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KAR KABALLA

GEORGE H. SMITH

Science fights magic on Earth's twin



Kar Kaballa was the new king of the Gogs and the rumor was that he would lead his barbaric cannibalistic band of Northern nomads down on a mad crusade against the civilized nations of the world. Cultured people found this improbable—but they were soon to learn better.

Their weapons were good, about as good as you could get in a Victorian army, which was what the period was. But there was a traveler in town with a weapon he said was better, an odd chap with a thing called a Gatling Gun from a country nobody ever heard of called the United States of America.

The question was could this outlander, this Major Churchward, sell his unearthly import to the Empire soon enough—or would Kar Kaballa become the new Tamerlane of a bloody-dawned Twentieth Century?

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GEORGE H. SMITH

AN ACE BOOK

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I

IN OTHER TIMES, on other worlds—almost certainly on the world called Earth, which lay beyond the Shimmering Gates—she would have been considered only an attractive teenage girl. But here in Avallon, capital of Annwn's greatest empire, she was a lady of importance. And on the night of Baron Leofric's ball she looked the part. Her long blonde hair fell in shining waves to her softly rounded white shoulders, and her evening dress of silver-gray trimmed with red silk roses was elegant. The small whalebone case of her bustle supported a cascade of artfully draped material which trailed to the floor and ended in a beribboned train.

Lady Alice Bran ap Lynn was only seventeen, but she considered herself a sophisticated, grown-up woman and was accepted as such in Avallonian society, which was at that time at the height of its glory.

"Who is the terribly intense young man who has cornered poor Prince Gregory over by the potted plants?" Lady Alice asked her host.

"Dylan MacBride by name," Baron Leofric said, holding his cigar and drink in one hand while he brushed ashes off the front of his checkered waistcoat with the other. "A Vinelander and relative of the Duke of Vineland."

"Aren't all Vinelanders relatives of the MacBrides?" Lady Alice asked, flicking her fan at the baron.

Leofric chuckled and leaned closer. "In Balwaan they joke about it, saying it is the intention of the dukes to breed their armies all by themselves."

"With four or five wives apiece, and Heaven only knows how many children, I shouldn't wonder but what they could," Lady Alice said. "But what is this MacBride so excited about?"

"You won't believe this, my dear," the baron said, his Vandyke beard almost touching Lady Alice's bare shoulder.

"I can hardly believe it myself, but he's worried about Gogs."

"Gogs? You don't mean . . . ?"

"Yes, the semi-mythical inhabitants of Basham." Baron Leofric coughed at the ridiculous idea. "You know, those hairy, pony-riding barbarians which the newspaper supplements find so fascinating."

"But what is there about them to get so excited about?"

The baron could hardly stifle the laughter bubbling up inside him. "I believe he's expecting a Goggish invasion."

"Oh dear, he is an odd one," Lady Alice said, "and he looks like such a nice young man, really rather handsome."

Baron Leofric waggled his finger under her nose. "Now, now, my dear, none of that! You know what those kilted, bagpipe-playing Vinelanders are like. I'll wager he's got a wife or two already back in Shetland Head or whatever overgrown village he comes from. Don't go making eyes at him, especially now that you're engaged to a young gentleman from my regiment."

"And what a regiment that is, Baron!" Lady Alice smiled archly and touched his cheek with her fan. "All the officers in the Duke of Amhara's Own Hussars are handsome—so handsome and so far away," the girl said, her pretty face growing sad. "One wonders when, if ever, the Dux Bellum will order the Eleventh back to Avallon and my dashing lieutenant back to my arms. What is a regiment like that doing on the dreary Northern coast?"

Baron Leofric allowed his laughter to bubble over. "Perhaps looking for Gogs?"

"Is the Vinelander really telling Prince Gregory that?" Lady Alice asked, looking again at the tall, handsome young man in evening jacket and kilts. He was certainly behaving foolishly, she thought. The Prince Regent seldom got out into society these days because of the mental illness of his father, the Emperor. Since they were so rare, the Prince valued his free evenings and would not take kindly to having anything interfere with his pleasure.

So the young Vinelander was a fool, Lady Alice decided, but a handsome fool. Her blue eyes risked a quick glance at the bare, brown legs beneath the plaid kilt and then shifted to the broad shoulders and the serious face with its generous mouth and almost hawklike nose. He was clean

shaven, which she found refreshing in this age of beards and moustaches. Yes, he was definitely handsome. Perhaps she could get a closer look. . . .

Baron Leofric had turned to engage another of his guests in conversation and didn't notice as Lady Alice moved away, making her way around the waltzing couples on the ball-room floor to get within listening distance of Dylan MacBride and Prince Gregory.

"But, your Highness, I was in Basham for a year and I tell you the tundra is all astir."

"I dare say it is an interesting place," Prince Gregory said, trying to get away without appearing rude.

"There is danger, your Highness. A very real and present danger. The new Kar has proclaimed a Migration. That means that before long the Gogs will pour across the Ice Sea and—"

"Humbug!" Prince Gregory interrupted, scowling. His face was flushed and his curly blond whiskers were quivering with anger. "I say humbug, young man! This is 1897, not 1200 or 1555. Goggish invasion, indeed! I can think of nothing more unlikely than that a few bands of wandering herdsmen might constitute a threat to the greatest nation and most powerful Empire that has ever existed on this planet."

"But, your Highness, there are considerably more than a few bands of wandering herdsmen! Basham is the third largest continent on the planet, and its population is estimated as approaching eighty million! The Gogs are the best light cavalry in the world. They are—"

"They are equipped with bows and lances!" Prince Gregory broke in. "They wouldn't have a chance against our rifles, artillery and airships."

"Your Highness, I happen to know that—"

"Enough!" Prince Gregory said in the manner of a man who can bear no more. "I don't know what harebrained scheme you're promoting, but I'll have none of it!"

He turned and strode across the room, a striking figure in his white cuirassier's uniform, but red-faced and angry as he confronted Baron Leofric.

"I'm sorry, your Highness," Baron Leofric said hastily. "I wouldn't have had you bothered for the world! If I'd known the young man was so addlepat, I wouldn't have invited

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him. It certainly was not my intention to do anything but entertain you."

"Humph! Young fool! He's quite ruined my evening!" Prince Gregory said, but to Lady Alice he sounded somewhat mollified.

"I know he has, sir," Baron Leofric said soothingly, "but perhaps we can salvage what's left of it. Another brandy, perhaps? And then I'd like to introduce you to a young lady lately come from Bellicossa. She knows all the newest polkas, and I've been telling her what a marvelous dancer our Prince Regent is. I'm sure you'll find her charming."

"Poor Leofric," Lady Alice murmured. "Now he'll have to spend all evening trying to pacify Prince Gregory and won't have time for that little ballerina he's had his eye on."

"I beg your pardon?" said the young man who was the cause of all the trouble. "Were you speaking to me?"

"No, I wasn't, but perhaps I should have been," Lady Alice said. "You could do with a little advice."

Dylan MacBride was staring after the Prince, an expression of dismay and annoyance on his face. "I beg your pardon?" he repeated absently.

"I suppose one shouldn't expect a bare-legged barbarian dressed in a skirt to know anything about manners, but you must know you've just behaved abominably."

"I have? In what way?"

"You've ruined the Prince Regent's evening," Lady Alice said. "That's what way."

"I'm trying to prevent the ruin of the whole Empire," Dylan said. "One man's evening seems a cheap enough price for that."

"Not when the man is the Prince Regent," Alice said. "You don't seem to understand what is proper. Things may be arranged differently in Vineland, but here in Avallon, there are proper channels for—"

"I've been trying to arrange for an interview with Prince Gregory ever since I arrived from Basham three weeks ago," Dylan said. "I've gotten only as far as a mincing fop of a secretary to one of his aides, and he burst out laughing when I mentioned Gogs."

"That has always been a subject of amusement," Lady Alice said.

Dylan MacBride's face turned red. "Young lady, I assure you it is not funny. I am dead serious. There are two hundred thousand of the best cavalry on Annwn poised on the other side of the Ice Sea, ready to overrun the Northern provinces and ultimately all of Avallon."

"You've been telling that to people? No wonder they're laughing at you."

"They'll be laughing out of the other side of their mouths when it happens," Dylan said grimly.

Drawn by the young man's raised voice, a small group of people had formed around Dylan and Alice.

"Tell me, young gentleman, why it is you think the Gogs intend to invade the Empire," said an older man with an aggressively outthrust Vandyke beard, "assuming for the sake of argument that they have the ability to do so."

"As you may have heard me tell the Prince, their king, Kar Kaballa, has proclaimed a Migration, and war banners are flying in every camp throughout the steppes. Migrations were also proclaimed in 1200 and 1555, you will recall. In 1200, the invaders burned Abaydos and Caer Sidi and swept through the border earldoms to the very gates of Avallon itself. The city would have fallen if a relieving army under the Dukes of Vineland and Emania hadn't arrived and joined the Southern legions in crushing the attackers."

"I've heard those stories," the man said, "but I've also heard that some authorities consider them only myths."

"Myths?" Lady Alice said, wishing she had paid more attention to the history she'd been exposed to at Miss Stanley's School for Girls.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the man said. "I am Professor Tobias Smottle, and have the honor of being a consultant to the Basham Company and something of an expert on the races and geography of that area."

The group was growing larger, and Lady Alice saw her older brother, Noel, grinning at her from just in front of the potted plants. He looked particularly well, she thought, in his new uniform as Lieutenant Commander in the Imperial Navy.

"What were you saying about myths?" Dylan asked the professor.

"Ah, yes. The center of the problem, I believe, is whether or not there was actually an invasion in 1200."

"Surely there can be no doubt of that," Dylan said. "I've seen the Battle Plain and the ancient monuments to those who fell, and so has everyone else here."

"I wouldn't argue that point for a moment. There certainly is a Battle Plain five miles north of this city, and the monuments there were raised in approximately the year 1200, but many savants are of the opinion that the battle was not against the Gogs but actually was part of the dynastic struggle between King Godrick of Amhara and the Pretender to the Throne of Arthur, called Dudo of Dinant."

"And next, I suppose, you'll tell us the invasion of 1555 didn't take place either," Dylan said.

"Consider the fact that 1555 was the year of the Great Plague," Smottle said. "Millions of people died throughout the Empire. Wild tales that it was the end of the world were everywhere, and the borders were deserted by troops who ordinarily held the frontier forts. It is quite possible that a few wandering tribes of Gogs or similar nomadic people did ride south as far as the Great Barrier, driven perhaps by famine. And there they were wiped out by the Imperial Army in a rather brutal massacre."

"But there are more legends about 1200," Noel Bran ap Lynn said. "Some concerning the identity of the Gogs."

"Ah, yes," the professor said, eyes glittering behind his steel-rimmed spectacles. "That is the crux of the whole matter. Myth has it that the Gogs were not human, mind you. That they were projections—co-walkers, if you please—of Cythraul, and that they were sent against Avallon to carry out some evil intent of that mythical monster."

"The saying was that Cythraul was all Basham, and the Gogs were the lice on his body," Dylan added.

Lady Alice felt a sudden chill. Even Christians such as she knew of the ancient Druidic beliefs about Cythraul, the primeval evil, the symbol of chaos from which the present order of the universe had evolved. Once, from the deck of a steamer, she had seen Cythraul Sands, the slimy black sand that stretched far into the Ice Sea from the southern coast of Basham. The boiling, sucking sands had become the grave of hundreds of ships in the past, and

legend said Cythraul dwelled beneath them, waiting impatiently for the time when he would awaken and return the universe to the original chaos from which it had come.

"So the story of the invasion of 1200 may be as mythical as Cythraul," the professor said.

"Cythraul is still worshiped in Basham," Dylan said. "The fires burn before his altar, and human sacrifices are forced into the tunnels where he can reach them."

"Really, Mr. MacBride!" Professor Smottle said, taking off his glasses and wiping them with a clean white handkerchief. "Must we listen to your childish stories?"

Alice was looking at the professor's eyes. They were an odd smoky blue, but there was something in them, or rather something *not* in them, that frightened her. The chill she had felt at mention of Cythraul became stronger and caused her to move closer to her brother, who was now leaning against the wall listening to the discussion with a look of skeptical interest.

"They may sound childish to you, Professor Smottle," Dylan said, "but I've seen those things with my own eyes. I've seen the Caves of Death on the cliffs above Cythraul Sands, and I've seen the larger ones near Cebula, Kar Kaballa's capital. Because I worked for the Basham Company and because my father, Sir Malcolm MacBride, was well-known among the lesser Kars as an explorer, they trusted me. I was allowed within a few feet of the mouths of the caves, and I smelled the sickening odor from within, the odor the Gogs say are from Cythraul's digestive juices, which flow through the tunnels. I saw the human sacrifices being herded into the tunnels, heard their screams and saw them no more. I listened to the priests of Cebula chant the Song of Cythraul, heard them sing of his omniverous appetite, of the hunger that continues even while he sleeps. I heard them tell of the time when that hunger will be appeased, when all the world is his larder."

"Myths! Myths and trickery!" Professor Smottle said. "Like all shaman, the priests of Cebula delight in fooling naïve tourists."

"Having practically been raised in Basham, I do not consider myself a tourist," Dylan said. "I might agree that stories about Cythraul are myths, but I know the Gogs believe them and act on the assumption that they must

someday rule the world in his name so that he can feed, renew himself and awaken fully."

"Really, this is too much!" Professor Smottle said. "I, too, have been to Basham and have neither seen nor heard of such things. I've traveled deep into the interior and studied the customs and the lives of the people. So have other well-known savants. That is why no one now believes the fantastic legends that less enlightened times delighted in about the Gogs or, more correctly, the Bashamites, since even the term 'Gog' is part of the legends. Anyone who has lived among them can tell you they are a fascinating, virile little people, not skin-changers or anthropophagic."

"What does anthropophagic mean?" Lady Alice whispered to her brother.

"Cannibalistic," Noel told her.

"I've seen them eat human flesh," Dylan said.

"You couldn't have," Smottle said. "At one time they may have been cannibals in the ritualistic sense, but many primitive people are, and the Bashamites no longer—"

"The Gogs eat human flesh because it is the most readily available meat in Basham," Dylan insisted stubbornly. "They have breeding pens for slaves and prisoners. They eat human flesh because they like it, not only because it is part of the ritual of Cythraul."

"If you insist on going on like this, you'll have the ladies fainting in terror," Professor Smottle said.

Dylan looked around at the expensively gowned ladies and their escorts. "I suggest that instead of fainting, the ladies pack their belongings and get out of Avallon before it is too late."

"Oh, come now, sir!" said a dignified older man with muttonchop whiskers. "It's one thing to speculate about imaginary horrors, but it's another to deliberately frighten people."

"I wish I could frighten them," Dylan said. "I wish I could scare them into doing something about the impending invasion."

"Prince Gregory keeps well-informed on military matters," Lady Alice said, "and he says the Gogs are armed with only bows and lances. What chance would they have against the Imperial Army if they did invade Avallon?"

"If that's all they had, I'm sure they wouldn't attempt an invasion," Dylan said. "But they have carbines and even some artillery. That is why their overwhelming numbers are such a menace."

"And where on the tundra of Basham would they get modern weapons?" Professor Smottle asked.

"Where else but from the Basham Company?" Dylan said. "Several hundred thousand carbines and Thunderian rifles have been distributed there in the last three years. Gog warriors are now trained in their use and are supported by batteries of horse artillery manned by Company-trained gunners. They are well armed and more mobile than any army on Annwn. That horde of Gogs is like a feathering thunderstorm that may burst about our heads at any moment."

"Sir!" Professor Smottle's voice had gone suddenly cold. "You have made a serious accusation against the Basham Company and its directors. I must remind you that includes such powerful and respected men as Lord Mark of Palladius, Sir Henry Cartwright and Mr. Johnathan Putnam of Putnam Industries."

"I know all about the Company's power," Dylan said, "and I also know of its ruthless methods."

"Didn't you say you once worked for the Company?" Smottle asked, and at Dylan's nod, went on: "I assume, then, that you signed the usual contract?"

"Yes, I signed it. Everyone who enters the country is required to sign it under the Company Charter."

"Then apparently you have forgotten the clause that enjoins any employee or past employee from leaking information about Company operations to possible competitors."

"No, I haven't forgotten," Dylan said, "but since Basham Company has no competitors, it is my opinion that the contract has no validity."

"It would have competitors if its trade rights and secrets of operation were to become public property," Smottle said.

"The bones of those who have tried to visit Basham without the Company's permission are piled high outside the Caves of Death," Dylan said. "A dozen would-be competitors have gone under in the last twenty years when

their caravans were destroyed, their ships burned or lured onto the Sands."

"You've not only made charges that are libelous," Professor Smottle said, "but you've broken your contract. I'm not a lawyer, but I'd say you are in serious trouble, young gentleman."

Dylan shrugged. "The whole Empire is in serious trouble. It doesn't bother me to be in a little more than the rest."

"May I ask you something?" Noel Bran ap Lynn said. He had been listening without comment, but his sister knew from his expression that he was irritated.

"Of course," Dylan said politely.

"You speak of an invasion by hundreds of thousands of horsemen, and I say such a thing is geographically impossible. You must know that the continents of Basham and Avallon are separated by a sea which is twenty to thirty miles wide at most places and much too deep for horses to wade across."

Dylan flushed. "I'm quite aware of the existence of the Ice Sea."

"Then perhaps you think the Gogs will come by ship?" Noel said. "If so, what do you think the Imperial Navy will be doing? Standing idly by and permitting it?"

"The Imperial Navy will do nothing," Dylan said.

There was a thin-lipped smile on Noel's face, and Alice knew it meant trouble. His hot temper was a constant worry to the family. It had gotten him into four or five duels and gained him a reputation as a swordsman which she found abhorrent.

"You have a reason for this insult to my branch of the service, sir?" Noel said. "Or perhaps that was intended as a personal insult."

"Noel, I'm feeling a little faint," Alice said quickly. "Will you please . . ."

"Be quiet!" Noel said. "I asked this gentleman a question and I'm waiting for an answer."

Dylan shrugged and turned away. Noel took a quick step after him and put a hand on his shoulder. Dylan spun around and knocked the hand away. "Don't touch me like that," he said.

"I understand," Noel said, smiling thinly. "The insult was personal."

"Now, just a minute . . ." Dylan began but stopped when he saw that all eyes were on him.

"You were saying, sir?" Noel demanded.

"Nothing," Dylan said.

"Very well. If I may have your card, my seconds will call on yours."

The Vinelander shrugged and reached into the sporran that hung at his waist. He drew out a wallet and handed Noel a card.

"Thank you, sir," Noel said with a formal bow and turned away.

"Now see what you've done!" Alice said to Dylan. "You'll be killed unless I can talk Noel out of this."

Dylan looked surprised but then turned grim. "Much as I regret causing so lovely a lady any distress, I must ask you not to interfere. I'll do my best not to hurt your brother."

"You're the one I'm worried about," she said. "Noel has already killed one man and wounded three others, and I don't care to have your blood on his hands just because you have peculiar ideas."

"I'm sorry you find my ideas peculiar."

"Well, you must admit that saying the Navy wouldn't do anything to keep the Gogs from crossing the Ice Sea was odd, to say the least."

"Perhaps I should have been more explicit," Dylan said. "The Navy won't be able to do anything because of the fifty-year cycle which is due this year."

"What fifty-year cycle?"

The one that causes the Ice Sea to freeze over," Dylan explained. "It has something to do with solar radiations. I've had word from friends in Nordlandia that the freezing has already started. Soon the sea will be closed to shipping, and the battleships and armored cruisers of the fleet won't be able to enter. And it won't be long after that until the ice will be firm enough to support horsemen. Then it will be only a few hours' ride from Basham to Avallon."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"Most people don't. But the government and the scientists do, although they don't seem to attach any particular importance to it."

"But you do? You think the Gogs will come as soon as the ice is thick enough?"

"I know they will," Dylan said. "That's why I came here tonight. But I failed with Prince Gregory and have gotten myself into a duel, so I think I'll leave and try my luck elsewhere."

"You won't go *anywhere* if I don't go talk to my brother," the girl said and turned to hurry away, her little bustle twitching as she went.

Dylan turned and headed for the cloak room. He had gone only a few steps when he ran into more trouble.

A buck-toothed, lanky youth in a frock coat stepped in front of him, put his thumbs in his ears, crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue. "Watch out for me! Watch out for me! I'm a Gog! I'm a Gog!"

Dylan knocked him into the row of potted plants and promptly had a second duel on his hands.

II

ONCE OUTSIDE in the chill November night, Dylan moved past the carriages and an occasional motorcar that awaited Baron Leofric's other guests. He had come from his diggings in Fishmonger Street on foot and would return that way unless he was lucky enough to find an omnibus still running.

With a vague feeling of uneasiness, he turned off the Malbian Way with its electric street lights. He was now in an older part of the city, lighted by flickering gas lamps. He knew the city was as safe as any great city at night, but that wasn't saying much. The morning papers usually contained accounts of muggings and knifings that had occurred the previous evening. But it wasn't fear of ordinary thugs that bothered Dylan. He was a tall, strong young man and carried a stout cane. He wasn't afraid of common thieves. But he had seen the look in Professor Smottle's eyes and knew the Basham Company's ruthlessness. He also had seen the professor hurry from Leofric's house while he was still engaged in conversation with Lady Alice.

The streets were almost deserted at this hour, and a top-hatted gentleman in greatcoat and kilts was conspicuous. If Professor Smottle sent Company men after him, they

wouldn't have any trouble finding him before he reached his rented rooms.

Dylan had gone only a few blocks when he became aware that he was being followed, but not by men on foot as he had expected. Instead, it was a cart pulled by a gray horse and driven by a man wearing a cape and a fore-and-aft cap.

Ducking into a doorway, Dylan studied the vehicle and its driver more closely. When he stopped, the driver of the cart stopped too and got out, pretending to adjust the harness. As nearly as Dylan could tell, the man was about fifty, had broad shoulders and sported a walrus moustache. He looked like he could be a formidable opponent in a fight. That didn't bother Dylan too much, but something about the cart did. A canvas had been thrown over it loosely and fastened down, suggesting it was intended to conceal and not merely protect from the night air.

That cart might very well contain armed thugs, Dylan decided, so the quicker he got home the better. Suiting action to thought, he started out again, quickening his pace until his kilts were swirling about his legs and his breath came faster.

There was no doubt in his mind that he was being followed when he heard the hooves of the gray horse clop-clopping along behind him. But what was the purpose of the cart? Did they intend to kill him, or perhaps kidnap him and carry him away under the canvas? Were they going to attempt to take him back to Basham on a Company ship?

Memories of things he had seen on the dark continent lengthened his stride, and as he turned a corner and started across the Street of Dunraven, he thought he saw a way of escape. An omnibus, brakes squealing and steam engine puffing, was just starting down Palatine Hill. Its headlights were cutting brightly through the mist, and he could see the driver and passengers in the lighted interior. If he could just get to the stop in time to catch it!

But as he started to run, disaster struck. Three men stepped out of a dark garbage-strewn alley to confront him.

"Where you bound for, toff?" the largest of the three asked.

" 'E's on 'is way to Basham, I 'ear," said a smaller man. "On 'is way to see the Kar."

"And the Kar's got a nice reception all set up for 'im," said the third man, balancing a gleaming knife in the palm of his hand.

Dylan didn't waste time talking. He lifted his cane, leveled it like a sword and charged. The sudden onslaught caught the man with the knife by surprise. The cane struck him in the stomach and doubled him over. The other two thugs closed in quickly, and Dylan caught a glimpse of a raised blackjack just before he felt a stunning blow on the side of his head that knocked his top hat off and sent him sprawling on the garbage-slick cobblestones of the alley.

He had a blurred view of the omnibus going by, its homeward-bound passengers unaware of what was taking place just a few feet from them. He tried to cry out but a blanket was thrown over his head, muffling his shouts. He kicked at the men holding him and felt his foot connect with the softness of a groin. There was a yelp of pain and curses, but the omnibus didn't stop, and Dylan heard it rumbling off into the night.

He fought against the blanket and managed to free one arm, but a booted foot immediately pinned his hand to the ground. They were trying to get a rope around his feet, but he kicked so viciously that they couldn't get a proper hold. Then the man with the blackjack went into action again, and Dylan felt numbness run down his arm as two blows missed his head and landed on his shoulder.

He jerked free, rolled to one side and lurched to his feet. His three assailants were outlined against the street light as they moved toward him. His cane was gone so he lashed out with a fist. He caught the largest man with a right and felt cartilage give under his fist. As Dylan staggered backward, the thug with the blackjack hit out again and struck his wrist, numbing the whole hand into uselessness.

He was almost helpless now. With only one hand, he could hardly defend himself against three of them, but he decided grimly that he'd make them kill him. That would be better than being carried off to Basham. Anything was better than that.

With his back against the wall of a building, he faced

them as they came in for the kill. Then the sound of a horse's hooves reached him, and the walrus-moustached man in the cape came leaping off the cart.

"'Old on, sir 'old on!" the man shouted, waving a revolver as he came toward them.

"Let's get out of here!" the short thug said.

"The 'ell with that!" said the man with the knife. "There's only one of 'im."

He lifted the knife, poised for throwing. There was a shot and a scream, and the knife was gone, the hand that had held it shattered. Then all three thugs were racing down the alley, and Dylan was sinking to the cobblestones.

"Are you all right, sir?" The walrus moustache was close to Dylan's face, and he could see a grim but not unpleasant face and a pair of steely gray eyes.

"I . . . I think so," Dylan said. "My hand and arm are numb but I don't think anything is broken."

"Beastly business. A man's not safe in the streets," the man said, slipping the revolver into the pocket of his cape. "It's fortunate I happened along."

"Yes, very fortunate," Dylan said.

"Here, let me help you up." The man spoke excellent Anglo now, with just the hint of an accent. "Things have come to a pretty pass when a gentleman can't walk the streets without being set upon by hoodlums."

Dylan swayed, and the man's strong arm supported him.

"I guess I'm a little dizzy," Dylan said.

"And no wonder. You've got a gash on the side of your head as big as a baseball diamond."

Dylan wondered what kind of gem a baseball diamond might be but didn't ask because he had to concentrate on scrambling up onto the seat of the cart.

"There you are, all shipshape," the man said. "Now I'll climb aboard and old Teddy will trot us away from here and deliver you to your place."

"I want to thank you for saving my life," Dylan said. "Those men . . ."

"Filthy bums! No sense of fair play at all. Three against one, but you were putting up a bully fight."

There were oddities about the man's speech that troubled Dylan. He sounded as though Anglo were his native tongue and yet he used expressions that were strange.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the man said as the horse trotted off at a brisk pace. "I am F. Woodrow Churchward . . . Major Churchward, late of the First Volunteer Cavalry."

"I don't believe I know that unit," Dylan said, holding a handkerchief to his cut head.

"No, I don't suppose you do," the man said. "It's in another place."

"Ah, yes, another place," Dylan said. "What other place, Major Churchward? Are you from Avallon or another part of the Empire?"

"No, I wouldn't say I am."

"You wouldn't say you're not from which?"

"Neither."

"Then you're from outside the Empire," Dylan said, "and yet you speak Anglo like a native."

"Of course I speak Anglo, but where I come from we don't call it that."

"I see. Then you're in Avallon on business?" Dylan said, noticing that Teddy was turning into Fishmonger Street and heading toward his lodgings although Churchward hadn't asked for his address and he hadn't given it.

"Yes, I'm here on business," Mr. Churchward said. "I discovered how to get here, took a Brodie and here I am."

"Took a Brodie? I don't understand."

"That means I took a chance. You know, like Steve Brodie, the fellow who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge."

"Brooklyn Bridge?"

"That's right, you wouldn't know about that either."

The cart pulled up in front of the two-storied house in which Dylan rented rooms.

"Tell me something, Major," Dylan said. "Why were you following me? And how did you happen to know where my lodgings were?"

"Those are fair enough questions," Churchward said, nodding his head judiciously.

"And the answers?"

"One answer will do for both. It's because you're the young fellow, I was told, who sees Gogs."

Dylan cursed under his breath. "Seeing Gogs" was an old

saying that implied mental imbalance. "Yes," he said tightly, "I see Gogs."

"Then you're a man I reckon I can do business with."

"And what is your business, Major Churchward? Perhaps you sell spectacles and think I need some to clear up my vision?"

The major chuckled. "No, sir, I don't sell spectacles. I sell weapons. And I have the world's deadliest weapon right in this cart."

"You've got what?" Dylan glanced over his shoulder at the canvas-covered bed of the cart. "What kind of weapon?"

"Well, it's kind of like a cannon, only different."

"You've got a cannon in this cart?" Dylan's eyes widened.

"Not an ordinary cannon. It's sort of a cross between a cannon and a rifle. A weapon that can fire eight hundred shots a minute."

"You don't actually expect me to believe that?"

"No, I guess not," Churchward said. "I've already tried to convince the officials of this city and failed. I thought that, because you think the Empire is in danger, you might at least be willing to see my gun in action. No one else would even do that."

They had climbed down off the cart as they were talking, and now the major pulled back the canvas. In the flickering light from the street lamp, Dylan could see was a device like a crank, and on top was a round hopper-like affair.

The major touched a button, and the sides of the cart fell away, revealing the weapon completely. What they had been riding on was an artillery piece with a seat at the rear.

"I figured it would be better to disguise it," Churchward said. "You never know what might happen when you're wandering around a strange city."

"True," Dylan agreed, still looking at the plumber's nightmare Teddy had been pulling. "Especially if you'd told anyone you were riding with a gun that could fire eight hundred shots a minute."

"But it can, sir!" Churchward said. "On my word of honor! In my country we use guns like this in war."

"And exactly where is your country, Major?"

"To tell you the truth, Mr. MacBride, I don't think you've ever heard of it."

"Try me and see."

Churchward took off his deer-stalker cap and ran a hand through his black hair. Then he looked around as though to assure himself no one else was listening and bent closer. "Have you ever heard of the United States . . . the United States of America?"

Dylan shook his head. "No, I've never heard of either one of those places and I don't think you have either!"

"Oh, it's only one place. A mighty big place, mind you—almost as big as your whole Empire—but only one place."

"Really now, sir. I'm an explorer and the son of an explorer. Could you show me on a map where this unlikely place is?"

"It isn't on any maps you're familiar with."

"Major Churchward, the maps of Annwn are quite complete. I've worked in cartography and I know."

"I don't suppose you'd believe the United States is in an uncharted part of the world?"

"No, I would not."

"Well, then you'll have to believe it isn't on Annwn. It's on a world called Earth."

"Earth? Oh, come now, not that old myth! Not the 'other world' of the Druids!"

It was the Major's turn to look surprised. "You mean you've heard of Earth?"

"Of course," Dylan said. "It's the unseen world on the other side of the Shimmering Gates."

"You believe that?"

"No, of course not! It's merely a myth. Earth is supposedly the place Arthur Pendragon came from to found the Empire, but no one seriously believes that except children and the superstitious."

"Arthur Pendragon? That wouldn't be the King Arthur of our legends, would it?"

"Since I know nothing of the imaginary legends of your imaginary world, I couldn't say," Dylan said.

"I assure you, Mr. MacBride, my world is not imaginary and neither am I. What's more important, neither is this gun. Produced in quantity, this gun could turn back the

hordes of Gogs you say are about to sweep down on this land."

Dylan looked back at the weapon. No, whatever it was, it wasn't imaginary. It had a look of grim reality about it that couldn't be denied. He stared at the ten barrels and the hopper-like affair, noticing that the latter held steel-jacketed bullets.

"Is this your own invention, Major Churchward?" he asked.

"No, it is not. It was invented by a Dr. Richard Gatling, a countryman of mine. Here on your world, however, I have the franchise to sell it."

Dylan was silent again as he studied the gun. He was trying to visualize what such a weapon would mean against the thundering charge of the Gogs, against the attacks they called "the endless storm."

The street was quiet now except for an occasional passing hansom and the sound of "Ta-ra-a-boom-de-ay!" coming from a nearby music hall.

"Funny about that song," the major said. "It's popular on my world too."

Dylan was examining the mechanism of the weapon and was amazed at the excellence of its machining and the simplicity of its construction. If it really worked, if it did the things the major claimed, there were at least a dozen gunsmiths he knew who could reproduce it.

Churchward was still listening to the tinkling music. "How odd. I wonder if someone brought that song here for the same reason I brought the gun."

"What do you mean?" Dylan asked.

"A man who had heard of the Gates and wanted to come here would surely come equipped to make a living, and songs copyrighted on Earth could be passed off as one's own here and become good little money-makers."

"And that's what you hope your gun will be? By the way, what do you call it?"

"In my country, they are called Gatling guns after the inventor, but here I call them Rattlers. I think it's a better selling name, and they do make a fearful rattling sound when they open up."

Dylan ran his hand along the cool barrel and looked at

Churchward. "Then you've already sold some of these on Annwn?"

"No, not yet," Churchward said with a sigh. "This land of yours is like mine in many ways. The language isn't too different and neither are the styles, but if you'll pardon my saying so, you people are backward in some ways. I haven't been able to convince a single person of the power of this weapon."

"You mean we're backward in the art of killing?"

"Yes, if you want to be perfectly blunt about it. And if you were quoted correctly in an article I read in the morning paper, you seem to think there's going to be a need around here for a superior means of killing."

"Yes." Dylan was thinking about the gun and about two or three influential friends who might be able to introduce it into the Imperial Army, or at least win a trial for it before the Army Ordnance Board. "Yes. Perhaps we ought to talk further. Will you come up to my rooms and finish our conversation?"

"First we'll have to do something about my little beauty," Churchward said, patting the gun, "and old Teddy don't care much for the night air either."

"Pull the cart in through that gate over there," Dylan said. "You'll find a carriage house at the end of the drive. The gun will be safe there, and you can feed and water the horse. Then, over a drink, I'll let you convince me that you come from another world . . . if you can."

III

AFTER TEDDY and the cart had been stowed away in the carriage house, Dylan led Major Churchward into his comfortable three-room apartment. A fire had been laid by the porter, and the bell summoned the chambermaid with boiling water for toddies.

"This will take the chill out of our bones," Dylan said, handing Churchward a mug and taking a few quick sips from his own. "If you'll excuse me for just a moment, I'll wash off this cut and put some medicine on it. Then I'll hear your story."

"To be sure," Major Churchward said, tasting the toddy

with much licking of lips. "Bully! A bully libation. Take your time, lad."

By the time Dylan returned a few minutes later, the major's mug was empty, so he fixed them both refills and then settled back in an easy chair.

"Now, what is it you want to know?" Churchward asked.

"I want you to convince me that the gun is as good as you claim it is. I also want you to convince me that you're actually from the mythical world called Earth. I warn you, both of those will take some doing."

"As for convincing you that Chauncey Depew is what I claim—I call this particular Rattler after a famous man of my country—no words could do that."

"Then what would?"

"Only seeing Chauncey in action would convince you of his deadliness."

"Perhaps, but I hardly think my landlady will permit a demonstration in her backyard," Dylan said. "I'm afraid it would upset the neighbors."

"Yes, I'll wager it would." The major laughed and his walrus moustache twitched. "But there's a place outside the walls, down by the lagoon . . . what do you call it?"

"The Silver Strand. It runs from the Ice Sea to the Medalgo Lakes. It's Avallon's highway of commerce."

"Yes. Well, there's an open meadow there with low cliffs at one end. We could take Chauncey out there tomorrow and let him strut his stuff."

Dylan nodded. There were so many bits of slang in the man's Anglo that he wasn't always sure he got the exact meaning of the words. Considering the fact that he claimed to be from another world, that wasn't so strange. What was strange was that Anglo and what he called English should be so much alike.

"So in the meantime, suppose I tell you a bit about myself and how I came to this world of yours, and you suspend judgment on the truth of my claims for Chauncey."

Dylan nodded. The fire was burning briskly now and in its flickering light he examined the major's face. It was a strong face with deeply chiseled features and level eyes. He looked the very picture of a man who would always look you straight in the eye and speak to you frankly, but

in his time Dylan had known a few men who had also looked that way and had turned out to be scoundrels.

"As I said before, I'm a citizen of a country called the United States of America, of a state called New York and of a city also called New York. In my day, I've worked at a thing or two. I was a detective for the New York police force when Teddy Roosevelt was Commissioner of Police. I've been an engineer, a hunter on the great Western Plains, and a soldier. Lately I've done a little gun-running and a mite of business as a wholesaler of arms. A few years back, my country had a little set-to with a nation called Spain. As wars go, I suppose it wasn't much of a scrap, but when Teddy Roosevelt called for volunteers to beard the Spaniard in his den, yours truly was one of the first to step forward. It was during that war that I got to know Dr. Gatling's invention and appreciate its possibilities.

"At one point we were being cut to pieces. The Spanish had their smokeless powder, and we couldn't even fire back, when up comes a young lieutenant with a pair of Gatling guns and starts spraying the Spanish trenches with bullets at eight rounds a minute. Pretty soon we were charging up San Juan Hill with Teddy at our head, and the enemy was running.

"After the war, I tried my hand at wholesaling Gatling guns in countries where I thought they might be needed, but by that time other types of guns were coming on the market . . . Maxim and Nordenfelt and such. Guns that didn't fire as fast but which were smaller and easier to operate. The only real market was on the continent we call South America, and somehow those fellows down there never seemed to have the right amount of money, or if they did have the money, they didn't know how to keep the guns in operation and . . . well, business wasn't very good so I went back to New York."

"If I were inclined to believe all this talk about another world," Dylan said, "the first thing I'd ask is how you got her to Annwn."

"I was coming to that, sir. There are ways, you know . . . perfectly legal ways. I assume you've heard of the Guardians of the Shimmering Gates?"

"Yes, my father once visited the Gates that lay in the Green Dolphin Islands and spoke to the Guardians, but

he never talked much about it. As far as I know, he was of the same opinion as most scientists—that the Gates lead to a series of underground tunnels through which artifacts and occasionally people are brought by the Guardians.”

“And where do the tunnels lead?” Churchward asked. “What do your scientists say of that?”

“I don’t really know. Perhaps to a hidden underground world, perhaps to unexplored areas.”

“Then you think the stories of the Gates leading to Earth are just myths?”

“Yes,” Dylan said.

“Well, let me tell you this: I’ve been through the Gates, and they do not open into caves. They open into similar, although hidden, Gates on my planet.”

Dylan sipped at his drink thoughtfully. “If what you say is true, how did the Gates come about? What kind of magic can connect two worlds across millions of miles of space?”

“Not magic,” Churchward said, “and not across space.”

“You’re not making sense. If the Gates are not magic, what are they?”

“Science. The science of a race of beings more advanced than either Annwn or Earth. The Gates were created at a time in the past that our history doesn’t remember, for a purpose I can’t conceive. The beings who created them left the Guardians to watch over them and departed for places unknown on business unimaginable.”

“And you say the Gates do not cross space? If they connect two worlds, how is that possible?”

“As I understand it, the two worlds exist in the same position in space but in different time continua, and this is what the ancient science connects.”

“But still, to most people on Annwn, Earth is a myth.”

“I might remind you,” Churchward said dryly, “that to most of those same people, your Gogs are a myth.”

“Touché,” Dylan said. “Please go on with your story.”

“Well, let’s see; where was I? Oh yes, I returned to New York. And that’s where I met *her*.”

“Her?” Dylan repeated, startled. “Who did you meet?”

“The lady who said she was a priestess of a goddess of your world. A proper beautiful lady she was too. Red hair and milky white skin and, if you’ll excuse me for saying so, a figure that outshone any Gibson girl I ever saw.”

"I'm afraid I don't know who or what a Gibson girl is," Dylan said.

"No, I don't suppose you do," Churchward said, "but perhaps you've heard of a goddess named Keridwen, since it's my understanding she's worshiped on this world."

"Yes, Keridwen is the chief goddess of a fertility cult that flourished in the Empire seven or eight hundred years ago. Her devotees were particularly active in Emania and in my own Vineland. The cult has all but died out in recent years and is considered disreputable."

"That's strange," Churchward said, taking a pipe out of his jacket and beginning to fill it with tobacco. "The lady assured me the religion of Keridwen still had great power. In fact, she told me that only a combination of the power of Keridwen and my Gatling guns could save Avallon."

Dylan was suspicious again. It was bad enough to be asked to believe in a world that he considered only a myth, but to be told that the old discarded religion of the Mother Goddess still claimed to wield power was worse.

"You say there are none left who worship this goddess?" Churchward said after he had puffed his pipe into life.

"I didn't say there were none. There are still a few who cling to the old ways. There is a temple somewhere in Trogtown, I understand."

"The lady mentioned that too. What is Trogtown?"

"The undercity," Dylan said. "Avallon is the oldest city in the world. It was built incredible eons ago by a people who called themselves Formorians. It was ancient when Arthur Pendragon was brought here by his sister Morgan le Fey to recuperate from his wounds and later to rule as Emperor Arthur the First. Over the ages, the most ancient parts of the city have been paved over and buildings built on new levels. Beneath these, the old buildings still stand, temples and tenements from time immemorial. People called Trogs live in the undercity, although since the ministry of Admiral Adam Max MacBride they have been permitted the freedom of the city."

"They would be the odd looking folks I've seen, the pale, albino people?" Churchward said.

"Yes. Some scientists believe they have developed as almost a race apart because of the centuries of living under-

ground," Dylan said. "But what of the lady you met in this New York of yours?"

"Ah, yes, the beautiful lady. It was rather odd how I met her. I was staying in a rooming house in Brooklyn—that's a suburb of New York—and just trying to get my bearings and figure out what line of work I'd go into next. She moved into a room just down the hall. Now that wasn't any fancy house, and she sure looked out of place—being so beautiful and ladylike and all—and everyone who roomed there wondered about her.

"I guess they'd have wondered even more if they'd known about the visit she paid me in my room on the third night she was in the house. Oh, nothing improper, you understand. She may have been a priestess of a fertility cult, but the Lady Ethne was a lady in every sense of the word."

"What did she want of you?" Dylan asked, trying to hurry him on.

"She wanted to suggest a line of work. The same line of work I'd been engaging in but in a new territory . . . namely Annwn. She said there was a great need for weapons like Dr. Gatling's in this place, and if I'd agree to go there, she'd see that I obtained transportation."

"And you agreed?"

"Well, not just like that," the major said. "I'd never heard of any place called Annwn and I told her so. But she kind of brushed that aside by assuring me it existed in a hidden valley in the arctic regions of Earth."

"A hidden valley?"

"I don't think she thought I'd believe the truth so she made up that little white lie, so to speak."

"And you agreed to go with her then?"

Major Churchward smiled. "In addition to being very beautiful and persuasive, the lady had ten thousand dollars that she offered me to buy a Gatling gun and a large supply of spare parts and ammunition. She said this would be my demonstrator to prove to the doubters that here was a weapon of great power come in time of need."

"Did she say what the need was . . . what danger she was trying to counteract?"

"She spoke of something called Cythraul, a being worshiped in a place called Basham by a race called Gogs.

She said Cythraul and the Gogs were a deadly menace to all who worshiped Keridwen."

"And to all who walk this planet," Dylan said.

"What is Cythraul?" Churchward asked. "Another of your myths?"

Dylan shook his head. "Cythraul is no myth, but whether it is a sentient being or a natural phenomenon, I don't know. Some authorities have hypothesized that at one time the universe was a chaos or giant 'cosmic atom.' From this chaos were formed the stars and the planets. Cythraul is the core, the consciousness of that 'cosmic atom,' and it waits beneath Cythraul Sands for the return of chaos."

"And that would mean the destruction of the planets?"

"Yes, and of the human race," Dylan said.

"Then perhaps the Lady Ethne did not exaggerate the danger."

"It is impossible to exaggerate it," Dylan said. "But continue your story. Ethne convinced you to go with her?"

"Yes. I got Teddy and the gun on board a train for a small town in Northern Manitoba. From there, we went north by riverboat. Finally we journeyed over a muddy, rutted road and then through open country until we reached a small hidden valley in the Northwest Territory. There the first part of our journey came to an end."

"All that traveling was just the first part?"

"Yes. The part that took place on my world ended there in that valley, because it was there we found the Shimmering Gates."

"What were they like?" Dylan asked.

"Like nothing I've ever seen on that world or this," Churchward said promptly. "A shimmering circle of light, but not a circle of light—rather a hole in . . . in reality. We stepped through that hole, Lady Ethne and I with old Teddy plodding along behind us. You'll not believe this, but we stepped through into *nothing*. A darkness that makes darkness as we know it seem like high noon. A darkness where there was nothing beneath our feet and yet we stood, or rather floated. A darkness in which there was a menace that caused even old Teddy to whinny in terror. Then we felt the tugging . . . the tugging of something unknown but which drew us toward another Shimmering Gate, and

then we found ourselves once more in reality . . . an odd reality, but reality."

"Where were you?"

"In a huge, temple-like building that reached almost to the sky. It was filled with people hurrying to and fro. I had the feeling I had stepped into a gigantic railroad station where thousands of passengers were rushing to catch trains. But the transportation in that terminal was not between towns, my friend, it was between worlds, and the commerce being carried on was brisk. I've since fancied that some of the merchandise being carried from my world to yours were things like inventions, songs and literature. Do you read Shakespeare here in Annwn?"

"We read the great mythic plays set in imaginary places and attributed to a man named Shakespeare, but most scholars agree no such person ever existed. The plays themselves are part of the Anglic folk literature."

"Shakespeare lived in my world," Churchward said, "and the places he wrote about were not imaginary. Have you ever heard of Rudyard Kipling?"

Dylan shook his head. "No, should I have?"

"I guess not. He lives in my world and time, but it seems no one has gotten around to importing him here as yet."

"You were in this place like a giant railroad station," Dylan urged him on. "What happened then?"

The major pulled at his moustache and looked unhappy. "That was where I parted from the Lady Ethne. There in that place they called Caer Pedryvan, the Revolving Castle."

"Why did you part with her?"

"She had to remain," Major Churchward said sadly.

"Why?" Dylan pressed him.

"The Guardians charge a fee for passage between the worlds. The fee for two human beings, a horse and a Gatling gun was large. It could not be paid all at once as the others seemed to be doing. To do so would have meant death for the one paying the fee."

"Death? I don't understand."

"Neither do I, Mr. MacBride, neither do I, but as Lady Ethne explained it, the price required by the Guardians is a portion of the life force of the traveler. To have surrend-

ered all at one time the amount of life force she had to pay would have killed her, so she stayed behind to pay our passage in installments while I boarded a sailing craft that took me to a place called Porte Santo. There I took passage on a steamer bound for the Modalgo River and ultimately for Avallon itself."

"A strange story," Dylan said, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair. "You say the price for coming through from your world was so large the Lady Ethne had to remain at this Caer Pedryvan to pay in installments, but what of the other 'travelers' you saw? Did any of them have to remain?"

"No. I think perhaps it was the gun," Major Churchward said. "I'm sure the Guardians were aware of the importance of the Gatling gun, the extra parts and the ammunition, and charged accordingly. They subsist on life force. They are not human, you know."

"No, I didn't know. I've always assumed that if such persons existed, they were merely the cowed priests of some ancient religion."

"Then you don't believe me?"

Dylan shrugged. "I neither believe nor disbelieve."

"You'll believe tomorrow when you've seen Chauncey Depew in action," Churchward said with the calm assurance of a man who knows what he's talking about. "Maybe then you can get the bureaucrats and incompetent military men of your empire to act. They're so bogged down by inertia that not one of them can bring himself to do anything. That is why I've come to you. I understand you have friends in high places and know your way around the military."

"Well, actually they were friends of my father."

"Even better, but that can all wait until tomorrow. Now shall we sleep?"

"Yes, tomorrow promises to be a busy day," Dylan said, suddenly remembering that he had been challenged to two duels and that the seconds for his opponents would be calling in the morning. He got to his feet and pulled the bell cord. When the chambermaid appeared he asked her to prepare a bed on the divan for the major.

While he wasn't willing to say so, Dylan was more than halfway convinced of the man's story, but just before they

retired, Churchward said something that made him doubt again.

"Oh, by the way, Mr. MacBride," Churchward said, "the Lady Ethne gave me a message for you."

"A message for me? Impossible. I've never heard of the woman and I'm sure she doesn't know me."

"Nevertheless, she gave me a message to be relayed to the son of Sir Malcolm MacBride."

"She claimed to know my father?"

"She said he died in Cythraul's caverns. Is that correct?"

"Yes. The subject intrigued him. He finally led an expedition into the caverns and never returned."

"Lady Ethne said Sir Malcolm MacBride's son should seek the answer to the menace of the Gogs from the Priestess of Keridwen in Trogtown," Churchward said.

"Priestess of Keridwen in Trogtown? Surely you jest, Major. A discredited religion holds the answer to a current menace? Hardly. And Trogtown . . . it's hardly even safe to go there."

"I merely repeat the words of the Lady Ethne," Churchward said stubbornly.

IV

AT EIGHT the next morning, Dylan and the major were awakened by a loud hammering on the door of the flat. Pulling on a dressing gown, Dylan went to the door and found a tall, blondish youth in the white and scarlet uniform of a Carabineer regiment standing there.

The officer stood for a moment holding his plumed helmet at his side and regarding Dylan out of pale blue eyes. "I am Captain Philbert St. John of the Prince Regent's Own Carabineers," he said finally. "Have I the honor of addressing Dylan MacBride, Esquire, of Shetland Head, Vine-land?"

"You have," Dylan said, knowing what was coming next.

"I have been honored by a request of Mr. Edmund Sprague to serve as his second in the matter at hand between you and himself."

"Of course," Dylan said. "Won't you come in, Captain?"

My guest and I were about to have a cup of coffee. I hope you'll join us."

Churchward had pulled his pants on over his red woolen underwear and was about to put on his shirt when Dylan escorted the young officer into the sitting room. A maid appeared almost at once with a tray with coffee and scones and a pot of jam.

Captain Philbert St. John had at first given the impression of being an insufferable young prig, but upon the arrival of the food, he unbent and smiled boyishly. "Scones and jam! How wonderful!" he said, setting aside his plumed helmet and covering his white britches with a napkin. "It's like home cooking."

"Please help yourself," Dylan said politely.

The young man proceeded to cover three scones with butter and jam and devour the lot without a pause for conversation. Finally, when the last of the food was gone, he leaned back in his chair and looked embarrassed.

"I . . . I assume we should get down to business," he said, "which seems a beastly thing to do after the pleasure of good currant jam, but . . . ahem, as the challenged party, I believe you have the choice of weapons."

"What is this—dueling?" Major Churchward said, aware for the first time of the purpose of the early morning visit. "Surely not in a civilized nation!"

Captain St. John contrived to look aggrieved and haughty despite the jam on his face. "But surely in a civilized nation, sir. How would gentlemen maintain a civilization except with a code of honor?"

Major Churchward scowled behind his walrus moustache but remained silent.

"Will you choose a weapon, sir?" St. John said.

"Well, let's see," Dylan said. "Do I prefer to be shot full of holes or hacked to pieces with a saber? I must confess that neither fate holds any fascination for me. Why not let Mr. Sprague decide?"

St. John looked distressed and more embarrassed. "Ahem! If you will permit my presuming on a short acquaintance and shared currant jam, I would not advise that, since Mr. Sprague would most certainly choose pistols, and I'm afraid he is one of the most deadly shots in the Empire. . . . Of course, he is also an expert with the epee," St. John added,

looking miserable. "I know of several men he has killed with it. I'm afraid Mr. Sprague is never satisfied with merely drawing blood."

"Then I don't see that I have much choice. It looks as though your friend is determined to kill me, and there isn't a great deal I can do about it unless he would consent to fight with claymores. That is the only weapon besides the rifle at which I am an expert."

"I don't think claymores are fashionable in duels," St. John said, "but I would be most happy to convey your preference for them to my principal."

"I was only jesting, Captain," Dylan said. "I wouldn't think of embarrassing you with such a message to your friend."

"Ahem . . . if you will permit me, Mr. MacBride, I would like to state that Mr. Sprague is not a friend of mine. Neither is he an officer of my regiment. He is a mere acquaintance, a card-playing acquaintance, you might say. But he is not a friend of mine, indeed not!"

Dylan lifted his eyebrows at the young man's vehemence.

"In fact . . ." St. John hesitated and then went on determinedly, "In fact, I have reason to believe that the gentleman is a professional duelist in the pay of a certain commercial house."

"Would that be the Basham Company?" Dylan asked.

"It would indeed," St. John said. "Since you have guessed, I see no reason to deny it. It may seem irregular of me to act this way, being the gentleman's second as I am, but I must warn you, sir, that Sprague intends to murder you and call it a fair fight."

"Bully for you, Captain! You're a gentleman of the old school. All to the mustard, as they say in my land," Churchward said. Then he turned to Dylan. "Of course you won't go through with this now that you know the truth."

"I'm afraid I must," Dylan said.

"Of course he must," St. John said. "Simply because Mr. Sprague has no honor, you wouldn't expect Mr. MacBride to fail to uphold his, would you?"

"I expect that a man who has important business—business on which the fate of his country and his world may depend—would take care that he isn't murdered," Churchward said.

"I'm afraid I should have thought of that before I got myself into this," Dylan said. "Has your principal suggested a time and a place, St. John?"

"Yes. As always, he prefers the sycamore grove behind the old Druidic burying ground on the Amion road. It is a place of considerable privacy where we're not likely to be interrupted by the constabulary. He suggests six o'clock tomorrow morning as the time."

"What a ghastly hour," Dylan said.

"A ghastly hour for a ghastly deed," Churchward said.

"However, the time and place are satisfactory," Dylan said, "and since I've neglected to arrange for a second, I'll have to ask Major Churchward to act for me."

Churchward was startled but not displeased. "Well . . . mind you, I disapprove of this whole business. It would never be permitted in my . . . well, I disapprove but of course I'll stand by you."

His business completed, Captain Philbert St. John shook hands, put his helmet on, saluted and withdrew.

Churchward was on his feet immediately. "What will happen if you're killed in this ridiculous business? Who'll alert the Empire to the menace of the Gogs? Have you thought about what will happen if you're killed?"

"I suppose I shall be buried with all the proper rites of reformed Druidism unless the Arch Druid of the area has placed a ban on dueling."

"But the Gatling gun—the Rattler. Who will be able to convince the authorities that it's needed?"

"Well, now, that does present a problem, doesn't it? I suggest that we devote today to doing what we can about that. As soon as we've breakfasted, we'll ride out to the Strand and see your gun in action. Then we'll make the rounds of the ministries."

"You're willing to spend what may be your last day doing that?"

"I can't think of a better way to spend it," Dylan said, but realized that wasn't exactly true. If he had really had his choice, he would have preferred to spend his last day with that pretty little Lady Alice he had met the night before. Thinking of Lady Alice reminded him of her brother.

"There is one other matter I shall have to attend to," he

said just as the knocker on the door sounded again. "And that is probably the gentleman now."

This time there was a spruce young gentleman in the uniform of an Imperial Navy Lieutenant standing on the stoop.

"Mr. MacBride, I am Lieutenant Samual van Rasselway. I represent Lieutenant Commander Noel Bran ap Lynn."

"I believe I'll choose swords, if that is satisfactory," Dylan said. "The hour of six tomorrow morning is taken, but the sycamore grove behind the Druidic burying ground on the Amion road will do fine as the place."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but did you say the hour of six was taken?" the young man touched his pencil-line moustache nervously. "Surely there is nothing that would take precedence over an affair of honor?"

"Nothing but another affair of honor," Dylan said. "I'm afraid I've promised six o'clock to a Mr. Edmund Sprague. If I'm still alive, seven o'clock will be fine for me to meet your principal."

"Seven o'clock!" the naval officer looked scandalized. "My principal likes to get these things over with as early as possible. By seven o'clock he is usually cantering in the park."

"Please convey my apologies to Lieutenant Commander Bran ap Lynn," Dylan said, "and tell him I regret not being able to accommodate his lust for my blood until seven."

The officer bowed stiffly. "I shall relay your words to my principal. If I may inquire as to your second?"

"This is Major F. Woodrow Churchward, late of the First Volunteer Cavalry. He will be my second."

"Volunteer Cavalry?" Lieutenant van Rasselway looked down his nose at the major. "I don't believe I know that unit."

Major Churchward's moustache bristled. "A very famous regiment in my parts, young man. In the First Cavalry we used to ride from dawn to dusk, to fight in the saddle and on foot and to lick our weight in Apaches, Spaniards or Philippine guerillas."

"I don't recognize any of those names either," the young man said.

"You don't, eh?" Churchward said. "Well, just so you

don't forget the First Volunteer Cavalry, I'm personally going to throw you down these steps!"

"Wait!" Dylan said, placing a restraining hand on the major's arm. "I'm sure Lieutenant van Rassalway meant no insult to your regiment."

The young officer turned beet red, and Dylan knew that if he couldn't smooth things over, there would be a third duel scheduled. "Lieutenant, the major is a traveler from a far land. You'll have to excuse his direct ways. He meant no offense."

"Well . . ." Van Rassalway was backing down the steps. Dylan wasn't sure if he had succeeded in mollifying him or if he was withdrawing before Churchward could carry out his threat.

"I'll see you at seven tomorrow morning," Dylan said hastily and closed the door. Then he turned to the major. "Really, Churchward! What were you trying to do, get yourself into a duel?"

"Why not?" Churchward asked. "You've gotten yourself into two. Are you trying to hog all the excitement to yourself?"

Dylan laughed. "I'm afraid there's going to be precious little excitement in either of these affairs. I doubt if Mr. Sprague will even work up a sweat before he runs me through, and Noel Bran ap Lynn will have his trip to the country for nothing. But that's tomorrow, and right now—I hear the maid coming with the rest of our breakfast and I've worked up a ferocious appetite with all this talk of bloodletting."

V

AT FOUR-THIRTY the next morning, Dylan and Major Churchward climbed into a hackney and told the driver to take them to the Druidic burying ground. The man looked back over his shoulder and shook his head sadly.

"I suppose I'll be bringing back only one of you gentlemen," he said.

"On the contrary," Dylan said, "we are both firmly committed to staying alive. We have a great deal of work to do."

The previous day had been one of both promise and failure. The promise had been in the test of the Gatling gun. It had performed even better than Churchward had led Dylan to imagine it would. The major had set up targets in front of a high embankment, then he and Teddy maneuvered the gun into position. He had taken a doughnut-shaped magazine from the cart and positioned it on top of the gun. The magazine carried 104 rounds of 45-70 caliber ammunition. Given sufficient ammunition and two leaders, the gun could fire 1500 rounds, Churchward told Dylan. He then fired the gun at the targets, cranking the ammunition into the ten barrels as he fired. The targets were torn to pieces. Dylan had been enthusiastic over the demonstration, but the rest of the day had been disappointing. The afternoon had been spent tramping from office to office trying to interest various officials in the gun.

Most of the officials wouldn't even see them. They were too busy, or they didn't see anyone without an appointment and no appointment could be made at the present time because they would be leaving shortly for country homes or Pleasure Island for the boating season. The three minor functionaries who consented to see them refused to attend a demonstration of the gun's capabilities. Two were obviously bored, and the third remarked that what they were describing sounded like witchcraft and he didn't want any trouble with the church authorities by countenancing such a demonstration.

So now they were riding out the Amion road without anything accomplished and with two duels hanging over Dylan's head. They were silent as the hackney rolled over the cobblestones, but Dylan knew by the grim expression on the major's face that he fully expected Dylan to be killed.

Although feeling far from cheerful, Dylan grinned and stretched his bare legs out in front of him as though he were completely relaxed. He had put on his best kilt, plaid and sporran, and belted his claymore around his waist. He looked the picture of a Highlander dressed for an event of importance.

"How can you look so cheerful when we accomplished nothing yesterday and you may be dead today?" Churchward said.

"We accomplished one thing," Dylan said. "Now we both know there is a weapon that could save the Empire from the Gogs."

"Yes, two of us know it now," Churchward said and added gloomily, "but in a few hours there may be one who knows it, and he isn't well enough acquainted in this city to do anything about it."

"I fully intend to be alive when this is over," Dylan said, "but if I shouldn't be, there is one man you might approach. He was a friend of my father's and I've hesitated because of that."

"Who is he? Where can I find him?"

"He's a retired general named Sir Angus Horwitz. He's a crusty old so-and-so with the manners of a buzz saw and the vocabulary of a mule-skinner, but he's the possessor of the most brilliant military mind in the Empire."

"You say he's retired?"

"Yes, like most men of genius, he was a misfit in the army, and after the Bolo Wars he was forced into retirement. Men like Angus Horwitz are suitable only for times of crisis. They burn too brightly for peaceful times. But I imagine he'll be back in uniform soon. You'll find him at his home in Penringing Circus."

"We'll both find him there," Churchward said, smiling for the first time that morning.

The Druidic burying ground lay in a valley filled with moss-covered trees and surrounded by lush green meadows. There was still mist off the Silver Strand hanging low over the area, and the ancient tombs loomed through it like buildings in a city long deserted by all but the dead.

Churchward shivered. "A grim looking place," he observed.

Dylan laughed. "Only for the moment. When the sun comes out, there will be birds singing and the smell of salt air."

"Well, it looks like some of our friends are already here," Churchward said, pointing to three men huddled near a carriage. They were dressed in top hats and greatcoats, and one of them had a pair of sabers tucked under an arm.

Dylan took a big gold watch out of his sporran and consulted it. "Five-forty. The gentleman is eager, but I'm afraid he's the wrong gentleman."

"The wrong gentleman?"

"Yes. Noel Bran ap Lynn's appointment isn't until seven o'clock, remember?"

"Perhaps he's just come early to watch," Churchward said, "or perhaps to apologize."

"That's unlikely," Dylan said, "since he brought his second, his swords and a surgeon with him."

"Ahem . . . ah . . . I don't suppose you could see your way clear to . . ."

"Apologize? No, I'm afraid not," Dylan said. "And if I'm not mistaken Mr. Sprague and Captain St. John are approaching on horseback. I hope we're not going to have an argument over precedence."

"This begins to look like a busier morning than we anticipated," Churchward said as they climbed down from the friends.

The hackman leaned down and touched his cap to Dylan. "Beggin' your pardon, sir, but I wonder if you'd mind paying me now. I know it don't seem right but . . ."

Dylan took a stack of coins from his sporran and thrust them into the man's hand. "Thanks for the vote of confidence," he said.

"Mr. MacBridel! Mr. MacBridel!" Noel was running to reach him before Sprague and St. John could. "I understand you have another engagement."

"The gentleman is arriving right now," Dylan said.

"I must protest this insult and the inconvenience you're putting me to."

"Insult and inconvenience?"

"Yes, sir. We have an appointment, and I understand from Lieutenant van Rasselway that you've had the bloody impudence to pick another quarrel and to let this other—ahem! gentleman—have first chance at you and thereby delay my morning ride."

Sprague and St. John drew up nearby and Sprague leaped from his horse and strode arrogantly toward them.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded of Dylan. "Who are these men?"

"I, sir, am Lieutenant Noel Bran ap Lynn, and this is Lieutenant van Rasselway of his Imperial Majesty's Airship *Vengeance*."

"And may I ask who invited you to this affair between

myself and this gentleman?" Sprague's buck teeth showed in an exaggerated sneer.

"I invited myself, *sir*," Noel said, "since the affair of honor is between *myself* and this gentleman."

"I'll be damned if it is!" Sprague said. "This gentleman struck me and accepted my challenge. The appointment was for six o'clock, and if my watch it not wrong, it is almost that time now. So I shall ask you to leave."

It occurred to Dylan that Sprague didn't want any more witnesses than absolutely necessary to their duel. That probably meant St. John had been right when he said the man was a professional duelist hired to kill him.

"I have no intention of leaving." Noel's voice was like smooth ice. "In fact, since I was first offended by Mr. MacBride and issued the first challenge, I must ask that you leave at once and let us be about our business."

Captain St. John tried to mediate. "Perhaps Mr. Sprague would be content to wait until Commander Bran ap Lynn has finished his business with Mr. MacBride before pursuing his own?"

Noel smiled coldly. "If he does, he'll have his wait for nothing, because I intend to kill Mr. MacBride for his deliberate insult to my branch of the service."

Sprague's face was so red that his freckles seemed to have blended together, but his voice was silky smooth. "Commander Bran ap Lynn is mistaken. It will be my privilege to kill Mr. MacBride."

"Gentlemen, please," Dylan said. "I would be happy to oblige you both but since I have only one life, I'm afraid—"

"It is now precisely six o'clock," Sprague said, taking a watch from his pocket. "I shall wait exactly three minutes for you gentlemen to withdraw."

"By God, sir, I have a watch too," Noel said. "I shall wait for exactly *two* minutes for you to leave!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Dylan said. "Can't we come to some amicable settlement of this? Perhaps if we tossed a coin?"

"I'll thank you to keep out of this, sir!" Noel said. "This matter is between this gentleman and myself."

"Yes, be quiet, MacBride," Sprague said. "This is our affair."

"Well, of course; I wouldn't think of interfering in some-

thing that isn't any of my business," Dylan said. Neither of his would-be antagonists were listening to him or to each other. They were holding their watches out in front of them, alternately looking at the timepieces and glaring at each other. Dylan shrugged and said to Major Churchward, "I was going to suggest I might blow my own brains out and that way neither would have to take second place, but they don't seem interested."

"By my watch, there is one minute and ten seconds left," Sprague said. "I expect you to be gone by then."

Noel yawned. "By my watch, which is very accurate, there are only twenty seconds remaining of the two minutes I gave you."

"If you are not gone in one minute," Sprague said, "I'll—"

"Your time is up, sir," Noel said and took a glove out of his pocket with obvious intent.

"Allow me to save you the trouble, Commander," Sprague said and handed Noel a card. "I am at your service, sir."

"Where?" Noel asked.

"Right here," Sprague said. "When?"

"Immediately," Noel said. "Will you choose your weapon?"

"Epees will do nicely" Sprague said. "Captain St. John is carrying a pair."

"So is Lieutenant van Rasselway," Noel said. "I suggest we each use one of our own."

"This is satisfactory," Sprague said and turned to St. John to reach for one of the two swords the Carabineer officer carried. "Shall we begin?"

"Gentlemen," Dylan said. "If one is permitted to point out, you both came here to accommodate me and—"

"Later, Mr. MacBride, later," Sprague said. "It will be your turn to die next."

"I hope you'll excuse me, Mr. MacBride," Noel said, "but I have taken an uncommon dislike to this gentleman's face. I can't abide the thought of it being carried around this city any longer."

"I'll remember that when I run you through," Sprague said. He moved a few feet away and was examining the footing with care.

"I really must protest," Dylan said. "Intentionally or not, you gentlemen are insulting me by this—"

"For God's sake, man, be still!" Churchward whispered

fiercely. "Let the fools kill each other and consider yourself lucky."

Then Dylan remembered something. This brash young naval officer was the brother of Alice Bran ap Lynn. If he permitted him to be killed by Sprague, he'd never be able to face her again.

"If you'll excuse me, Commander," he said, stepping closer to Noel, "I feel obligated to pass a warning on to you."

Noel was testing his sword by swishing it through the air. He spared Dylan a brief glance. "Step aside, if you please, Mr. MacBride. I'll get back to you directly."

"I have reason to believe," Dylan insisted, "that Mr. Sprague is a professional duelist hired by enemies of mine to kill me."

Noel's eyes didn't so much as flicker. "Thank you, sir, for the information. You can rest assured that Mr. Sprague will not earn his pay."

"But I . . ."

"Sprague, shall we begin?" Noel shouted, advancing toward the other man.

"Begin!" Sprague said. He had shed his topcoat and jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves and partly unbuttoned his checked waistcoat. "Begin now!"

He launched himself forward with his epee extended, the point aimed right at Noel's heart.

"Look out!" the shout burst unbidden from Dylan's lips, but Noel had already stepped aside, and Sprague plunged on past.

"Well, sir," Noel said quietly, "you're a tricky one, aren't you?"

Sprague only smiled, his buck teeth flashing in the sunlight that was just breaking through the fog. Then he attacked again with quick thrusts that were meant to kill, not wound.

Noel gave ground, keeping his guard up and his eyes fixed on the other man's eyes, or rather just below the level of his eyes, in an old duelist trick. Dylan wasn't expert enough to follow most of the finer points of the swordplay. The claymore, which was the national weapon of Vine-land, was a cut-and-thrust blade, mostly cut, but the epee was all point.

The flashing points of these two combatants were al-

most too fast to follow. Dylan was aware that at first Sprague had forced Noel back with his relentless attack. Several times the long, thin blade of his epee flashed past the Naval officer's slender body or had been deflected by his blade. Once Dylan was almost certain that the probing point had touched Noel's middle, but since the young man was wearing a red waistcoat, he couldn't tell whether any blood had been drawn.

Finally Noel stopped retreating and, for what seemed an eternity to Dylan, they both stood their ground, weapons clanging against each other but feet barely moving.

"I see you're something of an expert," Sprague said. His manner was unruffled, but Dylan thought he noticed a slight quickening in his breathing. "One is surprised."

"One has more surprises in store," Noel said, suddenly launching into a whirlwind attack that forced Sprague back.

"Hal! Now there's a swordsman!" St. John said. "Mr. Sprague may have met his match."

Once, twice, three times . . . Noel's sword flickered within inches of Sprague's chest only to be parried at the last minute. But then it got home. A spot of blood appeared on Sprague's shoulder.

St. John and van Rasselway stepped forward instantly. "First blood," St. John said. "Are you satisfied, gentlemen?"

"No, damn it, no!" Sprague said and hurled himself at Noel in a desperate flurry of thrusts and counterthrusts.

For a moment, Noel gave ground again, and then Sprague tried to finish it before he lost too much blood. He caught Noel's sword on his pommel and tried to flick it out of his hand. The ploy failed, and Noel's point came thrusting in over Sprague's guard and buried itself in his chest.

A look of surprise registered on the duelist's face as he stared down at the wound, but it faded almost at once, replaced by blankness as he slumped to his knees and then fell over backward.

The doctor stepped forward and bent over him briefly. Then he took a handkerchief out of his pocket and spread it over Sprague's face. "There is nothing I can do for him," he said, getting to his feet.

"I could have told you that," Noel said, wiping his blade and turning to Dylan. "Well, Mr. MacBride, are you ready?"

Dylan felt a coldness in the pit of his stomach as he moved forward. "Yes, I'm ready, unless you'd care to rest for a while."

"No, I think not," Noel said, taking out his watch and glancing at it. "I believe I'll still have time for my ride if we hurry."

Captain St. John placed an epee in Dylan's hand.

"Blast it, sir!" Churchward said. "Isn't one dead man enough?"

"Oh, quite," Noel said. "I have no intention of killing Mr. MacBride now. The fact that he warned me Sprague was a professional killer, plus the pleadings of a certain young lady of whom I am very fond, have made me content to draw only a little of his blood."

"I'll save you the trouble of that, sir," said a voice nearby, and they all turned to see a big man in a derby and turtleneck sweater step out from the shelter of a group of trees. "We'll be taking Mr. MacBride with us."

Dylan stiffened as he recognized the leader of the three men who had tried to kidnap him two nights before. Behind the man were at least a dozen other toughs in caps and striped shirts. All of them carried knives, bludgeons or blackjacks.

"What is the meaning of this?" Noel asked. "What are you men doing here?"

"We don't mean to be troublin' you gents," the big man said, "but we've got our orders."

"Orders?" Lieutenant van Rasselway said. "What orders?"

"Orders to take into custody the man named Dylan MacBride," the big man said. "He's wanted for assorted crimes and misdemeanors." He took off his bowler and stood looking down at Sprague. "The professor'll be properly disappointed in this 'un."

"Dylan MacBride is wanted by whom?" Churchward demanded. "Aren't you the leader of the thugs who tried to abduct him the other night?"

"I'm the authorized representative of the Basham Company. Dan Mark, by name. And I've got 'ere the authorization to take into custody one Dylan MacBride. We'll be takin' 'im now."

Four or five of the thugs moved toward Dylan. He backed

up, hefting the epee and then transferring it to his left hand so he could draw his claymore at need.

"I'm with you, Mr. MacBride," Churchward said and moved to his side. "We'll fight our way out of here."

"You keep out of this, toff," Dan Mark said. "'Tis no business of yours."

"I intend to make it my business," Churchward said, wielding the epee Dylan handed him.

"Just a minute," Captain St. John said. He and Noel had been examining the paper Mark had handed him. "This is no legal paper. This is nothing but a letter of attainder from a private company. You have no right to arrest this man."

"I 'spect those bully boys give me the right to arrest anyone I want to," Mark said, waving a hand at his men. "Get 'im boys!"

The five who had moved close to Dylan leaped for him, knives and tarred rope ends held ready. Dylan took a couple of quick steps backward and drew his claymore. The basket-hilted broadsword gleamed in the sun as he smashed the first attacker with the flat of the blade, knocking him head over heels. The second one was on him then with a lifted knife. Dylan moved in under the blow and, using the hilt of his broadsword like a pair of brass knuckles, smashed the man in the face. He felt bone and gristle give, and the man's face dissolved into a mass of blood.

Churchward was swinging the epee like a bludgeon and felled one attacker with it. But now more were coming in to surround them. Dylan wrapped his plaid around his arm and used it as a shield. A bearded character in a cap slashed through the plaid and he felt the knife nick his arm. He beat the man over the head with the claymore until he collapsed. Then four more of them swarmed over him, beating at him with rope ends and blackjacks. A blow to the side of the head sent him reeling and another almost knocked the claymore from his hand. They were dragging him down, trying to wrest his sword out of his hand.

He kicked out in desperation, and a man yelled as his foot got home. He drew his Highland dirk and, as they battered the claymore out of his hands, he tried to get one of them with it. But before he could do more than prick

someone in the shoulder, a numbing blow from a bung starter knocked it from his hand.

Lashing out with fists and feet, Dylan was aware that Churchward had also been knocked down and was being pounded and kicked into insensibility.

That was when Noel Bran ap Lynn decided to join the action. He tossed the document Dan Mark had handed him in the man's face and promptly knocked him down.

"Hold on, Mr. MacBride, hold on!" he shouted and, drawing his epee, began to lay about with it.

Captain St. John and Lieutenant van Rasselway looked at each other for a moment and then hurled themselves into the middle of the fight. Suddenly assaulted from the rear, the crowd of Basham Company thugs around Dylan gave way long enough for him to retrieve his claymore. Now he began to lay about him with a vengeance. Using the flat of the blade to avoid having to explain dead bodies to the authorities, he stretched three of the faltering toughs on the grass and sent two more reeling away with bloodied heads. He fought his way to where Noel had been knocked down by a club-armed bully and was about to be knifed by another. A blow of the claymore across the man's thick neck and shoulders made him lose interest in knifeplay and take to his heels.

Dylan helped Noel to his feet. "I want to thank you for coming to my aid," he said as they watched St. John and van Rasselway help Churchward hurry the rest of the thugs on their way with blows across the rumps from sword and epee.

"Think nothing of it," Noel said. "A gentleman could hardly stand by and let another be pummeled by a band of ruffians, no matter whom they claim to represent."

"Nevertheless, I am grateful."

"And I for your flattening of that scoundrel who was doing his best to knife me," Noel said. "I think we shall have to become friends."

"I would be honored," Dylan said, taking the other's proffered hand. "Perhaps some day when you have time I could explain to you what I meant about the Navy and the Gog invasion. An explanation in lieu of an apology might be in order."

"Why wait?" Noel said. "The others seem to have taken

care of the last of our violent friends, and I believe I've had enough exercise this morning so that I can forego my ride. May I suggest breakfast at my club? I have worked up quite an appetite."

"I'd be delighted," Dylan said. "I wonder if I might bring along my friend, Major Churchward. He has something I believe a Naval officer might be interested in."

The doctor, Captain St. John and Lieutenant van Rasselway remained to make arrangements for the disposal of the body of Edmund Sprague and to intimidate the now unconscious ruffians as soon as they recovered. Dylan thanked the two seconds for their help in the fight, and then he and Noel and Churchward got into the hackney and, with Noel's horse trotting along behind, headed back toward the city.

At Dylan's suggestion, Major Churchward launched into a description of the marvelous weapon he had stored in the carriage house where Dylan lived.

"Did you say fifteen hundred rounds a minute?" Noel asked, frowning.

"Yes, with two expert leaders as a gun crew," Churchward said.

Noel tapped his white teeth with a fingernail. "And you've seen this weapon demonstrated?" he asked Dylan.

"I've seen it do everything Major Churchward says it can do," Dylan said.

"Hmm. How heavy did you say this Rattler of yours is, Major Churchward?"

"What do you mean, how heavy?"

"Well, would it be possible to mount two or three of them in an airship with a good supply of ammunition?"

"Not only possible," Churchward said, "but an idea I've toyed with for some time."

"Then I think we have much to talk about, gentlemen," Noel said and gave the driver the directions to his club.

VI

A WEEK LATER, Dylan, Churchward and Noel were sitting in a café on River Gate Drive. Dylan and Churchward stared moodily into their whiskey and sodas while

Noel leafed through his mail, which he had picked up at the Admiralty Building an hour before. From time to time he would toss a bill aside or pause to sniff the perfumed envelope of a young lady.

"These I'll burn," he said, indicating the pile of bills from tradesmen. "If the Gogs are coming as you say, what's the use of paying bills?"

Dylan was tapping his glass, trying to think of a solution to the problem of getting the authorities interested in Churchward's Rattler. They had called on Major General Sir Angus Horwitz and found him out of the city. According to his servant, he had been recalled to active duty by the express wish of the Prince Regent and had been dispatched immediately as Inspector General of the forces on the Northwest frontiers.

With that promising path blocked, the three had decided to take matters into their own hands. Pooling their funds, they had gone to R. J. Rocklynn and Sons, one of the city's largest gunmakers. A price had been agreed upon for three copies of Chauncey Depew. The gunsmith had been fascinated by the gun, marveling at the simplicity of its construction. So now two Rattlers were being built to be placed aboard the *Vengeance* if Noel could get his admiral's permission, and the third was being constructed as a demonstration model in the hope of interesting Rocklynn and Sons to manufacture the weapon on their own for possible sale to the military.

"And these sweet missiles I shall place aside for later reading," Noel said, gathering up the scented letters, "because where matters of the heart are concerned, it doesn't matter if the world is about to come to an end. Isn't that true, my friend?"

Dylan nodded glumly. He was just about at his wit's end. The morning papers had contained mention of unusually heavy ice floes in the Basham Straits. One paper had mentioned the sighting of parties of horsemen crossing the ice at several points. To Dylan that meant just one thing: the Gog scouts were already moving into the Border Marches. The horde itself would soon follow.

"And this one from sister Alice I must read at once," Noel said, slitting open the envelope.

Dylan's ears perked up at mention of Lady Alice, but his

face fell as Noel went on: "The little dear is staying with Colonel and Lady O'Hara at their country home near Abaydos. She's engaged to the colonel's dim-witted offspring, Sean, of the Duke of Amhara's Own Hussars. A fashionable but incompetent regiment filled with younger sons of younger sons and remittance men from the provinces."

All Dylan heard was that Lady Alice was engaged. Those words caused the excellent lunch he had enjoyed to curdle in his stomach. And then suddenly something else got through to him.

"Abaydos? That's in the Northwest frontier area."

"Yes, I believe it is," Noel said, looking up from the note. "You seem concerned."

"The Northwest frontier will feel the first thrust of the Gogs against the Empire," Dylan said. "I would advise you to warn your sister to leave for Avallon as soon as possible."

Noel smiled as though his secret guess had been confirmed. Dylan's concern for Lady Alice was quite obvious.

"Actually, I've been thinking of driving north myself to pick her up. I've purchased a new motor car, a Cleary-Niven, one of those electrical wonders that everyone is talking about, and I'm dying to try it on the open road. Perhaps you'd like to . . ."

He paused, cocking his head to one side to listen. There was a deep-throated roll of drums and the sound of marching men.

"Something's going on," Churchward said. "See those mounted constables clearing the street?"

There was a flurry of excitement among the fashionably dressed ladies and gentlemen who had been strolling along the sidewalks in front of the expensive shops and restaurants along River Gate Drive, and several motor cars were directed into nearby side streets.

"I fancy there's a regiment moving to entrain for the North," Noel said. "The War Office seems to have its wind up. There've been quite a few troop movements in the last week. When I took the *Vengeance* on a training cruise yesterday we passed over three regiments of Border Horse and a flying battery of twelve pounders coming from the south. Ah yes, here they come now."

The street had been cleared and the regiment was turn-

ing into River Gate Drive. The troops were splendid in their red jackets and blue pants with tall bearskins on their heads. Out in front of the color guard was a detachment of pioneers in white aprons and beards with great axes over their shoulders. Behind them came the colonel of the regiment on a white-faced chestnut horse, and following him were the massed drums and bugles.

"The Fourteenth," Dylan said, looking at the regimental standard. "The Emania Fusiliers. They're usually stationed in the far South. Their barracks are in the Tri-City area. Yes, I would say that the War Office has got its wind up."

"A fine body of men," Churchward said.

"Yes, but unfortunately those rifles they carry are single-shot rifled muskets left over from the Bolo Wars," Dylan said. "I seriously doubt if they even have smokeless powder. And thanks to the Basham Company, the Gogs all have repeating carbines."

The drums and bugles had begun to play, and the men in the ranks were singing as they marched.

"Goodbye, Dolly, I must leave you
Though it breaks my heart to go,
Something tells me I am needed,
At the front to fight the foe."

"I'll be damned!" Churchward said. "'Goodbye, Dolly Gray.' We marched off to fight in Cuba singing that one. There doesn't seem to be much of anything that doesn't get through the Shimmering Gates."

"You really must tell me about this mythical world of yours some day, old man," Noel said.

"Yours is the world of myth, old sport," Churchward said. "Gogs are out of the Bible or something in my world. I'm surprised you haven't got a tribe called the Magogs as well."

"It's odd you should say that," Noel said. "There are such tribes in the far South, near the unexplored polar areas."

"Gogs and Magogs, and an empire named Avallon," Churchward said. "All out of our myths."

"Our worlds are part of each other's myths," Dylan said. "That much is sure, but Cythraul is no myth."

"No," Noel said, "Cythraul is death for all the worlds, if we can believe what the Lady Ethne told friend Churchward."

"Lady Ethne would not lie, and I think she could see things others cannot see . . . and not with the eyes alone," Churchward said.

"Speaking of Lady Ethne," Dylan said, "I've been thinking about her message. I've just about decided to go into the undercity and see if I can locate that temple."

"Oh, I say, that would be bloody foolish," Noel said. "You know what the Troggs are like. They hate us top-siders. They'd as soon stick a knife in you as look at you. They don't want any truck with outsiders."

"The priestess lives among them," Dylan said. "No one sticks a knife in her."

"No one would dare," Noel laughed. "Those witches can turn a person into an alligator or a frog merely by looking at him."

"And where else are we going to find any answers?" Dylan asked. "Where else will we find a way to block Kar Kaballa and his Gogs? Who knows the old secrets?"

"I agree that the priestesses of Keridwen know them," Noel said. "No one else remembers the old mysteries, but . . ."

"Then I'll go to the priestess in Trogtown and ask for her help in the name of the Lady Ethne," Dylan said.

"All right, I'll go too," Noel said, "although I do not like the prospect of being turned into a frog. It would make several young ladies of my acquaintance horribly unhappy if I were to turn up all covered with warts, leaping around and going *bellydeep, bellydeep*. But for the Empire, I'll take a chance."

"I've a hankering to see this undercity of yours," Churchward said. "I'll go too."

"No. The Lady Ethne said I should go so it's best I go alone. The priestesses are an odd lot, and this one might take offense or disappear if three of us showed up looking for her."

"So you want all the fun of chasing a sex-mad priestess by yourself," Noel said. "What are we supposed to be doing

in the meantime? Sitting around in some bureaucrat's stuffy waiting room hoping for a chance to be insulted?"

"No, you'll be getting ready for our trip to the Northwest," Dylan said. "If I learn nothing of importance from the priestess, we'll go north in the morning and take the Rattler with us. Maybe we can interest commanders in the field."

"Good idea," Churchward said.

"Yes. With the Gogs just across the Straits from them, the minds of the generals and the colonels might brighten a little," Noel said. "I'll place the *Vengeance* in the hands of Lieutenant van Rasselway and finagle myself a spot of leave."

"And while you're busy with that, I'll go to Trogtown and find the priestess," Dylan said.

"Aye, and you'd better wear a chastity belt if what I've heard about them is true."

Two hours later, Dylan was on his way. He had returned to his rooms, changed his coat and put away his plaid. His kilt was part of him and even in the interest of being inconspicuous he would never part with that. He carried a stout cane and, on Noel's insistence, had tucked a small revolver in his pocket.

It was almost dusk when he approached one of the gates that led to the undercity. Not that it mattered because, except for the areas around the gratings, it was always night in Trogtown.

The great iron gates that barred the ramps leading down into the undercity had never been opened in the memory of those still living, but the small gates beside them were seldom closed nowadays. They were guarded by a pair of unarmed constables who lounged against their little guard-house and watched the stream of pale-faced Troggs pass back and forth about their tasks. Previous to the time Dylan's great-grandfather, Adam Max MacBride, had been prime minister, the Troggs had been domestic servants only, but now they were shipwrights, mill workers and even small businessmen, but the law still required that they live in Trogtown. Dylan had never given it much thought but he assumed they preferred it that way.

As Dylan approached the gate, the two constables straightened and touched their helmets.

"Are you lost, sir?" one of them asked.

"No," Dylan said, "I'm going below."

"I beg your pardon, sir," the officer said, "but if you're a stranger to Avallon, I should warn you that—"

"It's all right, constable," Dylan said. "I know where I'm going."

"As you say, sir." The guards were dubious but didn't try to detain him. It wasn't unheard of for young gentlemen to keep girls in Trogtown.

Then he was through the gates, down the ramp and on the first level of the crowded streets below. Shops were open and one music hall had a thin-voiced soprano singing a sad little song Dylan had never heard in the upper city.

"Life is just a bubble, don't you know,
Just a painted piece of trouble, don't you know,
You come on earth to cry,
You grow older and you sigh,
Older still and then—you die, don't you know."

The song had a plaintive but at the same time slightly burlesque quality to it that caused Dylan to grin as he pushed his way through the crowd. He tried to go quietly but he couldn't help attracting attention. It was impossible for anyone from the upper city not to, since the average Trog man came only to the shoulders of a six-footer like Dylan. In addition, his deeply tanned skin contrasted sharply with the pale luminous white of theirs.

Looking around at the life in the undercity, he remembered that in the days of his great-grandfather, the Trogs had risen to a man to follow Adam Max in defense of the city. Dylan wondered what they found worth defending about their way of life.

Making his way out of the shopping area, the sounds of music and laughter from the music hall fading behind him, Dylan became more aware of the sweltering heat of the undercity and of the smells. As he passed the tenements, whose uniform three stories reached almost to the concrete overhead, the air was thick with the smell of frying foods and boiling clothes. There was a babble of voices from inside the houses, and the shouts of white-faced children playing ball in the street.

Ignoring the stares of the children and of women leaning from windows up above, he strode on toward the address that had been reluctantly given to him by a Reformed Druidic minister on the surface.

The temple of Keridwen was in a small brick building that looked as though it might once have been a store of some kind. The display windows had been painted over, as had the name of the former owner. There was nothing to mark the building's current purpose except for a small statue of a nearly nude red-haired woman over the doorway. Dylan supposed that was Keridwen herself. He went through the open door and found himself in a room about twenty by forty feet. At one end was a small dais with a candelabrum burning at either side. In the center of the dais was a six-foot statue of the same female.

"As the goddess of a fertility cult, she certainly seems to have all the necessary equipment," Dylan muttered to himself, slightly embarrassed by the frankness of the statue.

But except for the statue, the temple was empty. There were no worshipers and no priestess in attendance. Dylan looked for an anteroom but there was none. There were some hinges behind the dais, but it didn't seem reasonable that anyone would be hiding there, so after calling out once or twice, he went back outside and stopped the first passerby.

"I'm sorry to bother you, young fellow," he said to the teenage boy, "but can you tell me where I might find the priestess of this temple?"

The Trog youth looked at the temple out of frightened pink eyes and crossed himself piously. "Blimey, mister, I'd be the last one to have to do with the likes of them. I'm an altar boy myself."

Two chattering women with market baskets simply pushed on past Dylan with noses in the air when he tried to question them. The third try produced better results. A peddler whose dark skin marked him for a topsider stopped and looked puzzled until Dylan produced a coin.

"Oh sure now, and would it be Clarinda MacTague you'd be looking for?" the man said. "Clarinda and me do a spot of business now and again. You know . . . love potions, elixirs, horoscopes and things like that."

"Do you know where she can be found?" Dylan asked.

"Over across the street, the back apartment on the third floor," the man said. "That's the witch's den where she lives with those red-headed demons she calls children."

Dylan picked his way through the litter of garbage to the door of the tenement and entered a dark hall with a single gas light burning at the end. He edged his way carefully toward the stairs, hearing the rats scurrying along and the floors creaking as though they were about to give way.

He found the apartment at the end of the hall on the third floor without difficulty. In fact, he couldn't have missed it with the uproar coming from the open doorway. There were sounds of pounding fists, shouts and cries of anger and pain and the wailing of a baby.

"Stop that! Paddy, Mike, Shawn! Stop swinging little Terrence out the window!" a husky-voiced woman yelled in a thick Hibernian brogue. "Finn, get yerself off Kathleen or I'll be puttin' a spell on ye! And you, Dagda, you hellcat, if you drop the baby, I'll turn you into the Loathly Lady herself!"

"He bit me!" a girl yelled. "The damn brat bit me!"

"Sure now, and the poor little fella is teethin'," the woman said in a soothing tone. "He's got to bite on somethin' now, hasn't he?"

Dylan knocked on the door but there was no response. Two red-headed boys whose freckled faces would never have been found on a Trog child were rolling on the floor, pounding each other with their fists. The voices of the others were coming from another room that Dylan assumed was the kitchen because of the heavy aroma of cooking cabbage drifting from that direction.

"Boys!" Dylan called to the two wrestlers. "Is your mother home? I'm looking for Mrs. Clarinda MacTague."

One of the boys looked up and shouted toward the kitchen. "Hey, Ma, there's a toff here to see you!" Then he got a fist in the face and howled before sinking his teeth into his antagonist's shoulder.

Dylan took a step into the room and looked around. It resembled a disaster area. Two chairs had been overturned and a lamp knocked from a table. A pile of what looked like religious tracts was scattered all over the worn rug. The dirty wallpaper was covered with childish drawings,

and diapers that had been drying in front of a potbellied stove were in a heap on the floor.

"Ma, Ma! Shawn bit me!" the boy on the bottom was yelling. "Shawn bit me and there's a topsider in skirts here looking for you!"

"I'm comin' . . . I'm comin'!" came the husky voice from the other room, followed by a scream. "The baby! Keridwen help us, the baby's in the soup kettle!"

"I got her, Ma! She's all right. Just barely touched her feet."

"Thanks be!"

A tall woman backed through the door from the kitchen. She was wearing a print housedress and had an apron around her waist. Her red hair was hanging down her back, and she carried a kicking two-year-old under her arm.

"Who said someone was here?" she asked and then turned to face Dylan. "Oh, it's a gentleman."

Dylan stared. He had never seen a woman like this in his life. The condition of the room and the wild scene had prepared him for a fat and fortyish housewife, but what he was looking at was a goddess. Clarinda MacTague was almost as tall as he was. Her red hair glistened gold in the gas light. Even in the ill-fitting housedress, her figure was that of a young Juno. Although flushed by the heat of the kitchen, her face had an almost classical beauty except for a rather too large mouth and an upturned nose.

"I'm . . . I'm looking for Clarinda MacTague," Dylan said.

"Ye're lookin' at her, friend." The woman's voice was low now and well modulated although the brogue was even more noticeable. "Is there somethin' I can be doin' for ye? A love spell? Perhaps a bit of a horoscope?"

"I understand you are a priestess of Keridwen," Dylan said.

Clarinda MacTague's eyes narrowed. Beautiful violet eyes they were too. "Some people might be callin' me a priestess," she said warily. "Would ye be tellin' me who I'm talkin' to?"

"I'm Dylan MacBride, son of Sir Malcom MacBride."

"Pleased to meet ye, I'm sure," Clarinda said, making a little curtsy.

"I . . . that is, have you heard of me?" Dylan asked.

"Sure now, and I can't say as I have. I fancy ye're famous enough in your own part of the world, but down here . . ." She gestured with long brown hands to include all of Trog-town and almost dropped the squealing youngster.

"You've never heard of Sir Malcolm MacBride either?"

She swung the child up over her shoulder and patted its bare bottom. "Can't say as I have."

"Then perhaps I'm in the wrong place," Dylan said. "Perhaps there is another temple of Keridwen in the undercity."

"Not that I know of," the woman said. "It's kind of like a franchise, you know. One priestess to an area. There's few enough devotees, Keridwen knows. A lady can hardly make a living in the priestess business nowadays."

"I was told there was a message here for me," Dylan insisted.

She shook her red head. "No, I don't go in for that sort of thing. Passing messages back and forth between lovers can get a person into too much trouble."

Dylan cursed under his breath. "The message supposedly is from a priestess who goes by the name of Lady Ethne."

"Oh. Well, now, that puts a different face on things. Perhaps I do have a word for you," Clarinda said. She handed the toddler to the oldest of the three girls who had followed her into the room and stood staring.

"You know the Lady Ethne, then?"

"She is of the sisterhood," the woman said and beckoned to him. "Come, we'll talk in private."

She led him through a curtained doorway into a little alcove where a lamp gave off a bluish light. The walls were covered with bookshelves filled with ancient-looking volumes, and three chairs stood around a table.

"My *sanctum sanctorum*, so to speak," Clarinda said, gesturing Dylan to one of the chairs. "I have to put a spell on it strong enough to stun Avadugg himself to keep those brats of mine out of here."

Dylan seated himself, and she reached into a cabinet and took out a shallow golden bowl. She placed it on the table, then went to get a gold bottle from the cabinet and poured a pink liquid from it into the bowl.

"The Cauldron of Keridwen," she said, taking a chair

across from Dylan, "or at least a small, economy version of it."

"What does it do?" Dylan asked.

"Does it have to do something?" Clarinda laughed. "You sober-sided, practical-minded Highlanders. Don't you have any poetry in your soul? Wouldn't you like to look into a bowl of colored water with me for a few minutes?"

"If I understand the purpose."

"Just look, friend," Clarinda said, stirring the water with her fingers until it began swirling around the bowl. "Look into the Cauldron of Keridwen . . . look into the Cauldron. There are more worlds than one in the Cauldron of Keridwen. The bubbles are the worlds . . . and there the bubbles are gathering. A picture is forming. What do you see, Dylan MacBride?"

He saw a vast, dusty plain with a walled city in the distance and a series of rocky cliffs in the foreground. There were cave entrances in the sheer walls, and bands of stocky horsemen on sturdy ponies were gathered about the entrance to one of them. Moving among the mounted men was a group of black-robed priests, carrying torches and pushing before them two men and a woman who were obviously prisoners. As the priests moved into the cavern, the scene in the Cauldron changed. Now Dylan could see they were deep inside the cave, hurrying the prisoners to a place where a large black altar stood. The torches flickered in the damp air and smoke gathered overhead as the priests placed the three bound captives on the altar and stepped back. One of the priests lifted a long curved horn to his lips and blew it.

"What do you see?" Clarinda asked again.

"Basham. The plain before the Caves of Cythraul. Inside the caves the priests have prepared a sacrifice and summoned . . ."

"Himself?" she breathed.

"Himself. And he is coming."

The priests had back away quickly, leaving the bound prisoners on the altar. There was a darkness now on the far side of the altar, a darkness that was moving steadily toward the altar on which lay the helpless victims.

"Cythraul comes," Dylan said.

"Can you see the three who lie there?" Clarinda asked.

"There are two men and a woman. Their faces are turned away, but . . ."

"But what?"

"The woman has red hair and one of the men is wearing the kilt."

"And Cythraul comes?"

The darkness was moving across the altar. It came in crawling tentacles that crept along the floor of the cavern and snaked along the walls. As the darkness closed in, the bright flames of the ceiling lights sputtered and died. The scene dissolved into complete darkness. But just before it did, Dylan thought he saw . . .

"What's the matter?" Clarinda asked. "Your face has gone white. What did you see?"

"I saw three people die in the arms of Cythraul," he said.

"Who were they?" she demanded.

"I don't know, but one of them might have been me."

The woman didn't say anything.

"What was that?" Dylan demanded. "What caused what I saw? Was it a prophecy?"

Clarinda shrugged. "That's something only Keridwen can answer, and Keridwen has gone away."

"What do you mean she's gone away?"

"Once there was a race, a race of gods, you might call them. They joined the worlds together with the Shimmering Gates and bound Cythraul with the power of their geas. As long as Keridwen and the others remained, he could not burst loose, although he was able to create those who serve him—the Gogs and the priests are mere projections of Cythraul, as are others who walk in this very city."

"But was that a prophecy of my own death I saw?"

The woman brushed a strand of red hair out of her eyes and met his glance. "Fate is said to be fan-shaped. If you go to Basham in an attempt to destroy Cythraul, you will come to that altar with those others and your fate will be as you saw it. If you remain in Avallon, your fate will be different. Perhaps you will die when the Gogs take the city. Perhaps you will escape with your friends in an airship to die later when the worlds dissolve with the return of Cythraul."

"But I will die?"

"Sooner or later, we all die. Even Keridwen perhaps. She may be dead already. Sometimes I think she is."

"Then if I want to live longer, I should stay away from Basham."

"Cythraul can only be destroyed by going to Basham," she said.

"Are you sure Cythraul can be destroyed at all?"

"Only with the help of Keridwen," she said, looking into the Cauldron again. It seemed as though she was seeing visions in it, but he could see nothing now but the swirling water. "Keridwen and one other thing that I can't see and don't understand."

"But you said Keridwen is dead."

"She may be," Clarinda said. "If she were alive, I should have her power in me, but I have nothing."

"Then my mind is made up," Dylan said. "I shall stay as far away from Basham as possible."

"Then the worlds will die," Clarinda protested. "You must go to Basham."

"It's interesting you should feel that way," Dylan said.

"Why? What do you mean?"

"I mean that if I go to Basham and die, you will too. That woman with me on the altar was Clarinda MacTague."

The redhead turned pale and accidentally spilled some of the pink liquid from the golden bowl.

"Now what in Keridwen's name would Clarinda MacTague be doing in a place like that?" she asked, her voice unsteady.

"The same as I was doing, I would suppose," Dylan said. "Trying to destroy Cythraul."

The woman got to her feet, poured the liquid back into the bottle and put bottle and bowl away. "I never did think much of this thing," she said. "It's always telling me something I don't want to know."

She produced another bottle and poured two tumblers almost full of what it contained. "A thing like that can shake you up," she said, handing him one of the glasses.

"It can indeed," he agreed, sipping at what turned out to be Scotch.

VII

ALICE BRAN AP LYNN was aware of conflicting emotions as she sat in the library and waited for her host and hostess to come downstairs. She was looking forward to seeing her fiancé, Sean O'Hara, and had willingly accepted the invitation of his parents to visit them in their North Coast country home despite the lateness of the season and the coldness of the weather. She hadn't really been worried until the newspapers had arrived with the morning mail, but now she was glad her brother was coming to escort her back home. Even the prospect of the reception the O'Haras were holding for the officers of the Eleventh Hussars couldn't get the headlines out of her mind.

She picked up a magazine to distract herself but found she couldn't keep her attention to it. She reminded herself that newspaper headlines were the concern of men, men like her father and brother and her future father-in-law, Colonel Sir Patrick O'Hara. But the headlines kept pulling her eyes away from the *Lady's Journal* and toward the papers still lying on a nearby table. They kept reminding her of that dreadful but handsome young Vinelander who had been so impolite to the Prince Regent at Baron Leofric's party. Now it seemed that some of the things he had been saying might actually be coming true.

COLDEST WINTER IN SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS

BASHAM STRAITS FREEZING OVER

WANDERING TRIBES CROSS INTO EMPIRE

Those headlines screamed at her from the *Intelligencer* and those of *The Daily Mail* were even more alarming:

BORDER CLASHES SPREAD IN NORTHWEST TERRITORY

Bolo Villages Raided By Gogs

Even Alice knew the Bolos were a migratory people who had been clients of the Empire for over fifty years, that their villages and camps were spread in a great crescent across the Northern Marches and that the eastern-

most of those Marches was only a hundred miles or so from where she was sitting.

Of course Imperial cavalry would be hurrying to drive the barbarians back across the Basham Straits, but could they do it? She wasn't sure. Dylan MacBride had said the Straits were going to freeze. Maybe he could be right about other things too. Alice felt a sudden chill and got to her feet, pacing up and down and hugging herself. If only Sean would come! If only he were here to hold her in his arms. A vagrant thought of Dylan MacBride crossed her mind, but she repressed it instantly. She mustn't think things like that. She was engaged to Lieutenant Sean O'Hara and a guest in his parents' home. And from the sounds on the stairway, Colonel and Mrs. O'Hara were coming down now.

Colonel Patrick O'Hara was a big, bluff man from the Hibernian Exarchate, a semiautonomous part of the Empire that contained about three percent of the population and ninety percent of the troublemakers in Avallon. But Colonel O'Hara had served the Empire in several capacities in a dozen climes and was currently Chief of Staff to General Lord Henry Wilkins, who commanded all Imperial forces in the Northern Marches. That was why Sir Patrick and his wife had taken this country home a few miles outside of Abaydos and had invited their son's fiancé to stay with them for a week to be with Sean. But it hadn't worked out that way. Alice had hardly seen him at all because the Duke of Amhara's Own Hussars had been engaged in some mysterious maneuvers that had required the presence of most of its officers.

"But tonight I'll see Sean," she whispered to herself as Colonel O'Hara and his formidably bosomed lady entered the library.

"What's this, girl?" the colonel demanded jovially. "Dressed already? I didn't know there was a female alive who could be ready ahead of time."

"I'm afraid I'd have been my usual dilatory self and taken hours selecting my gown if I hadn't been so eager to see Sean tonight," Alice said.

"Bully for you, lass!" O'Hara said. "And see him you will, although it took the devil's own doing to arrange it, what

with these ridiculous alarms along the coasts and among the plains people."

Alice glanced at the papers again and then at the colonel. "Is it as serious as it sounds?"

"Of course not!" O'Hara snorted. "Ignore the rumor-mongering of those yellow rags. They're trying to make an invasion of a few scattered raids."

"The papers didn't mention an invasion," Alice said, feeling as though some of the blizzard-like cold that gripped the outdoors had seeped into the house in spite of the thick hangings and the roaring fires in huge fireplaces at either end of the room.

"Perhaps not, but there is talk of such nonsense," O'Hara said. "Why, there was a fellow, a Vinelander, at headquarters this morning trying to see Lord Harry. I had to deal with him myself before he'd leave. He was babbling about an invasion by the Gogs and wanted to interest us in an invention, a gun called a Rattler of all things, that he claims can hurl it back."

Alice's hand fluttered to her bosom. "Was the Vinelander named Dylan MacBride?"

"The same. Do you know him?" O'Hara asked, pouring himself a whiskey while his wife frowned her disapproval.

"I met him once at Baron Leofric's," Alice said, "and he was saying things like that then. It worries me to hear that the Basham Straits have frozen solid just as he predicted."

"It's nothing to worry about," the colonel said. "Probably shake up the Navy a bit when they find they can't sail around the North coast like they're used to doing, but they'll get over it. It's happened before, you know. Fifty years ago, in fact."

"Everything is all right, my dear," Lady O'Hara said, putting a hand on Alice's arm. "We're right in the heart of the Empire with Abaydos only a few miles away."

"Dylan MacBride says the Gogs burned Abaydos once," Alice said.

"Piff!" Lady O'Hara said. "I'd like to see them try it! Why, half the Imperial Navy is off the coast now and reinforcements have been coming from the South every day. How can there be danger from a few wandering tribesmen?"

"But the Gogs did burn Abaydos once, didn't they, Colonel?" Alice asked.

"I suppose so. At least, that's what the books say. Back in 1555 or something like that. Never put much faith in books myself."

"Then you don't think that—" Alice was interrupted by the clock chiming eight and a footman appearing to announce that the guests had begun to arrive.

"Now, my girl," O'Hara said as though glad of an excuse not to continue the conversation, "we'll be wantin' your best smiles tonight. You'll be seeing Sean, and we'll be meeting that famous brother of yours. What is he doing commanding one of those new gasbags instead of a genuine man-o'-war?"

"Noel is in command of the *Vengeance*, a semi-rigid airship," Alice said coolly. She didn't like patronizing remarks about her brother. She had become quite fond of him lately, and her fondness had increased since he had written that, instead of fighting a duel with Dylan MacBride, he had become friends with him.

"Well, I suppose an officer has to serve where the Admiralty sends him, just like we do in the Army," the colonel said, offering an arm to each of the ladies as they moved into the reception room to greet the guests.

Alice looked around for Sean but didn't see him among the peacock-bright officers who made up most of the early arrivals. She smiled as she caught sight of Noel looking rather somber in his blue Naval uniform amidst the canary-yellow and scarlet of the Lancer and Hussar officers. She lifted her hand to wave to him but stopped when she saw the tall, dark-haired man standing beside him. It was Dylan MacBride, and after the conversation she had just had with the O'Haras, it seemed as though he had appeared by magic.

"Well, sister," Noel greeted her after he and Dylan had made their way to her side, "your greeting is hardly overwhelming. In fact, I could swear your face fell when you saw me."

"More likely when she saw my shadow looming over your shoulder like the Devil in the Faust legends," Dylan said wryly.

"No, not at all. I had heard you were in the area, but I didn't expect to see you tonight," Alice said.

"We drove north in my new electro car," Noel said. "We've come to take you back to Avallon with us."

"Well, I'd like to—I've never ridden in one of those buzzing things—but I've already made reservations for both of us on the Sunrise Express from Abaydos."

Noel exchanged a glance with Dylan. "Actually, my dear, I feel that you should come with us and leave tonight."

"But the reservation . . ."

"It's possible," Dylan said quietly, "that the rail line between Abaydos and Avallon might be out before dawn."

"What? You mean because of the border raids?" Alice asked. "Colonel O'Hara told me they were nothing to worry about."

"I know. He told me much the same thing this afternoon," Dylan said, "but I'm afraid I don't agree."

"Then you think that—"

"Alice! Alice, darling!" called a handsome blond youth dressed in a red pelisse edged with white fur and tight buckskin britches. He wore the exaggerated sideburns and fierce *mustachio* affected by officers of Hussar regiments.

Alice stared at her fiancé, feeling confused. Things were happening too fast. "Sean, I'd like to introduce you to—"

"Later, my dear," the young lieutenant said, whirling her away onto the dance floor.

"A very handsome young officer," Dylan said as he and Noel watched the pair blend into the rest of the dancers.

"A lightweight," Noel said. "Like all the other gallopers, he still thinks the cavalry is the answer to all problems."

"Then he also agrees with Kar Kaballa," Dylan said. "But I hardly think the Duke of Amhara's Own Hussars would be any match for the Gogs."

Dylan watched Alice's lithe body encased in the powder blue gown gliding across the floor in Sean's arms and came to a decision. *You don't know it, Noel, my friend*, he thought, *but I'm in love with your sister.*

Now that's an absolutely ridiculous bit of fuzzy-headed reasoning, a voice with a thick brogue seemed to say in his head. *What in the name of Keridwen would ye be wantin' with a toothpick of a girl like that?*

Noel was looking around the room and didn't notice the startled look on his friend's face. "I suppose we'll have to wait until this affair is over if we expect to take Alice with

us tonight," he said. "What time are we supposed to meet Churchward?"

"He and Teddy are bringing the Rattler by in about an hour," Dylan said, glad to get his mind back to reality. "We'll all go south together. That is, if Teddy can keep up with that sputtering vehicle of yours."

"I'll consider myself lucky if the electro car can keep up with Teddy," Noel said. "In the meantime, we may as well help ourselves to something to eat and drink."

As the two moved past the reception room, a group of heavily braided officers from various regiments was gathering about General Lord Henry Wilkins and Colonel Sir Patrick O'Hara. They were all talking animatedly, debating the relative merits of the horses entered in the Winter Sweepstakes far to the south in sunny Balwaan.

"Do you suppose it would do any good to talk to Wilkins now?" Noel asked.

"No," Dylan said. "I tried waylaying the Prince Regent at a party and, as you'll remember, the results were slightly disastrous. Besides, I'd rather not draw his Chief of Staff's attention. He threatened to have me run out of the district, and I wouldn't put it past him to have me thrown out of his house."

"He wouldn't dare," Noel said. "You're here as my guest. If he says anything, I'll pick up my sister and carry her off and that foppish son of his will have to look elsewhere for a wife."

"Lady Alice might have something to say about that," Dylan laughed.

"Nonsense!" Noel said between bites of ham. "A woman's duty is to obey the man whom God has placed over her."

"In Vineland we have somewhat different ideas," Dylan said, cocking an ear to a distant rumbling sound which seemed to be drifting toward the house on the north wind.

"I should imagine that with all those wives a man would have to maintain an even tighter control," Noel said. "By the way, old boy, how many wives do you have back there in the Highlands?"

"None," Dylan said. "I'm as free as yourself."

"Oh, I wouldn't say I was exactly free," Noel laughed. "There's a ballerina at the Imperial Academy of Arts, a

pretty shopkeeper's daughter in Walla Wad and an actress I see occasionally in Balwaan."

"So you Avallonians aren't as different from Vinelanders as you like to think," Dylan said. "You have just as many women, but you don't bother to formalize your relationships."

"Perhaps we—" Noel broke off as an officer in the uniform of a rifle regiment appeared suddenly in the doorway of the room. Dylan recognized the man as Captain Michael Corville, an aide-de-camp to Lord Wilkins.

The captain's cloak was torn and there was mud on his boots and forest green trousers. He looked harassed and worried as he handed his cloak to a footman and crossed quickly to join the officers around Lord Wilkins.

"The streets of Abaydos are terrible tonight," he said. "I had trouble getting out of the city, and at Wolf Bridge there was a huge crowd. Something seems to have gotten the mob's wind up. People are streaming out of town south and into town from the north, and there's all sorts of wild talk about invasion."

"Humph!" Sir Patrick said. "There's bound to be what with troublemakers running around spreading rumors about Kar Kaballa and the Gogs."

Dylan winked at Noel and edged farther back into the alcove so that he was standing facing the windows and out of sight of his host.

"These things always happen when the wind blows out of the north," Lord Henry said. "The superstitious call the north wind Cythraul's breath. Abaydos has the most easily frightened population in the world. Every time the wind blows, they start seeing Gogs."

"But there have been some skirmishes, haven't there?" asked a bearded gentleman in a frock coat.

"Just minor incidents," Lord Henry said. "A few hundred dissident tribesmen are apparently across the Basham Straits and raiding native villages. I've dispatched Major Crawford with two squadrons of Hussars and a battery of horse artillery to deal with them. Mark my words, it won't amount to anything."

There was a loud rumbling that caused the chandeliers to sway, and Dylan thought he saw flashes of light from the direction of the coastal hills.

"I say, what was that?" Sir Patrick asked.

"Thunder, no doubt," Lord Henry said, but there was a nervousness about him that belied his calm words.

Lady Alice and Sean stopped near Noel. "It is thunder, isn't it?" she asked anxiously.

"I think so," Noel said.

Dylan said nothing. He was watching a line of flickering flashes on the northern horizon. Then he saw a figure silhouetted for a brief moment on the crest of a hill. It was a figure on horseback, waving a torch and then hurling it into a building, which burst into flame.

"I think the invasion has started," Dylan said to Noel. He sounded like a man who has been living with a nightmare for months and for the first time realized it wasn't a dream but reality.

"Surely not," Noel said. "Even Kar Kaballa couldn't move so quickly."

"What are you saying?" Sean O'Hara demanded. "Why are you frightening Lady Alice?"

"Look," Dylan said, pointing to where fires had broken out and were blazing brightly against the dark sky to the northwest.

"What is this? What's going on?" Lord Henry demanded, pushing his way through the group that had gathered at the windows. "What's the trouble?"

"Fires!" said an excited young man. "Look at all the fires burning over toward Stamford! That sound wasn't thunder, it was gunfire!"

"Those must be Major Crawford's guns in action," Noel said.

"Perhaps covering the retreat of his squadrons," Dylan said.

"Stuff and nonsense!" Lord Henry said. "I've served in the Imperial Army for forty years and I should know the sound of gunfire when I hear it. And that, by God, is thunder!"

The rumbling sound was now joined by a sharp crackling sound that could only be rifle fire and, hearing it, Dylan thought Lord Henry must have had precious little experience with guns if he insisted that was thunder.

"Horsemen are coming down the road from Stamford," Colonel O'Hara said.

"Hussars! Of my regiment, I think," Sean said. "They must be bringing news. They're riding as though the devil himself were after them."

"He is," Dylan said under his breath. "A devil named Kar Kaballa."

Lord Henry threw open the French doors to the balcony and stepped out into the arctic air. Colonel O'Hara and some of the other officers followed him.

"You there, Sergeant!" Lord Henry shouted at one of the galloping Hussars.

The man was bending low in the saddle. His busby was gone and his pelisse askew. He carried a broken sword in his right hand and gripped the reins with his left.

"Rein up, man!" Lord Henry ordered, but the man streaked on past without a backward glance.

Five or six more Hussars went by at a full gallop. Every one of them ignored the shouts from the officers on the balcony. Some were without weapons and others were wounded. They all looked as though they were riding for their lives.

"Stop! Blast you, stop!" Lord Henry yelled. "I'll have the lot of you court-martialed!"

Finally one man reined up briefly.

"What's going on?" Lord Henry demanded. "Are you from Major Crawford's command? Where is the major?"

"He's dead! Our guns are overrun! Everybody is dead!" the Hussar shouted. "The Gogs are coming! The Gogs are coming!"

Then the man was gone, following the other fleeing cavalymen. Lord Henry looked at Colonel O'Hara for a moment and then called for his cape. An orderly came running and then the room was filled with the outcries of frightened people. A woman's voice, shrill with panic, called to her husband. A gentleman, top hat in one hand, clutched his daughter's arm with the other and hurried her out the door. A servant dropped a champagne bottle that shattered on the marble floor, and a fat woman fainted into the arms of her bald-headed escort.

"Let's get out of here," Dylan said to Noel. "Churchward will be waiting for us."

"Get your cloak, sis," Noel said.

"But, Noel, I've hardly had time to say hello to Sean."

"You'd better go, my dear," Sean said. "I have to join my regiment."

"Hurry!" Dylan said sharply. He was frightened. He'd just glimpsed a score of fur-capped, lance-wielding riders on small shaggy horses come over the low-lying hills and gallop in the direction of the house. "Here they come! Here come the Gogs!"

Everyone in the room was heading for the door. Lord Henry had donned his cloak and befeathered cocked hat and was speaking to the officers clustered around him by the open front door.

"I go to assume personal command," he said. "We'll gather our forces and make our stand along Church Ridge before Abaydos. I suggest you gentlemen make the best of your way to join your regiments."

Dylan watched with rising apprehension as Noel came hurrying with Alice's cloak and she and Sean embraced briefly. Then he heard something that made him bite his lower lip and tighten his fists. It was the sound of unshod horse's hooves on the gravel of the drive.

Then they were pounding on the veranda, and a horseman appeared suddenly in the open double doors. It was a Gog, yak-tailed pennant swinging on his lance, black hair hanging in greasy strings about his shoulders and eyes like empty black holes in his head.

Lord Henry paused, looking at the horseman as though he were an apparition out of Hell. The officers around him stood as though glued to the floor, staring unbelievably at the figure on the small shaggy horse.

"What's the meaning of this?" Lord Henry sputtered finally. "Where did this creature come from?"

The Gog lifted his lance, leveled it and spurred into the room. The gleaming point pierced the chest of the Commander-in-Chief, striking him between the Loyal Order of Arthur and the Meldalgo River Campaign ribbons. The Gog laughed and shook the lance, and Lord Henry pitched backward and crumpled to the floor.

An aide-de-camp stepped forward and bent over his dead general. The Gog moved again, and his lance caught the man in the throat and pinned him to the floor.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then a woman began to scream and the men to scatter.

Dylan saw the sneer of contempt on the Gog's face as he dropped the lance and drew his sword, reining his prancing pony across the polished floor.

"Run, cowards! Run and die!" the Gog shouted in the Bashamite tongue as his sword sliced through the skull of an officer and then, still bloody, whirled to strike a screeching woman. "Die, whelps of nothing!"

The horse's hooves beat a tattoo on the ballroom floor while its rider cut down a captain of cuirassiers who tried to defend a sobbing blonde girl. Then he grabbed the girl by the hair and severed the head with a single vicious swing of the sword. Holding the blonde head above his own, the Gog laughed as the blood dripped down over his face. "In Cythraul's name, you all die!"

Of all those in the room, Dylan was probably the only one who understood the words, but the others didn't need to. Fear turned to panic, and brilliantly uniformed officers with swords hanging at their sides scattered like leaves before the wind.

Dylan moved into action. Grabbing a fleeing dragoon captain by the shoulder, he dragged the man's saber from its scabbard before pushing him aside. "Excuse me," he said, "I have use for this even if you haven't."

He raced toward the Gog, forcing his way through the terrified Avallonians. In a moment, he was facing the charging horseman, bracing himself as the creature leaned from the saddle and prepared to cut him down.

Instead of slashing at the Gog, Dylan lifted the point of the saber and plunged it upward. A look of surprise crossed the Gog's face as the point came thrusting out his back. He swayed in the saddle and slid off over the horse's rump. The body hit the floor with a loud thump, causing more screams to come from the women huddled against the walls of the room.

But there were more hooves on the gravel outside, and Dylan leaped toward the door as several Gogs spurred across the veranda. He was unarmed because the borrowed saber still protruded from the enemy horseman on the floor. Faced with two Gogs with lowered lances, he backed away and picked up a huge candelabrum that stood to one side of the entryway. As the horsemen came at him, he turned the thing sideways and lifted it above his

head. It struck the two Gogs and sent them sprawling from their mounts, and before the stunned pair could crawl away he brained them with the same weapon.

By now the room was in complete turmoil. Terrified men and women were milling around helplessly while three riderless horses plunged among them, hooves flying and teeth lashing, and more Gogs crowded through the door, some on foot and some on ponies.

Dylan swung the candelabrum about his head, knocking out a Gog who came at him on foot. He dodged a thrust from a sword and smashed his improvised weapon into a grinning face. Then there was someone beside him, swinging a curved Goggish sword. It was Noel, and he was shouting at the other men.

"Come on, you cowardly fools! Fight for your lives if they mean anything to you! Fight to protect the ladies!"

Everything became a wild blur as Dylan pushed his way to the double doors and pressed the candelabrum across them, trying to slam them shut in the faces of the Gogs who were pushing through. Swords licked out at him and hands reached for him; the grinning faces of the Gogs stared at him, and their wild yells drowned out the screams of the women, until he was joined by Sean O'Hara and half a dozen other men. They all put their shoulders against the doors and got them partially closed despite the lances thrust through the opening and the scimitars cutting at their hands.

Just then a Gog coming at a full gallop hurled himself through the air feet first and crashed against the door, and it flew wide open again. A shout went up from the horsemen outside and they spurred forward.

"Fire! Fire!" the colonel ordered, and officers hastily armed from the colonel's gun room poured a mixed volley into the charging Gogs. Several went down, and a horse fell in the doorway, mortally wounded, spouting blood and lashing about with murderous hooves.

"We've got to hold them!" O'Hara said. "I've sent a servant to the nearest garrison for help."

"They're coming in the windows!" Sean shouted and pointed to the swarm of Gogs crashing through the French windows with blood-curdling yells.

Dylan lifted the repeating shotgun he had taken from a

man killed by a thrown knife. He sprayed buckshot at a group of bandy-legged swordsmen fighting their way into the ballroom. Three went down, but the fight was hopeless. Gogs were pouring into the house, cutting down the defenders right and left and leaping on the women.

"Alicel!" Noel shouted. "One of them has Alicel!"

Dylan, too, had seen what happened. A Gog had hurtled across the heavy buffet table behind which Alice and some other women were crouched. Scattering food and liquor in every direction, he landed among the women. His sword had thrust into the heart of an officer's wife, and then he had grabbed Alice by the hair and was dragging her across the ballroom floor while he roared with laughter.

Dylan dropped his shotgun, cut down a howling Gog with a blow from his sword and raced toward the one who had Alice. The man saw him coming and half-lifted the girl to act as a shield. Dylan didn't waste any more time. He left his feet in a flying tackle, and his head caught the Gog in the belly. The thing went down as the breath exploded out of its body.

But then there was another Gog on him with uplifted knife. Dylan grappled with the creature, and they rolled on the floor, becoming tangled with the terrified Alice and the other Gog. The knife lashed out and cut through Dylan's jacket. He got his hand over the Gog's face and pushed his fingers into its eyes. Sharp teeth bit into his palm, and he yelped in pain but didn't let go.

The other Gog had struggled to his feet and picked up a sword. He lifted it and started a swing at Dylan's head. The blow was never completed. Colonel O'Hara stepped across the body of a girl pinned to the floor by a lance and fired both barrels of a shotgun into the Gog with the sword. Brains and blood splattered all over Alice, Dylan and the other Gog.

Noel and Sean had reached them by then. They dragged the struggling creature off Dylan and Sean ran him through.

"Get the girl and get out of here!" O'Hara yelled. The room was a scene of massacre by then. Gogs were everywhere, cutting and hacking the guests to death or dragging the women off to be raped and enslaved.

Dylan lifted the unconscious Alice to his shoulder and headed for the door with the two O'Haras and Noel. A small

group of officers had formed there and were holding off the Gogs with hunting weapons and swords. They and a few terrified women were all that remained of the glittering assemblage that had filled the room such a short time before.

"Outside! Everybody outside!" Colonel O'Hara ordered as they joined the officers. "It's our only chance!"

They fought through to the double doors and out onto the veranda. They blasted buckshot into obscenely howling faces. They plunged swords into squat bodies, cutting their way across the veranda and down onto the lawn. Then they looked death in the face.

Nearly a hundred Gogs galloped toward them, lances leveled and blood lust plain on their faces. Dylan shifted Alice's weight to his other shoulder, gripped his sword and waited with the others to die.

VIII

THE GOGS approached at full gallop, chanting a death song. A woman screamed and one or two shots were fired, but that was all. Most of the ammunition was gone, and the men had nothing left but their swords. In a moment the Gogs would overwhelm them. Dylan risked a quick look at the girl whose head hung over his shoulders. She was still unconscious. It was just as well, because when worst came to worst, he'd run her through rather than let her fall into the hands of the Gogs.

The thundering of the invaders' horses was pounding in his ears. O'Hara was saying something about standing steady and making every blow count, and he could hear Noel cursing as he tried to clear a jam in the repeating shotgun he had managed to retrieve when Dylan dropped it.

"Die! Die! Die!" the Gogs were screeching in Anglo as they came.

"Die! Die! Die!" the words echoed in his head.

Then there was another sound . . . the staccato roar of the Gatling gun.

"Down! Everybody down!" Dylan shouted, throwing himself and Alice onto the snow-covered ground.

The onrushing Gogs were suddenly being swept away as though by the hand of an angry giant. Three went down first, then half a dozen others dropped and soon there was a heap of dying men and horses not more than twenty feet from where the handful of survivors stood. The unseen Gatling gun spoke again.

"It's the Rattler!" Noel yelled. "It's Churchward and the Rattler!"

The Gogs were milling around in confusion as streams of steel-jacketed bullets swept through their ranks. A chieftain with a black banner on his lance was shouting orders and pointing toward a ridge across the highway, but the horsemen were ignoring him, dashing off in different directions as the roar of the gun added to their fear and confusion.

Another burst of fire caught the chieftain and the group that had gathered around him. Bodies spilled from saddles and horses screamed as they went down. Some of the Gogs had taken out their carbines and were firing into the darkness without knowing what they were firing at. The O'Hara house had been set afire, and now the Gogs were silhouetted against the light, making perfect targets for Churchward.

Dylan could see flashes from the Rattler's ten barrels as the gun sent burst after burst at the fleeing Gogs.

Then he heard Churchward yelling. "Dylan, over here! This way! Old Teddy and I've brought the gun!"

"Let's go!" Dylan said, urging Colonel O'Hara and Sean to their feet and picking up Alice. "Run for that ridge over there."

The Gogs had ridden off a few hundred yards, and now were circling and shouting and waving their weapons. They still hadn't spotted the gun's position, but when they did Churchward was going to need help.

"Come on, everybody run for the ridge!" Dylan said. "Stay low so you don't block the line of fire, and run!"

"What is that? Who is it?" Colonel O'Hara had a gaping wound in his shoulder and his face showed confusion.

"A friend," Dylan said, urging the older man on ahead of him.

They were running then with the Gogs yelping behind them. Shots rang out as the raiders resorted to their carbines. An officer went down, blood gushing from his mouth, and one of the women was hit as they crossed the road.

Noel knelt beside her for a moment and then shook his head and hurried after Dylan.

They plunged down an embankment and into a ditch filled with icy water and up onto a grassy slope slippery with new-fallen snow. They struggled up the hill, stumbling and sliding, grabbing handfuls of grass to pull themselves along. It had started to snow again, and the wind was whipping it into their faces as they reached the top of the hill. Dylan handed Alice over to Sean and leaped to help Churchward with the gun.

"The extra magazines are there," Churchward said, pointing to a wooden crate. "You load and I'll crank it out!"

The Gogs came at the hill at full gallop. They were met by a withering blast of slugs from Chauncey Depew. The front riders went down, dead or wounded. Horses slipped in the wet grass and in pools of blood on the road. A few shots rang out in return but, even standing up to serve the gun, Dylan and Churchward were fairly well protected by the crest of the hill.

A horn sounded three blasts and the Gogs withdrew, galloping back to the house where they were joined by thirty or forty others who had been looting and killing inside. Dylan could hear their war chiefs shouting orders for the men to dismount and attack on foot with their carbines.

"We'll have more trouble now," Dylan said. "They'll try to get around us."

"Here they come!" Noel said, and the Gogs swarmed across the highway on their short bowed legs, firing as they came.

Churchward bent over the gun, aiming it and turning the crank as he did so. A stream of bullets dug up mud in front of the running Gogs and then began to cut them down. Several fell before they scattered and took cover, mounting a sustained return fire.

Churchward was firing in short bursts, trying to pick out small groups and individuals.

"Will our ammo hold out?" Dylan asked.

"There's another crate in Teddy's cart down at the base of the hill," Churchward said. "Better send someone for that and the three rifles that are there too."

Noel and a young officer scurried down the back side

of the ridge and came back up carrying the crate of ammo between them, the three rifles slung over their shoulders.

Then there was a fire fight that lasted only minutes but seemed to go on for hours. Half a dozen times the Gogs leaped up and rushed forward but were driven back by blasts from the Rattler and small arms. Each time they paid heavily, but they also managed to make their way a little closer before being pinned down.

And as they came closer their carbine fire began to take effect. Two officers went down, one wounded and the other dead. Two of the women dragged the wounded man down into a little gully behind some felled logs and huddled there with him. Alice was on her feet now, helping to bandage her prospective father-in-law's wound.

"That's a magnificent weapon . . . absolutely magnificent!" Colonel O'Hara was mumbling. "Why doesn't the Army have them?"

"That's a question we've been asking all over Avallon," Noel said as he took careful aim with the repeating shotgun and picked off a Gog who was working his way forward on his belly.

"Look! They're going to rush us again!" Sean said, pointing to a spot where nearly sixty Gogs had gathered, half-hidden in some trees on their left flank.

They all ducked as a steady, well aimed fire poured at them from the hiding Gogs.

"They're coming! They're coming!"

Churchward and Dylan leaped to their feet, ignoring the bullets whistling about their heads. "We'll fire until the ammo's all used up," Dylan said. "Then we'll have to wreck the gun."

"Wreck Chauncey? I'd sooner—"

"Do you want it to fall into *their* hands?" Dylan shouted above the chatter of the Gatling. "Don't you know what they could do with it? They're quite capable of duplicating it, you know."

Churchward cursed and turned the crank, and the gun spat forth death at the charging Gogs.

Dylan was marveling at the smooth working of the gun. The multiple barrels prevented overheating and the cranking mechanism kept the bullets pouring out as long as he had magazines to hoist into place.

But in spite of this, the Gogs were forcing their way farther and farther up the hill.

"I don't think we're going to be able to stop them this time," Noel said. "They don't seem to know the meaning of fear. The more we shoot down, the more they keep coming."

"And look—coming down the highway—there's more!" O'Hara said, pointing. Then he shouted with joy. "No, not Gogs! Those are ours!"

A full squadron of scarlet-clad lancers came galloping down the highway. They were followed by mounted infantry and several companies of infantry on foot. The troops struck the Gogs at the precise moment they were at their most vulnerable, scattered out on the road and on the hillside. The lancers swept through the mounted Gogs, and the hurrying infantry were soon among them on foot, bayonets gleaming in the light from the burning house as the soldiers slaughtered the disorganized invaders.

The troops drove the Gogs away from the burning house but ran into more and more as they tried to push on down the highway. Finally they fell back and dug in on the same hillside where Chauncey Depew had made his stand. The dozen or so survivors of the massacre at the O'Hara house hurried off on horseback and in carriages.

Noel found his electro car undamaged and drove it to the point on the highway that was nearest to where they had fought. Colonel O'Hara and the other wounded officer were carried to the car. Then they brought Teddy around from behind the hill and hooked the Rattler up to his cart.

Colonel O'Hara protested vehemently when they carried him down the hill. "I've got to get to Abaydos," he said. "I must find Major General Redfern and inform him that Lord Henry is dead and he is in command."

"If Redfern is in Abaydos, he's dead too by now," the major in command of the infantry told him. "Look over there at the light on the horizon. That's Abaydos burning."

"You mean it's been captured?" O'Hara asked.

"The Gogs rode in before the gates could be closed," the officer said. "The gates were blocked with refugees that the Gogs seemed to be herding before them. I talked to a Northwest Railway official who was heading south in

hopes of getting through to Saxton Junction with orders to halt all northbound railway traffic."

"What are *your* orders?" O'Hara asked.

"Colonel Taylor has fifteen hundred men and three guns at Tripton. He's trying to cut his way out along this highway. I've been ordered to hold out here as long as possible to give him cover."

"Is your field telegraph set up?" O'Hara asked. "I could inform General Redfern that I've been wounded and—"

"No field telegraph," the officer said. "We marched from our barracks with nothing but our arms and the ammunition we carried—and we were lucky to get away at that. The Gogs came like the wind."

"But how many of them can there be?" O'Hara said. "We had nearly fifteen thousand troops strung out between Abaydos and the sea. Surely a few hundred poorly armed horsemen couldn't have—"

"Colonel, there must be at least fifty thousand across the Straits already. Before I left Tripton, I saw a message from the armored cruiser *Tiger*. They estimated that fifty thousand had already crossed the ice with maybe another hundred thousand on the way."

"My God! What is the fleet doing?"

"There isn't much they can do," the major said. "They poured a couple of hundred rounds of heavy caliber stuff into the ice pack but it was mostly wasted because of the range. They sent ashore engineers guarded by marine detachments to try and blast a channel through, but the ice is getting thicker all the time and is spreading fast."

"With all due respect, Colonel O'Hara"—Noel interrupted the conversation—"we had better get away from here as fast as we can."

So they left the troops guarding the road and the ruins of the O'Hara house still smoldering and headed east toward a junction with the Great Trunk Road. Colonel O'Hara and the other wounded man were in the electro car with Mrs. O'Hara and Alice to take care of them. Noel drove and Sean rode shotgun beside him, a pair of rifles across his knee. Dylan and Major Churchward brought up the rear in Teddy's wagon with the Gatling gun rumbling on behind. By dawn they had reached the main highway from Abaydos to Avallon.

They went south along the Great Trunk Road, but most of the Army of the North plus a good part of the population of the provinces were also going south. Before they had gone a mile, the road was jammed with refugees and the remnants of the Army.

Signs of defeat were everywhere—not defeat, disaster. There were no organized regiments, there were only men—terrified, dirty men, wounded men, men whose self-respect had gone with the arms they'd thrown away. A small group of Imperial Guards, bearskins awry, belts open, staggered past, followed by a wounded Hussar and a pair from the Sixth Empress's Own Dragoons carrying a wounded comrade.

"It's my guess that those troops ran without putting up any fight at all," Dylan told Churchward. "I think that when Abaydos fell, the Army just melted away."

"The Gogs will be sweeping along this road any time now," Churchward said. "It's a wonder they haven't overtaken us already."

"Those men dug in back there on the hill and the ones in Tripton may be holding them back," Dylan said, but he didn't really believe it. He expected to hear the war cries of the Gogs at any minute. Trapped here in the helpless mob they wouldn't stand a chance. Even the Gatling gun would be useless here.

"We've got to get off his highway," Dylan said.

"That's all right with Teddy and me," Churchward said. "But how about the car?"

"This is as good as any for Noel to find out how good his vehicle is. It may be a little hard on Colonel O'Hara and the ladies going across country but it's better than being caught in this mob when the Gogs show up."

"Is the colonel going to be all right?"

"I hope so," Dylan said. "He's the first high-ranking officer who's seen our Rattler in action, and I hope he's up and around and able to talk by the time we get to Avallon. I wanted him to tell the high command what Chauncey Depew did to the Gogs."

"He may get another chance to see the gun in action before we get there," said Churchward. "At the rate we're going, the Gogs may reach there first."

The slow-moving column of refugees reached a tiny cross-

roads hamlet where a company of Provost Marshal Cavalry was struggling to stem the tide and round up stragglers. The captain in command listened when Sean invoked his father's name and ordered his men to help the O'Hara party get clear of the crowd.

As they struck out across country, Teddy took the lead. The grassland was still wet from the snow and it was easier going for the horse and cart than it was for the electro car. During the rest of the morning, they made almost ten miles, and although they saw many signs of the invaders, they were not molested.

The sight of a burning village or a sacked farmhouse told them that the fast riding barbarians were not only on all sides but probably ahead of them as well. Twice during the afternoon they pulled the car and cart into the shelter of trees when they saw horsemen on the horizon. The first time the distant riders turned away and rode off; the second time, they approached at a gallop.

"Unlimber the gun!" Dylan yelled, jumping from the cart.

"I hope the ammo holds out," Churchward said as they unhooked the Rattler and swung it around to bear on the oncoming horsemen.

The electro car pulled up beside the cart, and Noel and Sean leaped out with rifles held ready. It was the work of only seconds to unlimber the Gatling gun, position a magazine and be ready to fire, but during that time the horsemen had come like the wind and were close enough for the men to see they weren't Gogs.

"Hold your fire!" Noel said. "Hussars."

"The Prince Regent's Own," Sean said. "They were supposed to be patrolling well north of here."

"They're running from a swarm of Gogs," Dylan said, pointing toward the horizon, which had turned black with horsemen carrying yak-tailed pennants and racing to cut off the hundred or so fleeing Hussars.

"This way, men! This way!" Sean yelled, standing up and waving his pelisse over his head so the Avallonian men would know they were friends.

The Hussars galloped up to the little group around the Gatling gun. "What is that thing?" the young captain in

command asked. "I thought it was a piece of artillery and that we might make a stand with it, but—"

"It's better than any piece of artillery you ever saw, young fellow," Churchward said, aiming carefully as the first line of Gogs bore down on them. "Watch, I'll show you!"

The Gogs were screeching war cries as they came. With nothing to face but the carbines of the Hussars, they expected to ride down these few defenders. They found out differently.

The Rattler opened fire with both Dylan and Noel standing by to load. It poured out fifteen hundred rounds of steel-jacketed death a minute for almost four minutes. Nearly a hundred horsemen were shot down and the nearest body was a hundred feet away.

"What is this thing?" the Hussar captain asked again. "With one of these we could have held Red Hawk Pass against Kar Kaballa and his whole horde."

"This is a Rattler, friend," Churchward said, patting the gun affectionately. "This is the gun that's going to save Avallon."

"If we can talk Avallon into wanting to be saved," Noel said, watching the Gogs circle warily, staying carefully out of range of both carbine and Gatling gun.

"They know they can't attack us, but they also seem to know we can't attack them," Sean said.

"They'll try to hold us here until night and then try again," Noel said, "or maybe they'll try to starve us out."

"We don't have to wait for that," Dylan said. "The bridge across the Imbro River is about two miles south of here. If we get across the river, we can burn the bridge behind us."

"If they haven't already burned it ahead of us," Noel said.

Dylan turned to the Hussar captain. "Do you think your men can cut their way through those Gogs?"

The young officer looked at his men. Hussars had originally been irregular cavalry, lightly armed and equipped, riding small, fast horses. But somewhere in the past that had been forgotten, and Hussars had become fashionable, brilliantly clothed show regiments with plumed busbies, tight varicolored pants and fur-lined jackets called pelisses that were worn hung rakishly over one shoulder.

At the moment, the Seventh Hussars didn't look very

chipper. They had been having trouble with extremely light cavalry and had not only lost the battle but a great deal of courage as well. They stood around looking dejected, red plumes hanging at odd angles and their beautiful canary yellow pelisses ripped and torn with sword cuts and bullet holes. It was obvious they hadn't the least bit of confidence in their ability to cut through twice their number of Gogs.

It was Churchward's turn to look dubious now. "I've often thought of rigging up some way that Chauncey Depew could be fired while moving, but . . ."

"Didn't you tell me that during that battle you fought at some place you called San Juan Hill, the Gatling guns saved the day when they were moved up to attack the enemy trenches?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"All right, then listen. Two Hussars were killed during the Gog attack. We can use their horses in tandem with Teddy to move the gun fast enough to keep up with the cavalry. We'll drive straight at those circling Gogs until we're in range, then unlimber and open fire. When we've driven them off, we'll pack up and be on our way."

"Bully! Teddy Roosevelt himself couldn't have thought of a better tactic!" Churchward said.

"It might work," Noel said, "if we don't run out of ammo. We're down to three magazines. That's only a little more than three hundred rounds."

"That's all the more reason for getting through and putting the river between us and the Gogs," Dylan said. "We'll have to fire short bursts and make every round count."

Ten minutes later, the little caravan started out with the remnants of the Seventh Hussars in close formation around them to hide the Gatling gun and their intentions. As soon as the advance began, the Gogs closed in, waving their lances and firing their carbines from the saddle.

Dylan clung to the cart for dear life as the three horses broke into a gallop to keep up with the Hussars. He could hear bullets whistling about them, and an occasional thud told him the cart had been hit. The Gogs certainly knew how to use the weapons supplied by the Basham Company.

A Hussar went down to the right of them, and then a second and a third. They struck a small group of Gogs at

a full gallop and swept through them, but there was a larger number ahead—fifty or sixty of them spurring at them, screaming their death chants.

"They're bunching up on us," the Hussar captain shouted. "We'll never cut our way through!"

"Then we'll shoot our way through!" Dylan shouted back, helping Churchward rein in the horses and then leaping from the cart before it was fully stopped to begin unlimbering the Rattler.

The electro car chugged up behind them, and Noel and Sean clambered down to help him. With four men working at the gun, they swung it around and into action before the Gogs realized what was happening. The Hussars moved quickly aside, and Churchward began turning the crank, sending off short, well-aimed bursts.

He hit the bunched-up Gogs and at least a dozen went down before the others scattered and ran for it. Several more were hit as they retreated, and then the Hussars burst through, cutting down stragglers and galloping toward the bridge a half mile ahead.

"Limber up! Let's go!" Dylan yelled.

Then there was trouble. They got the limber lifted and fitted onto the coupling on the rear of the cart, but the bolt that held it in place stuck because they had inserted it wrong.

"Gogs! They're coming!" Noel shouted, pointing to where a small group of Gogs had gotten around the Hussars and were bearing down on them.

"Into the car!" Dylan said. "Get out of here! I'll finish this!"

Shots rang out, and the Gogs shouted in pleasure at the sight of men on foot. Noel and Sean piled into the car, and it raced off while Dylan pounded at the bolt to force it into place.

"Hurry! Hurry, they're almost on us!" Churchward yelled.

"I am hurrying! Start the horses!" Dylan said. "I'll hang on back here."

The cart and gun jerked forward, Dylan climbing to the gun's trail, trying to pound the bolt in with his foot.

"They're catching up!" Dylan yelled as Churchward began to slow the cart to avoid throwing him off. "Keep going! Don't worry about me!"

The Gogs were only a few yards away now, swinging their swords around their heads and leveling their lances, disdaining to use firearms at such close range.

"Let the gun go!" Churchward shouted. "Save yourself!"

Dylan shook his head and kicked at the bolt again. Two things happened at once: the bolt slipped into place and the limber hit a rock and bounced into the air, throwing Dylan off.

He landed in a puddle of icy mud, choking and spitting as he tried to scramble to his feet. The Gogs let out yells of triumph and were on him before he could go five feet. He ducked a curved blade that sought to drink his blood but was knocked sprawling by the shoulder of a horse and fell, stunned.

The Gogs yelped in delight and leaped from their horses to close in about him, fighting each other for the privilege of killing him. Dylan tried to struggle to his feet but couldn't quite make it. He fell forward on his face and the barbarians closed in for the kill.

He was about to die and he knew it. Then why on earth should he suddenly be thinking of Clarinda MacTague, the red-headed, salty-tongued, hard-drinking priestess of Keridwen?

Maybe it was because she was suddenly standing there bending over him with a look of infinite compassion in her violet eyes, her hand reaching out to him.

"By Keridwen's skirts, ye've got yourself in a jam this time!" she said and turned to face the charging Gogs.

Dylan blinked and looked again. Clarinda MacTague couldn't be standing there. She just couldn't be. And suddenly she wasn't. There was no busty beauty in an overly tight dress with hands on her hips and red hair flying like a battle flag. There was only a Gog, yellow eyes gleaming with blood lust, and a raised sword that was swinging down to decapitate him.

The sword cut a path of brilliance across the afternoon sky as it came toward him, and he tried to roll away or at least raise his arm in defense but found he couldn't. The blade descended, gathering speed as it came and then . . .
it was blocked by a raised mop handle!

That was impossible. Mop handles didn't appear out of nowhere, and they certainly couldn't block razor sharp

scimitars. But he was lying here alive, and the Gog was staring at his broken sword blade with a look of complete bafflement on his face. And even more wildly improbable was the fact that he could again see the vague outline of a woman holding a mop in one hand and a heavy water bucket in the other.

"Clarinda MacTaguel! What in the name of Keridwen are you doing here?"

The red-haired priestess stared down at him. "Here? Where's here?" she asked and then turned to look at the Gogs surrounding them. "Oh, Keridwen, what are them beasties?"

A Gog bounded from his horse and reached toward Clarinda. The redhead yelped and swung the bucket, braining the man with it. The rest of the Gogs didn't wait for anything more. They turned tail and rode away, and Dylan heard them shouting something about Scathach, the Warrior Witch, being after them.

Clarinda turned and looked at Dylan as though to assure herself he was all right.

"Clarinda, how did you get here?" Dylan asked.

"I'm not here," the priestess said and disappeared.

Dylan staggered to his feet and looked around. Most of the Gogs who had been after him had run away, but fresh hordes were coming over the nearby line of low hills. The Hussars had reached the bridge and so had his friends. He started at a run to join them as more and more Gogs came into view. By the time a breathless Dylan reached the bridge and crossed it, there were several thousand Gogs in sight, and the bison standard of a *kargala*, a Goggish general, could be seen among them. Dylan knew several *kargalas* personally, and judging by the bodyguard of silver-mailed horsemen around the standard, he was fairly sure this was Kingu, the son of Kar Kaballa, and one of his most successful and ruthless generals. That could mean that this wasn't just another raiding party but the vanguard of a full scale thrust toward Avallon. Once across the Imbro, there would be a clear path across open farm country until Arthur's Barrier was reached with its low-lying ridges and series of forts that defended the approach to the capital.

"We've got to destroy this bridge," Dylan told the Hussar

captain. "It will take time for troops to move into defensive positions along Arthur's Barrier. We've got to give them that time. If the bridge is gone, that will hold them up until their pioneers can rig a pontoon bridge."

"Those savages have pioneers?"

"Basham Company has been training them for ten years in military engineering," Dylan said. "In some ways, Kar Kaballa's armies are better equipped for a campaign than the Imperial Army."

"Humph! I've always assumed they crossed rivers by magic," the captain said. "I've heard the Magi of Cebula are very powerful."

"That may be," Dylan said, "but I've yet to see a magician who can throw an army across a river, especially one as wide as this."

"It will take a while to rig up a demolition charge," the captain said.

"We don't have much time," Dylan said. He was looking across the river at the Gogs. They had learned enough not to attempt to storm the bridge in the face of the Rattler's fire. They had no way of knowing that Churchward was almost out of ammunition, so they were taking no chances. But a couple of hundred Gogs had dismounted and were coming forward in a line of skirmishers with carbines at the ready. A battery of field guns had come up and the crews were unlimbering quickly.

"If we don't blow the bridge before those guns get into action, we're through," Noel said.

"Perhaps I can be of help," Churchward said, reaching into a side compartment of Teddy's cart and taking out several strange looking sticks that had been packed in cotton. "These should do the job."

"What are they?" Dylan asked.

"A little something I brought along from my world as a sideline. They're a powerful form of explosive invented by a man named Alfred Nobel. Funny thing about this stuff: when Nobel invented it, he thought it would mean the end of war because it would make war too horrible. The same with my friend, Dr. Gatling. When he invented his gun, he thought it would make war more humane by reducing the number of casualties, since it was possible for one man with his gun to do the fighting of many."

"Well, neither of the gentlemen was right," Dylan said, "but Avallon may owe its existence to their mistakes. Come on, let's blow the bridge!"

IX

DYLAN and his friends reached Avallon four days after they left the Northwest frontier. They passed through the famous Vales of Avallon in which grew the thousands of apple orchards that had given the city its name—Avallon meant, literally, Place of the Apples—in some past too ancient to contemplate.

They passed through the Great North Gate, a gate that had once been part of a wall surrounding the city but which now stood alone because the wall had been gradually torn down as the city expanded toward the Vales.

The city itself was in a state of intense excitement. An army was being gathered and the militia standing to arms. Refugees by the thousand were pouring into the city from the North and other thousands were pouring out by every ferry that crossed the Silver Strand. Still others were fleeing down the Amion road, and all three of the capital's railroad stations were jammed from dawn until dusk by citizens wanting to leave.

Colonel O'Hara, Dylan and Noel went at once to the War Ministry, where the colonel made his report on the disaster of the Northlands. He was most emphatic in his praise of what the weapon called a Rattler had done to the Gogs. O'Hara was important enough to convince several generals and an undersecretary of state of the value of the gun. They not only listened to him, but they acted. Somehow the menace of the Gogs had cut through the quagmire of bureaucracy, and men who had been dozing through the years of peace now found themselves making decisions and then implementing them.

"We'll order a hundred of these weapons," the minister said. "But I'm afraid this war will be over before they're ready to go into action."

"What do you mean 'over'?" Dylan asked.

"Just what I said. The Prince Regent is personally leading an army of over a hundred thousand to destroy Kar

Kaballa. The guns can't possibly be ready before he marches."

"Surely the Prince Regent does not intend to move north of the barrier forts until all available forces have arrived from the South," Colonel O'Hara said. "There are at least a hundred and fifty thousand Goggish cavalry already across the Basham Straits of the Ice Sea, and other thousands are pouring across every day."

"We are quite aware of that," the minister said. "We have had dispatches from Admiral Markham off the coast of Basham this very morning. That is why Professor Smottle has advised the Prince Regent that there is no time to waste. He's a well-known expert on Basham, you know. He is convinced that only by crushing the Gogs already on Imperial territory will it be possible to stem the invasion."

"But Professor Smottle is . . ." Dylan blurted and then stopped as the minister looked at him coolly.

"Professor Smottle is now chief adviser to the Prince Regent and will also go north with the Army."

Then Keridwen help the Prince Regent and all of Avallon, Dylan thought.

Later, when they had left the War Ministry, Noel, Dylan and Churchward held a council of war. They were pleased with part of what they had learned: that the Rattlers would be manufactured in large numbers and men trained in their use. But the rest of the information they had received was little short of disastrous. The Imperial Army dug in along Arthur's Barrier with the guns of the Barrier forts to give them cover might have been able to hold their own against three times their number of Gogs. Marching out past the Barrier and into the plains and grasslands would be the sheerest folly. Kar Kaballa's army was almost exclusively cavalry, and there was no better cavalry country than that upon which the Prince Regent proposed to challenge him with an army composed mainly of infantry.

"We'll have to warn Prince Gregory," Noel said. "This is military nonsense. I can't imagine what he's thinking of."

"I doubt if he's thinking at all," Dylan said. "I suspect he's just listening to Professor Smottle and following his advice."

"Then Smottle is a fool!"

"He's worse than a fool," Dylan said. "He's in the em-

ploy of the Basham Company and, for all I know, an agent of Kar Kaballa himself."

"Then that's all the more reason for us to warn the Prince Regent," Noel said. "We'll all go to the palace and demand an audience at once."

Dylan shook his head. "No, you'll go. The Prince would as soon see a case of the plague in his audience room as me. After what happened at Baron Leofric's, anything I suggested would be anathema to him. Besides, time is running out and there's much to be done. We'd better divide our forces."

"How?"

"You go to the palace with Colonel O'Hara, then to the Aerodrome to see that our new Rattlers are mounted aboard the *Vengeance*. Churchward will go to the gunmakers to hurry along the completion of other guns and find someone to make more dynamite; I have something to take care of that only I can do."

"And what is that?" Noel asked.

"Never mind," Dylan said, "but before we go, tell me this: is the *Vengeance* capable of cruising to Basham, to Cebula itself?"

Noel did some quick mental calculations and nodded. "Yes, I'm sure she can, but why?"

"Because a witch has said I must go to Basham in order to stop the Gogs. With Kar Kaballa's army between me and there, I can't think of any way to get to Basham except by airship."

"A witch said you had to go to Basham? What kind of nonsense is that? Surely you don't believe it?"

"I'd rather not," Dylan admitted, "because she also prophesied that I will die there."

"Then don't believe it. And don't go."

"I have to believe it because of something that happened at Imbro Bridge," Dylan said. "The witch woman is more powerful than I dreamed."

"It sounds pretty farfetched and fanciful to me," Noel said. "I'll do as you ask and go see the Prince Regent, but I'm really going to concentrate on getting the *Vengeance* ready for war. I intend to use her to blast the Gogs from above with Rattlers and that dynamite of Churchward's."

"Let's get going," Dylan said. There was an idea stirring about in his head, an idea that required enormous amounts of dynamite, an idea that turned him cold with foreboding just to think of it. "And now I'm off to see a certain priestess of Keridwen and ask her some questions."

An hour later he was again peering through the door of the temple of Keridwen in Trogtown. This time, however, it was occupied. A small crowd of women and girls were kneeling in front of the altar, and standing on the dais before them was Clarinda MacTague. But a most altered Clarinda MacTague. Instead of the cheap calico dress she had worn in the apartment, the priestess was now clad in a gown of diaphanous silk that displayed her magnificent body as it was meant to be displayed.

Dylan stared open-mouthed at the woman's beauty as she stood there with her handful of worshipers at her feet. The gown stretched taut across the outthrust breasts, and her full-fleshed hips and thighs were silhouetted under the cloth in a way that caused him to draw in his breath sharply.

"She looks like Keridwen herself," he muttered to himself as she stepped back and he could see the smooth movement of her long legs and the easy swing of her buttocks. Her long red hair drifted around her, falling to her hips and gleaming in the torchlight. She moved to the stone altar upon which the statue of Keridwen stood, then leaned over and picked up a shallow bowl much like the one she had shown Dylan in the apartment. She lifted it above her head as though offering it to Keridwen, then lowered it and set it on the altar, staring into it as though hypnotized.

Dylan watched as each of the women and girls rose and moved forward to stare into the cauldron also. The communicant would stand there for a minute and then turn and hurry out of the temple. Most of the girls were smiling as they went past Dylan but one was weeping bitterly. He wondered what it was she had seen, or fancied she had seen, in Keridwen's Cauldron.

Soon all the worshipers were gone, but Clarinda still stood staring into the bowl while Dylan watched in silent fascination. Then, without looking up, the woman spoke.

"Come in, Dylan MacBride. Come into the temple of Keridwen."

Dylan started. She could not have seen him where he was standing in the shadows.

"Come forward, Dylan MacBride," she said again, her voice huskier than it had been before and minus the thick brogue. "You have questions to ask of the priestess of Keridwen."

Dylan moved toward the altar. "Yes, I have several questions."

Clarinda looked up, and he saw her violet eyes change, the soberness disappearing as that hint of devilment returned.

"Sure now and ye've come back from yer trip lookin' well," she said.

"How did you know I've been on a trip?" Dylan asked.

She rolled her eyes skyward. "Now how *did* I know that?" she asked herself. "I suppose Keridwen must whisper in my ear when she's a mind to."

"I thought you said Keridwen was dead," Dylan said, moving closer.

A roguish smile touched Clarinda's lips. "Sure now, and did I say a thing like that? Well, I've been wonderin' about it lately. Maybe the reports of the goddess's demise have been a mite exaggerated, so we won't be holdin' a wake until we've got more details. Especially since ye thought I was her when ye came into the temple."

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

She looked sheepish. "Maybe I just guessed that," she said. "A lot of men have said I look like a goddess."

"You look like a goddess, all right," Dylan said, "but you lie like a montebank. You picked that thought out of my mind, didn't you?"

"Why, what a thing to say!" Clarinda said. "How would the likes of me go about picking thoughts out of people's minds?"

"I don't know," he said. "Perhaps the same way you transported yourself to the banks of the Imbro River to rescue me from the Gogs."

She looked shocked. Her violet eyes widened and her lush mouth formed a silent O. "What a strange thing it is ye're sayin'. Whatever gave ye such an idea?"

"I saw you. Damn it, woman, I saw you there between me and the Gogs!"

"Mercy me! Ye couldn't get me within a hundred miles of one of those awful little cannibals, not even if ye used a team of mules."

"You didn't come by mule train," Dylan said. "You came by witchcraft."

"Witchcraft . . . me? I never would! Now if ye'd be wantin' a horoscope read, or a love charm to get a girl into your bed, I might be able to help, but flyin' through the air and defyin' Gogs . . . why, I'd be absolutely petrified to even think of it."

"Clarinda MacTague, you're lying," Dylan said.

"Look at me; I'm shakin' all over just from the thought of it," she said, holding out her trembling hands.

He reached out automatically and took her hands. They weren't really shaking. They were warm and strong in his hands. She smiled enigmatically and drew him toward her.

"What do you want of me?" he asked.

"The Kiss of Keridwen," she said. "When one takes the hands of her priestess on the altar, the Kiss is administered. It is a good omen."

There was a heady perfume rising from her, and combined with the deep violet pools of her eyes and the tantalizing beauty of her body, it was making him dizzy.

"You are going to kiss me, Dylan MacBride . . . for Keridwen's sake."

Their lips met, and her half-open mouth was warm and moist under his, her breath hot and sweet. He felt her body blend into his, breasts and thighs crushed against him. He heard her quick breathing and his own. There was such a pounding in his blood that it started a pulse to beating in his ear. He didn't understand it. This woman didn't mean anything to him, she couldn't. She was an immoral representative of an ancient fertility cult; she had half a dozen red-headed children and no husband. Thank the gods, she had no husband.

The perfume of her body and the incense from the candles were driving Dylan mad. He wanted to rip the gown from her and press his lips to her breasts, he wanted to . . .

She was drawing him toward the hangings behind the altar. "For Keridwen's sake, Dylan," she whispered, her

mouth against his ear. "For Keridwen's sake and our own."

Afterward, they sat on the edge of the altar, and Clarinda poured him a glass of sacramental wine from a bottle that rested at the foot of Keridwen's statue. She said the goddess should be willing to share the wine with them since they had shared their love with her. Then Dylan told her what had happened to him at the bridge.

"Now there's an unlikely story, MacBride," she said when he had finished.

"I know what I saw, MacTague," he said. "If you weren't there, how do you explain what I saw?"

"An optical illusion brought on by terror. Your sniveling cowardliness at the prospect of death caused your mind to project the image of a beautiful guardian angel, or rather, beautiful guardian priestess, who looked like me."

"Then how do you account for the Gog with his skull cracked by a water bucket and the rest of them fleeing in terror, shouting something about Scathach, the Warrior Witch, being after them?"

"They panicked before your magnificent heroism," she said, and the dimple in one cheek winked at him.

"You just got through saying I was cowering on the ground," he said, touching the dimple with a tentative finger. "You're lying, Clarinda MacTague. You were there!"

"All right . . . all right, I was there, blast ye!"

"How?"

"How, indeed?" she said. "I've not the slightest. One moment I was standin' in me own kitchen, mindin' me own business moppin' the floor, and the next minute I was standin' there in the road with all them fearful savages screamin' and yellin' for yer blood."

"How?" he insisted.

"You called out and I heard you," she said. "It was you who did it! You're the bloody witch!"

"That's nonsense, MacTague, and you know it," he said, running a finger along her full upper lip and thinking how warmly delicious it had been against his. "You're piling nonsense on top of nonsense."

"And what about you?" she demanded. "Draggin' a lady from her moppin' the way you did and exposin' her to death and possibly dishonor at the hands of a bunch of bow-legged barbarians!"

"How did you get there?" he persisted. "Did Keridwen have anything to do with it?"

"I told you, Keridwen's gone away, or maybe she's dead. Besides, why would she do anything for you?"

"Why would *you* do anything for me, for that matter?"

Clarinda actually blushed. "I thought I showed you why back behind the hangings."

"Oh," he said. "Was that personal? I thought it was just part of your religious duties."

"Why, you . . . !" Clarinda aimed a roundhouse blow at the side of his head that he only partially blocked.

"Anyway, let's get back to our original subject. You were at the Imbro, and you knew today that I was standing there in the dark watching you. How?"

"That was easy. I could feel your eyes like sticky little fingers all over me."

"You're lying again. You transported yourself to the Imbro, you saw me in the dark, and you read my mind. How?"

"How do I know how I do it?" she said. "Have you never heard of the *tag hairn*, the *fith-fath* and the *sian*? I'm of the *Gwyllian*, a prophetic sisterhood. Besides, me father was a prize fighter and me mother a fish peddler, both professions of great magical potency. I can do a lot of things . . . once in a while."

"Then what I saw in the Cauldron was a prophecy you were making of my death?"

She shivered, leaned against him and clung to his hands.

"No, that was from the Cauldron."

"A warning from Keridwen?"

"Why would she want to warn you?"

"I don't know. Maybe she was warning you. You rate pretty high with her, don't you?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never met the lady. People keep telling me she's the Prime Mover, Unmoved . . . she and her whole crew of Elder Gods. They started the clock going and then went off on some devilment of their own and left us to look out for ourselves."

"Then why do you operate this temple?"

She shrugged and grinned impishly. "It's a living, man! A girl's got to look out for herself in this cold, cold world."

Dylan took her by the shoulders and shook her until her

hair swirled around her head and her little gold earrings jingled. "You are positively the most impossible, most irritating creature I have ever met."

"Careful there, laddie buck! I'm a pagan priestess, you know. I might just cross my fingers and roll my eyes and change you into a frog or do something else to you!"

"What else can you do to me?" he asked, still shaking her. "Tell me, what?"

"This," Clarinda said, bringing her arms up around him and pulling him close. Her lips locked on his in a long kiss. "This is what I wanted to do to you that day when I thought you were about to get killed. I wanted to do it so bad that I just kind of bounced through the air to you. Now do you understand?"

"No, but I guess you can't explain it any better than that," Dylan said, catching his breath. "God knows, it's hard enough to imagine, much less explain. But there's another thing I want to ask you about."

"Faith, man, ye've pumped me dry of information."

"And found out exactly nothing," he said. "But this should be easy. You see, there's a certain young lady I'm very interested in. . . ."

"Sure and I know, that little snip of a Lady Alice with her toothpick figure and fancy bustles that swish when she sashays across the ballroom!"

"Ah hal You were reading my mind once before when I was near Abaydos weren't you?"

"Not readin' yer mind. Yer lustful thoughts about that teenage fancy girl just floated down to me and I told you—"

"She's no fancy girl. She's a lady. Which is more than I can say for a certain priestess."

"Oh, so now I'm no lady! Me mother always warned me," Clarinda was blubbering. She was much too large and striking a girl to blubber, but she was doing such a good job of it that Dylan began to feel like a beast. "Me mother warned me, if ye let a man take advantage of ye he'll lose all respect for ye five minutes later!"

"I'm sorry, Clarinda, really I am. But I didn't exactly take advantage of you."

She peeked out between the fingers of the hand covering her eyes. "Then what do ye call it?"

"I call it . . . well, you're the one who started it. You're the one who's the priestess of a fertility cult."

"There ye go, makin' fun of me religion!" she sobbed loudly. "I should've known better than to trust a sassenach."

"Blast you, stop that! I'm no sassenach . . . I'm no Saxon. I'm as Celtic as you are. Look at my kilt!"

"And very improper it is for a full-grown man to go around with his legs all bare. Back in Trelawny, the Druid would have run you out."

He realized then that she was just keeping up this ridiculous nonsense to avoid any further questions. "There's another thing I want to ask you about: your children."

"Ah, the little darlin's," she said, smiling through her supposed tears. "They're the joy of me life with their screamin' and yellin' and tearin' each other's hair out, black-in' each others eyes and tryin to scal'd the baby to hear her screech."

Clarinda MacTague was a great talker when she wanted to be. She could weave a spell of obfuscation with words that made her almost impossible to deal with. She probably could go on like this all night, and he didn't have all night.

"Well, Clarinda, you do have six children. Where's your husband?"

"I haven't rightly got a husband," she said, busily plaiting her hair into a long braid. "It's one of those things I've meant to get around to but haven't."

"Then who is the father of all those children?"

She cocked her head to one side and pretended to be counting on her fingers. "Let me see. . . . I'd say the fathers were kind of various."

Dylan turned away. He was shocked. He had known she was the priestess of a fertility cult, but this . . .

He changed the subject. "I came here hoping you could tell me something that would help against the Gogs."

"I'm afraid of Gogs. They're like mice. When I see one, I scream and hop up on a table until some handsome man comes and rescues me."

"Will you stop that stupid talk! This is deadly serious. The Prince Regent intends to march against the Gogs. He goes on the advice of a Professor Smottle, whom I believe

is an agent of Kar Kaballa. I'm afraid he leads the Army into a death trap."

Clarinda got to her feet and went to stare into the Cauldron. Her face was incredibly beautiful in the light that came from it. It was almost impossible to believe she was the kind of woman she said she was.

"The Prince Regent does indeed prepare to march," she said, her voice low and far away. The brogue was gone and so was the laughter that seemed to bubble in her eyes. "The streets of the overcity are filled with troops. Every available train and all river transport is being pressed into service to take the troops north to Killiwic."

"Killiwic? The fool! That's out past Arthur's Barrier. The Gogs will be on him before he can even deploy his troops. That traitor Smottle must be behind this."

"Smottle is no traitor!" she said so emphatically that he took a step toward her.

"How can you say that? He's leading the Prince to disaster!"

"Smottle is no traitor because he is not human." She was trembling all over. "I can feel the cold . . . the slimy cold of Cythraul in him. You've heard the saying that all Basham is Cythraul and the Gogs are but the lice on his body? Smottle is one of the lice. He's an avatar, a co-walker of Cythraul himself!"

"Then the army that goes north is in deadly danger."

"The army is doomed. Doomed! The men march but they are already dead. I see disaster—massacre—I see a prince's head rolling in the streets of Avallon like a soccer ball."

"I've got to warn them!" Dylan said.

"You can warn them, but it will be useless," she said. "The Gogs will come to Avallon, and you . . . *you* will go to Basham!"

"And what will happen there?"

"I don't know!" She was shaking her head violently and almost sobbing. "I don't know. I can see no further."

"I'll leave here right away," he said, taking a step toward the door. "I've got to warn Prince Gregory."

"Don't go yet, Dylan," she said, her voice serious. "I want to talk to you about the children."

"I shouldn't have asked you about them. It's really none

of my business, and now I have work to do. I must go."

"Please, let me tell you," she said, putting a detaining hand on his arm.

"No, I must go. If I waste any more time talking, I'll be as guilty as Smottle because I didn't try to warn those men."

"You don't want to hear the truth about the children," she said accusingly.

"No, I don't. Not right now," he said, pulling away from her. "I haven't time."

"Of course ye haven't, ye hairy-legged barbarian!" she yelled, changing again from the stately priestess to the fish peddler's daughter. "Of course ye have no time for me children! They're bastards and the children of a bastard to you! And that's just too much for ye puritan Vineland soul to swallow! Well, go on—go!"

She cursed him then in a steady stream of every language he knew and at least one he didn't recognize. She did a very thorough job of it. Much as he would have liked to stay and marvel at the artistry of it, he took off toward the door at a run.

"Blast your lousy Vineland soul to Uffern, MacBride! I hope Cythraul chews your innards out and spits them in your face!" Clarinda shouted and threw a silver chalice full of wine after him.

X

THE NEWS of the battle of Killiwic began to reach Avallon two weeks after Dylan's visit to Trogtown. During that time, he and his friends had tried without success to prevent the movement of the army to the north. When that had failed, they had concentrated on the manufacture of Rattlers and the acquiring of a large store of dynamite. With the permission of the admiral commanding Naval airships, Noel had armed the *Vengeance* with three Rattlers. The weapons had been mounted fore and aft in the cabin that hung beneath the great gasbag, and the third had been placed amidship where it could be moved from port to starboard at need. A trap door had been constructed in the bottom of the cabin so that dynamite sticks could be

dropped on the enemy below. Altogether, the *Vengeance* was now one of the most effective fighting machines on Annwn. Noel burned with the desire to get it into action against the Gogs. After a delay of several days, he received orders to take the *Vengeance* on a scouting mission off the east coast of Avallon. A merchant captain there had reported suspicious vessels in the Llyrian Sea and the Admiralty thought the Gogs might be attempting a flanking movement. Noel went, but he went in a rage.

Then when the first reports came in from Killiwic, it became obvious that the Gogs wouldn't be bothering with flanking movements. They wouldn't need to. The first intimation of what had happened came when the telegraph between Killiwic and Avallon went out. Then followed an ambiguous message from Agnal, the city across the Silver Strand from Killiwic, which reported a battle had been fought in which the Prince Regent's army had been heavily engaged. The message hinted that there had been a disaster. Confirmation came in a more direct way. A party of Rhenabwy yeomanry patrolling the Great Trunk Road only twenty miles north of Avallon's suburbs suddenly found themselves confronted by the equivalent of a regiment of Goggish horses. The Rhenabwy yeomanry were all gentlemen volunteers from the same hunt club, mounted on fine thoroughbred horses, so they managed to extricate themselves and ride into Avallon to bring the dreadful news. From then on, the news of Killiwic poured in with fresh streams of refugees and stragglers from the army.

Not only was the news all bad, but rumors that spread like wildfire made it worse. Not only had Prince Gregory fallen with his whole army, said unconfirmed reports, but General Sir Hugh ap Alexander with the Killiwic garrison had met the same fate when he had attempted to ride to the Prince Regent's succor.

Word spread that all available troops were gone and there was nothing between Avallon and the Gogs, Arthur's Barrier had already been crossed by the invaders, and word was passed that the only thing to do was flee. From refusing to believe in the Gogs at all, the city had worked itself into a state in which it was ready to believe anything, including the rumor that they had been seen south of the city and that the road to Amion had been cut.

General Angus Horwitz arrived in the city with several thousand troops he had collected from the wrecks of the frontier forces and the Prince Regent's army. The veteran officer was at once offered supreme command by the committee of the Senate that was acting in the Regent's absence. The old man was a dynamo of energy. He ordered out all militia units and gathered in the yeomanry from nearby provinces. He called on every able male in the city to take up arms and he put workmen on the job of trying to repair the parts of the ancient wall that were repairable. Entrenchments were dug and embankments thrown up in the many breaks in the wall. Barbed wire and barricades blocked all streets leading from the capital. The ancient and vulnerable city of Avallon prepared to defend itself as best it could from Cythraul's Lice.

"If anyone can save the city, General Horwitz will," Sean O'Hara said to Dylan as they walked with Lady Alice and Colonel O'Hara on an embankment raised to protect a mile break in the wall on the northwest side.

"General Horwitz and the Rattlers Dylan and Major Churchward gave the Empire," Lady Alice said.

Dylan smiled at her and then looked at the workmen who were busily stringing barbed wire along the outer edge of the embankment. Others were digging rifle pits and piling up sandbags. It had been two weeks since the battle of Killiwic. Kar Kaballa's horde could have been before the city in less than a week. Why were they holding back and giving Avallon time to make ready? That was something he might have asked Clarinda MacTague if he hadn't been so reluctant to visit her again.

Walking here with Alice by his side, even knowing that she was engaged to Sean, didn't keep him from thinking he was in love with her. Being in love with Alice was something solid he could cling to, not the confusing turmoil Clarinda produced in him. The truth of the matter was that he was reluctant to see Clarinda because he was afraid of her effect on him. Dylan valued his own hard-headed common sense too much to like being around a woman who teased, confused and bedazzled him. But every time he thought about the warmth of her body in his arms, the perfume of her hair and . . . He had to quit thinking about things like that!

Why hadn't the Gogs attacked by now? Why hadn't their patrols come closer than twenty miles to the city? He put his thought into words and discovered that Sean and his father were as puzzled as he was. Alice, however, knew the reason.

"I'm surprised that you military geniuses don't know why," she said. "It's common gossip in every salon in the city."

"What is common gossip?" Dylan demanded.

"Kar Kaballa is waiting for the city to surrender."

"Surrender? Why would Avallon surrender without a fight?"

"Everyone says that if the city resists there will be a general massacre after it falls, but if wiser heads prevail over that old bear Horwitz and arrange terms with Kar Kaballa, there could be a peaceful occupation."

"Which would promptly be followed by the massacre and cannibalization of the entire population," Dylan said.

"Oh, no," Alice said. "Everyone says Kar Kaballa is disposed to be merciful and that all the better classes would be permitted to leave the city for their country villas once the capitulation is arranged."

"Good Lord!" Colonel O'Hara said. "I had no idea people were talking like that. What do they need to convince them that this is a battle to the death?"

"But everyone says—"

"Who is this 'everyone' you keep quoting?" Dylan asked.

"Well, you know . . . everyone," Alice said. "I do remember one particular musical soiree at Lady Priscilla Gwalchmei's town house. Several directors of the Basham Company were there and they said surrender was the only reasonable course and that only a bloody-minded madman like Angus Horwitz would think of fighting on after all is lost."

"Basham Company directors, eh? That doesn't surprise me, but it sounds to me like someone else is spreading these stories for a purpose," Dylan said. "Who else have you heard talking?"

"Well, most of those who are for surrender constantly mention Professor Smottle and quote his views."

"Smottle? He's here in the city? He went north with the Prince Regent. I thought he was dead."

"Oh, no, I've seen him twice myself. Once at Baron

Leofric's and another time at Duke Lifris's going-away party. The duke went south a few days ago, you know."

"Yes, I know," Dylan said. "The city would be better off if the rest of those carping fools would do the same. How long has Smottle been back?"

"He arrived on a packet from Killiwic three days after that city fell," Alice said.

"Of course," Dylan said grimly, "I should have known. He's of much more value to Kar Kaballa here in Avallon than anywhere else, so safe passage would be arranged for him."

"He's been very active ever since he arrived," Alice said. "I understand he's been closeted with several leaders of the opposition party in the Senate for the last few days and that they intend to demand the resignation of General Horwitz and the sending of a delegation to wait upon Kar Kaballa in Killiwic to ask for terms."

"Damn the man!" Dylan said. "He's betrayed the Prince and now he means to betray the city! Something has to be done about him!"

Sean's eyes met his. "I agree," he said. "If he isn't taken care of, Avallon is doomed."

"What do you mean?" Alice asked, looking frightened. "What are you thinking of? Your eyes . . . I . . ."

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it, my dear," Colonel O'Hara said. "This is an affair for men."

"But you're thinking of murder—you're planning to murder that poor old man!"

"It isn't murder to kill something that's not human," Dylan said. "Professor Smottle is a co-walker of Cythraul, a soulless creature who does the bidding of its master."

"And the quicker we rid Avallon of him the better," O'Hara said.

There was the sound of motors overhead, and they looked up to see a long silvery airship passing over, headed toward Green Fields landing area.

"The *Vengeance*," Lady Alice said. "Noel is returning from that silly patrol."

"And there is another recruit for our Professor Smottle project," Dylan said.

"You mean another member for your band of murderers," the girl said angrily.

That night a small group of men gathered at Noel Branap Lynn's club on a street just off the Forum. The club was practically deserted since most of its officers had either died with the Prince Regent or were away with their regiments. After a brief consultation, revolvers from the *Vengeance's* arms cabinet were passed around and the six men climbed into an electro car and drove through the deserted streets of the city.

It was almost midnight when they approached a secluded three-story house on a quiet street near Ogmios University. The house was surrounded by a high iron fence, and the gate was closed and locked. A guard with a gun strapped about his waist stood at the gate.

With coat collars turned up and caps pulled down over their eyes, Dylan and Noel approached the gate. Dylan was conscious of looking and feeling like a character out of a Graustarkian drama, but he knew this was deadly serious business.

"What is it? What do you want?" the guard demanded.

"Inform Professor Smottle there are two gentlemen here to see him," Dylan said, hoping the rest of their party was out of sight in the shadows.

"It's too late. Professor Smottle is in bed," the guard said. "He ain't seein' nobody tonight."

"We have a message for him," Dylan said, gripping the revolver in his pocket.

"Hand it through the grille," the guard said. "I'll give it to him in the morning."

Dylan looked at Noel and his friend nodded. Taking a piece of paper out of his pocket, Dylan took a step closer. The guard drew his revolver and held up a lantern with the other hand, trying to see their faces.

"Here's the message," Dylan said, holding it out but not putting his hand through the gate.

The guard cursed, debated about putting down the lantern or the gun, and decided on the lantern. Holding the gun on them, he reached for the message with his free hand. Noel moved like lightning. His cane struck the guard's gun hand and sent the revolver flying while his own revolver was against the man's head before he could make a sound.

"Cry out and you're dead!" Noel whispered fiercely.

"Take us to Professor Smottle or we'll kill you!" Dylan ordered.

The guard was trembling as Sean O'Hara, Major Churchward and two of Noel's officers from the *Vengeance* closed in around him. He said nothing as Dylan took his keys and unlocked the gate. Then he led them silently up the walk toward the house and through a French door into a dimly lit library.

"The professor sleeps in an alcove at the end of the hall," the guard said. "He don't hold with no bedrooms. He's a strange one, he is."

Dylan looked at the others and moved past the guard to open the door.

"Look out!" Noel yelled and brought his revolver up as two figures leaped out of the darkness. "Gogs! Look out!"

The two bandy-legged, bearded creatures were indeed Gogs. There was no doubt about that despite the ordinary civilized clothing they were wearing. They were swinging scimitars and holding knives between their teeth.

Dylan caught the flat of one creature's blade on his shoulder and went down, his gun flying out of his hand. Noel fired across him. The bullet struck one of the Gogs between the eyes and toppled it, but the other one slashed Lieutenant van Rasselway across the chest and stabbed Sean in the arm before Dylan could roll clear and retrieve his revolver. Quickly he put three bullets into the howling barbarian.

"I didn't know they was there, so help me, I didn't!" the guard said, backing away from the fury in Noel's eyes.

"Wait," Dylan said, putting a hand on his friend's arm. "Where's the professor?" he demanded of the guard.

"He's in there, just like I told you," the man said, gesturing.

"And like as not, there's a dozen more of these in there with him," Sean said.

"There's only one way to find out," Dylan said, leading the way into the room with Noel, Churchward and Sean behind him. There were no more Gogs. Professor Smottle sat at a large oak table with a globe of Annwn before him. The professor's hands were gripping the globe and he was staring at it with glazed eyes.

Dylan took a step toward him, revolver ready. "Professor Smottle, we've come for you."

The man didn't look up. His full attention was focused on the globe. His lips were moving and he didn't appear to be aware of their presence in the room. The words didn't seem to come from those moving lips, and the voice didn't sound like Smottle as Dylan remembered him from their one encounter.

"In the beginning there was Oneness . . . Oneness that was the beginning and the end . . . Oneness that was all sentience and existence. Oneness was thought and beyond thought. Oneness dreamed and in its dreams created the others, the Shining Ones: Bran, Llyr, Gwyn ap Nudd, Muileartach, Danu and Keridwen. Then Keridwen and the others created also. They created the Formorians and the Tautha de Danann and the worlds . . . all the worlds that swim in Keridwen's Cauldron. And as they created, they weakened Oneness. Oneness became like the others and lost its all-power. It tried to regain its strength to bring all back to itself but failed because its children had grown too strong for it. Oneness was imprisoned in the sands of Basham. But now Oneness stirs . . . It draws all to itself. It eats the flesh of man and the flesh of rocks, the grass, the trees. The worlds return to Oneness. Cythraul wakes and calls all to return unto him. Resist not, puny ones. Cythraul calls. Cythraul calls. . . ."

The voice faded and Smottle's hands released their grip on the globe and his body slumped in the chair.

Noel bent over him and straightened up, disgust and amazement on his face. "He's dead. He's been dead for God only knows how long. The body is putrefied."

They backed away from the creature in the chair, lifted the wounded lieutenant and carried him from the house. Just as they reached the outside, there was a low rumbling, and the earth rocked. A sudden shattering roar was followed by heaving, rocking, rolling quakes. The sky spun dizzily overhead and the stars were displaced. Reality faded with brief overcrowding horror . . . faded and then returned.

"Cythraul! Cythraul wakes!" It was Clarinda's voice in Dylan's mind, and the voice was filled with terror. *"Cythraul wakes!"*

"An earthquake," Dylan said aloud.

"No, *Cythraul wakes! You must act soon or all will be lost!*" the priestess's voice insisted. "*Dylan MacBride must go to Basham!*"

"If Dylan MacBride goes to Basham, Clarinda MacTague must go with him," Dylan answered. "I saw that in Kert-dwen's Cauldron."

"*Nol Nol Nol!*" the woman's voice screamed in his mind.

The screaming was drowned out as every church bell and factory whistle in the city of Avallon began to ring or blow.

"The Gogs! The Gogs are coming!" Sean shouted.

"Cythraul's Lice are at the gates!" Dylan said.

XI

THE NIGHT was one of wild alarms, of marching and counter-marching of troops and the hurrying hoofbeats of yeomanry returning from patrols into the Vales and along the highways. The Gogs were all around the city and every road and byway was blocked, but the attack didn't come until dawn. During the night, Dylan and his friends helped distribute and set up the recently completed Rattlers and then stood by to help man them.

The whole city was aroused and ready by dawn. As Dylan and Churchward hurried through the Forum with a gun for the North Gate sector, they passed General Horwitz' stratetic reserve, drawn up waiting to be hurled into any threatened area.

Three regiments of vari-uniformed yeomanry, bright with plumed helmets and brilliant facings, were mounted on splendid thoroughbreds and drawn up in neat columns. To Dylan they didn't look half as effective as the single squadron of Border Horses and three companies of Transmorian Mounted Rifles who sat slumped in their saddles nearby.

Two line regiments which had arrived too late to be included in the Prince Regent's folly were also drawn up with a dozen or so militia organizations of varied uniform and weaponry.

"Say look, old sport," Churchward said as he spotted a

kilted regiment. "Those are some of your boys, aren't they?"

Dylan made a face. "Yes, Avallonian Highlanders. A fancy dress parade outfit composed of sportsmen and swells. There's not a real Highlander among them."

They parted company at the North Gate, Churchward to remain there with two Rattlers, and Dylan to man one in another portion of the defense perimeter.

The first move from the Gogs was the sudden appearance of a small group of them galloping toward the barricades that had been thrown up around the Great North Gate. There was a lot of shouting by pickets and the hustle of the guards turning out. A few shots were fired, but the Gogs, riding low in their saddles, penetrated close enough to toss two blood-soaked bags over the barricade and ride off, shouting triumphantly.

The bags landed with sickening thumps and burst open. The heads of Prince Gregory and General Sir Hugh ap Alexander rolled out. When a sergeant gingerly picked up the Prince Regent's head, a note was found stuffed in its mouth. The note was in Anglic, written in a clear, bold hand and was from Kar Kaballa himself.

To the Doomed People of Avallon:

I return to you the heads of your leaders. My chieftains and I have made an excellent meal on their remains, although I must say the Prince Regent was a little fat and greasy.

Make your peace with your gods, Avallonians, because Kar Kaballa brings many hungry warriors with him and all shall feed in the name of Cythraul when the city falls.

Kar Kaballa, King of the Gogs

Dylan gritted his teeth when he heard of the letter and then recalled that Clarinda had had a vision of a prince's head rolling in the streets of Avallon. But at least, he told himself, after that letter there would be no more talk of surrender.

The Gogs came at the walls and entrenchments an hour after first light. They came forward in the Endless Storm—wave after wave, column after column—scurrying ahead in closely packed ranks, covered only by counter battery fire

from their field artillery. The green Avallonian militia, firmly entrenched and supported by carefully husbanded regulars, cut the attackers down by the hundreds with the rapid fire of magazine rifles. The strategically placed Rattlers cut wide swathes in the oncoming lines of massed barbarians.

But all they could do wasn't enough. There were about three hundred thousand fanatic warriors around the city and only thirty to forty thousand defenders. And always in sight was Kar Kaballa, mounted on a great black war horse, resplendent in golden mail and scarlet plume. A full head taller than his followers, he was everywhere like a rallying point and goad for them—shouting, blowing his great war horn and driving his men back to the attack time after time.

And time after time, the Gogs gained the walls or fought their way through the barbed wire and embankments that filled the breaks. But each time, General Horwitz sent his reserve forces into counterattacks that drove the Gogs back at the points of bayonets.

The fighting went on all day and continued after night-fall, when the *Vengeance* and three sister ships dropped flares that lit up the whole area and the *Vengeance* poured streams of steel-jacketed bullets into the supporting column that Kar Kaballa attempted to send in.

The Gogs fell back, leaving a thousand dead and two thousand wounded. The latter were promptly slaughtered by an armed rabble the military governor of the city had sent to the aid of the regulars.

But the Endless Storm went on. The night was filled with the sound of bursting mortar shells and brightened by constant flares. The sharp chatter of the Rattlers and the bark of light artillery were ceaseless until the heavy *woof, woof* of old guns of the forts on either side of the Silver Strand drowned them out. They in turn were blanked out by the monstrous roar of the guns of the ancient battleships, whose rotting carcasses had been dragged off mud banks and pressed into the defense of the city.

With the support of gunboats and converted small craft, the naval units managed to make the shoreline roads and approaches a death trap for attacking Gogs, but their attack didn't falter. Smoke signals shot skyward and, with the

coming of a second dawn, the heliograph flashed, and the enemy's thrust turned inland against the Royal City and Cammlin areas of the city. The walls were battered down, then defended, but the damage had already been done. The Gogs swarmed forward on foot toward the breach. Manning a Rattler with two newly trained loaders, Dylan tore the first wave to pieces. But they came on in their thousands, dodging, ducking, dropping to the ground and firing as they came. One of the loaders was cut down and replaced by a towering blacksmith still black with soot from his forge. The other loader's head was blown off by an exploding mortar shell, and a slender Trog girl took his place. The firing went on until even the ten barrels of the Rattler grew too hot to touch.

Battling with sword, ax and carbine, the Gogs forced their way into Canal Street on Dylan's right flank and Titbourn Alley on his left, and the streets filled with blood-crazed Gogs.

But the fight went on. The citizens of Avallon were aroused by anger and fear. They forgot their fear for the moment and proved themselves worthy of the capital of a great empire. They swarmed to the rooftops, men, women and children, with shotguns, fowling pieces and even bows and arrows. They fired down into the masses of attackers in the streets while their unarmed comrades rained roofing tiles, flower pots, bricks and stones on the Gogs. The Gogs wavered under the fury of the assault, and as they wavered they were struck by the three regiments of wildly charging yeomanry, attacking with reins free, firing revolvers and wielding sabers until their white horses were red with blood up to the flanks.

Still the Endless Stream came on. The blacksmith was killed by a thrown ax. The Trog girl was wounded, replaced by a laconic hunchback with massive shoulders who did the work of both. Dylan was creased twice by rifle fire but kept the crank of the Rattler going while a line of teenage Junior Guides brought up fresh magazines of ammunition.

Fires were burning in several parts of the city—sabotage by traitors or Cythraul-possessed citizens, or set by mortar shells. The city's magnificent fire companies galloped from conflagration to conflagration, always managing to beat

them down while they prayed that the powerful pumps of the city's waterworks wouldn't be blasted out of existence.

Dylan collapsed across his gun after two nights and three days of constant action and was dragged away from the piles of bodies in front of his position, mute testimony to the battle he had put up. He was carried down a street filled with shouting men, dead bodies and riderless horses by figures he couldn't quite make out, except that they were all red-haired. The three carrying his legs were children, and the one clutching his arms was female and looked like a goddess.

The battle raged on, with the *Vengeance* and three sister ships attacking the Gogs with dynamite bombs and Rattler fire, and being fired on in turn by light artillery that downed one of the airships.

The Gogs assaulted the Great Gate with wagons loaded with gunpowder, which soon sent it and its supports crashing down. The First Trogtown Volunteers died to the last man defending an improvised street barricade half a block away, and the Royal Carbineers led by Philbert St. John arrived with a company of light infantry riding double on their big horses and drove the Gogs back across the piles of rubble that were all that remained of the gate and the walls around it.

Dylan slept in Clarinda's steaming little apartment while she tended his wounds and alternately moaned over him and screeched at her children, who seemed intent on re-enacting in the apartment the furious battle going on overhead.

"Dylan . . . Dylan, my love, you're no going to die! I say it, you are no going to die! In Keridwen's name, I command it! Do ye hear me, ye old harlot? He's not to die!"

Dylan knew his wounds were minor, but he kept his eyes tightly closed as she talked to him, sobbed over him and washed his face a dozen times a day.

Above ground, the battle flamed in all its fury. Colonel O'Hara, not yet fully recovered from his wounds, led a sortie from the city that drove the Gogs away from the gas works that produced the city's lights and heat. He died in the battle, and the works were finally felled along with a nearby reservoir. From then on, the city was without light or heat and the water supply was cut in half.

Sean O'Hara and Major Churchward formed a flying battery of Rattlers that responded to every alarm. In the Palatine area, they combined with a regiment of Fire Zouaves and three hundred armed constables and metropolitan police to put down a sudden burst of pro-Kaballa rioting that broke out among stockyard workers and spread to other working men. No one could understand what had caused the rioting until a Druid doctor working with the wounded discovered that several of them were co-walkers of Cythraul, completely controlled automatons of the monster's will.

The Green Fields area was attacked by infiltrating bands of Goggish horsemen who made a desperate effort to destroy the airship hangers and the supplies and equipment that kept them in the air, but the marine guards and naval landing parties fought them off.

Reinforcements drifted in: an armored cruiser, four paddle-wheel steamers that were loaded with nine hundred white-hatted Imperial Marines.

But the main force of the fleet that was attempting to force its way down the Silver Strand was turned back above Killiwic. The Gogs had blocked the Strand with sunken ships and from somewhere produced torpedo boats that inflicted heavy damage on the reserve fleet.

An army was also moving from the south and east to save Avallon. The dukes of Vineland and Emania had gathered forty thousand fierce Highlanders, who had been joined by volunteer Imperial regiments from the Southern Marches. Bolo tribesmen and Medelgo Confederacy sharpshooters had also rallied to their banners.

The whole Empire was concerned, not only because Avallon was the capital but because it was the most sacred city on Annwn. Its incredible antiquity and identification with the legends of Arthur Pendragon had created a mystique that all the peoples who paid tribute to Avallon responded to.

But the Gogs met the relieving armies over a hundred miles from Avallon. They blocked all roads with fallen trees, blew up bridges and destroyed railway track. Claymore-wielding Vinelanders cut their way through the Gog lines, exacting two or three enemy lives for every one they gave up, but it took time and time was one thing

Avallon was rapidly running out of, along with food, water and ammunition.

Dylan went back to the barricades, a magazine rifle in his hands and his claymore strapped to his side. He stuck a pistol and three sticks of dynamite in his belt and was determined to fight to the death. Clarinda MacTague went with him to make sure he did nothing of the kind.

"Come on now, MacBride," she urged as the city's defenders were pushed farther and farther back. "It's all over. It's time to run so we can fight another day. I think I can get us out of the city and—"

"What's the use? If the city falls, all is lost."

She yelped and used an ax to decapitate a Gog who had been about to saber Dylan from behind. "You're going to get yourself killed! And what in the name of Keridwen good will you do me when you're dead?"

"No more than the rest of the men you've had in your life, you man-hungry witch," he said.

"What's the point in dyin' in a city that can't be saved?"

"None. So come to Basham with me, and we'll blast Cythraul out of his lair."

"How do you plan on doin' that little thing, me bucko?" she asked.

"With dynamite. I've stored several tons of it near the Green Fields landing area, and Noel is ready to take the *Vengeance* north. But we need information about the caves to find Cythraul's vulnerable spot."

"That thing hasn't got any vulnerable spots. It's capable of destroying all of creation, and you want to try to blow it up with a few tons of explosives!"

"Then we'll die here," he said.

"Looks like we'll do that anyway," she said. "Here they come again!"

A group of ten to twelve Gogs rushed them. Dylan shot three down and cleaved the skull of a fourth with his claymore. But the others closed in around him, scimitars flashing. Clarinda stood up, waved her hands wildly and screeched at them.

"Curse you, you bandy-legged, beady-eyed, man-eating scum! Curse you in the name of Keridwen! Curse you and blast your innards to the depths of Uffern the Inferno!"

The curse worked. The Gogs collapsed, their bodies flopping to the ground like rag dolls.

Clarinda screeched with horror. "I never thought it'd work! I never used anything like that before! Oh, Keridwen . . . Keridwen, how horrible! They're nothing but empty sacks!"

By now Dylan was beyond being surprised at anything this woman did. Somewhere along the line, she had changed. She was no longer a charlatan, a dealer in fake love charms and horoscopes, but a powerful being.

More Gogs came at them. Dylan clobbered a big Kar Klingan who was leading the attack. Clarinda, sobbing all the time, lifted a pair of mailed horsemen into the air with her witch power and hurled them into the middle of those who followed, bowling them all over.

A Gog leaped from horseback and plummeted toward them, catching Dylan with both booted feet in the chest and knocking him sprawling onto the blood-covered cobblestones. The Gog rolled away with the Vineland's dirk in his belly, and Dylan staggered to his feet.

Two other Gogs leaped at him in the same way from horseback. Clarinda used her mind force again. She caught one of them in midair, lifted him by his feet and bashed out his brains against a nearby building. She tossed the other one into an alleyway where her two oldest children were waiting. The girl and boy beat the screaming Gog to death with cricket bats while Clarinda sobbed over the cruelty of it all.

General Horwitz committed his last reserves then and, led by the fresh regiment of marines that had arrived the day before, they once more swept the Gogs out of the city. Dylan and Clarinda staggered away from the barricades and collapsed on the grass of a little park.

"I'll do it," she said when they had caught their breath. "I'll take me life in me own two hands and go into the mouth of hell with you. Anything is better than fightin' here for all eternity."

"You'll go to Basham?"

"To Basham and the belly of Cythraul," she said resignedly.

"You remember what I saw in the Cauldron?" he asked.

"I've thought of little else," she said. "Me father and

mother didn't raise their little witch girl to be a temptin' morsel for a mass of slimy protoplasm, but when a Mac-Tague falls in love, she's a lost soul."

Dylan pulled her into his arms and his lips found hers in a long kiss.

She sighed with pleasure. "Sure now and a lady could almost die content after such a sweet."

"What about the children?"

"I'll send them back to Trogtown," she said. "The Troggs will barricade themselves in the undercity. They can fight. It will take Kar Kaballa a year to dig them out. In the meantime, we'll either have saved the world or we'll all be dead."

"Why have you changed your mind? You said there was nothing we could do. You said Cythraul was invulnerable."

"Me use a big word like that? I never!"

"Clarinda!"

"Oh well, maybe I did say something like that," she admitted, "but maybe I've thought of something . . . or maybe Keridwen's been whispering in me ear again."

"Then she's not dead and she hasn't gone away?"

"No. Of late I've been havin' the feeling that she's real close, as though she's worried about what's happenin'. After all, it was that great lady who buried the *thing* in Basham, wasn't it?"

"Then all we've got to do is ask her to dig it up and wring its neck, right?"

"No, that is not right," she said, shaking her head emphatically. "The elder gods and goddesses believe in leaving people alone to work out their own destinies."

"But *you* have an idea?"

She nodded. "The caves of Cythraul extend deep into the roots of Annwn. I saw. I had a vision the other night of a way down into the caves, and a place so deep that it lies beneath a giant volcano crater. If those thin walls could be blasted with your dynamite, the lava would flow into the caves, destroying everything, including Cythraul himself."

"And also the person who set off the dynamite," Dylan said.

Clarinda gulped. "According to your vision, we are both to die in Basham anyway. Perhaps we can take old Ugly Face with us."

"Come on," Dylan said, getting to his feet. "Let's find Churchward, Noel and Sean O'Hara."

XII

WITH THE ORDER to "Lift ship!" the Imperial Naval Airship *Vengeance* took off from Green Fields and pointed her bow north toward Basham. General Horwitz had reluctantly agreed to release the airship from the faltering defenses of Avallon because things were in such a hopeless state that he was ready to clutch at any straw. Aboard the airship were Dylan MacBride, Noel Bran ap Lynn, Sean O'Hara, Major Churchward, Clarinda MacTague and Lady Alice Bran ap Lynn, plus two officers and a crew of twenty. Noel had permitted his sister to accompany them because he felt she was just as safe with them as in the besieged city.

The *Vengeance* crossed the enemy lines at a high altitude but still drew considerable fire from the Gogs' light guns. Clinging to the rail of the open port of the gondola, Dylan watched as black puffs of smoke appeared off their bow and then behind them.

"They've straddled us," Noel said. "Take her up, helmsman! Full speed!"

The *Vengeance* clawed for altitude just as a salvo of carefully placed shells burst in what would have been her position if Noel hadn't taken evasive action.

"Keridwen, save us!" Clarinda moaned, looking a little green from the swaying of the ship. "Men and women were no made to fly like birds, exceptin' when there's a bit of magic involved."

"Doesn't flying through the air by means of magic make you dizzy too?" Dylan asked.

"A bit, but it no takes as long. Ye think about it and ye're there. There's none of this swayin' back and forth beneath a big bag of gas."

"Every sway takes us closer to Basham and Cythraul," Dylan said.

"Now there's a comfortin' thought for a poor creature whose stomach is still back in Avallon," the redhead said. She leaned over the basketwork sides of the car but jerked

her head back instantly. "Oh, what a long way down!" she squealed. "And me poor stomach a'heavin' like it'll be the death of me."

"I can recommend an excellent purgative," Alice said sweetly.

Clarinda gulped and put a hand over her mouth.

Dylan decided it was time to change the subject. "You told me Keridwen and the other elder gods placed Cythraul in the caves," he said to Clarinda. "Why did they do that?"

Clarinda moaned and swallowed before she answered. "There was a struggle between those who represented Cythraul and chaos and those who represented Keridwen and order, Cythraul lost and most of his power was drained from him. But over the centuries, he has regained much of it. He created the Gogs and they served him. Like many elder beings, Cythraul is all but immortal, and if he is supplied with the life force of others, he grows stronger."

"Churchward spoke of the Guardians at the Shimmering Gates and the fee in life force they collect from each traveler," Dylan said.

"Yes, the Guardians are of the Elder Race," Clarinda said. "The Gates were created by the gods for their own purposes."

Sean had strolled up in time to hear the last part of the conversation and now he said, "But if Cythraul has been buried for so many ages under the sands of Basham how has he survived?"

"The Gogs fed him," Clarinda said. "They fed him prisoners and they bred slaves to feed him. When times were bad and they had no prisoners or slaves, they fed him their children, and when that supply also failed, the priests of Cebula called on every second individual to sacrifice himself to the ever-present appetite below. And Cythraul absorbed all that life force, drained it out of those sent to the caves until—"

"How horrible!" Alice said, shivering.

"Sure now, lass," Clarinda said, a slight twinkle returning to her eyes, "there's no call to criticize someone else's religion, is there, just because it's a bit gory around the edges?"

"Oh, really!" Alice said and turned away with an indig-

nant flip of her bustle and went forward toward the enclosed pilot house, taking Sean with her.

"There goes a likely looking missy," Clarinda said. "'Tis too bad she's got her cornflower blue eyes on the wrong man."

"What does that mean?" Dylan asked.

"Yerself, me boy," Clarinda said. "She doesn't seem to know you've already been spoken for, and in Keridwen's temple at that. Those who are sealed by Keridwen are one forever." She touched his cheek with long slim fingers that smelled of some exotic perfume in spite of her having spent the last few days at the barricades.

Dylan was about to remind her that Alice was engaged to Sean when a shout from the lookout drew them forward.

Noel met them at the pilot house. "Three airships approaching from the north. Perhaps some of our forward bases are still holding out and have sent ships south."

Clarinda shook her head. Her eyes were half closed as though she were seeing without them. "No, they're not Imperial vessels. They were captured at Killiwic and Abaydos and are manned by Gogs commanded by priests of Cebula."

"Battle stations!" Noel shouted.

Dylan borrowed a pair of glasses from the first lieutenant and examined the enemy craft. They were semi-rigid craft with two engines, smaller but faster than the *Vengeance*. Each bore a symbol of a golden Kraken with its tentacles encircling the world on its side. "They've got one-pounders mounted fore and aft and they're coming in to attack," he told Noel.

"We'll have to get above them," Noel said. "These gasbags don't stand a chance in a fight without an advantage in altitude. It's impossible to fire upward."

Dylan looked up at the cigar-shaped, gas-filled bag above them and wondered just how many shells it could absorb before it burst into flames and incinerated the lot of them.

"Of course the gas is contained in separate cells within the rigid framework," Noel said as though in answer to his friend's thought. "A hit on the outer fabric covering wouldn't necessarily do any damage but hits on the cells could result in loss of buoyancy and . . . well, explosion."

"Glory be, and I let this man talk me into leaving me

nice warm nest and the little ones in Trogtown," Clarinda moaned. "The MacTague women 'vere always fools when it comes to men."

"They're opening fire!" the quartermaster said as a puff of smoke appeared in the bow gondola of the leading Gog craft.

"Short! Well short!" Noel said a moment later. "But we're not having much luck getting above them. Do you want to try a few bursts with the forward Rattler, Dylan?"

Dylan scrambled through a small tunnel into an open cockpit where a Gatling gun had been mounted on a tripod. A young Naval rating was standing by to act as loader as Dylan readied the gun for action.

"The lead ship is swinging around to pass along our port side," Noel shouted through the speaking tube. "I'm going to swing the ship a little to give you a chance at her."

Standing there in the bow of the control car, the sensation of the *Vengeance's* movement was a dizzying one. The horizon swayed and rocked, and the ground seemed to rise toward them. Dylan gulped and closed his eyes to steady himself.

"We're coming up on her now!" Noel said. "Can you see her, Dylan?"

There were several sharp barks from the enemy one-pounder. Dylan could see her long gray shape ahead of them and the puffs of blue smoke that the shells made about a hundred yards off their bow.

"They're getting a little closer," Noel said. "Can you get the range, Dylan?"

"I've got it!" Dylan said, sighting along the barrel of the Rattler and turning the crank to send death speeding toward the enemy ship.

He watched as the bullets laced a pattern down one side of the Gogs' gas bag and back up again. There was no fire or explosion as he had expected and he suddenly wished that the ammunition of the Rattlers contained some kind of incendiary cartridge.

The enemy ship was closing fast now, and the bark of her one-pounder was almost constant. Dylan swung his gun away from the gas bag and aimed at the car beneath it. That was a much smaller target and it took several

bursts of fire before he got the range. Then he saw the Rattler's slugs cut through the light metal of the car and smash the windows of the pilot house.

"Hit!" the loader said triumphantly as he positioned another magazine.

"Yes, but they're getting the range," Dylan said as a couple of shells passed close enough to shake the ship.

"Can't you get that gun?" Noel yelled. "Those shells will cut us to pieces!"

Dylan concentrated his fire on the bow of the enemy's control car, pouring a whole magazine into it at rapidly decreasing range. The one-pounder fired two more shells and then was silent. The last shell burst a few feet from Dylan's position and shrapnel slashed through the sides of the cockpit. The loader threw up his arms and collapsed across the gun. Dylan dragged him off and stared in horror at what had been a face. Then he gently pushed the body aside and reached for another magazine.

"They're turning away to give their aft gun an angle," Noel said. "Rake them, Dylan!"

"I need a loader!" Dylan yelled as he poured slugs into the side of the enemy's cabin as it passed close by.

"You're doing it!" Noel shouted joyfully. "One engine's out and so's the other gun! They're running, but the other two are closing in."

"My loader's dead! I need another loader!" Dylan said, emptying the magazine into the gas bag of a second enemy ship without much success. He reached back for another magazine but found none. "Ammol Ammol!"

"It's comin', me love!" said Clarinda's voice, and he saw that it was indeed coming. Three magazines were floating through the tunnel toward him on their own.

"How in the name of . . . ?" Dylan stared at the floating doughnut-shaped magazines with his mouth open. Then he saw Clarinda crawling after them. Her hair was done up in a bun and her skirts hiked up around her white thighs. "How are you doing that?"

"I'm just a'thinkin' that it's so," she said as the first magazine hovered over the breach of the Rattler, waiting for him to position it. "I just think these gadgets can float like this big gas bag and, 'cause I'm thinkin' it, they're doin' it."

He grabbed the magazine and inserted it into the gun. "Well, don't do it. It makes me nervous."

She crawled into the cockpit and pressed against him warmly. "Sure now, me love, there's nothin' to be nervous about. It's just a little black magic or mind power or whatever. But I am gettin' good at it, don't you think?"

The control car of the *Vengeance* was rocking with near misses as both enemy craft pumped one-pounder shells in their direction. Dylan heard the two Rattlers aft go into action.

More shells burst close by and, looking up, he saw a rip in the outer fabric covering of the airship. He prayed earnestly to Keridwen that the inner gas cells hadn't been penetrated.

Then he was emptying two magazines of slugs into the swaying gondola of the third ship. He watched in amazement and horror as the after engine burst into fire. Fire that leaped instantly upward to the fabric of the gas bag. For a moment, the Gog ship hung there, flames lapping around it, and then it blew up with a blast that struck the *Vengeance* like a giant hand, rocking her onto her side and sending flaming embers aboard that had to be beaten out by crewmen scrambling up the rigging.

"Ohhh Keridwen, mother of love," Clarinda muttered. "What kind of mess did you get me into, with burning airships and killing? And all because of a man!"

The *Vengeance* righted itself slowly and passed over the ball of fire that dropped rapidly earthward trailing the enormous cloud of smoke.

"I think we've finished them!" Noel shouted. "They're running! Good shooting, Dylan!"

"Don't let them get away!" Dylan yelled back. "Go after them and finish them! They'll warn Kar Kaballa that we're headed north!"

"Can't do it," Noel said. "We've lost too much buoyancy. We'll have to make repairs before we're fit to fight again."

Dylan cursed as he watched the two enemy craft limp away.

"Now you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dylan MacBride, for bein' so bloody-minded," Clarinda said. "You've already grilled a dozen or two of them poor fellows in one ship and shot up several in the other two, but you're

not content. That's the trouble with you men, never thinking of anything but war."

"Will you be quiet, girl?" Dylan growled. "You know those 'poor fellows' are bloodthirsty cannibals who'd skin off your beautiful hide and fry you over a hot fire."

Clarinda started to blubber. "I know . . . but you forget I'm a priestess of a goddess of sex and love. I've got to have tender feelings about everyone, even those monsters who'd be makin' a dinner out of me."

"It might be better if your goddess was one of war and death so she could send us a band of Valkyries to strike fear into the Gogs, or perhaps hurl a few thunderbolts at Cythraul," Dylan said sourly as they crawled through the tunnel into the main cabin.

"Don't say things like that!" Clarinda said, putting her arms around him. "You mustn't make fun of Keridwen. She's doing the best she can, and there'll come a time when we'll need her sorely."

"Well, it looks like we won't need her until we get to Basham," Dylan said, looking after the fleeing specks that were enemy craft.

If he had known how wrong he was, he might have thought seriously of turning around and going back to battle the Gogs in the streets of Avallon.

XIII

MORE TROUBLE came as they were crossing the Basham Straits, having just exchanged signals with the flagship of a squadron of scout cruisers lying close off the ice bridge and doing all the damage they could to the Gogs' communication lines. They were passing on toward the high, rugged coast of Basham when they saw the incredible things.

"What in the name of all that's holy!" Noel gasped and clapped his glasses to his eyes, staring to the northwest, where some kind of giant winged creatures hurtled toward the *Vengeance*.

"What are they?" Sean asked. "They look like . . . by the gods, I can't imagine what they are!"

Dylan had borrowed the quartermaster's long glass and

was staring too. The wingspread of the creatures must have been twenty feet.

"I don't believe my eyes," Noel said. "There aren't any such beasties on this or any other world. They've got the wings and forebody of a giant eagle, but their tails and hindquarters are those of—of a *lion*! And that's impossible! Nothing looks like that!"

"Nothing but a gryphon," Clarinda said.

"There's no such thing as a gryphon!" Noel said, and then, after another look at the rapidly approaching monsters, he changed his definite statement into a question: "There's no such thing as a gryphon, is there?"

"I don't know," Dylan said, "but we're seeing them."

"Yes. Unless we've all suddenly gone crazy, we're seeing something that can't exist. Where did they come from?"

"Obviously from Basham," Sean said. "Didn't you ever see such creatures when you were there, Dylan?"

"If I had I wouldn't have had the courage to come back," Dylan said, still peering through the long glass. The creatures were closer now and more awe-inspiring than ever.

"Whatever they are," Noel said, "they're going to attack us." He stepped to the speaking tube and ordered the chief engineer to push all engines to top speed. "We'll try to outrun them."

"At the rate they're coming, we don't stand a chance," Dylan said. "We'd better prepare to fight."

He dove into the gunwale again to man the Gatling gun. Clarinda came crawling after him, moaning about all the terrible things that had happened to her since she'd taken up with a man who wore skirts. While she was lifting a magazine with her mind power and holding it ready to load, she said, "And just to think I left me little ones for a hairy-legged barbarian in flappin' skirts."

"Yes, your little ones," Dylan said grimly.

"I been meanin' to tell you about them," Clarinda said. "About how I happened to have them."

"I have a pretty good idea of how you happened to have them," Dylan said.

Clarinda stuck out her tongue. "If you weren't a thick-headed Vinelander, you'd know some things in this world aren't so simple."

"I'm beginning to think none of them are," Dylan

said, aiming at the screeching eagle head of the leaping gryphon and opening fire. "Missed! Blast it, I missed!"

Clarinda poked her head up over the rim of the gunner's cockpit and took a quick look. "You're not correcting for the wind. You've got to compensate for that at this long range."

"Thanks," he said dryly. "I didn't know you were a gunnery expert in addition to all your other talents."

"MacTague women are great for pleasing their men," Clarinda said. "We're anything they want us to be. I can see the wind and the flight of your bullet with my power, you know."

"Then maybe you ought to be firing the gun," he said.

"I'd be that terrified I wouldn't be able to crank the crank," she said, dropping back down on her hands and knees.

Dylan got off a few more short bursts. One of the leading gryphons screeched and flopped over on its back, diving toward the sea below with its wings folded.

"Got one!" Dylan said. "But the others are making it hard to hit them now." The gryphons were scattering and taking evasive action. Dylan kept his bursts short, but the birds were maneuvering so erratically that it was all but impossible to hit them.

They surged past the *Vengeance*, circling it and alternately screaming like eagles and roaring like lions. Dylan managed to wing one, and it went flapping away toward the shore. Major Churchward on the rear Rattler severed the head of another with a well aimed burst, but the others—ten or twelve of them—were closing in, great beaks and claws ripping at the sides of the ship.

"We've got to get above them!" Dylan shouted. "Noel, can't you get above them?"

"No, we've lost too much bouyancy," Noel yelled. "We'll be lucky if we can maintain this altitude."

"Look out!" Clarinda yelled as a gryphon came darting straight at them, and Dylan ducked the huge razor-sharp claws that slashed at him.

He dragged his revolver from its holster as the three-foot beak of the thing drew back and then came at him again, mouth wide open. He emptied the full chamber of

the heavy revolver down the gaping throat, and the thing shuddered and lost its grip on the side of the gondola.

"Look! Oh Keridwen, look!" Clarinda gasped and pointed aft. One of the monsters had darted in suddenly and had lifted one of the crewmen in both talons, yanking him from the gondola into the air.

Dylan tried to swing the Rattler to bear but the superstructure that attached it to the main section of the airship was in the way. All he could do was watch in horror as the thing, still clutching the screaming man, soared upward and then began to rip him to pieces with its huge bill.

"Oh, no—no—no!" Clarinda moaned, hiding her eyes. "Keridwen, sweet mother of love, why?"

There was another wild beating of wings, and Dylan just barely managed to swing the Rattler around in time to blast an attacking monster at point blank range. This time he had the satisfaction of seeing the heavy slugs rip into the underbelly of the beast as it soared upward and then dropped like a stone.

"They're getting above us!" Noel shouted. "They're going to attack the gas bag!"

"They must sense that we're defenseless, there," Dylan said, leaning out of the cockpit to look upward. Five of the monsters were wheeling overhead while a sixth settled slowly toward the broad back of the *Vengeance* with claws held ready.

Dylan abandoned his gun and crawled back through to the cabin. "We've got to do something," he said. "I'm going up there."

"You're crazy," Noel said. "You've never been topside before. Even if those things don't get you, you'll lose your footing and fall to your death."

"We're all going to fall to our deaths if I don't do something," Dylan said, strapping on his claymore and loading a pistol. "Keep heading toward the coast. If we have to go down, we'll have a chance over land. I'll try to fight them off."

"Dylan, don't!" Alice cried. "You'll be killed."

He grinned at her as he picked up a heavy caliber rifle and put three sticks of dynamite into the sporran that

served as a pocket for his kilt. "I'm not easy to kill when I make up my mind."

"Even a head as hard as yours might crack like an egg-shell if one of those beasties takes a beak to it," Clarinda said.

Dylan ignored her and pulled himself up on the side of the gondola to scramble out onto one of the stanchions. He braced himself against the blast from the propellers and gripped the rope ladder that led upward to the three hundred foot long gas bag. Rung by rung he edged his way up the swaying ladder, the wind whipping his kilt around him, and the swaying of the ship threatening to throw him off at any moment. He risked a quick look down and wished he hadn't. The gondola swinging back and forth made him dizzy, and the sight of the gray water several thousand feet below was even worse. He clung to the ladder desperately and closed his eyes to shut out the sight.

It was then that he heard the beating of wings and opened his eyes to see a gryphon bearing in on him, red eyes aflame with blood lust and mouth gaping open. Wrapping his leg around the wildly swinging ladder, he reached for his gun. But the great beak was striking at him already. He threw his weight against the rope ladder and it swung just as the creature swept past. He smelled the musty odor of the thing as a wing struck him. His feet slipped and he slid down several rungs before he could regain his grip.

The gryphon had turned with amazing agility and was heading back at him. He knew it wouldn't miss this time. If only . . .

The familiar rattle of a Gatling gun drowned out the sound of the wind and the pounding of wings. The hurtling beast jerked as steel-jacketed bullets cut through its thick skin and ripped away a wing. The red eyes glazed, but the remaining wing flapped harder as the thing tried to get at the dangling man. It almost did. The beak raked within inches of Dylan as the creature fell away toward the sea below.

Heart pounding and breath coming in gasps, Dylan dragged himself up the rope ladder. And then came the hardest part. He had to swing from the ladder to the rigging that encircled the superstructure of the dirigible. He had

seen the ship riggers do this many times, but seeing it done and doing it were two different things.

First he got the rope ladder to swinging as much as he could so that it came closer and closer to the net-like rigging. Then he grabbed for the rigging with one hand and hung on to the ladder for dear life with the other. He was conscious of shouts from below, of the chatter of the guns and the beating of huge wings, but he concentrated on just one thing: getting a grip on the rigging without losing his grip on the ladder. He did get hold of the rigging, but then he was in more trouble. Just as he transferred one foot to the rigging and was spread-eagled between the two, the ship took a desperate lunge. The ladder fell away with the lunge of the ship, and he had about one second to make up his mind whether to go with the ladder or stay with the rigging. He chose the rigging, and there he hung by one hand, struggling to get a foothold.

It was at that precise moment that some vagary of the wind lifted his kilt upward to swirl about his face. Blinded and hanging between wind and water, he felt his grip loosening as his sweaty hand slipped on the tarred rope.

"Sure and it's a disgraceful spectacle ye're makin' of yerself," Clarinda's voice said in his mind. *"Hanging up there with yer altogether on display and shockin' poor maidens down below."*

"It would take more than a man's altogether to shock you, you hussyl!" he said before he fully realized his predicament and began to bellow, "Clarinda! Help, Clarinda!"

"Well, now, I wasn't meanin' I was shocked," she said, *"but poor Lady Alice is blushin' clear down to her bustle."*

"Clarinda!"

"I told you not to go scramblin' up there like a monkey, didn't I?" she scolded.

"Are you going to help me or not?" he yelled into the wind.

"I'm tryin'. Do you think I want to be a widow before I'm a wife? But I can't concentrate with you yellin' in me mind."

He had a sudden sensation of a woman's arms around him. He smelled the exotic perfume that was Clarinda's trademark and felt the warmth of her all about him.

"Upsadaisyl!" Clarinda said, and he could feel her hands

gripping him in a rather intimate way as she boosted him up onto the rigging. *"There he is, all safe and sound and his skirts back in place."*

"Thanks," Dylan said, scrambling up the net as fast as he could.

Then he pulled himself up onto the sloping but broad top of the *Vengeance* and blanched at what he saw. Three gryphons were engaged in a contest to see which could rip off the most of the tough outer skin of the dirigible. They were tearing at it with claw and beak. One had ripped away about twenty feet of fabric and was driving its huge beak into the opening, probing for the thin-skinned gas bag within.

Dylan raised his revolver and took careful aim, bracing his feet wide apart on the swaying ship. He hit the monster in the right eye and the glaring orb disappeared in a blob of red. The thing roared with pain and anger and started toward him. Another gryphon screeched above his head and dove for him.

Dylan took out a stick of dynamite and lit the fuse with a single shot. Then he tossed it with all his might up the throat of the diving creature. Its head and upper body disintegrated in a blast of black smoke and red flesh. Dylan ducked as blood and gore splattered all around him. He slipped and fell and that saved his life as the other gryphon struck at him and missed.

He grabbed hold of the rigging and saved himself from rolling off the rounded top of the ship. The hand he used to grip the nets was the one in which he'd been holding the gun and he saw it spiraling down toward the sea. The gryphon roared and struck again. Dylan met it with his claymore, driving the point through its breast. The beast screeched and writhed and beat at Dylan with its great wings. He stabbed at the heaving breast repeatedly and was soon covered with its stinking blood.

As it died, two more of the things landed, clawing at each other for the privilege of ending his life. He grabbed another stick of dynamite and struggled to light it, but a huge claw caught him on the shoulder and knocked him off his feet again. The dynamite went hurtling into space, and he was left with only his claymore with which to defend himself. The two gryphons closed in, beaks and claws

lashing at him. The claymore struck home twice, sending one monster fluttering away wounded, but another joined the attack and Dylan knew the fight was hopeless. Still, he kept hacking away with the claymore until there were nicks in the blade and his arm was numb with fatigue. The things closed in with cries of triumph and . . .

Clarinda was suddenly standing beside him, screeching almost as loud as the monsters. "By Keridwen's sacred buttocks, look at what you've got yourself into now!"

"Don't just talk, MacTague; do something magical!" he said as he thrust his blade through the throat of a gryphon. "Do the best magic you've ever done!"

"Magic, is it? That's all I ever get around here! Do you think I'm made of magic? Things like this take some doing."

"You'd better be made of magic," he said, "or we'll be ripped to shreds."

Suddenly she laughed. "There's no danger," she said. "No danger at all."

She's finally lost what little wits she had, Dylan thought as he ducked a snapping bill and lashed at a monstrous claw.

"I mean it," the girl insisted. "The creatures aren't real . . . unless you believe in them."

Dylan sidestepped a vicious peck and cursed. "They're real enough to rip the ship to pieces and me along with it!"

"No, no—look!" Clarinda said, deliberately stepping into the path of a monster. Dylan shrieked with horror as the thing's cruel beak lashed at her . . . and passed right through her body.

"You see? They're creatures of the *glamourie*, summoned up by the priests of Cebula to haunt us. If you can see through them, they have no power."

Dylan couldn't see through them. The slashing beak of one of the things struck him in the middle of the back, knocking him head over heels toward the curving side of the ship. Clarinda screamed and grabbed his feet and hung on. For a moment he hung upside down with the screaming girl clinging to him and the gryphons, real or of the *glamourie*, closing in for the kill.

"Keridwen! Keridwen, give me the power now!" Clarinda yelled. "Give me the power to—"

There was a sound like a dozen express trains, and a

creature the size of a small mountain darkened the sky. Its bat-like wings flapped with earth-shaking force, and its cavernous mouth opened and belched forth fire. The flames consumed two of the gryphons in one blast while the long lashing tail crushed another in flight. A fourth was crushed by teeth the size of stalactites. The remaining beasts fled, their lion tails between their talons.

"That's . . . that's a dragon!" Dylan gasped as Clarinda pulled him up beside her.

"What else?" she said as she waved her hand and the monster disappeared. "Nothing but the best for the friends of Lady Keridwen."

XIV

THE *Vengeance* limped toward the coast of Basham, losing buoyancy and altitude with every mile. Finally, with her ballast all overboard and the ropes hanging from her nose dragging in the surf, she staggered across the black sand of the beach and set down in a snow-covered valley.

"How long will it take to make repairs?" Dylan asked Noel.

"Several days," Noel said. "I'll get the crew to work at once, but we won't be able to take off for at least four days."

"We haven't got four days," Dylan said. "I'm not sure we have one day; Avallon may have fallen already. We've got to push on to the caves without the ship."

"How? We'd never be able to pass through Kar Kaballa's homeland. It would be hard enough with the ship, but without it—"

"I speak the language," Dylan interrupted. "We'll hire yaks and load the dynamite on them, then join a Yavasi caravan headed for Cebula."

"Who are the Yavasi?"

"A nomadic people subject to the Gogs. They make up most of the tradesmen and merchants of Basham and also most of the slaves for the feed pens. I've passed as a Yavasi before and I can again."

"What about the rest of us?"

"I suggest you remain with the ship. Churchward should stay, and Lady Alice, of course. I'll try to reach the caves. Clarinda will have to go with me because I'll need her powers. Perhaps one or two of the crew will volunteer to go with us."

"You've got a volunteer," Sean O'Hara said. "The Gogs killed my father and wiped out my regiment. I think that gives me the right."

Dylan noticed that Lady Alice's lips tightened at Sean's words and now she turned pale. Whatever she had felt for him, Dylan, had been a passing thing. Sean O'Hara was the one she really loved, and that was just as well since Dylan's infatuation for her had faded before the onslaught Clarinda MacTague had made on his emotions.

For Alice's sake, Dylan was about to turn down Sean's offer but then he thought better of it. What difference did it make how much danger any of them were exposed to? If he failed in his mission, they would all die anyway.

"I'll be glad to have you, Sean," he said.

"I'll volunteer too," Clarinda said. "I'll volunteer to stay with the ship and kind of keep an eye on things."

Dylan took her by the shoulders and looked into her violet eyes. "Without you, MacTague, we don't stand the slightest chance of getting to the caves or finding our way around in them. Will you go with me?"

Two large tears of self-pity formed in Clarinda's eyes, but she nodded. "Keridwen, you didn't know what you were doing to me when you sent this fellow to my temple. He's going to be the death of me."

"Of course Keridwen knew what she was doing," Dylan laughed. "She's all-seeing and all-knowing, isn't she?"

"Perhaps," Clarinda said, "but I sometimes wonder if she's all-caring . . . if she even gives a hang."

They had a chance to find out very soon if Keridwen cared or not. Dylan encountered no trouble contacting the head man of the nearest Yavasi village and obtaining yaks. The dynamite was loaded onto the yaks and Dylan, Clarinda, Sean and two sailors rode behind them on horseback. They followed a newly-made bison trail across the snowy plains until they reached a caravan track. A Yavasi caravan came along after a short wait, and Dylan dickered

with the leader while the others, disguised from head to foot in the Yavasi fur clothing, watched anxiously.

An agreement was reached and Dylan paid in gold for the privilege of being allowed to accompany the caravan to Cebula. They fell in at the rear, and the caravan started the two-day journey.

"I don't like the looks of that fellow," Clarinda said to Dylan. "Are you sure he can be trusted?"

"Probably not," Dylan said, "but he thinks we're Yavasi so I don't think he'll betray us."

She shook her head. "He has a shifty look about him. He reminds me of Battling Hogan, who fouled me old man so often in the twenty-first round of the Hibernian heavyweight championship fight that he finally broke his hand on me father's knee."

"If you distrust him, why don't you read his mind and see what he's up to?"

"Can't do it. You know the power can't be pushed. It comes and goes, comes and goes."

"Well, if you want my opinion, he's probably at least as crooked as Battling Hogan. All the Yavasi are. They've lived too long as a conquered people under the Gogs to be anything else. I'm sure he'd sell his own mother for a five-penny piece or us for a crust of bread."

"Sure now, I'm glad you told me that," Clarinda said. "You're a real consolin' man, Dylan MacBride."

"Maybe he won't . . ." Dylan began and then stopped as he saw the yak-tailed banners of a troop of Gogs come over the horizon and gallop toward the caravan.

"We could run for it," Clarinda suggested.

"And leave the yaks with the dynamite?" Dylan asked. "What would we use against Cythraul, then? Our prayers?"

"If we knew the right ones they might be more effective than that blow-up stuff from the other world," she said as they watched the Gogs surround the caravan, and the Kar Klingan in command ride up and start questioning the caravan chief.

"I think we've just been sold," Dylan said, seeing the chieftain gesture toward the end of the caravan.

"Shall we try to fight our way out?" Sean asked, drawing a revolver from beneath his furs.

"No, we wouldn't have a chance," Dylan said. "Maybe

I can talk our way out. After all, they have no way of knowing we're not Yavasi."

A score of the bow-legged little horsemen descended on them, and the Kar, resplendent in white fur, confronted Dylan. "Well, Avallonian, you've come a long way to die."

"You were so right," Clarinda's mind voice said; *"they have no way of knowing we're not Yavasi . . . except by looking at us!"*

"Word came that your ship was faltering as it crossed the coast," the Kar said. "Kar Kaballa himself ordered out patrols to make sure you were properly welcomed, Dylan MacBride."

"You know me?"

"The son of Sir Malcolm MacBride is known in Cebula as the deadliest enemy of Kar Kaballa and his people. He and the priests of Cebula have prepared a little ceremony for you and your friends, one that you will find unpleasant but which will please Cythraul mightily."

"You are going to take us to Cythraul now?"

"Of course. All prisoners go to He Who Devours. But don't fret about it. You go but a little sooner than the rest. Soon all mankind will return to the body of the Supreme One."

The Gogs herded them out of the caravan and permitted it to continue on its way. Then the Kar ordered the packs on the yaks searched and cursed when nothing was found but hundreds of red sticks.

"A fine cargo!" he snorted. "Who did you expect to fool with this firewood?"

"It was all we had," Dylan said, hoping he was going to be lucky enough to be taken to the caves of Cythraul with the dynamite still near at hand.

"Throw this useless trash away and drive the yaks to Cebula," the Kar ordered a lieutenant. "We ride to the caves where Kar Kaballa and Cythraul wait."

With their hands tied to their saddlehorns and a guard on either side with drawn scimitar, the five prisoners rode off into a blast of cold wind from the nearby Mountains of Doom. Dylan gave one despairing look over his shoulder as they went, a look at the piles of precious dynamite which now lay useless in the snow.

"It's time to call on Keridwen, girl," he said to Clarinda.

"What do you think I've been doing ever since we saw those bow-legged fiends coming?" Clarinda said. "I've been yellin' me head off but there's nary an answer. Maybe she's really gone away this time."

"Why should she?"

"I don't know. Maybe she's as scared of Cythraul as I am," Clarinda said, shivering.

Dylan moved his horse closer to hers and pressed his leg against hers. "Cheer up, love," he said, "we're not dead yet. Noel will be getting the *Vengeance* repaired and he'll come after us as soon as he can."

"I know, but I keep thinking about what you saw in Keridwen's Cauldron," she said. "The pair of us being devoured by that . . . that cosmic appetite. Ugh!"

The Gogs rode fast, using the whip on their wiry little ponies constantly. In a few hours they crossed a low line of hills and galloped through a deep ravine and a long natural tunnel. They found themselves in a valley surrounded by giant snow-covered mountains topped by a single volcano with smoke pouring from its crater.

"Is that the volcano you saw in your vision?" Dylan whispered to Clarinda.

"Aye, the same, but what good does that do us? We can't scoop up lava with our bare hands and throw it at Cythraul."

"No, but if you set yourself to it, you might be able to do it with your bare mind."

"I'd fry me brains," she said.

They were approaching a vast horde of mounted Gogs. At their head stood priests of Cebula, dressed in their black robes and tall mitred hats. With them was a man in black fur and golden mail who stood a head taller than any other Gog.

"Kar Kaballa himself," Dylan said.

"The Devil himself," Sean said, "and us without so much as a penknife among us to do him in."

"Bring them forward!" Kar Kaballa commanded in Bashamite.

The five were dragged from their horses and pushed along to where the king of the Gogs stood.

"Kneel" an officer said, pushing at Dylan. "Kneel to the mighty Karl!"

"Take your hands off him, you hairy little apel" Clarinda said and raked her nails across the man's face.

"You redheaded devil, I'll—" the Gog lifted a fist and started to hit Clarinda, and Dylan stepped between them.

"Let him stand," Kar Kaballa ordered. "They'll all be falling on their knees soon enough in fear of Cythraul."

"If I get near that blob of putresence, I'll rip it apart with me two hands!" Clarinda said.

Kar Kaballa scowled but then his face became placid again. "The redheaded woman has spirit. She is also a witch. She will please the palate of He Who Devours."

"Not me," the girl said. "I'm tough and stringy and I'll kick all the way down. I'll give him the worst case of indigestion he's had in a million years."

Kar Kaballa ignored her and turned his attention to Dylan. "You come to try to destroy He Who Devours, do you not, Dylan MacBride?"

"Yes," Dylan said. "We come to destroy him before he destroys the world."

"And you'll die for your effrontery as your father did before you. He sought to poison Cythraul with a formula brewed up by the Druids, but he failed as all who oppose Cythraul must fail. The father long ago joined Cythraul and now the son will follow him."

"And what do you get out of this?" Dylan asked. "Why do you bother conquering a world just so that it can be destroyed? What do you gain?"

"I gain oneness with Cythraul for myself and my people. The cosmic ecstasy of joining the Supreme Being."

"Of becoming nothing."

"No, of becoming one. I walk Annwn today as Cythraul's avatar. I will rule Annwn in his name as all go to join him, and then I and my priests will be amassed to his being and there will be nothing but Cythraul. But we have talked enough. The time has come for you and your friends to join He Who Devours."

He signaled the priests and they began to chant and ring the silver bells they held in each hand. Two by two they moved slowly into the mouth of a large cave. Prodded by swords, Dylan, Clarinda, Sean and the two sailors were forced into line behind the priests.

"Go to Cythraul with my blessing," Kar Kaballa said. "We will join you before too many moons have passed."

"And you go to Hades with the blessing of me and Keridwen!" Clarinda said and began to sob.

"Easy, girl, easy!" Dylan said. "We're not dead yet."

"You keep saying that but we get closer to it every minute," Clarinda said, pressing as close to him as she could.

"I'm sorry I got you into this," Dylan said as they entered the cave and followed the priests down a long sloping path.

"Now what kind of talk is that?" she said, tears gone and eyes flashing. "Where else would Clarinda MacTague be but with her man, no matter what happens?"

"That's my beautiful witch!" Dylan said. "We won't go tamely. If you can't whistle up a spell, I'll break these bonds some way and try to grab a sword."

"I'm tryin'," Clarinda said. "I keep tryin' to touch Keridwen's mind, but . . ."

"But what?"

"There's something else, something black and evil between us, and without her, I don't think I can do much."

For an hour they walked deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth, the priests chanting and ringing bells all the way. Finally they came to a huge vaulted chamber with a black altar in its center.

"I have the feeling this is where it's all going to happen," Clarinda said.

"This is the place I saw," Dylan said.

"The place where you saw us die."

"The place where I saw Cythraul close about us," he corrected. "I didn't see us die."

"That's a comfortin' thought. Maybe we'll still be alive when he starts digestin' us."

The priests ordered the guards to halt the prisoners near the altar. The black-robed ones advanced, their chanting growing shriller and the bells ringing more loudly.

Dylan was backed up against some jagged rocks, and so was Sean. A sidelong glance passed between them and they both began working desperately to cut the ropes by rubbing on the sharp protrusions.

"That chant is to summon Cythraul," Clarinda said.

"Me power's coming back a bit. I can feel him, hear him listenin' to the chant. He is pleased because he's hungry . . . very hungry. He comes quickly."

"Is Keridwen here?" Dylan asked.

"No. At least I don't think so," she said. "Just for a moment there I thought I felt her warmth, but now there is only cold . . . the cold of death and Cythraul."

Dylan's hands were bleeding, but the rope had started to give a little. The priests were through with their chanting now and were backing away from the altar. The high priest signaled to the guards and the five prisoners were shoved toward the black altar. Dylan fought and kicked, and Sean and the two sailors struggled to free themselves, but Clarinda permitted herself to be carried without protest. For a moment Dylan thought she had fainted from fear, but then he realized she was concentrating, trying to contact Keridwen or trying to do something on her own.

They were all deposited on the black altar and bound to it with heavy ropes. But the guards were in a hurry and became careless. They didn't seem able to see what they were doing because of a golden mist that floated over the altar, obscuring the vision of all near it.

"What's that mist?" Sean asked.

Dylan didn't answer. He was watching Clarinda's face. He knew where the mist was coming from but he wasn't sure how much good it was going to do them.

The priests were leaving. They were chanting again but this had a different sound than the previous one. The other had been a dirge reeking of death, but this was a joyful sound, a sound of rebirth, of joining with the cosmic one.

Dylan was struggling with the ropes that bound his wrists. They had been cut about halfway through by the sharp rocks. If he could get them off, he was sure he could get out of the clumsily tied rope that held him on the altar.

"Hurry, hurry!" one of the guards said. "He is coming! Unless you would go to him before your time, you must hurry!"

The captain of the guards waved his hands at the golden mist. "I can't see! I can't tell if they're all bound."

"This mist," another guard said; "I've never seen anything like it in here before."

"I must test the ropes," the captain said, bending over Dylan just as the rope snapped around his wrists and his hands came free.

The Gog's face was close to Dylan's and he recognized him as the one who had taken his claymore when they were captured. The man must have taken a fancy to the weapon because it was strapped to his side. He didn't get a chance to draw it as Dylan's hands unexpectedly closed around his throat.

"Help! Help!" the captain shouted in Bashamite, but his men didn't pay any attention. For some reason, they now seemed unable to hear as well as see in the golden mist.

Dylan's fingers sank into the neck of the struggling Gog. Bound to the altar, he couldn't use his arms very well but from somewhere an almost superhuman strength came into his hands. The Gog's eyes bulged and there was a gurgling sound deep in his throat as he died. Dylan dropped the body and found he could roll over in the loosely tied ropes. He reached for Sean's wrists and got them loose. Then he took the claymore from the dead Gog's scabbard and cut the ropes that bound him to the altar. Sean was on his feet also, cutting Clarinda and the two sailors free while Dylan moved unseen through the mist toward the other four guards.

One man had time to scream before the blade of the claymore split his head open. The others drew their swords and backed away from the altar and out of the mist. Dylan dove after them and was confronted not only by those three but half a dozen others as well. He cut down two of them with quick lunges and then backed away, fighting a defensive battle until Clarinda and the others joined him.

Sean and the sailors grabbed up swords the Gogs had dropped. Fighting alongside Dylan, they drove the Gogs back and back . . . and then suddenly the cold grew so intense that their arms and legs were numb and their minds grew confused and vague.

"Cythraul's spell!" Clarinda screamed. "Fight it, Dylan! Fight it, Sean! All of you, fight it!"

Dylan heard her voice but somehow it didn't matter. A great darkness was gathering at the far end of the cave and from that darkness came the cold and numbness. The Gogs had dropped their weapons and were staring at the

darkness with looks of rapture on their faces. Dylan's fingers relaxed and he almost dropped the claymore.

"Dylan, me darlin', fight! Fight Cythraul!" Clarinda pleaded. She was beside him now, her arms around him, her face close to his. "He'll draw you to him if you don't fight!"

"Keridwen," he gasped. "Where's Keridwen?"

"She's not here . . . not yet. She can't break through. Fight the spell!"

The Gogs were moving slowly toward the encroaching darkness. Their hands were raised as though in greeting to their god. As they approached the darkness, a stream of steaming slime flowed forward to meet them.

Dylan watched as though hypnotized as, one by one, the Gogs walked into that slime and slowly dissolved in the digestive juices of the cosmic being. He also noticed that first one and then the other sailor from the *Vengeance* and finally Sean were starting toward the thing. For some reason it seemed like a good idea to him too. He took three steps forward and then something struck him in the back of the head and he went down.

"Dylan, Dylan!" Clarinda was astride him with the rock still in her hand. "Are you all right, me darlin'?"

"I . . . I guess so," Dylan said. His head ached like it had been hit with a thunderbolt but his mind was clear and the numbness had left his arms and legs.

"Sean and the others! We've got to help them!" He leaped to his feet and ran after Sean, grabbing his shoulder and clipping him on the chin with his fist.

Sean went down and lay still. Dylan jumped over him and grabbed the nearest sailor. The man turned and struck at him, but Dylan's fist landed on his cheek and he went to his knees. Clarinda's foot connected with the man's chin and he went out.

That was when the wind started. It came from out of nowhere, a wind of hurricane force that drove them toward the waiting darkness. It caught the sailor who was still on his feet and hurled him into the creeping acid that came to meet him.

"Cythraul again. We've got to get out of this cavern."

Dylan dragged Sean to his feet, pushing him ahead of him against the wind. Clarinda tugged at the unconscious

sailor, yanking him along by the heels. Bending almost double, they fought their way toward the other end of the cavern.

"No, not that way," Clarinda said suddenly. "This way. Through that cave off to the side. That leads to the tunnel near the volcano."

"What can we do when we get there?" Sean asked.

"We'll tear down the walls with our bare hands if we have to," Dylan said, releasing O'Hara and pulling the now conscious sailor to his feet.

"Maybe we won't have to," Clarinda said as they forced their way into the other cave and started to run.

But the wind was in this cave also. It fought against their every step but not as strongly because the golden mist was with them again, surrounding them and trying to protect them from the numbing cold that closed in.

"He's coming after us," Clarinda said. "Cythraul is coming!"

The darkness was moving faster, and lapping out ahead of it was the deadly acid of its digestive system.

"How far to the place near the lava pools?" Dylan asked.

Clarinda seemed to be listening, or perhaps seeing with eyes other than her normal ones. "Just a little farther," she said.

They ran faster, the golden mist swirling about them and the darkness coming ever closer. They stumbled and sometimes fell, but always got up to run again because of the horror that followed them.

"Here! This wall!" Clarinda said, pointing. "I can feel the heat on the other side."

Dylan could feel nothing even when he put his hands on the wall, but he knew she must be right, that something else was guiding her.

"Damn it! If we only had an ax or a pick," Sean said. "We could smash our way through."

"And die when the lava came," Clarinda said.

"At least Cythraul would die with us," Dylan said, starting to attack the rock wall with his claymore.

"Maybe there's a better way." Clarinda's voice was changed and her eyes had a faraway look to them.

"There is," Dylan said grimly, "but the dynamite is a hundred miles away, lying in the snow."

"A hundred miles away," Clarinda said. "A hundred miles away . . . yes . . . seventy miles away . . . sixty . . . yes . . . yes . . . Keridwen, help me! Help me now!"

There was a flash of light and several tons of dynamite were neatly piled on the ground in front of them.

"That's a good trick," Dylan said, grabbing for a fuse. "How did you do it?"

"I'll show you some day after we're married and you've adopted me little brothers and sisters," Clarinda said.

"Your what?"

"You heard me, MacBride. The little darlin's are me brothers and sisters."

Dylan pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "Now, get out of here! Run, you witch! Run, Sean. Everybody run while I set the fuse."

Sean and the sailor took off as the darkness and the golden mist locked in mortal combat, but Clarinda didn't move. She took Dylan's hand and clung to it.

"Go!" he ordered. "Go before we both die!"

"No. Light the fuse and let me take care of the rest."

The cold was all about them, seeping through them, but the golden mist was holding back the digestive juices as Dylan struck a match and watched it go out.

"Hurry, hurry!" Clarinda said.

They couldn't get away now, Dylan knew. Cythraul was closing in around them just as he had seen in the Cauldron. They were about to die, but they could take the monster with them. He drew the revolver he had taken from the Gog captain and aimed it at the dynamite. If a match wouldn't work in this cold darkness, maybe a bullet would.

"Hang on, darling," Dylan said, squeezing Clarinda's hand. "We're going to die together, but so is Cythraul!"

"Go ahead, fire!" she said, eyes closed and mouth moving.

Just before his finger became too numb to obey him, Dylan pulled the trigger. The shot rang out, and the world blew up in his face.

Was this death? There was a moment of darkness, a spinning darkness in which there was a tiny pinprick of light and then . . .

He was standing on the open plain before the caves of Cythraul, and Clarinda was beside him holding his hand tightly.

"I did it! I did it!" She laughed delightedly. "I had to time it just right, but I did it!"

The ground was shaking under them and there was a smell of smoke and sulphur in the air. Sean and the sailor came stumbling out of the cave, looking terrified.

"Dylan! Clarinda!" Sean yelled. "How did you get here?"

"By the power, that's how," Clarinda said. "By Keridwen and the power she sent through space and solid rock."

"And right back into the hands of the Gogs," Dylan said. "Look!"

Several thousand Gogs led by Kar Kaballa were coming toward them on foot. They all held their swords in their hands and their heads high.

Dylan was still clutching the pistol, and his claymore was at his side. It would be a hopeless fight, but . . .

The Gogs moved slowly right past them. Their eyes were glazed, their mouths open. Kar Kaballa's glance was filled with hatred as it touched on Dylan, but he made no move to raise his sword as he went toward the cave.

"Cythraul is dying," Clarinda said. "He is dying in boiling lava, and he has called his people to die with him."

The earth shook more violently as the Gogs entered the cave, and huge rocks began to tumble down the face of the cliff.

"We'd better get out of here before the whole place blows up," Sean said. "That explosion also opened a way to the sea. Water is pouring in, and when it hits that lava, that'll be the end."

The four began running, darting through and around the mass of Gogs still walking slowly toward the cave entrance. They ran with terror urging them on, breath coming in ragged gasps. They ran and the earth trembled under their feet and rocks flew through the air as landslide after landslide came crashing down the cliffs.

"We're not going to make it. I can't go much farther," Sean gasped. The sailor had already fallen behind. "Go on, you two, save yourselves!"

"We *are* going to make it!" Dylan shouted, pointing. The nose of the *Vengeance* was pushing its way through the dense cloud of smoke that hung over the valley.

"It's Noell!" Sean shouted, waving frantically. "Noel and Major Churchward and all the others!"

The ship came about, put its nose down, cut its engines and drifted toward them with a rope ladder down.

"Up, everybody! Up quick!" Dylan said, lifting Clarinda onto the ladder.

"Careful of me dress, you bloody Highlander," Clarinda said. "You want me hangin' in midair with me bare bottom showin' like yours was?"

"On you it will look good," Dylan said as they scrambled up the ladder toward the gondola.

"Cythraul's dead!" Sean told Noel and the others as they clambered into the gondola. "Cythraul's dead and the Gogs have gone to die with him."

Noel and Churchward were pounding Dylan on the back, and Alice and Sean were embracing while the ship nosed upward and headed away from the caves of Cythraul.

"What now, Dylan?" Clarinda asked, snuggling into his arms. "What now, oh mighty Cythraul killer?"

"Back to Avallon," Dylan said. "Back to see if all is well with the city and to find a priestess of Keridwen to marry us."

"There won't be any need for that," Clarinda said. "While Keridwen and I were communing back there in the cave, I got her permission to perform the ceremony myself. I figure if I do it, I'll be sure you're well tied down."

"Shut up, you redheaded witch, and kiss me!" Dylan said.