

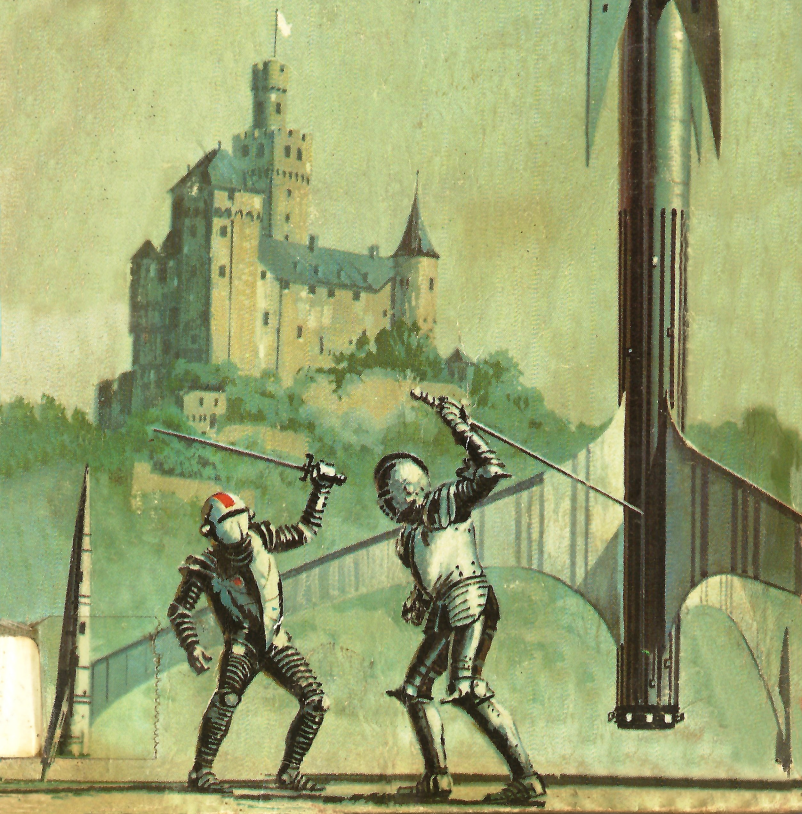
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He was pieced together from  
his own remains and returned  
to Earth a hero—but was he human?

# LIFE WITH LANCELOT

John.T. Phillifent



When the twisted and radioactive wreckage screamed down out of space onto their dark planet, the Shogleet were instantly intrigued. To that incredibly ancient race, evolved to the point where energy, matter and form held no more secrets, only curiosity remained. And this wreck was curious. Metals and plastics, physical and chemical combinations, they were familiar enough. By probing and deduction they could reconstruct the original form of it. But probing unearthed something else. Something lived, but only just.

Using their combined talents they caught the delicate fragment, studied it, reconstructed it. From the still viable patterns of intelligence they deduced the whole, and they remade a man. Going further, they discovered his history and, from that, something of the history of the whole species. They were incredulous, unwilling to admit that such a monstrosity could ever have existed. And yet their own probings could not be argued.

So they remade his ship and sent it back whence it had come—but appointed one of their number to go along with the experiment and observe. And there, as a certain noted young lady once had occasion to remark, things got curiouiser and curiouiser.

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The science fiction of John T. Phillifent, a Britisher, is well-known on both sides of the Atlantic.

# LIFE WITH LANCELOT

by John T. Phillifent



ace books

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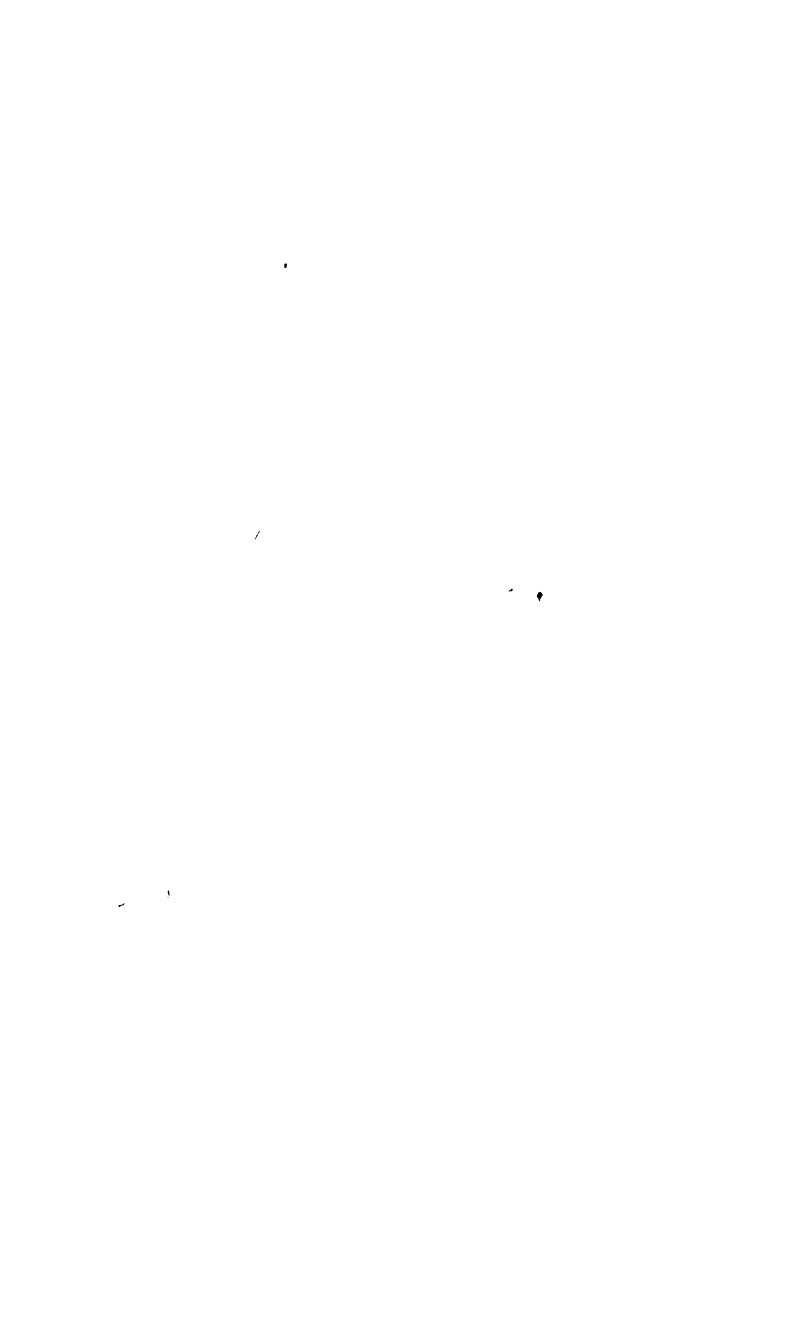
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## STAINLESS KNIGHT

### I

When the twisted and radioactive wreckage screamed down out of space onto their dark planet, the Shogleet were instantly intrigued. To that incredibly ancient race, evolved to the point where energy, matter and form held no more secrets, only curiosity remained. And this wreck was curious. Metals and plastics, physical and chemical combinations, they were familiar enough. By probing and deduction they could reconstruct the original form of it. But probing unearthed something else. Something lived, but only just.

Using their combined talents they caught the delicate fragment, studied it, reconstructed it. From the still viable patterns of intelligence they deduced the whole, and they remade a man. Going further, they discovered his history and, from that, something of the history of the whole species. They were incredulous, unwilling to admit that such a monstrosity could ever have existed. And yet their own probings could not be argued.

So they remade his ship, obviously only a small part of the whole wreck, and they sent it back whence it had come. But, after debate, they appointed one of their number, one Shogleet, of the people of the same name, to go along with the experiment and observe. And there, as a certain noted young lady once had occasion to remark, things got curiouser and curiouser.

The Shogleet crouched by Lancelot's glossy boots and purred, not just in pleasure, but as the by-product of its

curiosity-damping field. The corridor outside the Agent Director's office was a busy place, and the Shogleet had no wish to be observed. Its pleasure came from learning that these things called men were even more fantastically odd than its people had at first imagined. On the far side of the wall voices were discussing Lancelot. With extended preceptors the Shogleet listened in.

"—a damned pest. Hanging about outside my office, demanding to be sent on a mission. That moron? I wouldn't trust him to empty my wastebasket!"

"I'd thought about cooking up a mission for him, chief."

"Don't be obscene, Peters. A mission, for the clown who tried to rescue a disabled starship with a one-man life-raft?"

"No, chief. But I was looking through the files. I think maybe I have something, an otherwise routine upset on a vivarium planet."

"We don't touch those. That's a job for the local controller. Unless it's something horribly urgent . . . and even then, I wouldn't send *him*!"

"No, chief, but listen." The Peters voice was persistent. "This viv-planet is a three-culture set-up. Three widely separated land-masses. And the immediate problem is on one that is static in the 'pseudo-feudal' stage, the culture based on Arthurian legend. Ring any bells?"

"Arthurian legend?" The other voice lost its exasperation and became intent. "Peasants? Knights in armor? Sword-and-shield stuff? Tell me more."

"The local people will handle it, naturally. But I thought, if we . . . if you could play it up big, make it sound desperate, and then give it to him, it would at least get him out of the way for a bit. The culture is called Avalon. And this is the best bit, chief. It's in the Omega Centaurus cluster. That's twenty thousand lights away from here!"

"I like it, Peters. I like it. It will take him a month, real time, just to get there. Just one thing: we aren't treading on any toes doing this?"

"Not at all, chief. Strictly routine stuff. I'll send a sub-etheric to advise them to pass him straight through, let him do whatever he wants. He can't do any harm, not there."

The Shogleet crept to Lancelot's shoulder, vibrating gently in anticipation. When the summons came it rode with him into Agent Director Hugard's office and clung while he stiffened into a stern salute before the desk.

"Ah, Lake!" Hugard frowned portentously. "At last I have something for you, something that will tax your powers to the ultimate. You may have wondered why you have been kept waiting. Now you know. This operation is so serious, so crucial, that I am not asking you to volunteer, I am ordering you!"

"I understand, sir." Lancelot said sternly. "Rely on me."

"Good. I was counting on that. You'll take full details with you, of course, to study en route, but I can give you the gist here and now. The planet is a V-3; the culture, called Avalon, is a closed one. No one, not even we of Galactopol, can intervene in a closed culture unless the situation is desperately critical, the alarm urgent." The Shogleet felt Lancelot stiffen, saw the swell of his chest and the gleam in his eyes, and wondered anew at these strange creatures who thrilled to the prospect of danger.

"Most importantly," Hugard lowered his voice dramatically, "as this is a closed culture I have to send you in alone. Single-handed. You will be as fully equipped as is possible and be compatible with the culture, of course, but you will be on your own otherwise. You understand that?"

"I do, sir." Lancelot said it nobly. "If it's called for,

I will lay down my life rather than fail the Service. Rely on me, sir."

Hugard turned his face away, obviously overcome by some strong emotion. Then, clearing his throat, he rose and handed Lancelot a paper. "There's your authorization. You'll pick up the rest of your documents at the front office. You'll leave right away?"

"Of course, sir!" Lancelot saluted again, and Hugard stretched out his hand generously.

"All the luck in the world, Prime G," he said, pronouncing the title with proper reverence. "You'll need it."

"Thank you!" Lancelot grasped the hand with an enthusiasm that made Hugard wince. "Don't worry about me, sir. I'll come through!" Then he spun on his heel and strode from the office. "You know," he confided to the Shogleet, "old Hugard isn't such a bad guy after all. I should have realized he was saving me for something special. I've misjudged him!"

"Lancelot," the Shogleet whispered in his ear, "do something for me. Request a stock of vision tapes on feudal cultures, Arthurian legend, and on vivarium planets in general."

"You pick the queerest things to be curious about. Arthurian legend? My dad used to be interested in that stuff."

The Shogleet already knew this and, recently, had learned much more about Lancelot and how he came to be castaway in the first place. Gossip, in and about Galactopol Headquarters, had filled in the details of the remarkable story. Lancelot Lake, a humble technician in the lowest grade of Galactopol, serving his time in a spaceways Observation-and-Emergency station, had passed his lonely hours in dreams of glamor and glory, sharing the simple faith of the simple parents who had named him. One day, he knew, fate would give him his big break. And fate had been uncommonly obliging.

The star-class liner Orion, bulging with wealthy passengers, happening to have a simple defect in her main drive, had warped out of hyperdrive; her skipper, in angry calm, had ordered "abandon ship" and had pointed his lifeboat cluster towards the nearest O-and-E station. There had been no emergency, not the least danger, merely nuisance and the total loss of a valuable ship. His signals had said so, perfectly plainly. But not to Lancelot.

On fire instantly with holy zeal, Lancelot had powered up his one-man life-raft, designed purely for short forays about the surface of his station, and had stormed off to rescue the Orion single-handedly. Doing nothing by halves, he had also linked in the transmitter of his small craft with the powerful, all-wave, subetheric radio of the station. No one heard the lifeboat signals after that moment. Everyone heard Lancelot's heroic blow-by-blow tale, how, always dedicated, always brave, heedless of his personal fate, washed with deadly radiation from a rapidly disintegrating drive unit, he kept right on to his inevitable, gallant, hopeless end. Like a gnat grappling a runaway elephant, he and Orion went spiraling down into the vast gravity sink of Antares, until his transmission died and drowned in the thermal radiation from that giant sun. The rest was silence.

Now a gloriously gallant, even stupid, *dead* hero is one thing. Galactopol, while openly deprecating, welcomed the reflected glory. It made for a good image in public eyes. Posthumous awards look good, cost little. Galactopol made Lancelot a Prime G operator, their highest field rank. But the same hero returned from the dead was something completely different, as Agent Director Hugard had learned, and as the Shogleet was beginning to appreciate.

Perhaps, it mused, they had done too good a job on Lancelot. Using his own mental images for template, they had made him big and brawny, blue-eyed, golden-haired and handsome, near perfect . . . and virtually inde-



structible—a translation of his concept, “You can’t keep a good man down!” Had Lancelot known Hamlet he would have endorsed the words, “What a piece of work is man; how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties; in form and moving, how express and admirable; in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god!” But Hamlet was insane, whereas Lancelot was sincere, simple, and certain of the reality of his dream. And that, the Shogleet realized, was going to produce a few rather delicate problems.

By the second week of the long jump, Lancelot’s euphoria began to wear thin. The ship, though small, was comfortable and fully automatic. He had not a thing to do. In desperation for some way to dispel boredom he decided to check his equipment. What he found baffled him altogether, so he applied to the Shogleet, disturbing it from its engrossing tussle with the tortuous language of Mallory. “What are these things?” he demanded, and the Shogleet had to enlighten him from its studies.

“That is a lance, that long rod with the point. That blade with the cross and handgrip is a sword. This other equipment is armor. You wear it as part of your impersonation of a knight-at-arms. From the literature I gather there actually was a knight, a heroic figure, named Sir Lancelot.”

“That’s true. My dad used to tell about him. Hugarad knew what he was doing when he picked me. Still, with psychodynamics you can’t go wrong.”

The Shogleet kept discreetly silent, knowing full well that Lancelot knew little or nothing about the science of psychodynamics, beyond the name and the general theory: that the truly happy man is the man who knows what he can do and where he belongs, and behaves accordingly. Presumably it was the accuracy of psychodynamics that kept Lancelot a stationkeeper for so long, and only in some idealistic region of Lancelot’s mind

could it be true that his sudden elevation to knight-errantry was also in line with that science. But what the Shogleet was really curious about was how the technique would work when it came to seeding an entire culture with one single psycho-type.

In due course warning bells sounded, mechanisms took charge, and their ship coasted to a halt alongside the satellite platform where an observer-maintenance group kept watch over the cultures down there. Because of Lancelot's fame, and exalted status, Station Controller Turnham came in person to greet the new arrival. The Shogleet, discreetly invisible, saw that he was a small, precise and worrisome man, the type to depend entirely on the book.

"My instructions," he said, unable to hide his disapproval altogether, "are to pass you straight through and down, to take whatever action you think fit. Do you require any assistance, advice, comment on the situation?"

"That's all right." Lancelot could afford to be grand and off-hand, knowing that he outranked the controller by several degrees. "I'm used to working single-handed. Don't worry about a thing!"

It was true in a way, the Shogleet had to admit as more mechanisms took over and delivered their small ship precisely and invisibly down over a green and pleasant world set in an azure sea, down into a small glade in the forest, near a rolling green plain. It was early afternoon on a glorious spring day. Stepping out, Lancelot breathed deeply of unfiltered air rich with the scent of growing things, and voiced an instant complaint.

"This map," he scowled at it, "shows that we are about a hundred miles away from the chief city, Camlan. And no transport. What I mean, that gear I have to wear, it's heavy. I'm going to have trouble just getting it on, never mind walking in it!"

"According to the accounts," the Shogleet said, "a

knight rode on a creature called, variously, a steed, a mount, or a horse."

"I remember those, vaguely. Sort of an animal, four legs, head at one end, tail at the other. Hey, wait a bit, that would explain the rest of this junk." He sorted out some massive metalwork objects. "This will be horse armor. And that thing, by the look, is some kind of seat, isn't it?"

"I shall have to approximate," the Shogleet decided. "From your memories, and from the rather inadequate pictures in the tapes, I will transform myself into a horse."

"You'd better give me a hand with this hardware first. I can't get it on by myself. Frankly I don't see how it all goes on one man!"

A skilled synthesist, working from museum relics, had constructed the armor to fit and, with trial and error and struggle, eventually all the bits and pieces were buckled, strapped and locked into place. At the end of it all, Lancelot could hardly stand. He made a few labored steps, tried swinging his sword, and complained again, bitterly, at the effort. But the Shogleet now was busy on its own account; swallowing great quantities of air and energy, boosting its metabolism, it was converting its mass into something that would fit the remaining armor. Lancelot, shambling squeakily around, gave advice and comment according to his memories. Then, straining hugely, he hoisted the odd pieces—one at a time, to juggle them into place—and finally the saddle, by which time sweat was dribbling into his steel boots.

"Stars!" he growled. "This is a day's work by itself," and bashed at his helmet in a vain attempt to wipe sweat from his brow. "There has got to be an easier way!"

"I imagine," the Shogleet-horse guessed, "that this would be the function of the squire, as mentioned in the tapes." Lancelot grunted at that, hung the blank

shield on a saddlehook one side, the sword and sheath on the other, stood the long lance against a handy tree, and lowered his visor gingerly down past his nose, already skinned from his first light-hearted try. Then he eyed the stirrups in resignation.

"You'll have to kneel," he decided, "or I'll never make it up there."

They left the glade at a sedate walk, the Shogleet trying to work out a pattern of movement that would not unseat Lancelot. It evolved into a kind of rubber-legged glide that took them at a reasonable pace through what it assumed must be a "woody glen", with Lancelot grumbling, "The first thing we do, we get a squire. I will never make it to Camlan otherwise." Half an hour of this novel progress brought them to a large clearing laid out in a chessboard of little fields with a huddle of rough timber shacks in the center. Their arrival triggered a bedlam of shouts, screams and frantic barkings, but only for a few brief seconds. Then, apart from furtive rustlings in the bushes, all was quiet.

"Why did everybody dash off like that?" Lancelot complained, grabbing the saddlehorn. "Fat chance I have of rounding up a squire . . . No, wait, there's somebody, over by that tree."

He was an old man, grizzled, bent with rheumatism, clad in a simple brown smock. Clinging to the tree, he trembled at their gliding approach. Lancelot released the saddlehorn and sat up, trying to look impressive.

"Ho, there!" he called. "Why did everyone run away?"

"Marry, fair sir." The oldster cringed. "It would have been at sight of the strange beast thou ridest. No mortal eye ever saw the like before."

"What's wrong with me?" the Shogleet demanded curiously. "Isn't this the proper shape for a horse?"

"Now strike me dead!" The peasant blanched, grabbing the tree. "It spoke like a Christian. I heard it!"

"Naturally!" Lancelot took his cue swiftly. "'Tis a

magic steed, just as I am a holy knight. I have need of a squire. Call the others back."

"Nay, noble sir, we are but poor peasants. Wilt find no squire here."

"Oh hell!" Lancelot relapsed irritably into Galactic, then, with strained patience he asked, "Where then shall a knight find himself a squire?"

"The Baron Deorham has many such," the old man quavered. "Steeds too, though none such as thou ridest. But he is a wonderly wroth man and a great warrior. He will surely attack thee, an thou come near him."

"Fear not, old man. I am Sir Lancelot. I will to Deorham."

"Now am I dead and in hell, forsooth. Lancelot is legend!"

"Never mind that, old fool. Just point the way!"

The old man cringed again, then raised a feeble arm in the direction of a rough trail. The Shogleet resumed its gliding run. "A pity I couldn't get him to correct me on this shape," it said. "I must study a real horse at the first opportunity."

"I suppose so. This feels all right to me, but it won't do to scare the locals out of their wits all the time. Hey, that looks a likely place!" They had emerged from trees onto a vast grassy carpet that went away in a slow rise to a nearby hilltop, where stood a massive gray stone building. "That's a castle," Lancelot decided. "You'd better let me do the talking from now on. Horses don't talk, apparently. Let's go!" Clutching the saddlehorn valiantly, he stared ahead as the Shogleet worked up a turn of speed. For all its concentration on movement, however, it was not neglecting other senses. Suddenly, detecting life and movement nearby, it halted and swung around.

"Watch it!" Lancelot complained, clinging frantically. Then he hushed as he saw what the Shogleet had sensed. Some seventy yards away, just rounding a clump of trees,

came three riders. The figures either side were slight but the man in the center was gross, his steed huge, his armor bright in the sunshine. The device on his shield was that of a mailed fist, and a blue plume fluttered from the tip of his lance.

"That's what I ought to have," Lancelot murmured. "A picture on my shield and a little flag for my lance. Then everybody'll know who I am."

"So!" the Shogleet mused. "That is a horse, is it?" and began discreetly modifying its shape. "We will keep still and let them come to us. I want to watch that thing move."

As if in response to the thought the big man raised his armored fist. The click of his visor snapping into place was distinctly audible. In the next breath he applied spurred heels to his mount and began thundering over the turf towards the strangers.

"Look at him go!" Lancelot breathed. "I'll have to learn to ride like that. It looks easy enough." But then, as the mighty knight kept on coming, he grew uneasy. "He's never going to be able to stop in time, not the rate he's going. Now what's the fool up to?" For the strange knight had suddenly let his lance fall forward to the horizontal, and the unrushing point was aimed straight at Lancelot. The Shogleet, always curious, held quite still. Lancelot tensed. "Watch it!" he yelled. "You bloody fool, point that thing the other way!"

But it became obvious, even to him, that the mighty stranger had no intention of doing anything like that. At the last minute he managed to fumble his shield into place. There was a rending crash as point met shield fair-and-square, and the hideous impact drove Lancelot backwards from the saddle, over the Shogleet's tail, to land with a bone-jarring thud on the ground. He groaned, sat up, and then labored to his feet. The strange knight, wheeled to a halt about ten yards away, raised his lance and roared,

"Art unhorsed! Dost yield?"

"Yield nothing!" Lancelot shouted indignantly. "I wasn't even fighting you. You should give some kind of notice. Charging up on a man like that, not so much as a word—" and that was as far as he got. The stranger, throwing away his crooked lance, yanked out an enormous sword, put spurs to his mount once more, and rode headlong for where Lancelot stood. That blade rose and fell like a flail, the clang reverberating across the meadow. Lancelot buckled to his knees, hung there a moment, then keeled over and lay, groaning. The Shogleet trotted briskly to him, nuzzled him, whispering,

"You must get up and fight. It's expected of you. If you do not, I believe you are liable to be taken captive."

"Fight?" Lancelot groaned. "You must be joking. I'm half-dead now! There ought to be a law against lunatics like that!" He managed to sit up, to pound his mailed fist against his helmet, trying to clear his head. The enemy knight waited restlessly nearby.

"Quickly!" the Shogleet encouraged. "Get up!" It knelt obligingly, a performance that made the other horse cavort and back off, giving Lancelot time to struggle back into his saddle. And to get annoyed.

"All right!" he growled. "Wants to fight, does he? We'll see about that, right now." He heaved at his sword, managing to get it out of its sheath, and at once the enemy charged again, full tilt, standing high in his stirrups at the critical moment to lend more power to his sword arm. Lancelot raised his shield, reeling under the impact, but managing a blind swipe in riposte.

"Around!" he ordered. "Let me have another bash at him. I think I got a nick at him that time."

"You realize you may kill him?"

"What d'you think he's trying to do to me, then?"

"I am merely suggesting it might be wiser to ask him to yield. In that way we may gain information, which we sorely need."

Lancelot snorted, but when he'd had a chance to look and saw that his wild swipe had shorn away the opposition's helmet spike and split his shield in half, he made grumbling assent.

"Ho there!" He gestured with his sword. "Wilt yield?"

"To a foul fiend from the pit?" The enemy knight tossed away his ruined shield and bent sword. "Never! Pit thy sorcery against this!" And unhooking from his saddle a short length of heavy chain with a huge spiked ball on the end, he came charging again with unabated zeal.

"I told you!" Lancelot cried. "He's raving mad! If he connects with that gadget I'm a dead duck! Look out, here he comes!" He cringed behind his shield, peering around it warily. The spiked ball hissed in the air, crashed full on target, and slammed Lancelot hard over, almost unseating him again. In sudden fury the young Prime G lashed back, felt his blade connect and bite deep. The Shogleet pranced clear. Lancelot stared back, and his stomach suddenly heaved. The super-hard razor-keen blade had sliced efficiently through armor and knight, from shoulder to groin. There was spouting blood everywhere!

## II

"The fool would have it," he mumbled. "Now there'll be trouble!" But the carcass had hardly flopped to earth before the two attendants rode up, slid down from their mounts and went down, each on a knee, heads bowed.

"Spare me, Sir Knight," they said in unison. "I am thy servant."

"They're only youngsters." Lancelot sounded surprised. "Your names?"



"I am hight Alaric," said the ginger one, on the left. "And I Ector." The other shook his long yellow locks. "How shall we know thee, lord?"

The Shogleet felt Lancelot brace up stiffly. "I am Sir Lancelot!" he declared, and they fell promptly prone. "Oh, get up!" he urged irritably. "I'm not going to eat you! Now, one's to be my squire, the other to care for my horse. Which way do you want it?"

"The horse!" they voted together and instantly.

"That won't be necessary," the Shogleet said, forgetting. "I can look after myself quite well." The two youths hit the grass again, shaking.

"Get up!" Lancelot roared. "How can I get anything done if you keep falling down all the time? Now, what do we do about him?"

"Thy liege-men will attend to it, lord," Alaric quavered.

"My liege-men?"

"In sooth. Hast slain Deorham. that which was his is now thine."

"Eh? All of it?" Lancelot looked around and nodded approvingly. "Castle too, eh? That's handy. All right, one of you nip away smartly and warn the gang the boss is on his way home, hungry and bruised!"

"I will, lord!" Alaric fled for his horse and went racing ahead. The Shogleet contented itself with a more modest canter, finding the new movement intriguing. Lancelot didn't share the feeling.

"You're jogging me to a pulp!" he protested. "Let's have it the first way!"

"This is more accurate. You said you wanted to learn to ride. Now is your opportunity. You may have to ride a real horse soon."

Lancelot forgot his grumbles as they entered the courtyard and he saw the true proportions of the establishment. Great gray stone towers loomed over him, slit windows innocent of glass but with gay plumes trailing

from every vantage point. From various dark doorways men-at-arms approached in awe. Ector nerved himself to take the Shogleet's bridle as Lancelot slid down and stood. And objected instantly.

"You can't go off and leave me now! What'll I do? You know all about the manners and customs and stuff!"

"It will be only for a short while," the Shogleet consoled him in Galactic, making the men-at-arms back away nervously. "Just give orders. Tell them what you want. I will join you soon."

It permitted itself to be led by Ector to a vast stable where there were many half-wild horses and an immense smell. Once free of trappings and alone, it cast off the horse-shape and transformed itself into something almost human, but smaller, dark and nonspectacular, hoping thereby to avoid too much comment. Dodging rapidly through the stables, courtyard and into the great hall, where serfs were busy scattering fresh rushes, it found Lancelot seated at a long, plain wooden table, where other serfs were busy arranging platters heaped with hot viands. He was in deep conversation with an old, rugged-looking man in white linen. He looked up as the Shogleet scrambled up on the arm of his chair.

"This is Gildas," he explained. "Calls himself a seneschal. Sort of headman of the staff. He's been telling me about the property."

Gildas backed away in dread. "Now, sooth, I do believe thou *art* Lancelot, and this thy familiar. Is't a troll?"

"Lancelot." The Shogleet spoke reprovingly in Galactic. "You are on a mission. You should be asking Gildas for news of the emergency."

"That's right. I'd forgotten. It's not every day a man wins himself a barony." He turned in his chair. "Draw near, Gildas. There's naught to fear."

"Thou sayest it well, lord, but I like it not. A troll that

parleys like a man! Still, it is but part and parcel with the things that have but lately come to this land."

"That's what I wanted to know about. What's going on? I need to know, because I'm here to stop it."

Instantly Gildas was transformed from a sullen gray-beard to an angry enemy. "I knew it!" he roared. "Thou art false. I will call the men-at-arms that they might cut thee down. Strike me dead an thou canst, but I will call."

"Oh no!" Lancelot sighed. "For heaven's sake, man, I'm not going to strike anybody dead. I've had enough of that for one day. Be calm, and tell me what this is all about!"

"Methinks yon troll doth already know, and the question but a trap for me. Natheless I will tell it. Ye wit well there is but one sin in this land, which is hight Change. The wise ones say this is the best of all worlds and that it is sinful to think otherwise. So say all, where they can be heard. But who can stop what a man thinketh in his heart? To sweat and labor, thus to garner the fruit of the land, this is the old, the honest way. But what man will labor and sweat when his fields may be ploughed and down, aye and garnered into his own barn, and he never turning a hand. If this be Change, then many welcome it."

"Whatever that may mean. Don't tell me the sky is going to fall over a few ploughed fields?" Lancelot was baffled, short-tempered now. "First thing in the morning I think I'll take a few of those lads out there and ride for Camlan. Maybe there—"

"Camlan!" Gildas shouted, leaping back surprisingly spryly for an old man. "Now, certes, I *know* thou art false!" He had more to say, but Lancelot, in sudden rage, sprang up from the table and seized him by the throat in mailed hands, shaing him.

"Will you shut it off!?" he yelled. "I am sick and tired of all this double-talk. Why the hell can't you come

right out and say what you mean?" He craned angrily around to the Shogleet. "Can you make any sense out of it, or are they *all* stark, staring mad?"

"Let him breathe to talk." The Shogleet eyed Gildas thoughtfully. "Say, man, what land this is and who is your king."

"This is Brython," Gildas choked. "Our king hight Cadman, soon to be Cadman of the Fiery Dragon. He dwells in Alban, twenty miles south. Be wise, troll, advise this your master to ride to Cadman and pledge aid, with us."

"I think I get it." Lancelot sighed. "What's Camlan?"

"Camlan is for Bors, Bing of the Kellat and our sworn foe. Even now doth he call a great army of knights, to invade our land and seize our dragon. To destroy it, he claims, but many suspect it is but a ruse, that he will capture and use it for his own welfare."

"Come on, now! A real dragon?"

"My own eyes hath seen it, lord, and were weak for a day after. It is a strange beast and all fear it, but who will argue against a full barn and tilled fields, all without labor?"

"A dragon that labors in the fields? There was nothing of this in the tapes, Lancelot."

"A real dragon!" Lancelot sighed happily. "That's for me. Just my line of work. All right, Gildas, forget the politics. Pass some of that grub in this direction, I'm hollow. No tools?"

"There are no eating implements in this culture," the Shogleet advised from its reading. "Fingers and dagger is the rule." Gildas coughed humbly.

"Wilt permit thy wives now, lord?"

"My wives?" Lancelot looked up astonished. "Wives?"

"They were Deorham's, are now thine, waiting leave to attend thee."

"More than one?" Lancelot's reaction interested the Shogleet greatly now. In the rebuilding there had been

the concept, "irresistible to women, a great lover", but the interpretation had been impossible. For the Shogleet, sex was a long-redundant matter of biological record. That opposing sexes did exist and had effects on each other it knew, but not how and why. It paid very close attention.

Gildas shrugged as he said, "Naturally more than one, lord. Deorham was a lusty knight. At present they number six." Lancelot was visibly intrigued, unusually cunning.

"I have been long in the grave, Gildas. Mayhap I have forgotten the customs pertaining to the duties and services of a wife . . . or many."

"What else would a wife be for," Gildas stared now, "if not to serve? To comfort the flesh in whatsoever way she may best do? You know the saying, lord! A man may keep so many wives as he can keep . . . happy and satisfied!"

"Yes. Oh yes, of course," Lancelot said hastily. "Six, you say? And waiting to appear? Well, if Deorham could, I don't see why I—" And then he moved, and winced, and shook his head. "But not the way I ache right now. I need rest and repair. What with all that saddlework, and Deorham's bashing, I'm a mass of bruises!"

"The lady Phillipa hath the healing touch," Gildas offered. "Do thou but shed thy mail, lord, and she will attend to thy needs," and he clapped his hands before Lancelot could comment. The six appeared at once. They had obviously been close enough to overhear, for one advanced on Lancelot without hesitation, smiling and laying hands on him. She was robust, fair, about thirty years old, the Shogleet guessed, and efficient. In very little time at all she had the mildly protesting Prime G out of the armor that had taken him so long to put on, the rest closing in with giggles and nudges to assist. Lancelot's reactions were curious, a mixture of reticence

with regard to his nakedness and warmth in his attitude to the feminine presences. The Shogleet's sensors worked furiously, detecting and analyzing the interplay of gesture and glance, the subtle changes in chemical balance, the various stimuli and their physical effects.

Shimmering into invisibility it followed the chattering women as they swept Lancelot away to a vast bedroom. The senior one, the Lady Phillipa, made great play from kneading and oiling various bruises and contusions, while the others brought food and wine and hovered, their admiration obvious. In the process of performing a few workable repairs and refreshings of its own, the Shogleet was able to grasp the essentials of the male-female relationship and adjust Lancelot so that he was now able to meet the requirements called for by the concept "great lover". That done, and with only a moment to observe that all was satisfactory, it returned to Gildas, who now wore a gloomy look.

"Another lusty man," he muttered, "and not for me to deny what is every man's right, but we are for Alban and Cadman at crack of dawn."

"It will be all right," the Shogleet assured him confidently.

"Mayhap it is different for trolls and legends. Such things are beyond my knowing, but I wit well that Deorham had abstained from the flesh for the past seven days in readiness for the morrow. Your master is to meet with all the other great knights of this land, then to match against the Kellat. Twenty miles in the saddle, troll, and then the jousting. And he with six buxom wives to cosset this night?"

"It will be well!" the Shogleet declared, and then went to make sure that it was well in fact.

Mounting a real horse was a complicated business involving a primitive block-and-tackle and the service of three sweating serfs. By the time it was accomplished

Lancelot's early morning euphoria had worn a trifle thin. "I like this life fine," he declared, to the Shogleet sitting invisibly on his arm, "but they need some better kind of transport. Twenty miles, in all this gear, bouncing around on this great beast! How do they stand it?" He scowled at the great rout of men that jogged with him from the castle gates. "I suppose it's a wonderful treat for them, but it's a pity they couldn't have put it back a day or two. I was just starting to enjoy myself!"

The Shogleet, ignoring his bad humor, paid attention to the gossip all around them. The gathering, half of them mounted, the rest on foot, were one and all full of enthusiasm for the coming battle, but on the question of the dragon opinions were divided. A few dared to think that it was a blessing from the gods. The majority believed it evil. The right and proper way for a man was either to work or fight, and what man could do that when the dragon could do either, or both, better than any man? They were of the opinion that this new and legendary lord had come, for sure, to rid them of the curse in some way. And, incidentally, to guarantee them a great victory against the Kellat.

Lancelot's comments, as they jogged on, were anything but lordly. His teeth jarred and clicked at every pace; his armor creaked as he strove in vain to discover a comfortable posture. "Twenty miles of this?" he fumed. "I'll be a nervous wreck by the time we get there!" The company was making a good fifteen miles an hour, the Shogleet estimated, and looked for some signs of a city after two jogging hours had crawled by, but then it recalled from its reading that the education level consistent with this culture was extremely low, and resigned itself to waiting. The sun was standing over towards noon before wooden roofs and spires showed on the skyline.

"That will be Alban now," it told Lancelot, to comfort him. "I should have realized that few people here can count as far as twenty."

"They've got other defects too, such as feelings. I ache all over!" Lancelot would have been happier plodding at the rear, but once across the bridge and into the narrow streets of the city the others urged him into the lead. The Shogleet, listening out for anything more about the dragon, heard whispers on all sides about the 'silver knight with the naked shield!' but not a mention of the mysterious monster. In time, in the center of the city, they came to the castle of the king. Now the throng of sightseers gave way to a host of knights, squires and men-at-arms, who made an avenue so that Lancelot could jog to the foot of a great flight of steps. He stared, wild-eyed.

"I am not riding up there!" he declared. "I'm pooped. Just let me fall off right here." But Alaric spurred his mount forward, just as a tall, gray-haired man appeared at the head of the steps.

"Your Majesty!" The squire's voice was shrill but audible to all. "I am squire to this most noble knight. Yestereve he did slay Deorham with one blow. Today, with no stay for rest, hath he ridden and that right speedily, with this vast company, to offer heart, hand and sword in thy service against thine enemy. Your Majesty, wilt greet . . . Sir Lancelot?"

A great gasp ran through the crowd at the awesome name. Even the king himself seemed to quail a little at it.

"It is indeed a great honor," he said uneasily, "to have such a great knight return from the shades to serve in our cause. Dismount, Sir Lancelot. Draw near us and be welcome." Lancelot heaved wearily from the saddle, stood on creaky legs, then started the long trek up the steps, but the Shogleet forgot all that in response to something its keen senses had detected from the crowd. Alaric was in his proper position, one step in rear of his knight. Ector stood by the horse. To him the Shogleet made itself partly visible.

"Listen!" it hissed urgently, "See that man there in



the brown jerkin and the cap over his eyes, next the knight in the falcon shield?" Ector peered and nodded. "Mark him. Find out what you can. When the moment is fit, speak to him, say Lancelot has need of him. Then bring him."

"And if he will not?"

"Whisper in his ear this magic word. Galactopol. He will come."

Ector repeated the word fearfully and went off with the horse, leaving the Shogleet to rejoin Lancelot and hear the end of his weary complaint that he had traveled far and was in need of food and rest.

"How do they do it?" he demanded, in the chamber that had been assigned to him, while Alaric struggled to strip off his armor. "Cadman has just told me there will be jousting and swordplay all afternoon, and drinking and carousing well into the night, with every available woman in the city on hand to make sure nobody misses anything. What are they, steel and leather all through?" His gloom lightened a little as two serving wenches appeared with flagons of mead and a bowl of warm water to lave his distress. The Shogleet noted that it seemed to be obligatory for the female to be prominently developed in certain parts of their anatomy, and to be costumed so that those prominences were on continuous display. With one crouching over his feet and the other stooping over his goblet to pour, Lancelot seemed inspired to forget his aches for a while. But that was the flesh. In spirit he was well down.

"I'm a flop," he mumbled to the Shogleet on his shoulder, "at the finer arts. All right there's a dragon, and I'll have to fight it, I suppose. But I've no idea what the emergency is, why I'm really here, or how to start finding out. I mean, this is all very well"—he nodded to the obsequious wenches who seemed unwilling to depart—"but I'm supposed to be on a job!"

"Patience!" The Shogleet counseled. "I think I see

Ector, with some news for us." Ector had found his man and brought him. Lancelot looked up indifferently and returned to his survey of prettier things.

"Who might you be?" he asked.

"That's a good question," the stranger retorted crisply. "I was going to ask you the same thing. What's the idea, riding around in that phony chrome-silicon-steel armor, eh?"

"Yes!" The Shogleet shimmered into visibility. "I thought that was what I heard you say, down there by the steps." The man in brown took two prompt steps back, swallowed, blinked his eyes rapidly, then shook his head.

"I don't believe it. I see and hear a little black pixie with red eyes talking Galactic. But I don't believe it."

"Just a minute!" Lancelot sat up painfully. "You're talking Galactic too. Who the hell are you, mister?"

"He is obviously a Galactopol agent." The Shogleet was patient. "The real question, surely, is why is he here. Why two agents?"

"Two?" The stranger stared, then shoved back his cap. "I think I'm getting on to this. Haven't I heard of you? Lancelot Lake, Prime G?"

"That's right. And you?"

"I'm just a third-level sector man. Alfred North. Hi! I pass myself off as a journeyman blacksmith here. It's a living, what with all the armor. That's how I could spot yours as fake. Nobody here has anything can scratch that stuff. You'd be a payoff bet in a tourney!"

"Never mind that. What's this emergency?"

"It's a beaut, all right." North fished out a case, offered it. "Have a tar-free. I got plenty."

Lancelot reached, then frowned. "What about . . . observers?"

"It'll scare 'em a little, but they'll pass it off as magic. Covers anything you don't understand. That's how they can take the dragon so well."

"There really is a dragon?"

"You bet there is. You mean you don't know about it?"

"I only just got here last night. Class A-I special priority."

"Well, I don't know how H.Q. knew about it, but I'm glad you're here. And maybe you have the right approach, at that. We usually work under cover, but this one is different. When the alarm went off—"

"That alarm," the Shogleet interrupted politely. "I am curious about that. It is some form of automatic device, I understand."

"I was hoping you'd go away if I didn't look." North sighed. "Oh well. It's like this. This kind of culture is colonized by a single psycho-type, and the compatible beliefs are built in as a kind of dogma. There is also a built-in alarm system that triggers if too many events pop up that don't fit. It's a safety device. Even the purest strain can throw up a sport or two, a kind of aberrant genius who asks too many right questions about the stars up there, or starts inventing steam engines, something like that. But not this time!"

"A real dragon?" Lancelot was unwilling to believe it. North grinned.

"That will be the day!" he said, then sneaked another glance at the Shogleet and his grin slid a little. "It's this way. Back when they were terraforming this planet they used heavy stuff. One gadget they used a lot was a combined cultivator-harvester, thorium-powered and just about everlasting. Somehow, somebody must have goofed and one got left behind, in a storage cave. Just who made that clang is somebody else's business. Our problem is that a local man found the thing and is using it."

"But he wouldn't know how," Lancelot objected.

"He wouldn't have to, that's the hell of it. The thing runs off a mentrol, a kind of headband that you put on

and think your orders, like, say, 'stop', 'go,' 'fast,' 'slow', 'right', 'left', and that's it. What more do you need? The way I put the story together, the guy who found it tried on the mentrol for size, and the whole thing started from there."

"Oh brother!" Lancelot gasped. "He must have had the hell of a fright when the dragon stirred into action. But, as you just said, they lap up the magic, here. Who has the mentrol now?"

"Sir Brian de Boyce. Next to Cadman himself, he's the local biggie and he's sitting pretty with his serfs. They haven't turned a hand in months. But he is ruining the economy, as well as the social ambience. Idle people breed mischief, sooner or later. But I'm stymied. I'm just a freeman. I can't tell Sir Brian where to get off. You can!" North stubbed his tar-free and added, "What I mean is, you'll fight him for the mentrol."

"Fight him?" Lancelot choked. "I dont want any more of that. You should've seen what Deorham did to me. Anyway, he's on our side, isn't he?"

"So what?" North demanded. "What d'you think all this afternoon's jousting is going to be for, and by who?"

"I don't want to know," Lancelot groaned, but North told him.

"Right now they will be drawing lots to see who meets who in the first eliminators this afternoon. Tomorrow the short-listed champions will fight each other. Its part of the culture. Trial by combat, for prestige. Cadman wouldn't dream of leading out any army unless he knew they had all been graded by performance. I'll bet you what you like that every knight for miles around is itching to have a crack at you, right now. You can *call* yourself Lancelot, but for them you'll have to prove it. If you chicken out even a serf would spit on you, and get away with it."

"Oh no!" Lancelot groaned and put his head in his hands.

"Oh yes!" North insisted. "Your best bet is to lash out, right now, with a challenge to Sir Brian himself. If he's free to take you on, all you have to do is chop him and it's all over: But you'd better be quick. The competition is fierce!"

### III

The Shogleet, once more a horse, carried Lancelot through the busy streets that golden afternoon en route to the jousting field. It was of the opinion that the Prime G had been lucky. He had drawn one Gnut, a strange knight from the Westland, about whom little was known except fancy rumors.

"Discount the tales," it suggested. "These people have only vestigial contact with truth. Defeat Gnut, and tomorrow you will meet Sir Brian, and the mentrol will be yours."

"You can keep the knight business, for me." Lancelot refused to be cheered. "I'll be glad when it's over. All my days in this damned metal suit, jogging my guts out on a horse, getting bashed about ad lib! Now I have to fight two men I've never seen before, and suppose I win, then what? Every knight in the kingdom will be waiting the next chance to call me out, just to prove something. Don't anybody ever try to tell me anything ever again about dynamic competition! I hope I survive this long enough to quit!"

The Shogleet was disturbed. It had seemed unwise to tell him that he was virtually indestructible, so it was natural therefore that he should be able to contemplate possible defeat, but this despair was something to be dealt with quickly. The Shogleet was carefully formulating the thought when a scrap of gaily colored silk flut-

tered from a high-gabled house on a corner to catch on Lancelot's lance. Alaric answered their unspoken wonder.

"'Tis a troth, lord. Wouldst have me seek out its owner?" He had to elaborate further as neither Lancelot nor the Shogleet were up with him. "I will find the lady, lord, and beseech her glove, which thou wilt carry into the joust. An thou art victorious, the hand which fits the glove will be thine."

"Another? But I already have six!"

"What of that?" Alaric laughed. "Who knows what may hap this eve? I know not of Gnut, but be sure he will have wives, and possessions. And all will be thine, an thou defeat him. And tomorrow . . . Sir Brian is a wonderly rich and lusty man, as all know!"

"Good grief!" Lancelot gasped. "Doesn't anybody ever settle down with just one wife, here, and raise a family?"

"That is for when a man be old, done with glory and adventure!"

"He should live so long! What d'you call old?"

"Great in years, lord." Alaric was sober now. "Not many attain it. I can but guess the numbers but I would venture . . . thirty years?"

Lancelot was suddenly silent. The Shogleet was amused, knowing that the Prime G was thirty-two, but it also had food for thought. If only a rare few knights survived into the family-producing age, then the mad round of joust and tourney, battles for prestige and possessions, could be seen as a kind of automatic control mechanism, providing spectacle, entertainment, and skimming off the nonproductive, thus keeping numbers within the limits imposed by an agricultural community. And the dragon that worked in the fields was a real danger. North was right. Idle hands make mischief.

The tournament field was a riot of color. Gay streamers flirted with the breeze from the pavilions at either end,

each pennant identifying a knight. Heralds in tabards proclaimed the great to the chattering populace, who were accommodated on rude benches along either length of the field. In the center of one side stood the royal stand, thick with drapes and cushions. Alaric knew everybody and everything, reeling off reputations, tittle-tattle, honors and pedigrees, until even the Shogleet had to accord respect to such a prodigious memory. When he caught sight of Sir Brian's pennant he went into top gear for Lancelot's benefit. "His lands, lord, are the most spacious in all Brython, second only to those of the king. Vast herds beyond counting, and great game forests. Three castles—"

"And how many wives?"

"As I last heard it, lord, eleven."

Lancelot breathed hard. "They don't stint themselves, do they? I'm not surprised they don't last long. Fighting all day, feasting all evening, and—" Bugle tore the chatter to silence as the first bout started. Lancelot hushed along with the rest, to watch, and then to groan.

"Look at that," he urged the Shogleet. "Ton and a half of raving insanity on the hoof, moving at thirty miles an hour. Double it because the other lunatic is doing the same in the opposite direction. No wonder they count you out if you fall. Smashed in the guts with a lance, a straight five-foot drop onto hard ground, in all that armor! Who'd want to get back up, even if he could?" Very few did, indeed. Pennants rose and fell. Brass-lunged heralds told the score of victor and vanquished.

Sunset came near. A barred black pennant went up, bearing a single gold spot. A herald roared, "Sir Gnut of the Westland . . . to meet Sir Lancelot!" That mighty name hushed the crowd for a moment, while Alaric instructed another herald to reply. A pure white pennant ran up a mast and flew in the breeze. The retort came.

"Sir Lancelot to meet Sir Gnut!" The surf-roar of comment rose as the Shogleet waited for Lancelot to settle and grip his lance. At the far end of the lists Sir Gnut was already visible, a smallish, burly man, in black armor and mounted on a wiry stallion. He looked fast.

The Shogleet advised, "Put aside your lance. Be ready for swordplay." It cantered onto the field before Lancelot could protest. "Sit firm. Fend off his point with your shield, then cut him down with your sword."

"Who, me?" Lancelot was having a hard time just staying in the saddle, and the crowd bayed to see the legendary hero forced to fling his arms around the neck of his steed to keep from falling off. The Shogleet halted. The warden's flag fell. Gnut went into a gallop at once, head well down, hunched over his couched lance. Lancelot struggled to hold up his shield and drag out his sword at the same time. The Shogleet braced itself. Lance met shield, full and fair, and splinters flew. The Shogleet pranced nimbly around to keep Lancelot in the saddle. Gnut was just as lively, tossing away his ruined lance, heaving out his broadsword, darting in and out like a striking snake, to batter and bash Lancelot again and again, until the Prime G got good and angry at the treatment. He had his sword firmly now and gave up trying to fend off Gnut.

"All right, mister!" he growled. "You've asked for this!" He stood up in his stirrups, waited for the black knight to charge in just once more. Then he slashed down, hard and savage . . . and there was a shocked "Aaaah!" from the audience. "Serve him right!" Lancelot growled, as they trotted from the field, leaving to serfs the unpleasant business of sweeping up Sir Gnut's sliced remains. "Let's hope Sir Brian saw that. Make him think a bit."

Back in his tourney tent there was a surprise waiting for Lancelot. The Shogleet, poking its horsehead through the flap, saw a slender young female, glossy gold hair done



in braids about her head, standing close to the victorious knight, speaking softly, looking up at him. She seemed agitated, her translucent skin flushed with pink, her chest curves threatening to spill out from her lace-edged garment at any moment. Alaric whispered explanations.

"It is the Lady Jessica, she who threw the silk."

"This night I am thine, Sir Lancelot," she breathed. "An thou defeat they challenger tomorrow I shall be all thine, for as long as thou wilt." And she offered him a slim hand, which he took as if it had been eggshell. Then she strained on tiptoe to press her lips to his and drew away, even more glowingly pink. "I go," she whispered, "to warm thy bed and wait thy coming." The Shogleet was puzzled now by Lancelot's reactions, his beet-red face, his stunned stare into vacancy as he sat. But North came, at that moment, to offer his congratulations.

"Nice work, Lake," he said. "No style, but you chopped him good!"

"Yes." Lancelot seemed abstracted. "I want to ask you something. Brief me, would you, on this wives business? I mean, Deorham has—had—six, and Gnut must have some. Sir Brian has eleven. If I win them all, well, I'm not complaining, you know what I mean? But suppose a man wants to settle down with just one, raise a family, that kind of thing?" North shrugged.

"It's this way, Lake. This life is hectic, usually short, so they go all out, make the most of it. But if and when a man gets to the point he feels he would like to retire, he makes a public proclamation first, in case there are any outstanding grudges to settle. Then he does a deal with the king's advisors and they sort out how much estate he can keep for himself and which wife he is going to stick to. All the rest of his property is shared out among the rest of his wives, as dowry, and they are back on the market again, until they can get some knight to fight for them and win. Their estates go along with them, of course. It works out reasonably well. Why?"

"Oh, nothing." Lancelot waved it away and managed to stand up. "I'd better be getting back. Another big day tomorrow, you know."

He was suspiciously silent on the way back to his chambers, and curiously nervous when he found the Lady Jessica there, literally warming his bed with her unclad body, softly asleep. It was out of character for him to say, as he did to the Shogleet. "You don't have to hang around *all* the time, do you?"

"Not if you desire privacy." It was tactful. "Just let me minister to your bruises first, then I will leave you until the morning." As part of its ministrations it took care to invigorate him with large doses of tuned energy, realizing that he would need it during the night. Then it withdrew to ponder, and wonder. There was obviously more to this male-female business than just vigorous physical exchange. But what? Lancelot was still pensive the next morning, seemingly unwilling to bid goodbye to the Lady Jessica. She, huge-eyed and half-swooning, clung to him and swore to follow just as soon as she could robe herself for it.

"Truly art thou legend," she sighed. "Never before was there such a valiant knight as Lancelot, nor so fortunate a woman as myself."

The tournament field was brighter than ever for this, the finals day, but Lancelot's thoughtful mood persisted. He watched one encounter after another with little interest, only pricking up his attention when the fateful name was bellowed forth for all to hear as Sir Brian's pennant went up.

"You will take the lance this time," the Shogleet advised, studying their adversary. Lancelot was staring too.

"No wonder he's the top man," he growled. "Look at the size of him! He's going to take some cutting down!" This was another shift of attitude, and the Shogleet would have pondered it deeply but there was no time now.

"Couch your lance firmly," it warned, as the warden's

flag fell and it moved into a trot, then a canter, and then into a gallop. Lancelot sat firm, leaning forward, forgetting to complain. The mighty Sir Brian thundered to meet them from the other end, his lance glittering in the sunshine. At the moment of impact the Shogleet braced, then stiffened, rearing on its haunches to keep Lancelot in the saddle. There came a deafening double-clang from the shields, a wheeze from Lancelot as the wind was punched out of him, the shrill screech of tortured metal, and a hideous gargle from Sir Brian. And then, despite all the Shogleet could do, it felt Lancelot lifted and dragged bodily up and clear of the saddle.

Skidding furiously to a stop, it wheeled to look. There was Lancelot, on foot, still doggedly clutching the haft of the lance. The other end, with its razor tip, had driven through Sir Brian's shield, his armor, Sir Brian himself, and out the other side by an arm's length. Grunting with effort, Lancelot dragged the lance free and shambled back as the Shogleet cantered up and knelt for him to remount. That act stunned the crowd into silence, but only for a moment. Then it went wild as the victor cantered past the royal stand for the salute and the accolade. Even King Cadman seemed shaken as he observed the ritual formalities. Then it was back to the tent, where Lancelot climbed down, handed his lance to Alaric, and tramped inside. And sat.

"That's it!" he declared. "I'm through. Done. Finished!"

North came pushing through the flap in time to disagree with the last word. "Not yet, Lake. There's still the dragon. But that shouldn't be too hard now you have the mentrol. Just as well you're not staying in these parts, though. The local warriors don't stand a chance against you."

"It's the superior metal, of course," the Shogleet commented, poking its horsehead into the conversation. North

jumped a clear six inches from the ground, banging his head on the tent spar.

"Talking horses too?" he gasped. "Is this routine equipment for you Prime G's?"

"Forget that!" Lancelot snapped. "Let's get this dragon sorted out, and then we'll see whether I'm staying here or not!"

North eyed him curiously, then shrugged. "I suggest we play it like this. There'll be a break soon, for refreshment. That's your chance to get an audience with Cadman. Tell him this dragon is a great evil, that you've come to slay it, and once that's done you'll return to the shades, and everybody will be satisfied all round. Right?"

"Sounds easy enough, but *can* I kill the thing?"

"Sure. I can fix that, once I have the mentrol." North peered out of the tent flap and chuckled. "Here it comes now. Sir Brian's seneschal is on his way to turn over all Sir Brian's goods and chattels to you. The lot."

"Suppose—" Lancelot's tone was studiously casual, "—suppose I was to stay here for good, and I didn't want all this stuff, these retainers?"

"You *could* manumit them." North told him. "Give them their freedom. But that might not be clever. Those estates don't run themselves, you know. Those lads earn their keep."

"It's a point." Lancelot nodded, and went to receive his spoils. By the time that was done the Lady Jessica had arrived, occupying the tent and blissfully awaiting the return of her knight. As Lancelot strode in and saw her she flushed rosily as before and ran to him, her pinkness escaping from its totally inadequate restraint. Both the Shogleet and North were politely but firmly invited to withdraw. North was scowling. The Shogleet thought it knew why and decided to sound the prospects of a possible ally.

"Would you explain something to me," it asked. "I am

aware there is a form of polarity between humans of opposite sexes, a matter of biochemistry. That is simple enough to understand. But apparently it has another form, an urge to 'settle down' and 'retire' and 'raise a family', and I am not clear on the mechanism of this."

North chuckled despite his preoccupation. "You're not alone. You are talking about love, now, and nobody ever has been able to explain that. One thing is for sure. It has nothing to do with reason or logic. Are you thinking what I'm thinking? That it wouldn't be on for Lake to try settling down here? That would be Change in a big way, and he would never be allowed to get away with it. But how can we stop him?"

"I must think about it," the Shogleet decided, and proceeded to do so while the rumor of Lancelot's intentions spread like wildfire among the chattering crowd. Soon the excitement of this sideshow attraction drew all interest from the tournament proper, and Lancelot was eventually parted from his amour and urged to perform his proposed deed. The sun stood high for noon as he rode forth for the meadow where the monster slept, and the awed populace kept a discreet distance in the rear. Only North went with them, on foot, the mentrol in his hand.

"It won't be any trouble," he promised. "Just a little bit of sabotage will fix it up for good. You'll see. And there it is."

It was easy to see why the peasants had dubbed it a dragon. Its sectioned body, all of fifty feet long, hugged the ground for most of its length, rising to a twenty-foot high hump in front, with a single headlamp to give it a one-eyed evil appearance. "The front scoop," North explained, "sets to any level, and the controls can be set to process what it picks up. It has brain enough for that, enough, too, to reject living organic matter. It wouldn't harm a man even if you tried to make it. Also it processes wastes and makes its own fertilizer, all in the one opera-

tion. Ruining the economy. But not now, not now that we have the mentrol. Come on!"

The Shogleet had an idea. "Lancelot," it said, "you had better go back and warn the populace not to come too close. Also there is someone back there who would wish to see you before the battle, I think."

"That's right!" Lancelot slid down eagerly and went clanking back.

"You're a smart creature." North cocked a critical eye. "What's on your mind now?"

"It is not enough that the dragon be destroyed. It must be seen to be destroyed, spectacularly. Can you arrange that?"

"How do you mean, spectacularly?"

The Shogleet told him, and his eyes widened. "I can fix that, sure, if you say so. But can you handle it? That's thorium, remember!" The Shogleet assured him it could handle thorium, and he went hurriedly away to enter the gaping jaws of the cultivator. By the time he had done what was needed Lancelot had clanked back and was mounted.

"Let's get it done!" he growled, dropping his visor. "You might as well know, as soon as this is over I'm retiring from Galactopol. I'm through. I'm going to settle down here, all right? Now, what do I do?"

"You give me time to get well clear," North advised. "I'll put this gadget on and make it look as if the thing is fighting you for a while. As soon as you're ready, you bash it with your sword."

"A fat lot of good that's going to do."

"No, it's all fixed, I tell you. Keep your eye out for a yellow plate, an inspection cover, marked DRIVE UNIT INSPECTION. Just hit that."

The Shogleet broke into a gentle canter, Lancelot drew his shining sword, and in a moment or two the long, crouching machine stirred into life. With a growl of gears

it swung its head and opened its mighty jaws like a great serpent seeking its prey. The headlight lit up, sending out a bright beam. It began to rumble along impressively.

"This isn't such a bad place," Lancelot muttered, hanging on as the Shogleet danced evasive rings around the machine. "Once you get away from the armor-plated bashing business. I'm going to retire and settle. I'll get a fair estate out of my winnings. I'll have Lady Jessica . . . she's a wonderful person—"

"You are a Prime G, Lancelot. It is your duty to accomplish this mission and then report back."

"North will do the reporting."

"But you do not belong here, in this culture!"

"What do you know about it?" Lancelot demanded rudely, and waved his sword wildly in the air. "I'm all right with—" and the Shogleet swerved at that moment to bring the swordtip into contact with that yellow plate.

The bang was violent enough to impress even the Shogleet, and kept it busy for several fractioned sections warding off blast, radiation, heat and hurtling debris. Then there was a thick, ringing silence, a haze of slow-settling dust. It scrambled carefully up out of the crater and trotted across scorched and ruptured earth to where North was peering, frankly open-mouthed, from a sheltering bankside. Of the Brythons there was nothing to be seen but dust on the horizon from their flying heels.

"You look to be all right," North admitted. "But what about him?"

"Stunned only, a kind of temporary fugue. It will pass. You can take care of the remaining details, I think?"

"Oh sure, I can handle those. You're going to shove off now?"

"I think it would be best. It would be extremely unwise to allow him to resume his irrational attachment for that female, so the safest thing is to remove him from

this environment. You will . . . er . . . word your report in very cautious terms, I assume?"

North grinned. "You mean, I don't say anything about pixies or talking horses? You can depend on that. I like my job. But . . . just what are you, anyway, some kind of guardian angel?"

"You could say that," the Shogleet nodded, wheeled, and began the long canter back to the quiet glade and the ship that would get them back up to the satellite platform. It considered that it had contrived a satisfactory solution to the immediate problem, but it was still intrigued by the peculiar interrelationships of these things called man.



## LOGICAL KNIGHT

### I

Planet Controller Turnham stood up hurriedly behind his desk as Lancelot strode into his office, ready for anything. "Glad to see you are fit and well again, Prime G," he said, reluctantly deferential. "I've just been reading the case report from operative North. You did a first-class job!"

The Shogleet, riding invisibly on Lancelot's shoulder, felt the usual chest-swell and shrug as the praise was airily gestured aside. "Just a job, controller. Over and done with, just part of the day's work. Any new problems on hand?" Turnham shrugged, determined to be equally off-hand.

"Minor matters, Lake. Nothing to interest you—" and there was a timid interruption from the woman at Turnham's elbow. Her dark blue eyes under a lenticular framework glinted with momentary determination. She made a gesture with the papers in her grasp.

"Culture Two psychodynamic chart *is* leveling off, controller!"

"Of course, tech-Osmonde. I'm aware. We will deal with it later."

"Hold on a bit." Lancelot smiled at the woman, anonymous in her loose blue smock, her jet-black hair tight-drawn into a prim bun. "I'd like to hear about it. Charts are always important." His easy charm brought pink confusion to the technician and an uncertain smile in response.

"Just as you say," Turnham yielded. "Tech-Osmonde, explain your point. Make it brief and nontechnical, please."

"Yes, sir." The young woman pushed her lenses into place, clutched her papers firmly, smiled uncertainly again at Lancelot. "Culture Two is based on a blend of classic Greek rationality and Roman logic and pragmatism." With a very brief upsurge of courage she interrupted herself to declare, "Logic and reason are the very pinnacles of human achievement!" That said, she reverted to her timid murmur. "At first, of course, the culture had compatible myths and legends, but they withered in the usual way and for the past three generations all has been well. Until now. For some reason the dynamism reading is leveling off." She selected a crackling sheet and came near Lancelot, to peer up at him and hold it for his inspection.

The Shogleet sensed her inner agitation, the awe and near-worship as she stood close to Lancelot. Chemistry again. It was much more intrigued by the lens framework on her nose. A crude, though effective, means of correction for defective vision, obviously . . . except that its probes showed the woman's vision to be quite normal and good. Odd! Lancelot knew nothing of this.

"You'll have to explain," he said, smiling down at her. "I'm just a field agent, not a technical expert like you."

"In effect," she mumbled rosily, "it means the culture is rapidly becoming static—"

"Stable!" Turnham corrected impatiently, and she turned on him.

"Oh no, sir." Her determination was an effort. "There's a difference between stable and static. This can—and will—lead to stagnation!"

"But not immediately. The problem will be dealt with when it becomes acute. At the moment it is hardly a matter for a Prime G!"

"Why not?" Lancelot contradicted. "I'm interested, and

I don't have anything else to do. Go on, tech-Osmonde. What seems to be the cause?"

Her confusion deepened. "That is just the trouble, sir. I need field data for reference. The chart merely indicates something going wrong. I need on-the-spot detail before I can proceed further."

"All right!" Lancelot made a throwaway gesture. "You have yourself a field agent now. Myself! Just tell me what you want me to look out for—"

"Now really, Lake!" Turnham started to protest, then remembered he was out-ranked, and sat, visibly irritated.

"It's all right, controller. I'll accept responsibility. Like to make myself useful, you know. Now—" he returned his smile to the technician.

"Oh dear!" she gasped. "It would take a week to instruct you in the basics. You really ought to have a technical expert to go with you."

"Why not?" Lancelot shrugged, and Turnham nodded, nastily.

"Why not, indeed?" he said. "Tell him why not, tech-Osmonde!"

"I'm afraid there isn't one," she said dismally. "Except myself. And I have never done any field work at all!"

"Precisely!" Turnham's nasty smile hardened, and he drew breath to be appropriately scathing, but Lancelot got his in first.

"No problem," he declared grandly. "You'll be perfectly all right. I'll see you don't come to any harm. You just leave that to me, right? Now—" With that decision made he looked to Turnham. "How soon can you fix us up to go down? No point in hanging about."

The Shogleet, observing, saw the rapid shuffle of emotions across the controller's face, from outrage to resentment to resignation. "Very well, Prime G, it's your responsibility."

"I've already said that. And I can handle it. What we

need now is backup, resources, a program. That's where you come in!"

"Very well!" It was Turnham's turn to flush at the thrust. He hit buttons on his desk to light up a read-out. "You'll need a crash course hypno-implant in the language, and compatible identities to match the culture—"

"Hold it!" Lancelot's tone indicated the rare birth of inspiration, and the Shogleet wondered what was coming now. "You said," he directed a stare to the timid technician, making her cringe a little, "that the culture had gone static, didn't you? Well, suppose we stir it up a little, introduce a . . . kind of factor . . . what's the word I want?"

"Perturbation factor?" she whispered, and he beamed.

"That's it. So we can stir them up a bit. That way you'll be able to observe reactions all the better, right?"

Even Turnham was impressed. "That is quite valid," he admitted, and set up a fast-running array of drawings and images. "Of course, to do that you'll need to be someone with status and influence. A peasant would hardly upset the social flux to any degree. Let me see, now, a landowner? A merchant? Or a philosopher, perhaps? A Solon?"

"Better than that." Lancelot's brain was grinding along its own peculiar pathways. He came back to the wide-eyed technician. "You said they started out with a set of myths and legends. I know about things like that." And it was true. In attending to Lancelot during his fugue-shock the Shogleet had let him retain some of the experiences, the more pleasant ones. "I've been a legend," he said. "This classical Greek thing, they had gods and goddesses, didn't they?"

"Yes, of course!" Tech-Osmonde's eyes blinked rapidly in professional fervor. "Originally they were grossly anthropomorphic: mere human figures made larger than life and representing various abstractions.

Athena, for example, was the goddess of wisdom; Ceres, of corn and the seasonal cycle; Mars of war; Eros of love; Venus of beauty, and so on. Splendid ideas, though quite, quite naive. With the rigorous development of logic and reason the anthropomorphic element withered, but the abstractions remained."

"You surely weren't thinking of impersonating a god, Lake?" Turnham's voice reeked of unbelief, and the Shogleet could have told him that was exactly the wrong tone to employ.

"And why not?" Lancelot challenged. "That would shake up their logic and reason a bit, wouldn't it? Show me some pictures."

Turnham thought he would protest, then changed his mind and touched a switch or two, more buttons, and the screen glowed with a set of fine-line drawings and pictured sculpture. Lancelot watched, agog with his own idea.

"That one!" he said suddenly.

"That's Apollo!" tech-Osmonde said faintly. "The most Greek of all the gods, accepted as the ideal type of manly beauty!" The Shogleet was most interested, recognizing in the drawing many of the proportions and attributes Lancelot had carried in his unconscious. It was in no way surprised to hear him say, with disarming modesty:

"I wouldn't claim to be perfect, but I reckon I could have a stab at playing that part. That will do me. Now, what about you?"

But tech-Osmonde shrank almost visibly into her shapeless blue coverall. "Oh no!" she gasped. "I couldn't, not a goddess!"

Lancelot frowned, then looked to Turnham for rescue. The controller shook his head thoughtfully.

"I'm inclined to agree. Such a performance would call for a degree of panache . . . let me think a moment. If tech-Osmonde is to make useful observations she must

have an identity that will permit her always to be present. In this culture frame," he added pointedly, "the woman has a very subordinate and secondary role. Ah!" He rapped more buttons for confirmation, then nodded. "That might do it. In myth the Greek divinities always had numbers of attendants, servants to wait on them. Handmaidens. That could be your role, tech-Osmonde, I think?"

"Oh yes, controller!" she snatched at his life-saving straw. "Yes, thank you!"

For the next hour or so Lancelot was fully occupied with the hypno-implanted language drill and tech-Osmonde with a hurried revision of charts and systems, leaving the Shogleet ample time to investigate on its own into this peculiarly hybrid culture frame, to learn much that was curious to it.

With apt timing, a small, silent and fully equipped shuttle ship descended into a quiet dell on a mountain top that loomed over the sea on one side and gave a commanding view of the scene on the other. It was just on dawn over the land-mass calling itself Olympus. The humans stood by a viewpoint.

"Olive groves on the higher slopes," tech-Osmonde pointed out, "and then small-holding farmsteads. Fresh clean air, sunshine, natural foods and patient labor. The quiet, peaceful, good life, simple and sane!"

"You're really sold on this culture, aren't you?"

"Oh yes!" She had a gentle glow now. "This is how people were meant to live. You know, it is generally agreed that in ancient Greece mankind touched a peak it has never been able to achieve since. All the basic ideas, all the big questions, were originated and asked here. Art, music, beauty—it all began in just such a setting."

"But it went wrong, though," Lancelot reminded her, with unusual insight. "And it looks like it has gone wrong again here. Which is why we are here. But not to worry. You just do exactly as I say and you'll be all right. The

first thing we do is to change into costume and get the hang of it." He hefted a pack and set it on the cushions for her. "That's yours. Strip off and try it on. This is mine!" The Shogleet watched curiously as he peeled in casual unconcern and started undoing the package. Tech-Osmonde gave him a wide-eyed uncertain glance, then, reassured by his manner, peeled out of her shapeless coverall and tackled the fastenings of her pack with nervous fingers.

"Good grief!" Lancelot muttered, staring at what he had been given to wear. "Is this all? Sandals, a cloak with a hood, a belt and pouch with a few drachs, a meal pouch, and a staff?" He turned to tech-Osmonde to complain, and she shrugged apologetically at him.

"I'm afraid that is quite correct." She tugged helplessly at her own pack. "I hadn't before realized how spartan . . . oh dear, I can't open this!"

Lancelot forgot his complaints, gazing at her in sudden and silent admiration, so much so that she went pink all over. "You should have grabbed at the goddess part," he said, his tone quite different now from his hitherto reassuring familiarity. "You'd have made a terrific Venus!"

"Oh!" she whispered, pinker than ever and embarrassed but obviously delighted by his candid admiration. "Do you really think so?"

"No doubt about it at all. If they could see you like that, those people down there couldn't think anything else! You're perfect for the part, just as you are. Sure you won't change your mind?"

"Oh no, really," she said. "I couldn't. I'd much rather have some sort of costume . . . please?" and she gestured to her pack.

"Oh! Yes, sure!" Lancelot tackled the fastenings, breaking them with ease and handing out her costume. "I suppose you're right, but for me you will never be better-dressed than you are right now, in just skin!"

"You're much too kind to me, Prime G," she murmured. "I'm overwhelmed already to be working with

such a famous person." She grasped the cloak and tried to swing it around herself.

"Let me help you." Lancelot held the cloak for her. "And forget the rank business. We are partners now, working together, remember? You can call me Lancelot. What's your name?"

"Sybil!" she breathed, letting him arrange her cloak and do up the belt about her waist, obviously awed by his attentions. "Lancelot . . . it suits you so well. But then, so does Apollo. You look so like the picture!"

"Do you think so?" Lancelot was modestly pleased by her admiring eyes. "Oh, well, I suppose I'd better get dressed too. Here, let me help you with your sandals." As he knelt she protested, not too strongly.

"This is all wrong, Apollo. I am supposed to serve you, as your handmaiden, not the other way around."

"That's for the public, Sybil. Between us we are partners, and good friends, all right. Don't you worry about a thing." He tugged his cloak into place then approached her again, smiling. "You won't need these." He tweaked away her eye-lenses. "And you should let your hair down. That's better. Now, let's go and see what this is all about."

The brisk air about the mountaintop was chilly enough to make the humans shiver and set out at a brisk pace down the rugged slope, but half an hour of steady walking got them to the first of the olive groves and into the growing warmth of the sun. "This is better," Lancelot declared, indicating a mossy rock where they could sit awhile and take stock. "Where are we, Sybil?"

"According to the map there's a small village just a little further on, at the foot of the mountain, called Eprus, and the capital city Lavinum is about twenty-five miles beyond that."

"Lavinum for us, then. Can't stir up much effect in a farming village. But I don't fancy walking all that way. We'll see if we can scare up some kind of transport in Eprus."



"You make everything seem so simple and obvious," she said, as they started to walk again. "I feel I can trust you absolutely."

"You can," he said. "But I'm going to need your skills too, you know, in time. Hey, looks as if we're coming to a farm!" A dry-stone wall blocked their progress, and as they climbed it to see that it held a blowing field of some kind of vegetable, their arrival started a small four-legged animal into frantic barking. It was the Shogleet's first encounter with a dog, and it found the shape so neat and convenient that it immediately assumed that form and went to make closer acquaintance. There was a man in the field too, an old gray-head, weather-beaten, his cloak girdled about his waist to give free play to his arms and chest. He glared in surprise as his dog howled and retreated before the stranger. The Shogleet followed in curiosity but there was little to learn from a beast that cowered and ran, so it returned to the field, to find Lancelot in debate with the old man.

"We are not mad!" he insisted, obviously not for the first time.

"You must be." The old man was determined. "You came down from the mountain. I saw you. It is not possible to come down from a mountain without first going up. And the only way up is across this field of mine. So you are now crossing my field for the second time, and you will pay me damage and trespass, as I ask. Without argument."

"But we did not cross your field!"

"So you say. And I say you are mad. Or pretending to be, so as to dodge payment. And we have ways to deal with that, too."

"Now look!" Lancelot thumped his purse. "I can pay you, but I won't. I don't owe you a thing. Show me what damage we have done!"

"Oh no!" the farmer didn't bat an eyelid. "You show

me how you can in any way cross a field without treading on it!"

"You're a crook!" Lancelot accused, and the farmer smiled thinly.

"You're free with your tongue where none can hear, stranger. If you would care to slander my good name before witnesses I think your purse would soon shrink. Now pay me what I ask, and be off!"

"You obviously don't know who you're talking to." Lancelot tried a new tactic, drawing himself sternly erect. The farmer spat, hitched his cloak.

"My name is Evos, an honest farmer's name, as anyone hereabouts will confirm. I'm not interested in what you call yourself, only the color of your coin. Show me."

"I am Apollo!" Lancelot declared grandly. The farmer stiffened, then put on a stare of anger.

"Oh, so you're one of those, are you? I've heard of your kind. Layabouts! Work-shy loafers! Fool about in the woods, steal a turnip or two, a handful of beans or olives, or a bunch of grapes here and there. Enough to live on, if you call it living. Head full of superstitious nonsense about magic and a good time for everybody, without honest work! Well, we don't want your sort here. Pay me, and get gone. Or do a magic, go on!"

Lancelot was red-faced and furious now, but even he had sense enough to see that he was stymied. The Shogleet shimmered to his shoulder and said, "A small miracle will suffice for the moment. I will render you invisible, so that you can walk past him a little way, then turn and speak to him again."

The farmer's eyes bugged as Lancelot faded out. He made vain swipes in the air, whirling about. Twenty steps and the Shogleet tuned out again. Lancelot turned and spoke. "What think you now, Evos, honest farmer?" and the old man sprang around savagely.

"How did you do that?" he shouted, and Lancelot smiled loftily.

"I told you. I am Apollo! Come, Sybil, it's all right. Let her pass, Evos, or worse may befall you." Miss Osmonde came, eyes huge, her face full of awe, and only the Shogleet noticed the farmer's sudden intense frown, his instant concern, as the humans passed on their way.

"How did you do that?" she breathed, and Lancelot smiled, not displeased by her near-adoration.

"Tricks in all trades," he murmured. "I told you, stick close to me and everything will be all right."

The village was a humble affair, four cart-tracks meeting at an open space bounded by two-story timbered buildings that were mostly produce sheds and open-fronted stores. The dwellings, laid further back, were unpretentious one-level shacks, simply but stoutly constructed. The appearance of strangers made only a small stir, an indifferent curiosity in the few old men who sat mumbling in the sun.

The Shogleet, finding the dog-shape ideal for camouflage, started out on a trotting tour of investigation, getting back to the agora—the open marketplace—as the sun was standing high over towards noon. Now the doddering elders were chuckling as at some joke, and, deducing rapidly from their words, it made its way to a large store-shed, to find Lancelot involved in strenuous labour. Copying the farmer, he had secured his cloak about his waist to leave his upper half free, and was sweating profusely as he loaded bean-sacks on to a low cart.

"It's the only way I can earn us a ride into Lavinum," he explained, pausing for a much-needed breather. "When I tried to pay I found I had only ten drachs, and that's not enough."

"You have been deceived," the Shogleet sighed. "Ten drachs would be more than enough to purchase this entire store-shed and contents. And all the village produce will be going into Lavinum tomorrow anyway, as it is the regular market day. You could have ridden with it freely."

"What?" Lancelot roared; and glared at four grinning

idlers who lounged by the open swing-doors of the shed. "Do they know that?"

"It is their task to load this stuff. They know!"

Lancelot snorted, fighting to master his rage. "This tomorrow stuff, that's no good! I want to get to Lavinum today!"

"Unless you walk it is quite out of the question. Like it or not, all possible transport has to be held for tomorrow. All produce is marketed on the same day, to avoid unfair competition. Where is your companion?"

"She went across to the house to get something to drink. I'm so dry I can't spit! Here she comes now!" The Shogleet saw Miss Osmonde appear with a large jug and a goblet, making her way across the cobbled yard. The loiterers saw her too, and turned to gang up in the doorway.

"Let me pass, please!" she demanded timidly, and one youth chuckled.

"Let's see what you've got, first, gorgeous!" he demanded, and with her hands full she couldn't stop him from parting her cloak and reaching for her flesh. Lancelot crossed the shed in four long steps and reached out a gentle left hand to tap his shoulder. As the youth turned he ran straight into a furious fist that knocked him absolutely cold long before he hit the ground. In the next moment the remaining three, all grins gone, made a ring around the Prime G, work-calloused fists ready.

"The stranger wants to play rough," said one. "We know some games like that too, don't we, brothers?"

Lancelot brushed Miss Osmonde briskly aside and snarled, "All right, come on, who'll be first to die!" and the Shogleet sighed. It seemed this was a universal pattern. The thrill of violence, the urge to fight, and, too, the inevitable male-female involvement—a curious mixture of savagery and gentleness. The village youths pounced in unison, fist and knees and elbows all in vigorous play as the quiet storeroom erupted to yells and groans, the

sharp clumps and thumps of blows on flesh. The Shogleet saw no need to intervene. This was the one area in which Lancelot really was expert. In very short order only he was left standing, battered and hard-breathing but triumphant. Now came the outraged and indignant merchant who had employed him, trotting across the yard to survey the wreckage of his work-force.

"What's the meaning of this?" he cried. "How am I to get my work done, now that you've crippled all my men?" But Lancelot was in high gear now. He seized the merchant by his cloak, pinned him against his own door with a furious hand and glared at him balefully.

"You should have thought of that all the time they were standing idle watching me do their work for them. They are your men. I hold you responsible for the fact that they tried to molest my handmaiden! Now listen! I'll finish loading this cart. Then *you* will provide a meal for both of us, and somewhere to sleep this night. And in the morning you will take us to the city, to Lavinum, understand?"

The merchant, by no means a small man, tried to struggle free, but Lancelot shook him like a doll. "You hear me? Or shall I pull this shed down around your ears, man?"

"All right! All right!" the dealer choked, and then massaged his throat as he was released. "You'll pay me, of course? We agreed—"

"I'll pay you nothing! You tried to trick me, and that makes me angry. I am not to be tricked. I am Apollo, and this is my handmaiden, Sybil!"

The Shogleet saw again that same curious frown, the mixture of unbelief and anxiety, that had moved the farmer. It decided to intervene, manipulating enough energy to raise sacks and place them into the cart to fill it. The merchant was just in time to see the last ones settle. With bulging eyes he stared at the cart, then at Lancelot. "Very well . . . lord—" he mumbled. "If you

will come this way I will command my goodwife to feed you, and your Sibyl." The look he gave Miss Osmonde was full of fear. "This way," he repeated, taking the jug and goblet from her and leading off.

"Oh Lancelot!" she whispered, touching his bruises. "You were so fierce, so terrible, so wonderful, so . . . godlike!"

"Those slobbering louts!" he muttered. "They dared to lay hands on you. I couldn't stand that. Not you, Sybil!" She was touched. As the cringing merchant set them at a table and harried his wife to bring food, nothing would satisfy her but that she would procure a bowl of warm water and linen to clean and ease his hurts, lingering on the task much longer than the superficial bruises required. The Shogleet sighed. Chemistry again.

Leaving them to their pleasures it went off again in search of information. The farmer, Evos, had come in for his dinner with a tale to tell, and the merchant had something to wag his tongue about too. The Shogleet listened, learned, and thought much. In a while it was able to make its way to a long, low, stone-walled building near the agora, there to insinuate itself through the bars of a small window innocent of glass. Inside were four rough but reasonably comfortable cots, the pungent odor of ill-dressed sheepskin, and Lancelot and Miss Osmonde, huddled together in dejection.

"They fooled me again!" Lancelot growled. "The village inn, that crook of a merchant assured me. Put us up for the night, he said. And look at it! This is a brig, if ever I saw one!"

"It is, in fact, the village jail," the Shogleet confirmed, and Miss Osmonde shrieked gently.

"Who are you talking to, Lancelot?" she quavered, huddling close to him. The Shogleet decided to assume visible form in its favorite goblin-shape, as Lancelot told her, off-handedly:

"Just a friend of mine, nothing to worry about. Look,

just bust us out of here and I will really give this village something to think about!"

"Let us not be hasty," the Shogleet counseled. "Think of it as an exercise in logic and reason. Quite obviously this culture has taken logic to the point of casuistry, but that is a two-edged weapon, remember."

"What's the good of that, while I'm in the pokey?"

"Only for a few hours. Tomorrow, when the produce goes to market, your captors intend to take you before the city fathers of Lavinum, to dispute and claim a reward."

"A reward?" Lancelot shouted. "How can there be a price on us? We've only just got here!" Miss Osmonde said nothing, merely stared owl-eyed and clung tightly to Lancelot.

"Apparently," the Shogleet explained, "there have been a number of outbreaks of unreason recently, the beginnings of a subversive swing away from logic and back to myth and superstition. There is a substantial reward offered for anyone who can bring in a hardcase to be made an example of."

"Me!" Lancelot groaned. "I had to go and stick my neck out." But then he remembered Miss Osmonde, shivering within the strength of his arm. "What about Sybil? She didn't do anything!"

"I'm afraid you did, Miss Osmonde." The Shogleet regarded her and she swallowed audibly. "You, of all people, should have appreciated the cultural significance of a Sibyl."

"What's that again?" Lancelot demanded, baffled.

"A Sibyl is the name given to a priestess of Apollo. When excited and inspired by her worship of him, she has the power to prophesy, to foretell the future, usually in a cryptic manner, with a wild and insane appearance."

"Good grief!" Lancelot squeezed her affectionately and asked, "Is that a fact? Why didn't you say?"

She had to swallow several times before her voice would work. Then, "I didn't like to mention it, Lancelot,

especially when you chose to be Apollo and were so wonderfully like the real thing, so inspiring to me! Oh dear!"

"Never mind." He hugged her again. "We'll make it work out. You don't have to worship me, though. Not you!" With a visible effort he dragged his mind back to the problem at hand. "You mean they believe all that stuff about prophecy and prediction, here?"

"It appears to be the one nonrational factor they will accept, and even this they bolster with logic. In a strictly causal universe, if one has enough data one can, in fact, make accurate predictions. Would you agree with that, Miss Osmonde?" She gulped again bravely.

"That is a fundamental logical axiom, yes. But I don't see how it can be of any help to us in our present case."

"Perhaps not, but it is worth remembering. There is one other point to be made. As a devotee of logic and reason you should be acquainted with various paradoxes?"

"Why yes, of course!"

"I suggest you instruct Lancelot in some of them, for use in case there should be anything resembling a trial."

"I'm no good with words," Lancelot growled. "Trial by combat is more my line. Something big and spectacular, to scare the pants off them!"

"A meaningless metaphor, in this culture, but it raises a further point. Will you be warm enough? I understand the evenings are very chill in these latitudes."

"Don't worry, we'll keep warm." Lancelot hugged her close again. "I'll keep you warm, Sybil. Fancy you being a priestess of Apollo and not mentioning it to me. You should have said!"

"I wanted to," she whispered, gazing up at him. "I knew, right from the first moment I saw you, that something wonderful was happening to me. And when you chose to be Apollo, I could only think of worshipping you, of giving myself completely to your service. Then



when I found favor in your eyes I didn't dare say anything that might break the spell, that might turn you away."

"That's not likely to happen, Sybil. I'm not really Apollo, but you make me wish I could be . . . just to please you—"

"To inspire and excite me . . . you do! To me, you are Apollo!"

The Shogleet withdrew tactfully, but for all the difference it would have made, a thunderclap wouldn't have distracted the murmuring pair.

## II

The village, like any farming community anywhere, was astir at dawn's crack, the prisoners being disturbed and fed with crude but wholesome fare before the sun was an hour into the sky. Having kept a periodical check on them throughout the night the Shogleet knew they had been driven to cling together tightly against the cold, sharing cloaks and sheepskins, but they seemed none the worse for it. They ate heartily and Miss Osmonde seemed infused with an inner glow that found outlet in a dazed smile every time she eyed Lancelot, as if she couldn't quite believe what she saw. When the time came the villagers unceremoniously roped the unresisting pair together and tossed them on the very cart of bean sacks that Lancelot had loaded. The docility was by the Shogleet's advice.

"Save your resistance for later," it had said, "when it will be the more effective. At least you are riding to Lavinum!"

Lavinum itself, from the gracious villas of the outer suburbs in to the majestic marble structures of the city's

heart, bore traces that told their own tale to the discerning eye. The Shogleet needed neither instrument nor chart to detect incipient stagnation in the ill-swept streets, the neglected paintwork, the knots of unkempt idlers at almost every corner and the overall atmosphere of indifference that even market day did little to dispel. Wall-daubings added their own emphasis. "CUI BONO" read one, "CAVE DIES IRAE" another, "DELEND A FACTUM" a third, and there were others. As the caravan came nearer the city center Lancelot managed to spot the right time to ask:

"What happens next? What will they do to us?"

"You are to be taken to the forum, before the council of elders, who will interrogate you, apportion the reward fairly, and decide on your punishment." Lancelot growled, heedless of sniggers and mumbling from the onlookers.

"Punishment? Before the trial?"

"By any standards you are already guilty of illogical acts!"

"I don't care!" Miss Osmonde declared. "Whatever happens, I just don't care, not after last night. My mighty Apollo!"

"Don't talk like that, Sybil. This isn't the end. We'll show them a thing or two, you'll see. Just take your cue from me."

"Anything, Apollo! I'll do anything you want me to!" Her smile was radiant but touched with wistfulness. "They're going to execute us. Can't you hear the murmurings?" The Shogleet had also heard and was disturbed. "But I don't care," she repeated. "So long as I am with you, I don't care about anything!"

Lancelot seemed embarrassed, almost relieved when the cart halted for them to be dragged down to the ground and bidden to march. The caravan broke now, the produce going to the market, the prisoners, trailed by an expectant mob, marching to the forum. Farmer Evos was there doggedly, and merchant Menes, each determined

to grab all the possible credit, and as much of the reward as they could. Whispers burned through the followers like a fire through straw. "Magicians!" "God-believers!" "The woman calls herself a Sibyl!"

The forum of Lavinum, true to old tradition, was an open space square set about with magnificent marble buildings, the one on the east side being a temple to Athena. Close to its steps were gathered rough stone benches in stark contrast. Here the elders sat, and ringing them at a distance but within earshot were all the citizens of Lavinum who had nothing better to do. The Shogleet, making a quick survey, saw little of wisdom here—despite the temple dedicated to that quality—or of the venerability of the council. They were just old, and cunning, men. This temple, like the others, was grubby and ill-kept. The square itself was plagued with dust devils and rubbish that stirred up as the helpless pair were marched and halted before the benches. The old man in the front-row center spoke loudly.

"I am Polydox, Senior Solon. Who brings prisoners before this council, and why?"

The farmer got in first, in a gabble. "I am Evos of Eprus, Great Solon. This man is mad. Together with the woman he did cross my field coming down from Mount Artiga, an hour after dawn yesterday, claiming he had not gone up thereby. Whereas all know there is no other way up nor down, unless it be by my field. When I demanded of him the due payment for setting foot on my land he refused, naming himself Apollo!" Giving the appreciative gasp time to die down, he went on. "Then by some kind of trick he made himself invisible, passed me, and then called his woman, naming her Sibyl!" That got another gasp, over which he shouted hurriedly, "I claim the reward, a hundred drachs!"

The merchant protested immediately, then started to tell his tale, naming himself Menes "whom all know to be fair and just" and recounted without any blush exactly

how he had tried to defraud Lancelot into working his passage, the incredible conflict and wreckage of his workhands, and the bare-faced trap into overnight jail, making them to sound as tributes to his cunning: "and the man did, indeed and in my hearing, name himself Apollo, and the woman as his Sibyl. I claim the reward!"

That part, at least, was well within the competence of Polydox. In a casual, off-hand tone he declared, "The reward is appointed thus: one-fourth to Evos, three-fourths to Menes, to be paid after the accusations are proven. The whole to be diminished by twenty drachs for every hour that such proof may take. *Fiat justitia, ruant coeli!* We will now examine the man. Strip him!"

Now the Shogleet noticed some seven or eight among the crowd who, by their orderly manner, obviously well-used to such scenes, were probably officials of some kind. Two of them came promptly forward to tear away Lancelot's cloak and bonds and shove him clear. Lancelot glared. Polydox glared back.

"Man!" he said. "Tell your name and where you come from. Then answer the charges you have heard. Speak true. We like not liars, here."

Lancelot made a fierce grin and then, to the Shogleet's mild surprise, said, "That's just too bad, isn't it? Because I'm a liar. You can't believe a word I say." If the Shogleet was pleased at this evidence of learning, the audience was not. After a first involuntary snigger or two there was a thunderous silence. Then the council members started muttering among themselves. It was noticeable that the audience was almost totally of middle-aged and elderly citizens, and all male. The rumblings went on for a long time, but eventually Polydox came back to his prisoner.

"Man, your words offend reason. Answer me, do you claim to be Apollo?"

"Would you believe me if I did? And answer me one, Polydox. Why do you and your wise men turn your

backs on wisdom?" and he pointed to the temple. The Shogleet was quite impressed, but Polydox wasn't. Dark with anger he retorted:

"You are a man. All men are mortal. Therefore you are mortal. And that can be proved!" He made a sign and one man sorted himself out from the crowd, came to bow and said:

"Great Solon?"

"Gordo, a small task for you. Thrash some sanity into this fool and we will then question him further."

The Shogleet sensed joyous anticipation now in the audience, and understandably, for Gordo was half as big again as Lancelot, in all directions. By the way they cleared a space and offered to hold the big man's cloak, this kind of thing had happened before. But there came an interruption none had expected, as Miss Osmonde tore herself free of her bonds and strode to Lancelot's side, then to kneel before him. "Oh glorious Apollo!" she cried. "Greater and more powerful than any man, show them! I, your proud and devoted Sibyl, do declare for all to hear and behold: thus do the gods deal with unbelievers!"

Lancelot strode forward, slightly stunned by the fervor of her cry, and thus a fraction too slow to fend off a roundhouse right that connected with his head and sent him sideways and down with a bump. Gordo, grinning widely, came on to swing a calloused foot in a kick that boomed off Lancelot's ribs, pitching him over and into a sprawl. But then the euphoric daze wore off and rage took over. Snorting, Lancelot rolled over just in time to avoid being stomped, rose to a knee, swayed, then came to his feet with a punch that traveled all the way from the ground before it exploded in Gordo's middle. The slog of the blow echoed back from surrounding marble and Gordo folded, tottering back in whooping need of breath. Lancelot followed tigerishly, his two hands poised like blades, waiting for the big man to straighten up. But

Gordo had a few tricks of his own. He came out of his "agonized" crouch with surprising speed to flail another blockbusting punch, but this time Lancelot chopped viciously and expertly and swayed away, circling as Gordo winced and heaved, trying to make his arm work. Deliberately now, Lancelot stepped in to administer a left-right head-shaker, and stepped out again leaving Gordo glassy-eyed and wide open. The audience was still as death as it came time for the finish, the quietus. Lancelot threw a dig to the body to fold his opponent again, then swayed and threw a tremendous right-hand blockbuster that exploded in exactly the right place. It left Gordo standing for a moment, out on his feet, then he fell all of a piece, like a felled tree. Lancelot flexed his knuckles, blew on them, stalked back to Polydox. "You were saying . . . ?" he demanded.

"No more questions! Seize him!"

Lancelot offered no resistance as six of them leaped on him. "This is logic?" he mocked. "This is sanity, sweet reason, justice?"

"Silence!" Polydox was black with rage. "It is well known that a madman is more cunning than a fox, stronger than any three men. You are guilty, beyond all doubt of behavior contrary to reason. You will be punished accordingly. Hold him safe, make ready the chains. Let any others who seek to overthrow reason and common sense observe and be warned. We will now examine the woman. Strip her!"

The Shogleet half-expected some kind of screech of objection or offense, but apparently Miss Osmonde's conversion to the worship of Apollo had gone further than mere play-acting. Ignoring the heavy hands that ripped away her cloak, she strode forward unashamed, almost flaunting her nakedness, holding her chin high as she stared at Polydox, and then around at the gaping audience. Something about her manner struck them to awed silence. Even Polydox seemed stopped for a question to ask in

the face of her defiant stare. Then, suddenly and dramatically, she raised her hands high to the sky and wailed, looking up at the sun. The wail switched to a full-throated maniacal cackle that sent shivers and rustlings through the crowd. Lancelot stared at her, goggle-eyed.

"Supreme Apollo!" she cried. "Your light burns the skies. Your perfect presence manifests itself here in god-like beauty"—her arms fell and she pointed to Lancelot—"to dazzle our eyes. Most wonderful, most perfect man of all the gods, now hear thy Sibyl, thy slave, they most adoring and devoted handmaiden. Fired with thy great love, excited by thy manly nobility, inspired by thy perfection, I call on thee to grant me a small favor. This is a cold, a narrow, a spiritless people, a nation of cheats, robbers and double-dealers, of old men who talk much and do nothing, who claim wisdom but have only precept, who haggle the price of all things yet know the worth of nothing. The great concepts for which they built temples are as neglected and worn as the temples themselves and the young grow up full of restlessness and ill humor for want of a sign. A sign!" she grew shrill. "Give them a sign!"

Lancelot caught at his cue, stiffened, raised his chin. "What sign would convince them, my much-loved Sibyl? What shall I show them?"

She shook her hair wildly about her face and writhed, making that chill cackle again. "I see!" she cried. "I see—" she aimed a palm at the sun and peered past it, "—I see the great white winged horse of the gods coming to spread fear, bearing vengeance. I see the sun grow dark at noon, and a great thunderbolt from heaven that strikes the temple of wisdom, the temple of great Athena, and it is destroyed! A sign, Apollo, inspired by thy great love for me. A sign!"

Long before she had completed her words the Shogleet was shimmering on Lancelot's shoulder, hearing him

groan and demand in an urgent whisper, "What in the world's gotten into her?"

"She is acting out her part," the Shogleet reminded him. "Your praise has inspired her. Her manner is certainly having an effect on the audience!"

"Yes, but . . . hell, Pegasus? And an eclipse? She must be out of her mind! Can't you stop her?"

"It would be most unwise, at this moment."

"All right, but we have to make this stuff work, remember?"

"Perhaps. I notice that her dramatics may have impressed the populace, but not the council. They are made of sterner stuff."

Polydox seemed angry rather than afraid, and the rest of the council with him. They mumbled together awhile after she had concluded her speech; Polydox rose, glared at the crowd, then the two magicians. "Seize them!" he commanded. "Out of their own mouths are they convicted. Fetter them, each by a leg, and chain them in the temple they seem to venerate so much. Perhaps, by noon tomorrow, something of its wisdom will have inspired them to recant! In the meanwhile we will devise for them a fitting punishment. People of Lavinum"—with an orator's cunning he pitched his voice softly so that they had to be quiet to hear him—"you have heard. You have heard wild words from irresponsible people, vain attempts to set aside the laws of common sense. This is no god, but a man. This is no wise woman, merely a woman, formidable of tongue as are all her kind. Tomorrow at noon they will die, just like any other wild and dangerous agitators. Take them away!"

For all the heat of the day, the shady interior of the temple, open to the four winds, was cool, the marble tiles of the floor chill to the feet. "This will be like an icebox when the sun goes down," Lancelot predicted grimly. "We have to do something before then." A stout iron fetter had



been riveted about his ankle, the twin of it about hers, and a length of strong chain joined them, looped about a massive column but leaving them freedom to move. She stood close to him, seeming stunned by what she had done.

"I just said whatever came into my head," she confessed. "Oh, Apollo, have I done it all wrong for you?"

"That's all right." He put his arm about her reassuringly. "We'll work something out. You did just fine, wonderful!"

"At least," she sighed, turning up her face to him, "we have another night together. A whole night! So much, much more than I had dared to hope for!" and she gave him her lips, pressing herself eagerly to him.

"Yes, well"—he managed to break free without being too rough—"we have a lot to do, Sybil. Problems to work out."

"You'll be able to do them," she said, supremely confident. "You can do anything. And we'll be together—"

"Where did you get the concept of a flying horse?" the Shogleet demanded, highly curious. "Such a thing is aerodynamically ludicrous!"

"It is not!" she said indignantly. "It's one of the best known of all the Greek myths. Why, we even named a constellation for it!"

"That's right!" Lancelot supported her. "Pegasus is a star group."

"So it may be," the Shogleet murmured, "and a myth, but a horse that will fly . . . ?" Already Miss Osmonde had dismissed the problem and was pressing herself urgently close to Lancelot, stroking his hair.

"We have such little time, Apollo!" she murmured. "So little time!"

"You'll be able to fix it!" Lancelot declared. "Sure you will! And the rest of it, if you try real hard!"

The Shogleet left them to their own amusements, adopting the dog-form again for its passage through the

city and then by means of its own to the hilltop where the ship lay. Just to correct any minor details, it ran off what data the ship's computer had on Pegasus. There was quite a lot, including several highly imaginative artist's reconstructions; also the theory that the horse with wings was merely a benevolent version of the even older dragon myth, and that one possibly came down from lizards and reptiles of the age of dinosaurs. None of which helped much. It ran the machine again, as a second check to its own intelligence, over the aerodynamic potentials of wings, and brooded over the result. Then, accepting the challenge, it set to work to create a myth. The result would have passed muster to an uncritical eye in a dim light. It could even fly, not very stably or smoothly, with an action like bouncing on a trampoline, but flying nevertheless. By which time the sun was sliding rapidly down the sky-vault into evening.

By comparison, the eclipse and the thunderbolt were relatively simple matters, and the ship itself carried mechanisms that could readily be adapted to produce such phenomena. The Shogleet worked on those diligently until it was satisfied, and also until it was close to sunset. "By which time," it mused, "no one will be able to see the manifest errors in my Pegasus," and it took on the shape of a winged horselike creature, ran a few steps and vaulted into the air, to flap its majestic way through the red sky to Lavinum. During the routine of flight it gave thought to the larger problem, of what was really amiss with this curious culture, and evolved an answer that differed in many ways from anything the two humans had been thinking. But then it was close enough to swoop impressively about the city, and to extend its perceptions to discover how Lancelot was getting along with his newly inspired Miss Osmonde. It heard voices, strange ones. The prisoners were no longer alone!

"Gotta hand it to you, palms and laurels, Apoll-oh!

baby," an admiring male voice was declaring. "She's a real chill thrill, that Sibyl of yours. How come you never do the priestess bit with me, Agira?"

"Any time you get muscles like that, Casso, I'll be first in line, you watch me. I really yearn towards that male shape, Apoll-oh, man! You needing any more priestesses soon, maybe? I learn, like real quick!"

"Chill off, Agie girl. Like she's got three of everything you ever had. Say, Apoll-oh . . . you really going to douse the sun and go pow with the marble makings, for real?"

"Now look!" Lancelot sounded irritable. "Why don't you go roll a hoop with your own friends, and leave us alone? I don't mean any offense, but I have things to do, can't you see?"

"That's what I've been saying, god-man! That's the type thing I crave to do, too. You care to swap, maybe? That chain won't make no never mind. Who cares about an ankle? And Agie, she's real slick—"

"Oh Apollo! Don't stop to talk!" That was surely Miss Osmonde's voice. "Just keep doing it . . . you're so wonderful . . . so male . . . !"

"Hey fellers!" other voices swelled up out of the background. "This you gotta see! A horse-bird, for real!" and the Shogleet set itself to pinion down into a swoop and four-footed landing by the steps of the temple. Seven or eight tousled youngsters came to stare and exchange words of wonder. All were grubby, unkempt, naked but for drapes of wilted flowers and herbs. If they were a fair sample of the subversives, the Shogleet thought, it was small wonder Polydox and the council weren't unduly anxious. And now Lancelot came, to the extent of his chain, with Miss Osmonde clinging to him.

"Hey, that's great!" he exclaimed in praise, and Galactic. "But what do we do about these leg irons?"

"A moment!" The Shogleet adjusted its energies, focused them. "Now, you will find the metal soft enough

to pull apart with your hands. When you are both free, press it together again and I will harden it once more. Let your audience observe, it will help to impress them."

In fact the strong-man feat stilled the youngsters much more effectively than any supernatural demonstration had done hitherto. As Lancelot led Miss Osmonde down the steps the Shogleet saw several of the youths take up the fetters and stare at them in awe. Apparently metal bands were of a different, more convincing order of reality for them.

"What's the next item on the agenda?" Lancelot asked, preparing to get up. The Shogleet had been considering this.

"I think I had better fly around a few times, to create an impression, and then we must return to the ship. There are some mechanisms you ought to see and understand. Are you ready?"

Lancelot swung himself up and into place, then extended a strong arm down to hoist Miss Osmonde up. "Oh!" she cried nervously. "I've never ridden a horse before, not even an ordinary one!"

"Nothing to it." Lancelot lowered her into place in front of him. "Just settle right down, rest against me, and you'll be all right. Here we go!"

The Shogleet trotted three steps and went up, flapping mightily. The angle of ascent was unavoidably steep. Miss Osmonde cried out, reaching forward to clutch the flowing mane as she slid suddenly backwards into Lancelot's lap. Then she cried out again, in a quite different tone, as the Shogleet-Pegasus bounced into the air with every powerful beat of its pinions.

"Oh! Apollo!"

"Gosh! I'm sorry . . . I can't help it . . . !"

"Sorry?" she breathed. "Oh, Apollo! This is heavenly! So wonderful! Ride, Pegasus, ride! Harder, higher! Go! Go!"

The Shogleet swung into a steady air-beating rhythm,

climbing and swooping about the city center, the two humans clinging breathlessly to its back and bouncing in time to the mighty pinions. This would be a night to remember, it mused, one the good citizens of Lavinum would never forget. But was it the right way to set about the main problem? It wondered whether it should offer its cogitations to the two humans but they seemed blissfully content just to ride, clinging tightly to each other, so it contented itself with a series of dives and climbs and aerobatics, and then set off on the long up-flight to the top of Mount Artiga once more, flapping in to a neat landing in the quiet dell and settling solidly. Lancelot slid off, seemingly exhausted, having to breathe hard and long before he could summon strength to lift Miss Osmonde down. She seemed as weary as he, barely able to stand, clinging heavily to him.

"Oh dear!" she gasped. "This must be a dream! Nothing so absolutely heavenly as that could possibly be real. Oh Apollo, never was there such an ecstatic ride before, never! It is all a dream, isn't it?"

"If it is, it's the most wonderful dream I ever had too, Sybil!" The Shogleet watched them stagger away, transmuted itself and followed, to see Miss Osmonde fall fast asleep in the act of throwing her arms around Lancelot. It directed a dosage of tuned energy into him and saw him shake his head and come fully conscious once more, sitting up and gently drawing a cover over the sleeping technologist. Then he stayed awhile, gazing down at her, studying the smile on her sleeping face and shaking his head. "Anybody would think she was making up for lost time," he murmured. "Maybe she is, at that. I don't wonder she's convinced it's all a dream. That ride was really something!"

"I'm glad it was appreciated. But now you must pay attention to the devices I have prepared and recheck my figures. A small error could be vital. This," it proceeded to explain, "is a standard ion-flux collecting dish and

transmitter. As you know, an eclipse is produced by some opaque body intervening between the sun and the planet below."

"I know that!" Lancelot grumbled. "So what?"

"This dish, properly programmed, will fulfil that function over Lavinum at precisely noon tomorrow. It will obscure the sun for six minutes. In that time it will collect and store enough energy to produce a respectable thunderbolt when it is all released at once. But please recheck my figures, as it is necessary to be absolutely accurate, especially with the beam."

Lancelot grumbled, and yawned, and checked laboriously. And yawned and demanded, "Now look, I'm just about beat. No sleep last night, at all, and that ride was a lot of fun, but it takes it out of a man, you know? Is there any reason why I can't catch up on some sleep now? None of this gadgetry is due to move until midmorning tomorrow!"

"Sleep, certainly. Miss Osmonde needs rest too. Had it occurred to you, Lancelot, that she is along with you as a technical observer? And that she is now in no state to perform that function?"

"Oh good grief!" Lancelot was conscience-stricken. "You are so right. But what can I do? Now that she has . . . come right out of her shell, as you might say, I can't possibly persuade her to crawl back in again, can I?"

"I will give the matter some thought. Meanwhile I have one or two things of my own to do. Sleep well!"

Again traveling by its own distance-eating methods, the Shogleet went back to Lavinum, to become one unsuspected addition to the many nightmares that plagued that city that night. But this was a nightmare with a difference, with a message that it repeated over and over again, to unwary but receptive ears. The morning was well advanced by the time it returned to the peaceful little mountain dell, cautiously sending perceptions in advance.

There were quiet voices. The two were awake and enjoying a meal outside in the sunshine, on a mossy bank, talking softly to each other.

"No, truthfully, Sybil," Lancelot was patently sincere, "it's been a wonderful experience for me, too. You were . . . you are . . . really great, and I don't just mean in looks. The way you threw yourself into that performance—you convinced me, never mind the citizens. For me you were a goddess then, and you still are, just between us."

"That's the whole point, isn't it, Lancelot? Oh, I can't think of you as Lancelot, not like this. You'll always be Apollo, my divine lover. But it isn't real, is it, any of it? I mean"—she laughed unsteadily—"I know we are both acting out roles, playing parts that aren't really us. You must have had to play many parts, in your career, and you do it so well. And this isn't really me, is it? I mean . . . me, being quite naked together with a man and feeling so absolutely right, so good . . . and so thrilled with your love, and wanting it so desperately . . . and being able to tell you that, without a blush . . . that is not really me!"

"It's the you inside that has always been there and could never get out, Sybil, not until now."

"You do understand! I knew you would. But it can't last, Apollo. We know it can't. This is just a job for you, and then you'll have to move on. And I will have to go back to being a dynamic-technician. And I won't mind. I will have my dream, the most wonderful dream any girl ever had. You gave me my dream, darling Apollo. You made it all possible. I don't know how. I don't want to know how you do everything, how you managed that Pegasus—I just know that I shall never forget that frantic ride, and all your loving. Of rourse I want it to last, to go on. I want to ride again, with you, to lose my mind and go mad with your godlike strength. You can't blame me for that. But I do know it has all got to come to an end, sometime."

"You made it all possible, Sybil. It couldn't have happened without you. And I want it to last a long time, too. I'll never forget. There'll never be anyone quite like you again. To me you'll always be perfect."

The Shogleet backed tactfully away and transformed itself swiftly, to leap into the air and make a spectacular approach through the morning sunshine, bringing the two humans up standing to await its landing. Miss Osmonde was starry-eyed, clutching Lancelot's hand, her breasts agitated. "It's still a dream!" she sighed. "But so wonderful, so wonderful." She stretched her other hand tremulously to pat the white flank, then turned to Lancelot. "Will you ride again, with me?"

"Why not?" he said. "We have to go back to the council, by noon, to lay on our miracles for them, and we might as well go the way we came."

"Yes," she whispered. "But that's not for hours yet. Can't we go for a mad ride, just for the pleasure of it, just for us? Something to remember?"

"That's what I want too," he said simply, and scrambled up on the broad back, to reach down and hoist her up so that she could settle down happily astride, and wriggle her way onto his lap. Then, leaning forward to caress the Shogleet-horse's arched neck, she sighed.

"Go! As you never went before! Up; up and away!" and the early-to-work farmers of that region must have seen, and wondered at the sight, as a mighty white flying steed soared and cavorted through the sunlit air about the top of Mount Artiga, with two breathless and exhilarated humans clinging crazily to each other on its broad back. The Shogleet, listening to the rapturous panting of the pair, was more than ever convinced that it had the right solution to the culture problem, but this was not the time to discuss it. All too soon the stolen hours ran out and they had to land once more, to set the trigger mechanisms and prepare for the coming spectacle. Lancelot decided to introduce a touch of added brilliance.



"We have luminous paint," he said, "among the stores. Come on, let's look like something super-special, just this once. Not that you need anything to make you radiant, Sybil."

It was a scant half-hour before noon as they took off once more, into the sky and powering down the mountain slope towards Lavinum, to circle once around the square of the forum and then swoop in to a landing before the assembled council. The Shogleet was critically aware of sharp eyes and suspicion, but Lancelot had no such qualms as he dismounted and helped Miss Osmonde down to stand by his side. The people of Lavinum were there in their thousands, but all at a very safe and discreet distance, leaving it to their elected council to face the magic. And the Shogleet noted that, too: that the old men were grim, and angry, rather than fearful.

"Well, Polydox?" Lancelot challenged. "What do you say now? It is almost noon. Have you worked out a suitable punishment for me, Apollo, and my Sibyl here? If you have, let's hear it, while there's still time."

"You are beyond my power to punish," Polydox growled. "You are beyond all sense and reason. You, and that woman, and that . . . thing! We want nothing to do with you. Go away!"

"Can't do that. You heard the prophecy the Sibyl made. Darkness at noon and the temple destroyed with a thunderbolt, remember?"

"There's no need for that!" one of the other elders shouted, and Lancelot frowned. The dialogue wasn't going as planned.

"You are going to get it," he declared, "like it or not." And he raised his hand to point at the high-standing sun. In a moment a black blur began to eat away at one edge, and a mighty groan swept the distant watchers. Sudden breezes swept the square into swirls of dust and the scene grew swiftly darker. And darker still. Stars emerged, twinkling.

"That's enough!" Polydiox shouted angrily. "Undo it, whoever you are!"

"I am Apollo!" Lancelot shouted back, glowing in the dusk. "Why don't you admit it? I am Apollo, and this is my Sibyl!"

"And what if I do admit it? Then what?" Polydiox snarled. Lancelot frowned again and backed up close to the Shogleet-Pegasus to mumble:

"What's wrong with the old fool? What's he holding out for?"

"It is a well-observed phenomenon that the convinced believer cannot be diverted by force or contrary evidence. Opposition merely makes him more stubbornly convinced that he is right."

"Now you tell me!" Lancelot sighed, and moved back, to lower his arm. "I give you back your sun, old man. Observe. Learn the error of your ways. Do not incur the wrath of the gods again!"

In a moment or two the first fiery edge of the sun broke, and the cheers swelled up from the relieved crowd as warmth spread rapidly across the scene. Lancelot raised his arm again and got immediate silence. "The wrath of the gods!" he shouted, and aimed his arm back there at the temple of Athena. For three long seconds there was a dreadful hush, then a thick pencil of blue-white glare lanced down out of the clear sky; there was a moment of intense heat, then a shattering crash, and the marble roof of the temple flew apart in fragments, spraying the area with chips and dust. A succession of lesser crashes shook the ground as large chunks of stone fell inwards and smashed on the tiled floor, fountaining more dust. Then there was an echoing silence.

"And that's it!" Lancelot declared, dusting himself off. "What do you say now, old man?"

Polydiox was still angry. There was fear in his eyes now, and awe in his manner. All the members of the council were shaken. But all were, like their senior, angry above

all other feelings. "I say this!" Polydox raised his voice for all to hear. "You may be what you say you are. Apollo, god, devil, whatever you call yourself, so be it. But we want nothing of you. Go away! Leave us to our own ways. Or, if you are truly beyond all reason, and will not go . . . if you remain, know this much: we will fight you, oppose you in every way. We reject you and everything you stand for, and we will continue to reject you, night and day, until you leave us in peace, or until we are all dead. It may be within your power to strike us all dead here and now, for aught I know. But it makes no difference. We do not want you here! We reject you!"

Lancelot was totally and obviously baffled now. "I don't understand you," he said helplessly, and Polydox snarled.

"Of course you don't. You can't. Your ways are random, arbitrary, at your whim, without form or reason, sense or logic. It doubtless pleases you, inflates your ego, to have powers at your every whim. But we want no part of that. We prefer our well-ordered life, the sane and rational way, in which every man may know the rules by which he lives, and understand them, in which every man has equal say in how his life is to be conducted. Our ways are far from perfect, let that be admitted, but they are infinitely better than the misrule of magic and the wayward fancies of gods and priestesses!" Polydox had to stop, to cough and clear his throat of the fumes and stink of fused marble. Clouds were beginning to pile up and a fine rain had started. He got his breath again. "Go away, god! We want nothing of you. We are not perfect. We have problems of our own. But we will deal with them in our own way. We reject you!"

Lancelot shook his head, struggling to find proper words to reply, but before he could say anything there came a hail from the gradually nearing crowd of citizens. The council turned as one man, to see an elderly, gray-haired woman stalk out of the crowd and come rapidly

close, followed by one or two more, and then several, scores . . . of women.

"Wait!" she shouted. "We have something to say in this!"

"Hagara!" Polydox was furious. "What is the meaning of this? Have you lost your reason? Get back to your kitchen where you belong! This is men's work, no place for you!"

"Men's work?" she sneered, reaching the foot of the steps and setting her feet firmly, hands on hips. "Men's work?" She ran a scathing eye over the council, then Lancelot and Miss Osmonde and the Shogleet-horse. "A fine mess you're making of it, too, all of you. You, with your thunderbolts and your magic tricks, your servile, lick-spittle priestess . . . and you, with your everlasting talk!"

"Be silent, woman!"

"Oh no. We've had enough of that. You men have had it all your own way for far too long. That is going to be changed!"

"Silence!" Polydox raged. "Back to your kitchen. I will deal with you later. Go!"

"You'll deal with me now!" she retorted. "With all of us," and she swept her arm to include the horde of women at her heels. "We are having a say in this, in all things from now on. You!" she sneered at Lancelot. "You can go, and take her, and that, with you. We don't need anything like you. We can deal with this, in our own way!"

"Can you, indeed?" another of the council snorted. "We shall see about that. If Polydox can't control his own wife—"

Another woman thrust out of the crowd before he could complete the sentence. "Can you control me, Clepius?" she challenged shrilly. "*Can* you?"

The rest of the council shifted uneasily as they recognized familiar faces among the pressing women. Polydox

struggled for calm. "What is the meaning of this strange behavior, Hagara? What is it that you want here?"

"It is very simple," she declared instantly. "We want a voice, a right to become members of the council, a hand in the making of laws, the same rights and respect as men. Equal citizenship! That is what we want!" The crowd at her back nodded their agreement and began to chant in unison, "Equality! Equality!"

Polydox scowled darkly, let them go on for a moment or two, then spread his palms for silence. When he could be heard he was brief and positive.

"We refuse you!" he said flatly. "Now, go home, all of you!"

"And that's your answer, is it?"

"That is the answer!" he shouted. "Go home!"

"Very well!" Hagara had to shout too, against the rising wind and rain. "Know this, Polydox. You no longer have a home, only a house. You will get no more meals cooked except those you cook yourself. You'll do your own mending and tending, your own washing and sewing, you will gather your own eggs and vegetables . . . and you will make your own bed, aye, and warm it yourself, from this day on. And that goes for all you men. All men! Do you hear that?" She swung around now to rally the women. "Are we agreed, sisters? We make no homes, cook no meals . . . share no beds . . . until we have our way, our say, in this? Are we agreed?"

The instant and tremendous scream of assent made the council blench. Lancelot backed up against the Shogleet once more. "Is this your doing?"

"Not original," the Shogleet murmured. "I first saw the concept in a legend, and I adapted it. But it will work. It will mend the imbalance, set right the stagnation. There cannot be a healthy and viable society in which half the members have neither voice nor status."

"I suppose you're right. I hadn't thought much about it.

Do you think the council will cave in and give them what they want?"

"Perhaps not immediately, but in the end, yes, they will."

"Well!" Lancelot shrugged. He cringed from the sleet-ing rain. "We'd better get on our way. They don't need us any more." He went back to Polydox and grinned. "You have problems of your own all right, old man. Let's hope your sane and rational methods can sort them out. Good luck, and goodbye!" He scrambled aboard the Shogleet once more, hoisted Miss Osmonde into her seat of delight in his lap, and dug in his heels. "Ready for one more ride, Sybil?"

"Always!" she sighed, snuggling down tight, gasping as the Shogleet soared powerfully into the air. "I could never tire of this, Apollo, never!" and she bounced happily in rhythm with him as the Shogleet powered rapidly up and above the rainstorm into the bright sunshine.

"You're an amazing person, Sybil. You really do let everything go, when you feel like it. I would never have suspected—"

"I didn't know, myself, darling Apollo, until you happened to me. Now it seems that all my life has been waiting for this ecstasy . . . and you made it all possible, and glorious!"

"You did it!" Lancelot whispered, as they broke out into the sunshine. "You have what it takes to make a man want to do great things for you, to perform great deeds, to give you everything you want!"

"But you are already giving me everything I could ever want, dearest," she panted. "Everything! More than I had ever dreamed of, or thought possible. I know it can't last. I know it's too wonderful to be true, but it's so marvelous to have you ride with me, like this, that I'm silly enough to want it to go on, and on . . . never to stop!"

The Shogleet, listening, marveled to itself all over again

at this further evidence of the polarity between male and female. If the men and women of Lavinum could be measured by the same yardstick, then there could be no doubt whatever that Hagara and the rest of the women would have their way, in time. But how long? It craned its neck around to murmur to Lancelot in a voice pitched only for his ear: "Miss Osmonde still has her duty as observer. Perhaps we should not return to the control station until we are quite sure the technique is working out properly?"

"That's a point!" Lancelot muttered, clutching Miss Osmonde tightly. "It could take a while. I'll ask her." He hugged her more tightly and breathed in her ear. "Sybil! There's no call for us to go back to base just yet awhile. After all, it's your job to hang around and watch the way things work out, so that you can make out a report."

"I could never report this, lover! No one would believe it!" she gasped. "And I wouldn't want to anyway! This is our dream!" She breathed hard for a while, then: "How long do you think . . . we could make it last?"

"I don't know!" he admitted breathlessly. "Couple of weeks, maybe? But there's one sure way to find out!"

"What's that?" she asked anxiously, and he laughed.

"Try it, and see! What's that line from Macbeth? 'And cursed be he who first cries "Hold, enough!" ' We stay here until you're ready to go back, right? Whenever you say!"

"Oh, Apollo!" she cried fervently. "Now I know it's a dream, and I am never going to wake up, never!"

At which the Shogleet sighed, and kept flying, heading for the mountaintop. Never is a very long time, it thought. It would be an interesting datum to record for future reference.

## ARABIAN KNIGHT

### I

When Lancelot finally reported to the planet controller's office for duty, Turnham seemed impatient and yet relieved. "What took you so long?" he demanded, at the same time as he came to shake Lancelot's hand. "Three months, just to collect reference coordinates?"

"There were a lot of suppressed tensions, controller, a big build-up. Nothing else we could do but ride it out. You had tech-Osmonde's report?"

"Yes. Just the gist, of course. She seems completely satisfied. A thorough job. Well now," he went back and sat, "with that out of the way, and you back on the job—"

"Something big on, sir?" Lancelot caught up and became alert.

"Something quite unprecedented. Unique! Never known in the Vivarian Service before. As you know, in the best of all possible worlds it is our job in this service to provide optimum cultural environments for certain well-defined psycho-types: agrarian, feudal, logical, whatever they may be—"

"Which one's gone wrong this time?" Lancelot anticipated him.

"Three!" Turnham groaned. "It's called Islam, and is based on the master-servant, paternal, semi-oriental culture pattern of the Caliphates. Strange, the way people are made! But that's not our concern. Our job is to maintain constancy, avoid change. Very few people indeed are genetically endowed to be happy with constant change. Most prefer the well-worn paths, the known and familiar ways, the regularity—"



"What's gone wrong?" Lancelot cut through his rhetoric briskly, and Turnham mopped his brow agitatedly.

"You're quite right. I'm wandering. I'm totally disorganized, in fact. Lake, one of our agents has gone renegade!"

"Renegade?" Lancelot gasped. "But that's impossible! The tests, all the psycho-profiles, the training . . . it can't happen!"

"I know. It shouldn't happen. But it has. Richard Hassan . . . Lord! That name, itself, should have warned me. Of course, with his inside information and access to data, it has been simple for him to work his way into power, to take over the role of caliph. Caliph of Baghdad!" The Shogleet was highly intrigued. In the three months during which Lancelot had been constantly busy satisfying Miss Osmonde's needs, there had been little for it to do apart from keeping him charged up with the necessary vitality, and so it had been free to comb the data banks of the ship's computer. In consequence it knew a fair amount about Islam and the Caliphate culture pattern. Lancelot was more to the point.

"What have you done to stop him?"

"What *can* I do? In his position he can jeopardize the whole culture, the lives of several thousand innocent people, if we make any overt move. Our only way is by infiltration—and I've already lost three agents that way!"

"Right!" Lancelot squared his shoulders. "I'm here. When do I start?"

"I knew I could count on you, Lake. But it's not that simple. You see, you weren't available, and the situation was so critical, that I had no choice but to ethergram H.Q. for aid. And they sent me a G-Two. Sandy Thorpe. And I've regretted it ever since. For three days now she has had my entire executive staff and synthesizers in a turmoil, requesting this, demanding that, wanting to know where the devil you were—"

"She?" Lancelot caught up again. "A G-Two female? I didn't know there were any of those."

"My dear Lake!" Turnham went off at another tangent. "You don't seem to realize there isn't a capital G field agent anywhere higher than Four actually *doing* field work. They are all department heads, in offices. A G-Three in the field is an unheard of eccentricity. G-Two Thorpe is all of that!"

"What does that make me?" Lancelot demanded, and Turnham smiled.

"The answer to my prayers, I hope. Ah! That sounds like her now!" The Shogleet had long since detected the rapid approach of booted feet. Now the two men turned to stare as the door slid open and she strode in. She was an impact on any eye. Even the Shogleet was impressed. A blaze of fiery red curls, added a coronet to her almost six-foot height, accented the dagger-blue stare of her eyes, the bold scarlet of her mouth. Her beauty was arrogantly displayed in the thrust of her chin, the swell of her magnificent breasts within the sheer knit of a white leotard, and the strong columns of her legs, the stance of her calf-high white boots. Even at rest she gave off an aura of impatience as her blue stare surveyed Lancelot from head to toe.

"So!" she said, in a rich throaty purr. "You must be Lake, Prime G. At last!" She strode forward, thrust out her hand. "Glad to know you, Lake. Now, maybe, we can get on with the job! This whole damned platform seems to be exclusively staffed with weeds and chair-polishers, old women of both sexes. It's a pleasure to meet a real man. Fit, are you?"

"Enough!" Lancelot retorted, matching her grip defensively. "Miss Thorpe. Glad to know you!"

"Let me look at you." She circled him, jabbing with her finger critically at various spots. "I've heard a lot about you, Lake. Fine! Good! No flab, that's what I like to see. Just the man I need!"

"Wait up a bit!" Lancelot objected. "What's this all about?"

"I'll explain as we go, it'll save time. We'll want the full kit and backup, Turnham. See to it! This way, Lake!" She seized his arm and led him briskly along to the briefing room. "We'll have the routine language and culture implant, of course, but I can fill you in while we're doing that. Naturally"—she halted abruptly—"you outrank me by one grade, if you want to lean on that. It's up to you. Only I've been chewing at this thing for three days now, and I know it backwards. I've studied Dick Hassan's psycho-profile. And I have a plan of sorts, a *modus operandi* that is just about the only way we will ever be able to get near him. Do you insist on being boss, or can we work this thing between us, equal partners? Up to you!"

Lancelot shrugged. "I'll try to keep up with you, Thorpe," he said, meaning to be sarcastic, but she took it straight and thumped his shoulder happily, showing white teeth in a broad grin.

"Good man! It's going to take the two of us, believe me." The Shogleet, vastly curious now, went with them into the briefing room. This was a new kind of female, one who threatened to invalidate the whole picture it had built up on the male-female polarity effect. As the two agents sat side by side under headclamps and wires, watching instructional hologram screens, it was even more impressed to see Agent Thorpe touch Lancelot's hand and go right on talking, leaving the implant business to her unconscious. For the majority of agents an implant was a full-time experience. Apparently Thorpe was superior to that.

"That culture down there," she said, "is a synthesis of all the main features of Islamic legend. The island continent is about the size of Australia back on Earth. Ever been there? I'm from Hobart, myself. Great country. Anyway, it's big enough to provide desert sands, heat, oases and the nomadic life, for those who need that kind of

thing. And five cities, reasonably isolated, set up to satisfy those who need myth and magic with their daily bread. There is Samarkand, of course, where they work in gold and silver and precious metals; Shiraz, where they make the wines and spirits and other fancy booze; Bokkhara, where they specialize in spinning and weaving, carpets and fine linen and all that stuff; Ishtar, the ancient, the place of knowledge and history, full of libraries, and scrolls, and scholars. And there's Baghdad itself, the capital. That's where our boy is, the renegade!"

"It must be a crazy sort of mixed-up life down there!"

"It is!" she laughed. "But there you are, the universe is full of oddballs, people who would rather have exotic notions like afreets and jinns, magic spells, ogres, flying carpets, anything but the cold reality. This is for them."

"You mean, they really do have magic down there? Laid on?"

"All done with electronics, Lake. Fancy gadgetry. And all under strict control from a central computer, until now. You see, if you want to be a nomad, a sheik, fine! Or if you'd rather be a craftsman, or run a bazaar, be a merchant, ply a trade—that's fine too. You live soft. You have slaves to wait on you, dancing girls to entertain you—if that's what you want."

"Slaves? Dancing girls? People won't stand still for that, surely?"

"That's the whole point. The menial stuff is done by androids, controlled by the computer. And all the top-decision rules, the laws, the supreme bossing, is done the same way. It's all controlled. That's just to make sure the whole system stays stable and nobody gets too many big ideas, see?"

"I get it!" Lancelot growled. "This Hassan has moved in?"

"Right! Instead of being just an observer, his proper role, he has got himself right up to the top, the Caliph. The caliph figure is masterminded by the computer, but

Hassan is different. He has the computer on his side, in his hand, *and* the power that goes with it, all the gadgets."

"That sounds like quite a chore. Say, isn't there some way to cut off his power-source itself?"

"Good thinking, Lake. That was my first thought too, only it won't work. Each city is supplied from a thermo-nuclear pile safely buried well down, and absolutely tamper-proof. You know the kind. If you monkey with them they either shut right down dead, and the city slows up and dies, or they blow, and the city dies just the same, only faster. I know it. You know it now. So you can bet he knows it too. That's out!"

"I'll take your word. You said you had a plan. What?"

"There's only one way. We have to match him at his own game, and outsmart him!" The briefing staff came to unwire them and Agent Thorpe stood and stretched magnificently. "Thank God that's done with. Always makes my head buzz. Come on, I'll give you the rest of it on the way down."

This shuttle ship was considerably larger than any the Shogleet had seen so far, and it had to be to carry all the equipment Agent Thorpe had deemed necessary. "It's all for show, though," she explained. "I'd thought of trying to work up some fighting androids but it was too chancy, with him in charge of the computer. So we just have servants, and transport, and finery. And when it comes to the actual conflict we will do that bit ourselves. He can't mess *us* about with switchgear. Now, here's the map we need." She put up a schematic of the region. "There's a camel train due from Bokkhara in a couple of days, passing just there. So we will put down there and ride in on our own. Thirty miles or so. That will give us a day to get settled in and spread the word, and then we can ride out and bring in all the rest of the stuff to make a big impression on the caliph, right?"

"Who are we supposed to be?" he demanded. She

hunched her shoulders deprecatingly, then laughed awkwardly.

"That is the delicate bit. You'll have to play along, Lake. I'm gambling on what I know about Hassan, from his profile. I shall be Balkis, the great Queen of the South!" Lancelot frowned, then dug into his recently gained information and his eyes widened.

"Balkis? That's the Arabic name for the Queen of Sheba! Won't that make him suspicious straight off?"

"Not necessarily. The old legendary names get used quite a lot. I'll bet there are quite a few sultanas and queens around. Real ones, I mean. And Hassan is a dreamer, always was. By this time he probably half-believes he is a caliph. Heads should roll that he was ever allowed to get this far. But the big point is, he has a weakness for women. Shapes! Pretty faces! He's one of those. As soon as he hears there's somebody in Baghdad claiming to be Balkis, he won't be able to rest until he has seen for himself. That's why I picked her. That's how I'm going to get right under his guard. Just give me half a chance and I'll have him eating right out of my hand!"

"I don't doubt that for one minute," Lancelot said diplomatically, if not completely truthfully, and her blue eyes flashed immediate daggers.

"Don't go soft on me now, Lake," she warned. "It will all be an act so far as I am concerned. I've no time for that moon-June lovey-dovey stuff. I never yet saw the man who could make me breathe any faster, and I'm sure you're not the sort to be caught by this kind of thing." She passed her hands over her more than ample curves and sighed. "You use whatever talents you have in this game, ruthlessly. Now you," she brisked up again, "are going to be my champion and defender, the mighty Iskander, whom some call Alexander, than whom there is none more great and powerful—it says in the book!"

"I can do that bit." Lancelot agreed, with no modest hesitation at all. "You just leave that to me!"

"Fine!" She pounded his shoulder happily. "We are going to be a great team, Lake. All you have to remember is that whatever he may throw at us, it's just gadgetry. Magic is for the peasants. We know better!"

The Shogleet, listening, was not quite so off-hand in its appraisal of gadgetry. It recalled Turnham's mention of three lost agents. Whether believed as magic or understood as gadgetry, a several-thousand-volts charge of electricity is equally lethal. It resolved to be very alert indeed. The ship settled gently to the sand, and in very short order disgorged one huge white elephant for the convenience of Balkis-Thorpe, a snow-white camel-android to bear her immediate needs, and a prancing white stallion-android for Lancelot to ride. She was heavily and discreetly veiled and hidden behind curtains. Lancelot rode out in the open all in white and silver, from turban to glossy kid boots, a curved scimitar glittering by his side. That was for show. His real defense lay in the ornate star in his turban, and in the bracelet that she wore, both carrying efficient jamming devices.

"The androids," she had explained carefully, "will be master-controlled by short-wave from the central computer. No matter how Hassan has it fixed, that's still the way. And our gadgets will stop them cold. Our androids are wire-controlled, so it won't affect them. Let's get moving. We have thirty miles to go and it's almost noon."

So, in the roasting sunshine, the strange cavalcade set off, leaving the ship invisibly behind, secure inside a protective field, heading for the semilegendary city of Baghdad. Almost at once the Shogleet was aware of being watched. It tuned its perceptors, extending them, and soon discovered that the desert sand immediately ahead of them was liberally seeded with sensitive crystals. It broke the news to Lancelot in a murmur.

"Agent Thorpe has underestimated the resources of Hassan," it said. "The sand ahead is full of optical sen-

sors, obviously an early-warning system. Our approach is known in Baghdad, almost certainly."

"That's a good start!" Lancelot groaned. "I'd better warn her!" and he reined the stallion in, intending to wheel it about and ride back, but before he could spin all the way around the bright desert ahead of them grew suddenly dark, and a thin black cloud seemed to rush in on itself and become semisolid, spinning and whirling, creating a blast of hot air.

"Ride towards it," the Shogleet urged. "I'm curious to see it from close up."

Lancelot spun the stallion all the way around and spurred at the towering black cloud. As he approached, it solidified more, to become a vast black figure with glowing eyes and a huge mouth that rolled out a challenge.

"Ho! Ho! Whosoever rides this way must first pass me, Gamael!" it boomed, and aimed a finger that spat fire at the sand in front of the stallion. Lancelot pulled up hurriedly, almost falling off, singed by the heat, his white turban rolling away. The Shogleet, probing swiftly, put up a defensive screen.

"Ride on, straight into it!" it commanded.

"If you say so!" Lancelot grunted and spurred the stallion again. In a moment rider and steed were within the cloud itself. Lancelot tingled to the potential of the field; he saw sparks erupting from the tip of his scimitar, felt his hair standing on end; his clothing beginning to smolder.

"Up there!" The Shogleet drew his attention to a tiny white glow-spot high above. "That is the control unit. Throw your sword at it. I will guide it into contact." Lancelot swung the scimitar, spraying sparks, and hurled it straight up through the swirling murk. It spun, glittering, and went right home on target. There was a crack, a searing flash of energy discharge, and the whole construct vanished abruptly, leaving the sword to spin twinkling



down to the sand in complete silence. But when Lancelot tried to spur his steed after it, there was no response. Instead, as he stared anxiously down, he saw curling smoke emerging from the stricken android, and was just in time to leap down and get clear before it burst into flames.

"I'm not surprised," he muttered, striding across the sand to retrieve the sword, and his turban, which, like his clothing, was smoldering. "What the hell was that thing supposed to be?"

Agent Thorpe told him, when he had tramped back to the elephant and, when it made a "leg" for him, scrambled up to her howdah. "That was a pretty good afreet," she declared. "Plenty of power there, too. Why didn't you jam it?"

"Never got the chance. My damned turban fell off. I had to do it the hard way. Burned out my stallion, though. Damned near burned me out, too!"

"Never mind, Lake, you did a fine job. Quick thinking! You'll have to ride up here with me for a while, until we get closer. Then you can take the camel. And you'll need fresh clothes. Peel those off, they're ruined. What I don't get, though," she went on, as Lancelot started to strip off his scorched finery, "is how the hell Hassan got onto us so fast!"

"Wouldn't surprise me if he had all the desert approaches bugged. You have a detector there. Try it and see."

She busied herself with the equipment that was built into the howdah, and nodded after a while. "You're right. He is really on the ball! What made you think of that, Lake?"

"Oh, it's the sort of thing I would do myself if I was looking out for enemies. And Turnham did warn us he had lost three agents already!"

"Right again! It's an education, working with you, Lake. This is going to be a bit tougher than I thought. Still, press on. Nothing else we can do now. Say, you look cool

like that. I'm tempted to join you. No sense in being smothered in these duds until I have to. We've miles to go yet." Lancelot, about to wrap himself in fresh linen, let it go and settled uneasily while she stripped to the skin and sat cheerfully beside him. "Suppose he *is* warned," she declared, "so what? We want him to be curious about us, don't we? I'm all for the direct approach, always was. I remember a case—"

She launched into a take of her exploits that passed the time until the first minarets of Baghdad appeared on the horizon. By that time the scorch of the desert had given way to tilled fields, clusters of stately palms, small suburban villas set among fragrant wild thyme and eglantine, shaded by orange trees and cedars. The travelers came upon a broad avenue lined with palm and pomegranate that led them through one of the mighty gates into the city itself. By now both agents were once more properly appareled, Lancelot riding ahead on the milk-white camel to meet the challenge of the gate guard.

"Who seeks to enter Baghdad, first city of all the world?"

"I am Iskander!" Lancelot raised his scimitar and held himself proudly, his raiment ablaze with jewels. "I am he whom some call Alexander, many call great, and all do well to fear and respect. But I ride with another even greater than I. Know, all, that it is my honor to escort and defend none other than she whose beauty shames the skies, whose wisdom equals that of Solomon the Wise, whose wealth has never been counted. I speak of the Queen of the South, she who is named Balkis, come here to seek audience of the great Caliph Hassan, the all-powerful Lord of the East!"

"Great is Iskander!" the officer of the guard salaamed respectfully, "and greater still is the Queen of the South. Baghdad is honored to have such illustrious ones in her midst. Enter, great ones. I will send word immediately to our great caliph, informing him of your presence, and one

of my men shall be your guide, to conduct you to the finest house in all Baghdad, save only that of the caliph's palace itself. Ho, there, lead these mighty ones to the house of Caphras the jewel merchant!"

The guardsman rode ahead sedately. Lancelot following after, the huge elephant treading silently in train, through narrow streets thronged with people.

The Shogleet, scanning busily, saw that Agent Thorpe had spoken truly. The merchants, bazaar keepers and craftsmen were all genuine people, seemingly happy enough in their colorful robes; all the load-bearing slaves were android, human-seeming but programmed and controlled. Also, here and there, were occasional white-robed fakirs, long-bearded and wild of eye, and they, too, were nonhuman. It could well be, it reflected, a most efficient spy system, just as it was meant to be, but reporting to the central computer. In the hands of an insane, power-hungry man it could be a formidable hazard.

The house of Caphras was a magnificent establishment, walled with inlaid marble, roofed in gold, and the old man himself, forewarned, stood in the entrance arch to greet his distinguished guests, white beard snowy against his golden robes. He bowed and salaamed low to Iskander and to the inscrutable howdah where the queen hid. Inside, in the tree-shaded courtyard, all was mercifully cool. A black-tiled sunk-pond fountain plashed pleasantly and the air was rich with the scent of honeysuckle and roses. Servants came to take charge of the beasts. Lancelot dismounted, lending his strong arm that the queen could step down, heavily veiled, to the ground. Caphras stood humbly by.

"Mighty Iskander!" he said. "All that I have is yours to command, of course, and I am greatly honored by your presence, blessed by the foot of the Queen of the South, of whose beauty all have heard. But, as I am certain that the caliph, my lord and master, will not permit such illustrious guests to remain long in my abode, certainly not

more than one night, may I crave one small favor in return?"

"Ask, Caphras." Lancelot watched Agent Thorpe being obsequiously led away. "If it is in my power to grant, you shall have it. But know this. Neither the great queen nor myself seek favors of you, or anyone. Here—this will, I think, more than pay for this night." He dipped into his pouch and handed Caphras an emerald that more than filled his hand. It was flawless and genuine, having been synthesized only hours previously in the platform laboratories. The old man was stunned, his eyes staring at it.

"My business is with gems, Iskander," he mumbled, "but never have I seen one such as this. It is too much. For this I will be evermore in your debt!"

"It is nothing. What was the favor you wanted to ask?"

"A rash one, I fear. I am old, and I have seen great beauty in my time, but all the world knows there has never been beauty like that of Balkis. Dare I ask that she will eat with us, tonight, and . . . unveil?"

"I will ask, old man. The answer will depend on her and how she finds your hospitality!" Lancelot spoke disdainfully, and the Shogleet was mildly amused at the glib way in which he could assume the grand manner. It seemed to come naturally to him. Of course the language helped a great deal.

It rode on his shoulder as he was conducted by a servant to a magnificent chamber adjoining the suite that had been set aside for the queen. Here the air was moist with the aroma of bath water. Wine jars and goblets were handy. Slim slavegirls, clad in nothing but smiles and sandals, came to wait on him and prepare him for his bath, and the Shogleet decided it would be safe enough to leave him alone for a while. It wanted to explore this strange new place.

There was much to see and wonder at. To judge by the many storerooms filled with food, spices and wines, Caphras did a lot of entertaining. And not all his staff

were android. The men who tended his gardens were human, as were those who cooked his food, and the craftsmen who worked on his gems and jewelry. Also, tucked away in a quiet room, guarded by a vast Nubian who *was* android, were a dozen sleek and beautiful wives, all blonde, who were *not* android at all. It was not surprised to find that the house had vast cellars, some of which were strongly constructed, obviously intended to keep treasures safe. But there were others which in turn led to lower chambers and on down into passages. The whole thing was a veritable warren. In the act of investigating this underworld the Shogleet became aware of stealthy movement. He saw a party of three black dwarfs, each with a curved blade, making their way out of the passages, obviously en route to the house of the jewel merchant. They were android, and by their unhesitating movements they had some mission in hand. Anticipating trouble, the Shogleet sped swiftly back to Lancelot's chamber, to find him in irritable dispute with Agent Thorpe.

"Old Caphras is as normal as bath water, Sandy. Harmless. Why, all he can think of is a chance to get a look at your beauty. Does that sound like he is plotting something against you?"

"Don't be fooled!" she spoke over the heads of the slavegirls who were disrobing her for her bath. "That stuff about unveiling is a routine. All high-born women are veiled. To drop it is a mark of special favor. I'm not likely to go that far with Caphras. That's for Hassan, if and when." They were speaking Galactic for caution, Lancelot standing uneasily in the archway that separated the two bathrooms. All he had on was a towel, and slavegirls were gently trying to persuade him into his own bath.

"Bent or not," he argued. "Nothing can happen in a bathroom, surely?"

"That is exactly what you are meant to think." She

strode to the edge of the bath nearest him. "Look at us, right now. Not a stitch. Can you think of a better time, or place, to catch us bending? I'm surprised at you missing that point. Look, you stand right there and keep your eyes wide open while I have my bath, then I'll do the same for you. And don't get too far away from either your sword or that jammer, right?"

"If you say so," Lancelot muttered. "I have the jewel right here, in my towel. Go ahead and bathe!"

## II

The Shogleet shimmered at Lancelot's shoulder. "Agent Thorpe's instincts are good," it murmured. "Three formidable black dwarfs have just entered this establishment from a subterranean passageway. Better be alert."

"That's different!" Lancelot growled, losing his hang-dog look at once. In three steps he was at the shelf where his robes were stowed, to grab his scimitar and prowl back again to the connecting archway. Agent Thorpe, bobbing in her bath, grinned up at him.

"What changed your mind, Lake?"

Lancelot, trying to keep his eyes on all parts of two rooms simultaneously, and finding it no easy job because of the swarming slavegirls, spoke off the top of his mind, not wanting to alarm her unduly. "Self-defense," he said. "It's all this naked flesh, I'm not used to it. Makes me nervous. Not now, dear!" he fended off one persistent dark-eyed damsel. Agent Thorpe laughed.

"Don't tell me they are turning you on, Lake!" Her tone was as jocular as his. "They are only androids, you know. Can't you tell the difference?"

"Don't see how. They look . . . complete enough. Or

is it because they haven't any hair . . . you know . . . except on their heads, of course . . . eh?"

"That's not it. All Islamic women depilate. That's according to the Koran and Mahomet's description of the houris. An ideal. Also hygienic. No, it's the way they move—" Lancelot heard no more. From an ornate wall-tapestry on his right emerged a grinning dwarf figure on the run, brandishing a saber, sending the bath-girls screaming. Lancelot crouched, ready, then slipped his free hand into his towel to grasp the star-jammer and squeeze it. For one frozen moment the oncoming menace halted, wreathed in an aura of energy, then came on as before. Lancelot had to spring smartly aside, dabbing at his towel which was now smoldering and flicking his burned fingers angrily. He wheeled, jabbed, fended off the dwarf's next run, then dragged off his towel and swung it around his left arm, charging in to the attack. Blade met blade in a clash of steel and a shower of sparks.

"In the stomach!" the Shogleet urged. "That is where the control unit is located," as Lancelot stabbed and parried, ducked and backed away. The dwarf was fast and strong, but lost out a little on reach. Lancelot slipped on a wet tile, went down to a knee, then seeing an opening, came up savagely and slashed, almost severing one arm. As the dwarf tried to juggle its blade into the other hand it was wide open for Lancelot to jump in close and drive his blade deep into its belly. The blue aura of energy discharge came again, and Lancelot wrenched to the instant shock, but the dwarf figure died, to become a lifeless smoldering mass. He withdrew his scimitar—then became aware of pandemonium in the other room and ran, flexing his arm.

The two other dwarfs were already there, kneeling one either side of the sunken bath, slashing at the water, trying to reach Agent Thorpe, who was splashing and dodging frantically in the middle. She saw Lancelot.

"Bracelet!" she shouted. "On the ledge, there!" Lance-

lot delivered one furious slash at the nearest dwarf, splitting his head almost in two, then leaped for the ledge, grasped the bracelet and pressed its controls. Again there was that blue crackling tension around the two hideous attackers, and Agent Thorpe screamed as power shorted into the water around and through her. The bracelet fused in his fingers. Lancelot cursed, dropped it, and charged back to the fray, to tackle the dwarf with the split head, now doubly hideous but still just as dangerous. Agent Thorpe, stunned, bobbed in the water ever nearer to the other creature, and the Shogleet grew anxious until she sneezed, stirred, spat water from her mouth and sized up her peril in a flash. She made for the side just as Lancelot managed to deliver the *coup de grace*, cringing again at the shocking discharge of energy. The split-head dwarf figure toppled into the water, and Agent Thorpe, scrambling out, nimbly caught its saber as she passed by.

"Let me have this one!" she shouted, eyes blazing furiously, and ran like a tiger around the tub's edge to meet the remaining enemy. Lancelot ran the other way around, just in case.

"Get him in the guts!" he advised. "That's where the power unit is!"

"Right!" She checked her run and advanced in a pantherish crouch, her blade flickering in a blur of steel. Once more the chamber rang to the clash of steel on steel for a second or two, then the dwarf's blade went spinning away. She lunged in to sink her point deep in the dwarf's middle, and then wrenched up on her toes as the power discharge flowed momentarily through her body. The smoldering figure dwindled down and lay inert at her feet.

"You all right?" Lancelot came close anxiously.

"Hell's fire!" She massaged her arm tenderly. "They really were loaded! Damn that Hassan! What went wrong with the jammers?" Lancelot retrieved both of them for her inspection. They were still hot, shapeless blobs of



metal. She scowled, scratched her chin. "He's crafty, all right. Those weren't regular androids at all, they were self-powered, and self-programmed too, I'll bet. He has really worked on this thing, the devil. Still," she rubbed her arm again and grinned at him, "we're still here! Great work, Lake! I like your style the more I see it." She surveyed the silent bath chamber and thought hard. "Looks like I've finished my bath, like it or not. We can let the slavegirls dispose of the . . . er . . . bodies. Come on, we have things to discuss while we get ready for our dinner with Caphras."

She led him away to another chamber where there were mirrors, and wall cabinets filled with perfume jars and unguents, paints and powders, lotions and all the other paraphernalia of cosmetic art.

"You're going to go through with that, then?"

"I have to," she declared. "Look at it this way. Hassan is dug in. He has all the cards. We have only two. One is his curiosity. We have already knocked out two of his offensives. He must be itching to get a look at us."

"Maybe. But he will really get out the big guns next time, Sandy."

"That's a chance we have to take. Meanwhile, our second card is that he is a sucker for women." She had opened a chest and was choosing gauzy silks and jeweled trappings, trying them against herself before the mirror. "That is *my* card. Oh sure, he will try to rub me out, but first he will want to see me, to see what I have on the ball. And that is where I get *him*! I have to get him so turned on, so steamed up, that he will do whatever I want. He will brag—want to show off his power—and that's where I lay my hands on the master control unit. And that's where he's finished! Get it?"

"I don't like it," he admitted. "But I can't think of anything better. And if you can't turn him on, nobody can, that's for sure. Or maybe I shouldn't say that?" She swung

away from the mirror suddenly, to come close and meet his eyes with a plain stare, lifting her chin.

"Tell me straight, Lake—between us—do I turn you on?"

"That's different!" he said. "We are working together. We have a job to do. My chief concern is your safety, and getting the job done."

She smiled dazzlingly. "Great! I knew I'd picked the right man. But you see my point. I *have* to succeed with Hassan. And he will be suspicious."

"So all right. But what has that got to do with keeping a dinner date with old Caphras?" Lancelot watched her now as she produced a tray of pots.

"It matters." She handed him a curiously carved pot. "Here, this is a complexion lotion. Ass's milk, rosewater, crushed pearls, various oils and perfumes and whatever. Help me rub it on, all the places I can't reach. All over. Put plenty on." Lancelot began to sweat.

"Do I have to? Isn't this a job for those slavegirls?"

"Long-eared machines! The less they know, the better. They'll be here soon, so hurry. But they are part of the point, Lake. They are programmed to serve. The dancing girls are programmed to turn a man on. Every step and twist and movement is calculated to that end. And you can bet old Caphras will want to show off his toys. And that's what I have to see. I know most of the routines in theory, I've studied them. And I can dance, I've been trained. But I need to see the real thing, and learn the finer points, so that I can really slay Hassan, see?"

The Shogleet, intrigued, whispered a cue to Lancelot.

"Suppose the old man's dancing girls are real, Sandy, what then?"

"It's a possibility, of course. It's a good life, if you like that kind of thing. But that's all the better, from my viewpoint. They'll be really expert, and I can learn a lot from watching them."

The Shogleet was impressed. This was its first encounter with a female who had insight into the male-female polarity and its potential as a weapon. It observed how Lancelot's hands were unsteady and sweating as he applied the lotion to Agent Thorpe's rear curves, whereas she seemed utterly calm and deliberate, unmoved. It probed her delicately, expecting to discover some abnormality, but there was none to detect.

"Twiddle that mirror a bit," she instructed, "so I can see my back. That will do fine, hold it. Yes, yes, that's all right. You do a first-class job, Lake, whatever you tackle. Real professional. Now, what else? I can trust those machines to dress me, and I can do my own face now, and hair. What about my nipples? What d'you think, gold paint or rouge?"

"How would I know?" Lancelot protested, red-faced.

"You're a man!" she retorted, grinning. "What's your preference?"

Lancelot swallowed audibly and made a wild stab. "Gold paint . . . it's sort of artificial, isn't it?"

"Good point! All right, make it rouge. You do those while I do my face and hair. I'll try not to wobble about too much. This damned hair of mine . . . I've been tempted to dye it a time or two. Glad I didn't, now. My data is that Hassan is soft on ginger. You managing all right?" She looked down at herself as the patter of bare feet and chattering announced the return of the girls. "That's good. Makes them stand out, doesn't it? Right, you'd better nip off and get yourself dressed. Thanks for the help!"

Lancelot's costume was a fairly elaborate affair of pale silks and gold embroidery, a loose shirt with frills, voluminous trousers tucked into point-toed shoes, and the middle of him wrapped in a scarlet cummerbund into which he could tuck his scimitar. Deft hands helped him; they wound an elaborate turban about his head. He shook it gently as he studied the expanses of naked pseudo-flesh on

all sides. "She's right, you know," he confided to the Shogleet. "You can tell this lot are all dummies, somehow, even if they are gorgeous. But she is really different. Once Hassan gets a line on her, he's hooked. She had me coming and going, back there just now. I'll have to watch that. She trusts me. Mustn't let her down!"

Old Caphras, obviously making every effort to delight his guests, came to greet Lancelot in the archway that led to his vast dining room. "We will have a moment to drink wine together, great Iskander," he said, leading Lancelot over the polished floor to a huge divan on the afr side, where colorful cushions were piled high, and low tables stood covered with linen and heaped high with tempting viands. "You must tell me what I can do to please and divert the great Queen of the South." Hidden musicians kept the air trembling with gentle melody. Patient slaves waved great ostrich-feather fans to maintain a cool breeze, and a bevy of gossamer-clad slavegirls stood ready to provide them with dainty morsels. "A light wine to begin with," Caphras suggested. "Then a sherbet to refresh the palate . . . grapes in snow, great Iskander?"

Lancelot did his best to loll on the cushions the way his host did and found them grossly uncomfortable and awkward, but he managed his lines well enough. "Queen Balkis," he declared. "has no desire to impose her demands on you, oh Caphras. Rather would she prefer that you order everything according to *your* pleasure, so that she might the more quickly learn the ways of Baghdad, and thus be more able to please the great caliph himself!"

"I have heard that Queen Balkis is as wise as she is beautiful," the old man said. "Now I learn it from your own lips, Iskander. It will be my task to show her how we delight ourselves in this, the greatest city in all the world. Try these almonds. I have them specially imported from the groves of Sirat. How long have you known Queen Balkis?"

"Long enough," Lancelot declared, "to be ready to defend her with my life!" The old man raised his hands in dismay and surprise.

"But she is in no danger here, great Iskander!"

"She is always in danger, Caphras. Wisdom and beauty always evoke the envy and wickedness of others. But I will say no more on that," he added, as the Shogleet cued him hastily, "if it distresses you."

"He obviously is unaware that anything irregular has happened," the Shogleet whispered. "And that must be obvious. Hassan would hardly league himself with other humans, who might betray him."

"That's what I tried to tell her!" Lancelot muttered. "This old boy is harmless. Innocent as a baby!"

Before Caphras could frame some kind of reply there was a flutter of movement by the far archway, then the stately tread of six Nubian slaves who formed a double column, and Caphras rose hurriedly, trotting forward as Agent Thorpe made her dramatic entrance. Lancelot went with him, striding heroically, but staring somewhat at her appearance. Slim golden chains held slippers to her feet as they moved beneath the edge of a billowing robe that had no more substance to it than a puff of pale blue smoke. Under it the outrageous curves of her body were draped in more gold chain openwork, studded with pearls and emeralds, emphasizing rather than concealing, leaving nothing at all to the imagination except her face. That was veiled, from eyes to chin, by a white patch of linen. Above her bright eyes her fire-red hair gleamed in an ornate pile. Rings glittered on the hand that she held out to Lancelot.

"Great queen!" he said, touching her hand. "This is the jewel merchant Caphras of whom I spoke, a personal friend of Caliph Hassan himself, and your host for this night."

"You do us honor, Caphras." She stretched her hand to

him and he bowed over it humbly. "Your house pleases me."

"The honor is mine, Queen of the South, and my humble house is blessed by your presence. Please look indulgently on my feeble attempts to entertain and amuse you. If you will come this way . . . ?" He offered her his arm as they crossed the floor to the cushion-piled divan, where she nonchalantly threw back her gossamer robe and reclined, sprawling comfortably. Caphras bowed again, then clapped his hands and shouted, "Bring on the jugglers and acrobats!" He settled himself at her feet, leaving Lancelot to squat by her head, and mutter at her in an undertone:

"I know the old fool asked you to unveil, Sandy, but isn't this sort of overdoing it a bit?"

"Don't be silly!" she writhed a time or two for the benefit of the old man. "I'm not unveiled at all. My face is what matters. He's free to goggle at everything else I've got. Check up on your implant, you'll see I'm right!"

Lancelot shrugged and tried to be off-hand, munching nuts and accepting wine and jellied treats from the slaves as the acrobats performed, but he had to mutter, aside, to the Shogleet, "It doesn't seem right to *me*, anyway, to call that little snitch of stuff a veil, while she is hanging everything else out for the old man to stare at and drool over!"

"It is all part of her plan. And it seems to be working with Caphras."

The old man's face was flushed now as he plied his guest with delicacies and openly feasted his eyes on the charms she so blatantly exhibited to him. Agent Thorpe seemed to take it all in her stride. "Tell me, Caphras," she murmured, "how do the women of Baghdad most please and delight their menfolk? In my country it is required of all women that they be skilled in dancing and movement, for this is what their men find exciting. Do you have that custom here?" Caphras beamed and nodded.

"Indeed we do, great queen, though I doubt if there is one in all Baghdad, nay, not even in the palace of the caliph himself, who could rival you!"

"But you have not yet seen me dance. It may well be that when I have seen the best of your dancers I might be ashamed at my clumsiness in the art. I'm sure yours are skilful. Will you show me?"

"Your wish is my command!" He clapped his hands imperiously to dismiss the acrobats. "Call my Circassians . . . and Fazouka!"

In a moment here came the twelve from the seraglio, and Agent Thorpe paid keen attention. So did Lancelot. "They are real!" he declared positively, as they began a complicated routine involving long serpentine strips of gaily colored silk, artfully managing to conceal themselves while apparently freely waving the stuff about at random.

"They are damned good, too!" Agent Thorpe admitted. "See the one always in the middle, who doesn't do a thing except undulate? That will be the star-turn, Fazouka. You'll see." As they watched, the routine grew wilder and wilder, and then halted, and the centerpiece cancer came to life, writhing and twisting as if every bone in her body were rubberized. The others formed a double column with silk strands between them to simulate barriers, and Fazouka had to pass, by leaping over and gliding under, again and again. "That's very like limbo dancing," Agent Thorpe murmured. "She can really spread herself, can't she? I've done a bit of that."

From the corner of his eye Lancelot saw a white-robed servant scurry around the periphery of the room and approach Caphras, to mutter in his ear. The old man scowled, nodded, shrugged angrily, then smacked his hands together loudly, dismissing the dancers with an irritable gesture.

"Oh!" the pseudo-queen cried. "I was enjoying that!"

"You see in me, oh queen, the most unhappy of men. But alas I have no choice in this matter. This very

moment has come word from Caliph Hassan, Star of the East, Greatest of the Great, the Chosen of Alah . . . that I am to convey to you his felicitations and desire you to attend him at once, in his palace. The litters await you at my gates. I weep, oh queen. My mouth is filled with ashes. But what can I do? You must go!"

"Worthy Caphras, I share your distress. You have entertained me well. I regret, as you do, that I must depart before we could know each other better. It is obvious to me that you are a man of great experience, well-skilled in all the pleasant arts, and I had hoped to learn much from you this night. But it may chance that another time will present itself." She rose and gathered her totally inadequate robe about herself. Caphras struggled to his feet, took her hand, placed it on his head as he bowed.

"I swear, lovely Balkis, that should fate bring you under my roof again you will experience delights such as you have never before known!"

"Old fool!" she muttered, as Caphras trotted on ahead and she took Lancelot's arm as they followed more sedately. "Men! They're all alike. Just once give a man the notion that he has something you like, and his head fills with just one bit urge, so that he can't wait to prove it. I don't mean you, of course. You're special. You're the first man I ever felt I could trust."

"What do you suppose Hassan wants?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Me, I hope. That's the whole point of the exercise. And that is where you come on strong, as my champion and defender. If he tries anything too far-out . . . that's your cue to check him!"

"Let me be sure I read you right," Lancelot muttered. "You're just going to stir him up, turn him on—that's all. That's where it stops?"

"That's right. I knew you'd understand."

"Haven't you ever—" Lancelot hesitated delicately, "—I mean—"



"Not me!" she was quietly scornful. "I've never yet met the right kind of man. Maybe I will, someday, meet the man who can turn me on. But not until then. I would rather die! Still, let's not talk about things like that. These must be our litteres now!"

From the outer archway came two giant black men, each with a sputtering torch, to bow and salaam humbly. "Oh great Balkis!" said one. "The All Highest awaits your coming. This way!" The other, equally servile, held his torch for Lancelot to scramble into the other litter. In the next moment they were being briskly jog-trotted through the streets, the torch-bearers on ahead to clear the way for them, to scatter the pedestrians and mendicants. They moved through a maze of narrow streets where flaring oillamps lit bazaars and fruit stalls, wine-shops and craftsmen's displays, and the babble of many voices came continuously.

It was a sight that would have diverted the Shogleet at any other time, but now it was much more curious about Agent Thorpe's remarkable words. It put a pertinent question to Lancelot and was mildly surprised at his reaction.

"Nothing queer about it," he said. "Old-fashioned, maybe. Romantic, too. Most people start off with the notion that there's going to be only one, the right one, some day. Most of us grow out of it, though, pretty quickly."

"And this pleases you?"

"Yes, it does, in a way. I'm flattered that she told me, for one thing. And . . . well, I had her weighed up as some kind of freak—you know, tough as boot leather and no time for sentiment? And she's not like that at all. She's a real woman, underneath it all. A great girl! I envy the right man, when he finally comes along!" By which the Shogleet realized that the standard chemistry was still working in one direction, at least.

The jog-trotting went on for quite some time through

the busy streets until, all at once, the lead litter turned one way, and Lancelot's another, to plunge into a dark lane. In the next moment, amid hoarse shouts, the torch was knocked down and trampled out, and there came the tramp of many feet, the thud-and-grunt of blows given and exchanged, and strong hands came to rip the curtains of the litter and drag Lancelot out bodily. He struck out furiously with one hand, struggling to draw his scimitar with the other, but the odds were too great, and in a matter of minutes he was down, helpless, and being dragged away. A few yards further on and he was seized and manhandled down a dark hole in the cobbled street, into even thicker darkness and more rough hands. Battered and bruised, he was taken swiftly down, to a passage where water dripped and rats squeaked and scampered. In all this the Shogleet was content to observe and assure itself that he had come to no real harm. It followed as the abductors dragged him swiftly along, to stone steps and up into a warren of passages, thence to a stone-walled cell where there were steel rings set into the floor. There another torch was ignited, to show six villainous sets of oriental features and Lancelot, scuffed and filthy, blood-stained and bruised, but still struggling. In another moment came a cackling old man in white, with a huge ring on which keys clanked. He peered, nodded, chuckled to himself.

"The great Iskander, is it? By the beard of the Prophet, I never thought to see the day I would have Iskander in a cell of mine. Bring chains!"

Eventually the heavy door crashed shut and Lancelot was left alone, fastened by a neckband to a chain that was locked to the rings in the floor, and gagged. "This is Hassan's work!" he growled, as soon as the Shogleet had loosened his gag. "And he will have Sandy in his clutches by this time. What the hell are we going to do now?"

### III

The Shogleet had to think very rapidly indeed, extending its perceptions in several directions. "It is not practical for me to be in two places at once," it said, "so you must listen very carefully. This cell is part of a dungeon that lies under the caliph's palace itself, so you should not have far to go."

"I'm not likely to go anywhere like this!"

"I can't free you from your chains and release the door. You still have your scimitar. I have modified the blade so that it will tingle and give you adequate warning whenever one of those androids is near. Now, pluck a thread from your cloak and unravel it."

"What for?"

"Attach one end of it to a ring. It will serve to guide you, so that you will not move in circles. Also so that I may find you quickly."

"Find me? Where are you going?"

"I must locate Agent Thorpe and see that she suffers no harm. You must somehow manage to make your way up to the inhabited level of the palace. It merely means working your way upwards all the time. I will rejoin you as soon as it is practical. Can you understand all that?"

"Just leave it to me!" Lancelot growled. "You're right, Sandy needs you more than I do. Away you go! I'll be all right. Just let me get close to one or two of those damned androids, that's all. I'll fix them!"

By methods of its own the Shogleet passed swiftly through doors and walls and corridors until it reached the more glamorous areas of the palace. It came on Agent Thorpe as her litter was halting within a courtyard by the entrance to a quiet chamber from which a tall, dark, imperious individual came to greet her.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded sharply, as the man salaamed gracefully. "Who are you? Why have I been brought here?"

"Most gracious Queen of the South, it is my humble honor to be vizier to the All Highest, Caliph Hassan. I am Ferid, your humble servant."

"Indeed? And what has happened to my champion and defender, Iskander?"

"Of him I know nothing, oh queen. I am charged with the duty of bringing you before Shadouk, the Mage! If you will follow me . . . ?"

"What have I to do with a wizard?"

"Very much, great queen. The caliph has many enemies, those who seek to do him harm. While he is well-protected from all mortal thrusts, there are other ways to guard against. The arts of Shadouk will quickly discover whether or not you carry any evil spells, or a talisman of power, or some such device."

"Fool!" she threw back her robe indignantly. "Does it look as if I am concealing anything?"

"Nevertheless," Ferid bowed again, "I have my instructions. You will follow me, please." The Shogleet had already observed that this Vizier was a standard android, remote-controlled, probably programmed by Hassan especially for this defensive role. The chamber of Shadouk was a fascinating place, a sore temptation to curiosity, being crowded with the most remarkable collection of gadgetry it had ever seen. Bubbling alembics gave off colored vapors. The surrounding shelves held bottles and flagons of every conceivable shape and size. There were mixing bowls, a pot bubbling over a charcoal fire, strings of aromatic herbs, the stuffed body of a bat slung from the low ceiling, huge leather-bound tomes of wisdom, rods and wands and jewels . . . and the mage himself, impressive in a long black cloak embroidered with zodiacal signs. Ferid pronounced her name and retreated as far as the archway. Shadouk bowed stiffly.

"I have heard much of the enchanters of the southlands," he wheezed. "It is said they are very powerful. If you will stand on the golden disc, oh queen, we shall soon see how much of your beauty owes itself to magic, and what spells you are carrying!"

"None that *you* can break, old wizard!" she sneered, and stepped onto a metal plate set in the floor. The Shogleet was instantly alert, perceiving that there were powerlines connected to that plate and to a copper rod that projected from the roof immediately above. A brief surge of ultrahigh-frequency current would be quite enough to ruin any electronic gadgetry she might be carrying on her person, and that was the obvious intention here. But such a power surge would also give her severe burns from all the gold wire she was wreathed in. It acted swiftly, delicately. As the mage-android went through a pantomime of pointing a wand, at the same time setting up a switch with its other hand, the Shogleet did several things very quickly. With precisely tuned energy it snipped away and lifted clear all her finery, to drop at her feet. In the same instant it built a conduction channel between plate and point and bent it to touch the tip of that wand the android held. And it added several thousand amperes of its own to the surge that came as the switch closed. A bright blue double-arc struck at the wand. The mage-android jerked, burst into flame. In the next instant part of the tapestry-covered wall billowed inwards in a burst of flame and sparks. And Agent Thorpe snatched at herself, then saw all her filligree finery, at her feet, melt and puddle into destruction. Furious, she whirled on Ferid in the archway.

"Satisfied?" she demanded. "Or do *you* want to try a trick or two?"

Ferid's programming obviously had no scope to handle this kind of thing. He merely bowed a gracious inclination and said, "If you will follow me, the All Highest will receive you now."

"You bet he will!" she gathered the gossamer cloak around her and set out in pursuit. "And he will receive an earful of my comments, too!"

To the Shogleet's perceptions the surrounding passages and corridors held many more mechanical figures, but none of them immediately threatening—and no human presences at all. Their way led now into and across a courtyard lit with oillamps, past a fountain and gardens where night-flowering trees filled the air with scent, past a guard of muscular Nubians, each with a fearsome blade, into an outer chamber where musicians played softly, and then into a vast hall roofed in rock-crystal, from which hung hundreds of lamps of the same stuff, shedding a bright light. The vizier led the way across an enormous tiled floor to the ornately draped and cushioned divan at the far end. This, the Shogleet perceived, supported Hassan himself. It extended probes at once and was intrigued. That whole corner of the chamber, walls and cushions, was a mass of electronic eyes, ears and potent weapons, needle-beams, field generators, a fortress-arsenal that was virtually invisible to the innocent eye.

Hassan himself was tall; he had once been a big and powerful man but was now running to fat. Under an ornate gold turban his face was pale, calm, fork-bearded, set in a watchful sneer. The vizier announced her presence.

"Great Caliph, Star of the East, Lord of Lords, Anointed of Allah, here to thy most noble presence has come Balkis, Queen of the South, most beautiful and most wise of all women, to beseech an audience with thee."

Hassan nodded, none too profoundly, and raised a hand. "Queen Balkis, draw near. Ferid, summon slaves, a banquet, wine and delicacies for the Queen of the South!" He had a high-pitched voice, one calculated to carry well. A crafty smile was on his face as Agent Thorpe moved cautiously near, then halted.

"Great caliph," she said. "I am ashamed to be seen by

your eyes in this manner. You must be told that I was taken before your mage, one Shadouk, who seemed to think that I might be carrying some talisman or evil spell to wreak harm on you. At that time I was wearing a costume as befits my state, jewels and gold fit even for your eyes to see. Now, because of his sorcery and clumsiness I am stripped naked as any slave, and thus shamed in thy sight."

"Not so, Queen Balkis. Feel not shamed to appear thus. I have heard much of the fabled beauty of Balkis. I cannot imagine any jewel, or silk, or ornament, that could improve the perfection of your own satin skin. Feel no shame in appearing thus before me. However, if my Mage did aught to offend, if he has spoiled or damaged anything of value to you, speak, and he shall be punished befittingly—and I will replace what ever you have lost!"

"There is no need," she went closer. "What I lost was trivial, a few emeralds, pearls, gold . . . I have much more. As for your mage, I struck him dead!"

Hassan stared, startled for a moment out of his sneering calm. Then he lifted one hand and peered into his palm, and nodded. "I see that it is so. You are resourceful as well as beautiful. But . . . are you alone? It was told me that you came with another, the great Iskander!"

"My champion and defender, yes. It is true. He had been delayed by a small diversion. He will be here soon." She had reached the edge of the divan now, and Hassan came to extend his hand and help her up, so that she could recline in comfort. The Shogleet was pinpoint alert, seeking out and neutralizing all the offensive weapons it could detect, all the gadgetry that could possibly be used to harm her. She cast her cloak casually aside and stretched herself out beside him, seemingly quite at ease.

"Your summons came at an inopportune moment, caliph. I was about to learn something of importance from the jewel merchant, Caphras."

"And what, pray, could old Caphras have to teach you, Balkis?" Hassan queried, devouring her nakedness with hot eyes.

"The same that any woman seeks to know, anywhere, anytime. The same secrets that led me to come to your city in the first place, to speak with you."

"Indeed?" Hassan dragged his eyes away from her body, to meet her eyes in cautious wariness. "What secrets can I possibly share with Caphras?"

"You are both men. I seek to know what it is that a woman may do to have power over men—all men!" She smiled at him innocently. "All women seek to have power over men, you must surely know that?"

"I see!" Hassan smiled back at her. "Balkis the Bold!" There was a fine gloss of sweat on his face now, and an attentive slavegirl came to wipe it off with fine linen, while others offered cut-crystal goblets of wine and small honeycakes for them to take. "I would have thought that one so unbearably beautiful would have no need for further powers."

"You are very flattering." She writhed languorously, rearranging her posture, smiling at him still. "But beauty in stillness is no more than any statue might have, and men do not grow faint with desire for a statue! On the other hand, beauty is also like a keen-edged sword. By itself it can cut nothing. In clumsy hands it can do harm. In my country all women learn the art of dance and movement, and thus enchant men until they are powerless. Caphras told me the women of Baghdad also dance, in their own way, for the delight of their men. This he was showing me when your summons came!"

"I have dancers!" Hassan declared, red-faced and breathing hard. "The finest in all the world. But"—his caution struggled through—"this is a strange thing you ask, that I should show you, instruct you in the art of enslaving me! What would you do with such power? Why do you seek it?"



"Why else," she laughed, "than to use it to obtain the delights that follow after? And to know that I can summon them, have them, whenever I wish! Is not this what all women, everywhere, most desire?"

"I see!" Hassan's eyes were afire now. "Well, I have dancers. You shall see. Ho! Summon Zuleika and the Circassians!"

"Caphras had Circassians, too."

"But not so skilled as these. You shall see. Watch them, beautiful Balkis, and learn . . . and then . . . you will dance for me!"

"But I have no proper costume, great caliph!"

"Have I not already said, you are wearing the most perfect costume you could ever put on, now! Besides, it is the custom for my women to dance naked for me, as you shall see!"

The Shogleet estimated that it was safe to leave Agent Thorpe to her own wits for the next few minutes, and it sped off quickly to see how Lancelot was faring. Finding and tracing the clue-thread it made its quick way up through many levels, through storerooms, kitchens, workshops, the seraglio, now empty, and into rooms of state, music chambers, rooms full of scrolls—noting the scattered traces of violence here and there—and to a winding stairway down which echoed the sound of conflict. At the top, stripped to the waist and begrimed with sweat and blood, his tattered blouse around one arm, Lancelot was beating back a determined onslaught by three ferocious oriental warriors.

"How many more?" he snorted, his scimitar hissing in his hand. "Somebody is going to start missing staff, soon! Cop that one!" He lunged in, low and savage, and shivered as energy ran up his arm. The Shogleet gave him a much-needed refresher charge of a different kind of energy and he sprang on the two remaining ones with redoubled violence, slashing and chopping. "Got a system," he grunted, becoming aware of the Shogleet's pres-

ence. "Watch this!" He backed his remaining foe into a corner and slashed, severing the legs so that the creature was helpless. Then he challenged. "Where am I?"

The helpless android said, "This is the caliph's private suite. It is forbidden to enter." Lancelot grinned, made the jab that destroyed the power unit and stood back, armed sweat from his brow.

"They talk, if you beat 'em up a bit. I figured this was the best place to make for, once I got clear. Sooner or later Hassan has got to come here, with or without Sandy. Then I've got him, right?"

"Wrong!" the Shogleet sighed. "It will not be that simple, Lancelot. For the moment Agent Thorpe is safe enough. She has provoked Hassan into demonstrating his dancers. That should take a few minutes. Then, presumably, she will dance for him. So we have time to think. We have a problem. He is surrounded by electronic defenses. I can cancel most of them, all the more obvious ones. But I cannot locate his master control. Which makes me suspect that it is a mentrol, that he is wearing it under his turban."

"That's bad!" Lancelot scowled. "Thought patterns. And he will be hooked into the master computer, for sure—"

"And the central reactor too!"

"Oh no!" Lancelot gasped. "You mean . . . a death-wish?"

"It would be the most obvious thing to do. If he is killed, or if anyone tries to remove the mentrol by force from him . . . the reactor will go."

"That's smart! That's real insurance! What the hell can we do?"

"For the moment we can only cut away at his resources. You have already destroyed several androids. He will have more, but not an unlimited number. And he has no human helpers at all, so far as I can determine. I think your best plan, in fact, is to wait in this area."

Lancelot was exploring as they talked. Now he came to a dangling curtain of gold beads and pushed it aside to discover a large room with a tinkling fountain, rich tapestries on the wall, several birdcages with canaries, and a huge bed with an equally huge mirror in the roof over it. "Here!" the Shogleet decided. "Most assuredly Hassan will bring Agent Thorpe here, sooner or later. If you conceal yourself behind one of the tapestries and I create a diversion to draw him away, you will be able to carry her off to some safer place."

"She won't fancy that much. I don't like it either, but I can't think of anything better right off-hand."

"Nor I. Let me repair your wounds. Clean yourself up while you wait. And keep a sharp ear."

The Shogleet hastened back to the hall. Agent Thorpe was into the near-climax of her dance, using the gossamer cloak as a prop, writhing her magnificent body in time to the music, and Hassan was hunched forward on his cushions, staring, sweating freely. For her crescendo she ran and leaped and slid, on her knees, spreading them wide and arching her body back until her flame-red hair touched the floor, to slide to a halt before him.

"Magnificent!" he cried, applauding wildly. "Wonderful! How can I reward you adequately for such an enchanting performance? Ask, and it is yours!"

She rose lithely and moved towards him, breathing deeply, deliberately. "You know what I want, great caliph!" she sighed meaningfully, and his eyes shone.

"You shall have it!" he stretched out his hand to help her up to his side, then put fingers to her cheek . . . and the Shogleet was aware of a sudden, subtle change, a smile of devilish cunning on Hassan's face, an agitated gasp from Agent Thorpe. Her breasts heaved, heaved again, and she moaned, then began to writhe as if struggling to fight off some invisible threat. "You lose, Bal-kis!" he cried, chuckling, watching her agitation. "You wanted to win me, me! But I am not to be won. Instead,

I have won you. It's true, isn't it? That fire in your veins . . . the raging desire . . . the hunger . . . the need . . . you can't fight it. You're helpless. You need me!" He laughed again as she writhed and strained to reach him, her lips flushed and swollen, her eyes heavy, her magnificent breasts heaving as if to burst, arms longingly outstretched. Hassan stood, evading her in contempt, clapping his hands to summon a giant eunuch. "Take her to my suite and stand guard outside. I will be along in a moment. You will suffer torment, queen, waiting for me, craving me . . . and I will enjoy you all the more! Take her away!"

The eunuch took her up like a baby, despite her struggling and moaning, and carried her up the winding stair to the chamber behind the gold-bead curtain, the Shogleet following after in great curiosity. How had such a trick been done? Inside, the eunuch tossed her carelessly on the bed and retreated, taking up a stand outside the curtain. Lancelot stuck his head out from behind a drape, came all the way out and stared, astonished. Agent Thorpe sat up on the bed, her eyes huge, her whole body undulating with uncontrollable urges, stretching out her arms to him helplessly. "What's the matter?" he gasped, going close.

"I don't know!" she moaned, clasping him, hugging him, pressing herself hungrily to him. "I don't know, Lake! Something he did to me! I'm all on fire, all ache, all heat, all hungry for you. I can't help it! God! I need you . . . desperately! I'm going crazy for you. Do something, Lake! For God's sake . . . do something!" The Shogleet had probed, and now whispered hurriedly in his ear:

"A powerful chemical imbalance, a stimulant hormone of some kind. She is quite helpless to control herself, and I can do nothing now that it is in her bloodstream."

"Good grief!" Lancelot struggled to evade her demanding lips, her arms wrapping powerfully around him. "You mean, she's turned on?"

"Totally! The only way to alleviate the effect is to discharge it by catharsis, work it off . . . otherwise she could suffer severe nervous injury!"

"Sandy!" he tried to speak calmly. "Listen . . . there's only one way to cure this . . . you know? You know?"

"I know!" she gasped. "I understand! I can't help it, Lake. Do . . . whatever you can . . . only hurry, hurry . . . I'm going out of my mind with longing for you. Do something!"

"It shouldn't last more than about half an hour," the Shogleet said. "I will divert Hassan for that long!" It sped hurriedly away, out into the scented air of the courtyard. In the next few seconds it directed shafts of energy at all the trees and flowering shrubs so that they started to burn in furious sparks and rolling clouds of smoke. There came frantic shouts and an eruption of staff to deal with the blazes. The Shogleet held on, reigniting as fast as any blaze was put out, until it saw Hassan come stalking, angry, demanding to know what all the noise was about. It sped back to the suite.

"Again!" she moaned, clutching tight, heaving and straining. "Again, Lake. It's beginning to work out . . . I think! Oh God! I never dreamed anything could be so powerful! Again! You're a great man, Lake, a real man. I'll never forget this . . . sacrifice . . . just to help me . . . I'm going mad again! Hold me!"

"Don't you worry, Sandy," he panted. "I'm here. I'll help you!" The Shogleet gave him a burst of refreshing energy and returned to the courtyard to keep the flames going. Hassan was tramping to and fro in the pandemonium now, screaming orders and cursing his laggard staff, beating at smoke and coughing. At last and in desperation he screamed at them to chop everything down and throw it in the pool. The Shogleet went back to the suite, to find Agent Thorpe on her back in the bed, limp and

quiet, gazing up at Lancelot who hung over her on one elbow and dabbed at the sweat on her brow.

"You're all right now?" he said. "Aren't you?"

"Thanks to you, Lake. That was a hell of a thing you did, for me!"

"You were in trouble, Sandy. I'm glad I was here, to help. The least I could do. Your champion and defender, remember?" He tried a grin, but she shook her head, gripped his hand strongly.

"It's like you to try to pass it off lightly. You did what was necessary, and, like everything else you touch, you did it with everything you've got. But I know what it must have cost you, saving me like that, from that hell!"

"It must have been hell for you, Sandy. Helpless, like that?"

"It was. For the very first time in my life . . . I was scared out of my mind! But you were so quick, so strong . . . and so gentle and understanding, too. I'll never forget that, Lake. Never! That swine, Hassan!" She made an effort, sat up, breathed hard, shook her head. "How the devil did he do that to me?"

"Some sort of chemical, I suspect." Lancelot stood, regained his sword, gave her a hand to stand up beside him. "We'd better get out of here before he shows up with a few more devil tricks!"

"Run away?" she flared. "I don't play that game. All the same, though, I haven't any weapons now. And I don't know a damned thing about chemistry. Electronics, yes. Chemistry, no! Maybe you're right, dammit!"

Lancelot tiptoed to the bead curtain and tried to peer through it without making a noise, but the eunuch had sharp ears. At the first tinkle he came around, roaring, drawing a saber twice the size and weight of the scimitar. Lancelot backed frantically away, fending off the pounding steel, ducking, sending birdcages tottering wildly as the eunuch flailed at him. In a moment the cur-

tain parted again and Hassan stepped inside, weighing up the situation in a flash. "Kill him, Babool! Kill the infidel!" he shouted.

In that crucial moment all Hassan's attention was on the battle. Agent Thorpe saw her chance. Launching herself from the bed she struck Hassan in the rear, bringing him down and struggling savagely with him on the carpet, her strong arms wrapping him, all the rage of her recent failure powering her attack. In a few desperate squirms she had him in an armlock and then a neckhold.

"Now!" she growled, her knee in his back and her fingers like steel. "Now, Hassan, this is where you get yours!"

For that moment the Shogleet was completely stopped, unable to act. If its theory were right, and Hassan had a death-wish built into his mind-control, then Agent Thorpe had to be stopped from killing him. But it shrank from using its powers on anyone but Lancelot directly. Hassan's neck began to creak, his face purpling. Lancelot, battered down to a knee, came up with a frantic stab to the belly and wrenched in shock as the power discharged through him from the eunuch-android. Struggling for his life, Hassan got one hand back over his head, close to Agent Thorpe's snarling face . . . and the trick worked again. In the next instant her neck-breaker hold softened, her hands went limp, she started to pant uncontrollably . . . and Hassan wrenched himself free, scrambling to his feet. Then he halted and backed as Lancelot came for him, blade at the ready, grinning in savage anticipation.

"Come on, caliph, have a taste of this!" he invited, and lunged into attack. Hassan squealed, sprang aside, and aimed a finger, obviously expecting a lethal effect. But nothing happened. The Shogleet had taken care of that. He jabbed again, then leaped madly away as Lancelot pounced after him once more. He aimed another finger and yelled in rage:

"Die, vile infidel! Die! Die!" but still nothing happened. Lancelot, suddenly inspired, made a ferocious grin.

"Your magic can't touch me, Hassan! Not me!" and he leaped forward to thrust and jab again. Hassan snarled, hurled a cage of screeching canaries in his path, backed away, ripped a tapestry from the wall and threw that, ducked and ran for the bead curtain, there to hesitate only a moment.

"My magic?" he raved. "You've seen only my toys, so far, Iskander. You will stay here! I will show you what real magic can do! Stay here!" and with that he ducked through the rattling curtain and was gone. The Shogleet was only just in time to restrain Lancelot from charging in hot pursuit.

"Not that way!" it warned, sharply. "The bead curtain is a forcefield. Toss your weapon at it and see!"

Breathing hard, Lancelot backed off, hurled the scimitar, and winced in dismay as it flared into a spray of molten droplets as it touched the flimsy-seeming screen.

"Hell!" he growled. "Can't you jigger that, somehow?"

"I can pass it myself, but I cannot switch it off. The control is part of Hassan's thought pattern, linked with his mentrol."

"That's just great! We're trapped here!"

"In a sense, yes. But safe also. Nothing can pass that curtain until Hassan himself shuts it off, which he will have to do in order to attack you again, or if he sends anything—" The Shogleet let it hang there as Agent Thorpe, writhing on the carpet, reached out to clutch Lancelot and drag herself up to her knees, hugging his legs, her face upturned to him showing all the evidence of her stimulated condition.

"Lakel!" she mumbled, heavy-eyed and lips swollen. "I've got it again! I can't help it! Worse than ever! I'm going mad!"

"Oh no!" Lancelot stared down haggardly. He stooped



to help her up, but staggered as she thrust herself crazily at him, gasping and heaving. In a desperate aside he whispered to the Shogleet, "You've got to help me! I can't take much more! She's as strong as a horse!"

"You know the only remedy for her condition, Lancelot," the Shogleet murmured, charging him with vitality. "Take care of her. You will be safe here until Hassan returns, and I shall have something to say about that. I shall go and discover what he is planning. I think I know a way in which we can overcome him without destroying the city."

"It's worse than last time!" she panted, dragging him to the bed. "I'm burning up! I need you, Lake! For God's sake, help me . . . do something!"

Hassan was back in his seat of power in the great hall, but now that scene had dramatically changed. From the four corners of the vaulted roof blazed the cold beams of arc lamps, lighting the huge hall with glare, making the oil lamps seem sickly yellow by comparison. Coiling scarves of woodsmoke drifted in from the smoldering garden. Hassan had discarded his gold turban and the metal band of the mentrol across his high forehead shimmered with the power he was using. The Shogleet watched curiously, aware that he was calling up special mechanisms. It was also using this opportunity to analyze the various thought patterns that Hassan had installed for defense and attack. And it now realized for certain what it had already begun to suspect, that Hassan had slipped over the edge of his imposture into believing that he really was the master of infernal powers, the equal of Solomon the Great, master of jinns and afreets, demons and giants, ruler of all the dark world.

Now, on invisible ether-waves, he was calling up his creatures, not androids this time, but protean power-units with special abilities, designed to project terrifying illusions. These, by direct linkage through him to the vast resources of the reactor itself, could wield great destruc-

tive energy. As he opened his mind in this insane exhibition of power, the Shogleet was able to read the death-wish pattern it had already deduced, and to see that it was shaped with all the cunning skill of a madman. Truly, death to Hassan meant the eruption of the reactor. But, as added insurance, any attempt to tamper with or shut down the reactor would also mean death to Hassan, and the same result. It was a delicate position, and the Shogleet readied itself accordingly.

The creatures began to appear, led by a huge white elephant with mighty tusks and burning red eyes; then a huge black camel, a pair of striding gorillas, vast writhing serpents, a swarm of grinning black dwarfs, black stallions that snorted fire, a striped yellow tiger with eyes like burning emeralds, a slinking panther . . . and all were shimmering, shadowy, insubstantial, larger than life. The Shogleet sped back to the bedroom just to check. The two were locked in hard-breathing effort, a momentary pause.

“ . . . owe you my life, Lake . . . a hero . . . a great comrade—”

“Nothing at all, Sandy . . . least I can do . . . help you in your need—”

“I’ll never be out of your debt. What must you think of me! Helpless, using you like this . . . ashamed—”

“Don’t say that. You make it easy . . . a pleasure to do things for you . . . you’re a wonderful person . . . with or without chemicals!”

“Good of you, Lake, to say that. Our secret, always. Trust you. Glad it was you. Know you’ll understand. Call you . . . Lancelot?”

“Please do, Sandra . . . any time . . . gladly . . . for you—”

“Oh God! Here it comes again! The fire! Help me . . . help me!”

The Shogleet withdrew, returning to the hall. These curious humans, it mused, so full of potential abilities yet

so critically vulnerable to the jabs and upsets of their emotional design. This Hassan now, he too was trapped by his emotional need, his lust for power over others, and if that lust were not satisfied, what then? Agent Thorpe had shown all the signs of incipient trauma in her helplessness and need. Would Hassan react in the same way?

The great hall was ringed on three sides now by the creatures of Hassan's distorted mind, all growling, snorting, baying, grimacing, facing him. In the forefront were twelve gigantic black warriors awaiting his command. The power flow was enormous now, wreathing Hassan's forehead with a blue aura as he surveyed his things and gloated. "Bring the prisoners, the infidels!" he commanded, and six of the black warriors trotted away, soon to return with Lancelot and Agent Thorpe, dragging them helplessly down the sweeping staircase and to the floor at Hassan's feet. Her fever had passed off. Though utterly helpless in such giant hands, her eyes were blue daggers as she glared at Hassan.

"It takes all this, mighty caliph?" she sneered. "All this, to subdue one naked and defenseless woman, one lone man? Is this your magic?"

"You shall see, Balkis the Bold, the beautiful. You shall see your champion, your defender, Iskander the mighty, being torn limb from limb very slowly. You shall hear his infidel screams, his pleas for mercy! And then . . . it will be your turn! I have diversions planned for you such as you have never dreamed of. Hold her here, to one side! Let her see!"

"An unarmed man!" she scorned, and Hassan laughed shrilly.

"Give him a blade! Thrust him clear. Now, Iskander, defend yourself against my creatures . . . if you can!"

Lancelot was a sorry sight, his garments ripped and filthy, his torso bared, and only the keen scimitar between him and the shadowy shapes on all sides. The

Shogleet rode invisibly on his shoulder and whispered. "Leave this to me. Merely thrust with your point at anything that comes near enough. I will do the rest. For your part, taunt him, jibe at him, make him angry. That is very important. I want him unbalanced with rage."

Lancelot drew himself up, eyeing Hassan defiantly. "Little man!" he said. "Bring on your entertainment, your toys. You can't hurt me!"

"We shall see!" Hassan aimed a finger, and the huge shadow-tiger growled and paced forward. In that instant the Shogleet built up a shimmering veil of energy around itself and Lancelot that reached out to the tip of his weapon. The tiger growled cavernously, wriggled and sprang . . . and vanished in a searing flash of light as it touched the scimitar point. Hassan waved his arms in rage, and the black dwarfs charged, grinning horribly, swinging their blades . . . and met the same fate in a series of blinding flashes. After them came two vast gape-mouthed serpents, big enough to swallow Lancelot whole. For a second one of them did, until it, too, erupted into flaring nothingness. Then the other.

"Excellent!" the Shogleet whispered. "I am gathering energy from them in great quantities. Taunt him again!" Lancelot, half-blinded by the pyrotechnics, made a laugh in Hassan's direction.

"Is this your best? Kittens and worms? These feeble things?"

Hassan stood, frantic with rage, urging his creatures on to the attack. The stallions charged, the elephant trumpeted hideously, lumbering forward, the giant black warriors closed in . . . and the great hall crackled and flared to the release and transformation of millions of watts of energy as each creature impinged on the shield and was swallowed up. Hassan, dancing, foaming at the mouth with frustration, urged his powers on until all were gone and the hall was echoing silent. There was only himself,

panting and spent; and Agent Thorpe, wide-eyed and transfixed with amazement; and Lancelot, still erect, still disdainful, in the middle of the floor.

"So much, little man, for *your* power!" he shouted, taking his cue from the Shogleet. "Now you shall see some of mine!" and he tossed away his sword, stretching out his right hand, palm upwards. The Shogleet, sitting there, made itself into a small glow of red fire that grew . . . and grew . . . and spun and swirled and grew bigger and bigger until its top touched the roof—a huge burning cloud shot through with veins and wires of white fire that became a terrible figure, a man-shape with white-hot eyes and a cavernous mouth that rolled out an enormous chuckle. Agent Thorpe stared up at it in terror and clutched her heaving breasts, backing away fearfully. Now the Shogleet stooped itself to peer down at Hassan, cringed back and sweating, white-faced on his divan, vainly trying to palm away the apparition.

"Poor pathetic mortal!" it rumbled. "Did you think, when you sold your soul to Eblis, whom some men call Satan, that you would never have to surrender it to me? I come to collect my due, Richard Hassan!"

"Never!" Hassan screamed. "Never! I renounce thee. I foreswear—"

"Foreswear? The time is long past for that. Thou hast had thine, now I will have mine. The bargain is fair!"

"I will die first, kill myself!"

"Nay!" the Shogleet chuckled. "That thou cannot do, now! Death is too simple, too gentle an escape for thee!" It reached out a vast hand to pick up the half-swooning Hassan in finger and thumb and dangle him helplessly in midair before its open mouth. "You are not to die, Richard Hassan. Instead I will swallow you whole and take you down below with me, to the nethermost hell of all, there to live with me in everlasting torment . . . for all time!"

Hassan screamed, made one last frantic struggle, then

slumped and went lifeless. The Shogleet probed instantly, anxiously, but was relieved to find it was only a faint—total shock and insensibility, making it possible, now, to remove the mentrol and cancel all its emissions, fusing it into a blob of useless metal.

“So much for that,” it said, turning to Agent Thorpe, for a moment forgetting its fearful aspect. She screamed, tried to run to Lancelot, and collapsed in a faint in his arms. “Ah well!” it said philosophically. “It is possibly just as well, for the moment. Gather her up, Lancelot, and I will transport all of us back to the ship. We have done all that is necessary here. The rest is a matter for repair and maintenance people. Come!”

Lancelot was shaken. “Just what the hell happened?” he demanded, as they flew through the air towards the open desert. “What about him?”

“It became obvious from many things, his use of the word ‘infidel’, for instance, that he had completely identified with the role he was playing and was utterly insane. I merely attacked him on that level, presented an overwhelming illusion. That way, he was too distraught to remember the technicalities of his apparatus. Everything is safe now. I think he is in catatonic shock!”

Dawn was edging the desert horizon with red and gold as the Shogleet settled down with its burdens by the shielded ship and resumed its less demonic, semi-invisible appearance. Lancelot carried Agent Thorpe inboard and laid her gently on a bunk, drawing a thermo-blanket over her nakedness.

“We had better tie him up,” he decided, “just in case. And put him in the brig. But how the blazes am I going to explain this to her?”

“You will doubtless think of something.” The Shogleet was placid. “Call it illusion, or, as you have done before, tricks of the trade. You are, after all, a Prime G in her eyes. You must try to act like one!”

Agent Thorpe came around eventually, with a sigh, a start and a sudden gasp, to find Lancelot sitting by her side, gazing anxiously at her. She sat up to stare about her fearfully, but he smiled and touched her shoulder gently. "It's all right, Sandy. All over and finished. Hassan's roped and tied and in the brig. We can take off for base whenever you feel ready for that."

Her blue eyes were huge and awe-filled as she gazed at him. "It was . . . all like some insane dream!" she breathed. "Right at the end . . . all those awful creatures, and you so strong and calm, so . . . incredibly brave! And then . . . that terrible flaming devil . . . that *you* made! Oh, Lancelot . . . it was a dream, surely? It couldn't be real, could it?" Her bosom heaved in agitation as she stared around again at the familiar ship's interior. "And yet, here we are, all safe. I don't know what to think!"

"Don't worry about it, Sandy. It was real enough, in a way, when you think about it. All Hassan had was illusions, compulsive ideas and myths, you know. Nothing else. Some gadgetry to help out, of course. But mostly they were illusions. And two can play that game. One learns a trick or two, you know how it is?"

"Of course!" she sighed. "You're a Prime G. To think that I had the everlasting gall to try taking charge, to try bossing you about!"

"That's perfectly all right." He smiled at her. "I didn't mind a bit. You did a great job. You're pretty good to work with, Sandy. It's been a privilege, an experience, and a pleasure, working with you."

She sat all the way up, swung her legs from the cot, heedless now of the blanket, and blushed rosily all over. "You're kind. Too kind. It takes a real man, like you, to say things like that, to overlook all my boobs. When I think how I was going to put the arm on Hassan! That plan of mine! And what he did to me, instead!" Her rosi-ness deepened, her breasts heaving in agitation. "That

trick . . . the way he got at me . . . was that all illusion, too?"

"No. That one was for real." Lancelot held out his hand to her, to show her the ornate ring in his palm. It was engraved platinum, set with a huge onyx. "This is what did all the damage. Just a press on the stone and it squirts out a fine spray of chemical. I looked it up in the computer banks. It's a kind of hormone . . . a pheromone. It is designed especially to turn you all the way on, if you're a woman. You didn't have a chance against it."

She took the ring from him, rolled it in her palm, stared at it. "What a devilish thing to do!" She breathed hard, looking up to meet Lancelot's eyes, and her blushes were scarlet now. "That was the most dreadful thing that ever happened to me—you know? To be so helpless, so crazy with need? But"—she took another huge breath, unsteadily now—"it was a wonderful thing too, in a way. It showed me what you're really like, Lancelot, underneath. A real man! You didn't hesitate for a moment. And you were so strong, so competent . . . and yet so gentle and kind, and understanding. There's only one word for it . . . you were noble!"

It was his turn to be red and uneasy. "I think we ought to talk about that, Sandy. You have me all wrong. Sure, I did what had to be done—"

"And tremendously, with all your wonderful expertise and thoroughness!"

"Yes, but"—he took her hand—"you mustn't think it was any great hardship for me. It wasn't. You're not just a great person, a really fine agent to work with, you're more! You're a beautiful woman, Sandy. If there ever was a Balkis, she must have been like you!"

"You mean," she whispered, "that you could feel like that about me . . . anyway . . . just spontaneously?"

"Any time!" he muttered. "Of course, that damned chemical had to be dealt with, but even without that—I



know you don't want to think about it anymore—I know you would never feel that way about me ordinarily. I understand all that, and I respect it. But I just wanted you to know that you have what it takes to turn me on, any time, anywhere. To give you the truth!”

“Oh!” she breathed, dropping her gaze to the ring in her hand. “I didn’t think . . . I never knew it could be like that—a kind of crazy, helpless need! I didn’t realize that . . . you could feel that way . . . too! Just think—it takes only a squeeze!” She pressed the jewel and it hissed, emitting a fine spray of vapor.

“Oh!” she gasped, staring at him, then down at her hand. In her agitation she squeezed it again, harder this time, and it sizzled. “Oh dear! I’ve done it again!” and her fingers twitched, so that once again the ring spat a steady sizzling spray for several seconds. “Oh . . . Lancelot! What have I done? Oh, my dear, my hero, you’re going to have to help me again! God, I’m all ablaze . . . all afire . . . I need you so much . . . I can’t help it! Oh, my champion, rescue me from this torment—”

The Shogleet withdrew tactfully and went to perch in the observation dome of the ship to watch the blistering dawn spread over the desert, a scene that reminded it very much of its home, and to muse thoughtfully on human oddities. And illusions. And the fact that it had, ever-cautious, taken care to wash out that ring and refill it with distilled water. But that didn’t seem to be very important just now.

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