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The Star Magicians by Lin Carter



PROLOGUE

For 6,000 years the great Carina Empire controlled the larger part of the Milky Way Galaxy. But slowly it yielded before the remorseless erosion of centuries. And as it weakened, the power of the wild, untamed barbarians of the Rim grew stronger. For a time, the inevitable was staved off by a brilliant stroke of political genius. The Emperor Rinald Tenth, the extraordinary mastermind of his age, commissioned the Rim Barbarians themselves to patrol the very stars they menaced. It was little more than a disguised method of buying safety with tribute, but it worked—for a time.

Over generations, the Imperial line ran out in weaklings and soft degenerates, and the Sacred Blood no longer brought forth leaders like Carmion or Rinald or Diovar. More and more the princelings of the fading Empire in eclipse came to rely on the mighty "Barbarian Legions"—now so powerful they had a major voice in the Imperial Council. At last, the Barbarian Legions dominated. At their

whim they could depose or create Emperors. And finally came that dreaded day when the Imperial Treasury could no longer pay the gigantic tribute. The legions struck . . . and, in a single day and night, the mightiest Empire in galactic history fell in a ruin of flame and thunder.

In the ages that followed, the Empire decayed. Province by province it fell apart into Star-Kingdoms. Torn by rivalry and civil war, as competing Star-Kings and Cluster-Lords struggled for the lost Imperial diadem, the fragments of the Empire lost touch. Communications were failing. Trade declined. Technology ebbed and entire sciences were lost, obscured in the darkness that was closing over the once-great civilization like a tremendous wave of darkness.

The civilization of the Galaxy was disintegrating, while, by an ironic trick of destiny, the Barbarians themselves remained the most monolithic power among the Near Stars. In their huge nomad fleets, these Star Rovers (as they came to call themselves) wandered at will from star to star, hastening the collapse of interstellar culture. No planet could stand against them. Their fleets drifted the star-trails, looting, destroying, crushing everything that stood in their way.

One world alone stood against the dark night of savagery that was engulfing the stars. Barren and small, rocky, desolate, inhabited only by a tiny band of ascetics called *The White Adepts*, the mystery-world of Parlion alone held out. The Adepts preserved the lost science, working technological miracles that seemed magic to the half-civilized worlds of this latter day. Tirelessly they strove in secrecy and darkness, using their powers of scientific wizardry to reshape history and forge the Empire anew.

Yet even their strange, awesome powers dwindled to smallness before the overwhelming armed might of the Star Rovers. World after world the barbarian Rovers laid seige to, and conquered, pausing only briefly to loot the wealth of the planets they took, before moving on to another prey.

Then came the rich trader's world of Argion.

Then came—*Calistor, the White Wizard*.

1. SCARLET SANDS

On the sixth planet of Havory 36, a binary star in the Wyvern Cluster, the last scene of a tense drama was being acted out on the bloody sands of the arena, to the south of Argion City.

The double sun blazed down on crowded tiers of stone seats, and flashed from barbaric ornaments of rare metals, the gem-studded hilts of rapier and laser gun, the rich banners of stiff silk blazoned with Clan heraldries. The throng that filled the stone benches was mostly composed of the conquerors, the Star Rovers and their captive women. But here and there among the crowd could be seen a few native Argionids in their distinctive feather-robés . . . traitors and quislings who joined the star-traveling barbarians at their triumphal games, hoping to curry favor with the new lords of Argion planet.

Although the crowd had been drinking heavily and the men were hoarse from shouting, all was still in this suspenseful moment. The throng gazed down in delicious anticipation . . . waiting for the moment of death, when the bright sands below would drink hot red blood.

In the center of the arena, the naked Argionid swordsman blinked sweat and blood from his eyes, narrowing them against the sun-glare. His gaze was riveted on the monster *thard* and his brawny hand tightened on the worn hilt of his longsword, knuckles whitening. A dozen paces from where he stood, the beast crouched, belly scraping the sand, motionless save for the uncontrollable twitching of its twenty-foot tail, which bristled with thorny spikes. Its brass-

colored, bird-like beak gaped hungrily, foam dripping from scaled jaws, flaming eyes glazed with fury.

The Argionid was superb: a blond titan, thewed like the bronze statue of the hero Lionus that stood before the arena gate. Although little more than a youth, he was tall, and for all his well-muscled bulk he was lithe and quick-footed as a jungle-cat. For seventeen Carina Standard minutes now the youth had successfully evaded the frenzied lunges of the monster reptile. The marks of his agile bladework showed: dribbles of green blood marked the *thard's* blue-and-yellow-mottled hide. And along its back, where the spinal ridge of jagged horns rose bristling, several had been sheared away. The young swordsman himself had received only one wound, a narrow slash across the brow. Slight though it was, it would prove his undoing, for the blood was running down into his eyes, blinding him. He blinked again, as the scene swam in a red haze before him.

In the stone rows, the thronged barbarians held their breath, waiting—for, despite his valiant efforts, the longsword was useless against the giant strength of the *thard*, mailed in tough scales that were proof against anything less than a sizzling laser-bolt.

This the swordsman knew well. His only hope lay in tiring the monster. And this seemed an empty hope, for the jungle dragons of Argion planet were tireless engines of muscle and bone.

The blood flowed steadily, trickling into his eyes, the salt-stinging gore drawing tears that blurred his vision to a swimming haze. He blinked his eyes clear again, knuckles tautening on the sweaty sword-pommel. At any second now the *thard* would charge again . . .

Above, in the royal box, Drask reclined at his ease on the satin cushions, half his cynical attention on the tragic drama unfolding below, and half on the trembling young girl beside him, whose nude breasts he was idly fondling. A philosopher

in his rough way, the Warlord of the Star Rovers mused on the changeful ways of Fate. In this moment of time the young Argionid swordsman was filled with robust life, bursting with manly vigor in the full hot morning of his youth . . . in the next moment, his splendid, virile body would be an awful bundle of bloody rags, crushed in the inexorable jaws of the slaving *thard*.

We are toys at the feet of the gods, he thought.

So it was, too, with the pale maiden at his side. But yesterday she had been the proud princess of a free world, daughter of the 76th Lord Argion, reigning merchant-prince of this trader's world, heiress to a magnificent fortune with half the princelings of the Near Stars bidding for her hand. Then, in a moment, all had been changed forever. Out of nowhere had come the star-wandering nomad fleets of the dread barbarians—the fury of battle, the ravening flame of planet-mounted laser-batteries—the buffeting thunder of mobile ship-to-planet hydrolithium bombs—and today she was the listless slave of the conqueror, a plaything, the toy of a moment, to be cast aside after he had had his amusement. And so sudden had the change struck, she still seemed dazed, stunned.

Drask's half-smile deepened. The fleet had struck without a moment's warning from the black abyss of the Rift. Within hours Argion planet had fallen, her obsolete defense-network drifts of incandescent metal-vapor rising from craters of fused stone and liquid steel. And now the princess sat, huddled beside him as one in a dream, eyes blank, limbs flaccid. He would not keep her long, he thought. . . .

And yet she was a lovely creature. Her young breasts were like warm white fruit, soft beneath his hard hands. He stroked her slender body—as suddenly the stillness was rent by a great shout.

The *thard* struck like a thunderbolt. And the blood-blurred vision of the blond

swordsman played him wrong. His magnificent young body dangled now from the scissor-beak, its nakedness clothed in dripping scarlet. As the crowd thundered with earth-shaking approval, the jungle-dragon ripped the body into shreds and lifted its own deafening roar in challenge to the many-throated thunder.

Huddled by Drask, the girl shrank back, her cold flesh crawling with revulsion, as if the ring-laden hands that touched her body were dripping with the gore of her slaughtered countrymen.

As the Rover guards baited the *thards* attention away to the other side of the arena, removed the mangled corpse and brought out the next "rebel" for his punishment, the Warlord let his attention return to the girl. Eyes dilated and nostrils pinched and white, she stared at the scarlet thing that only moments before had been a vigorous young male.

"A friend?" Drask asked, cynically. His lips twitched. "Perhaps—a lover? Ah, I sympathize—he had a fine body, for a youth."

Her blue eyes blazed, the stunned languor of shock vanished now.

"You filth," she said.

Drask smiled thinly.

In the dazzling sunlight below, the Rover chieftain, Tonguth, consulted a parchment scroll. Sweating in his leather tunic and orange cloak beneath the dazzling light of the two suns, the rough-bearded barbarian downed another tankard of chilled ale and blinked at his list. The Warlord had reclared him Master of the Victory Games as special recognition for his bravery during the Siege of Argion, but Tonguth would rather have lolled in the cool shade of patterned awning on the stone benches. His sweat-soaked leather and iron garments chafed him raw. Grumbling a curse, he rinsed his thirsty throat with

another tankard of sour ale, and blinked as the next victim stumbled out of the cages and into the open arena. Glancing at the slim, tattered figure below, he bellowed the man's name.

"Perion of North Hollis, piper to the court of the late Darion, Lord Argion, rebel and traitor. Turning from his tunes to red murder, the Piper slew six Star Rovers with a stolen sword during the capture of the palace. *How say you, brothers?*"

As one man, the Rovers massed along the climbing rows of stone benches raised sword, axe, mace, laser gun or Haemholtz coagulator, and thundered one word: "*DEATH!*"

The tiny figure below seemed to cringe beneath the weight of that many-tongued cry. But then it straightened, preened, and with a gallant, rascally impudence, swaggered boldly out into the full view of the *thard*. The monster snorted blood from its throat, and tensed.

Drask smiled thinly, rather admiring the little troubadour's impudent—and imprudent—courage. Courage in any form was, in fact, his only god—and it seemed almost a pity it must be crushed out in a red smear. However, one cannot hold a conquered planet unless the example made of the heroes who have defended it is so terrible as to daunt potential liberators. And the Rovers were true barbarians: they wanted to see blood, and pain, and panic. Still, Drask watched the small figure with more than common attention.

Reaching the very center of the arena, the small minstrel paused, struck a pose, flourished his ragged many-colored cloak—and bowed to the throng. He doffed his little plumed cap to Lord Drask. In so doing, its broken cock-feather dabbled in a pool of the last victim's blood, a touch of poetic irony that pleased Drask's sense of artistry and drama. The throng, pleased by this gesture and the fellow's daredevil impudence, applauded noisily.

But the *thard* was still mad with bloodlust, and impatient for the kill. A long ripple of tension ran along the rows of men and woman, a visible thing, as stalks of neocorn register the pass of the wind's viewless hand. The dragon froze immobile, save for the twitch of its tail. The spectators drew in their breath.

Tonguth, as Master of the Games, tossed a slim rapier into the arena.

"Here, tunerster," he bawled hoarsely. "Make music with this!"

The blade fell in a glittering arc of sun-struck steel to the hot red sand, to thud a few yards from the bedraggled figure in motley. And then the Star Rovers saw something unprecedented in all their crimson annals of loot, conquest and rapine. The ragged minstrel struck a pose—spurned the weapon with his foot—and turned his back on it, and on the *thard*.

And he turned a cartwheel.

In the astounded silence, belly scraping the coarse red sand, the *thard* inched forward, its burning flame-colored eyes fastened on the slim capering figure of its next victim. Even Drask held his breath, eyes riveted on the lonely little figure dancing on the edge of death.

Perion turned a somersault.

The *thard* paused, hesitant, wavering. Man-things either ran screaming before him, or stood with naked steel awaiting his charge. They never *ignored* him . . .

Drawing a dirty kerchief from his pocket-pouch, Perion waved it at the stands to catch the spectators' attention—then slipped it over his eyes, fastening it with nimble fingers behind his head. Then, blindfolded, he began fumbling over the steaming scarlet sand towards the frozen *thard*, feeling his way along with first one foot extended and then the other, tapping his way, hands extended like a blind beggar.

Like a thunderbolt, the *thard* struck—

And missed! Perion evaded the beast's lunge with the nimble grace of a dancer. Raising a blinding storm of sand, the *thard* halted, turned—struck—
And missed again. Again the slim, ragged figure dodged, blindly.

On the parapet of the arena, burly Tonguth stared, jaws agape, as the minstrel played with the furious monster, evading its ferocious charges as easily as a clown, on Year's End Day, dodges the paper dragons in the festive, torch-lit streets.

"Pick it up, fool," Tonguth muttered, gritting his teeth. "Pick up your sword—fight!" Such courage was crazed—foolhardy—suicidal—yet even rough Tonguth felt a glow of admiration for the sort of man who could clown and play while teetering on the brink of sudden death.

Now, as if tiring of his game, the piper plucked the kerchief from his eyes and stood, boldly daring the panting, enraged *thard* to strike again. But it refused to move, standing still although trembling with frustrated rage, foam slavering down its gasping jaws.

Then he turned his back on it.

And sat down, tailor fashion.

Drask—even Drask, terrible Warlord of the Star Rovers—gaped and swore with amazement, struck with the sheer daredeviltry of the little man.

The *thard* moved, then. Again it hurled its sinuous blue-mailed body at the taunting figure—but, as if warned by some sixth sense, Perion flipped head-over-heels in an acrobat's leap . . . and landed *astride the thard's shoulders*.

For one long, breathless moment, the beast hovered, dazed, as if unable to believe that such audacity could exist in so small and puny a creature as this spindly-legged manling. In the next moment it exploded in a frenzy of pure rage. Leaping, whirling, lashing the sand with its barb-spined tail, the *thard* cavorted

madly around and around the arena, raising dense, choking clouds of sand in a mad attempt to dislodge the thing that clung with uncanny ease to its back.

A gust of wind blew the dust cloud away, treating the astounded throng to an even more fantastic sight. For now, instead of blindly clinging for his very life to the back of the whirling, frenzied monster—the minstrel was actually *riding* the dragon like a bucking horse! Flapping his plumed cap against its heaving flanks and beating his skinny heels into the *thard's* ribs, the little minstrel rode, clinging with one hand to the beast's pig-like ear.

It was then that someone in the crowd—Drask never knew who it was—cried out in a loud, ringing voice, "*Free him! Life for the juggler!*"

In a moment, other voices took up the lone cry. The crowd, its brutal admiration for pure bravery touched by the gallant spectacle, burst into a thunderous roar of approval. Whistles, cheers, war-cries, cat-calls—a wild cacophony of noise applauded the minstrel's feat.

"Free him!"

"Life! Free the piper!"

"Amnesty, Warlord!"

Drask rose to his feet, stilling the mob with lifted hands. When all was silent in the arena, save for the muffled thunder of the wildly raging beast—he shouted his answer.

"The voice of the Rovers has spoken! I give life to the little man, and free amnesty for his crimes—if he can get out of there alive!"

An explosion of laughter followed his words as he sank back into his seat with rare good humor. And far below, still riding the maddened jungle-dragon, the tattered jester himself answered in thin, reedy tones:

"A thousand thanks, my Lord Conqueror! And behold— *Perion comes!*"

With those words, the minstrel sprang to his feet, hopped down from the *tharc's* shoulders to the sands. The slow-witted reptile continued, for a time, its dance of rage, as Perion, unnoticed, ran across the arena to a spot against the curving wall and just below the royal box where the Warlord and his girl-slave sat. Then, stooping, Perion doubled like a coiled spring and flung himself into the air. It was a fantastic leap; only a trained acrobat could have accomplished it, or a man with the steely, disciplined muscles of a dancer—and even so, the lithe juggler almost failed. His fingertips just grazed the rim of the wall—grazed—slipped—and for a moment that lasted like an eternity, he hung, dangling suspended by the fingers of one hand— "*It sees you!*" the Rovers shouted.

Indeed, the slow-witted *thard* had only now spotted the motley-clad form of its tormentor as it clung, spider-like, against the arena wall. With golden eyes that flamed with the madness of frustrated rage, it flashed across the full length of the field, to crash against the massive wall of yellow Argionid granite like a giant battering-ram of living flesh—just as Perion, with one last supreme effort, drew himself up over the brink, tumbling into the box to huddle panting with effort at Lord Drask's booted feet.

Then, his maddening quarry completely escaped, the jungle-dragon went mad in very truth. It battered against the wall again and again, a hissing, clawing, squalling Fury, screaming like a steam whistle, raking the wall with razor-claws that ripped long, raw grooves, cut deep in the solid stone.

"Guards! Drive the beast back from the wall!" Tonguth bellowed.

Rovers stationed along the arena's brink to keep order beat the infuriated, squalling *thard* back with their electric whips. The throng went wild. Women screamed and ran for safety; Drask shouted commands that went unheard in the confusion; whips cracked and sizzled across the monster's tautly up-stretched

neck, spitting foot-long sparks of blue flame and cross-hatching its hide with a black grill of burned scars that filled the air with the stifling stench of charred reptilian flesh.

Finally there came the dull, droning whine of the Rover's dread coagulators. Beams of dim violet light speared down, fixing the monster in their vague glare. With a hoarse, almost human scream of agony, the dragon's hold slipped. In its fury it had half climbed the wall and was nearly in the royal box, but now it slid thrashing down, hitting the sand with stunning force. Dazed it half-limbed, half-dragged its wounded bulk away, then collapsed, dead from the beams that still played over it. The stench of ozone and burned flesh was nauseating.

An exhausted silence fell over the tiers of stone benches. Drask sank back into his chair.

Then the bundle of rags between his heels unfolded and merry brown eyes set in a hard, wizened, swarthy and pinched elf-face twinkled slyly up at him. He gaped, astonished.

"Good time of day unto my gracious Lord," said Perion the Piper.

2. *A FEAST OF KNIVES*

Night hung over Argion City, a murky pall lit by no moons but dimly illuminated by the fainter, smaller of the two suns low on the western horizon: a dim blur of yellow luminance drawn along the sky's edge. A chill gust of wind whipped the lithe, slim rossiter trees along the verge of the River Temera, ruffling its dark mirror and setting aflap the stiff, silky banners that adorned the palace towers.

Within the great hall where the Argionid Lords had reigned for centuries past

and gone, since the collapse of the mighty Carina Empire had given this stellar kingdom its independence, the Conqueror of Argion feasted and made revel with his clan-leaders amid a scene of fantastic and barbarous splendor.

Torches of resinous wood flared from brackets of blackened iron set in niches along the walls of smooth lime-green Vegan marble; they guttered as the cool night-wind tossed their flame-plumes, light flickering over the rippling, bright-colored war-banners and gorgeous tapestries stiff with silver wire and gilt threads. Sprawled on rich cushions beside long, low tables of mellow harpwood, the chieftains of the Star Rovers fed gluttonously on the fruits of their conquest. Argion was a traders' world, and the rarest delicacies of a hundred planets loaded the long benches. Bearded pirates drank down the cold green wines of Shazar and Bellerophon, the rich red-golden ales of Netharna and Chorver and the fiery purple liquors that the far Eophim vintners distill from the wine-apples of Valthomé . . . gulping the princely vintages from crystal cups, tankards of noble metals and horn goblets encrusted with glittering gems.

Great platters of chased gold, electrum and *chaya* bore smoking meats: succulent roast moon-ox, broiled *shynx* with Vegan cloves, crisp infrared-fried cave-fish from the cold, subterranean rivers of Argion's Silver Isles. And there were fragrant stews and heaps of glistening, exotic fruits, and flaky mounds of dainty pastries.

As the conquerors gorged and drank, native musicians in feathered cloaks played for their pleasure, striking gay festival tunes and strumming heady, heart-stirring battle-themes from a dozen worlds with pipe, lute and tambour. Sleek-limbed, ripe-breasted dancers veiled in floating lucent gauze wound sinuously between the long, low tables in a graceful, weaving rhythm.

On the dais above the hall, beneath canopies of spun-gold cloth, sat the Warlord, Drask. The ancient Seat of Argion had been flung aside, and in its place the age-

blackened King-bench of the Star Rovers stood as throne chair. And by the Warlord's side, the slim daughter of the last of the Argion-Lords sat, pale, silent, with haunted face and downcast eyes.

When he had at length eaten his fill, Drask summoned before him Perion. The barbarian warchief looked him up and down with amused, appraising eyes as he stood at the foot of the dais. The piper was a little man, slim as a boy, spindle-shanked and bony, with mischievous brown eyes and a mocking, yet servile, grin that lit his sharp-featured, swarthy face with elfish wit. He was still garbed in the soiled and ragged motley he had worn in the arena—a comic patchwork of green, yellow, red and black. His battered multi-pipe of worn, cheap metal was thrust through his girdle like a sword. Thus: Perion of North Hollis.

For his part, the piper, unabashed, returned the Warlord's scrutiny with frank curiosity. Drask was a lean dark hawk of a man, burned leather-black by the unfilterable *lambda*-radiation of deep space. Cruel, sneering lips were framed by narrow black moustaches; the cleft, lean jaw pointed a spike of black beard; strong, jutting bones of cheek, jaw and brow gave testimony to a taint of ancient Earthish blood. About his powerful chest and broad shoulders was flung a thick dark fur cloak of Pharvisian snow-tiger, its yellow ivory claws crossing at his corded throat.

A huge radium-ruby smoldered in his left earlobe like a living coal. A brief kilt of black leather straps, studded with squares of bronze, clothed his loins and thighs. A yard-long Sirian hook-sword hung at his left hip in a scabbard of cobra-skin, and a beautifully machined Wayne-Drew laser pistol studded with chips of ruby was holstered at his right. His naked arms were thewed like an Ormisian wrestler's; armlets of platinum and gold were set at wrist and bicep. He was booted in black leather, with sea-bear fur trim.

Altogether (Perion thought) a formidable figure—every inch the warrior, the

barbarian, the King.

Drask spoke, and the musicians stilled on the instant.

"Piper," he drawled, toying with a chilled goblet of *neol*, "for resisting my invasion of Argion planet—and for slaying my valiant warriors—Rim-law condemned you to the arena to die the traitor's death you had earned. But your bravery, or wit, or perhaps a whim of the gods, won you the gift of life again . . . until another Divine mood whisk it away. The voice of the Star Rovers bade you go free, and free you are. What say you, brothers?"

"Hai!"

The scrawny little man winced at the unexpected, full-throated cry. Drask glanced at him with amusement.

"By Thaxis of the Hungry Spears, now do I wonder that you slew those men of mine! Why, from the ill-nourished looks of you, Piper, I'll wager you'd find it a trying task to even bed a wench—yes, a willing one, at that."

The Rovers bellowed with ribald laughter. Perion shrugged, spreading his palms apologetically, simpering at being the center of attention.

Drask thumped his goblet against the side of the King-bench, calling for silence.

"Yes, by Thaxis' Own Blood, I am minded to make you my clown. I care little for songs or capering or jests, but the very sight of you rouses laughter in my guts. What say you, little man—will you prance for my pleasure—and your supper?"

The Piper fell to his skinny knees, pressing his brow against the Warlord's booted feet, and shrilly declared: "Yes, dread Lord, give me a full belly and a wet tankard now and again, and I'll dance attendance for anyone—even so fearful a master as yonder *thard*, for whom I danced in the arena!"

Drask frowned coldly, remembering the humiliating scene—for the dragon's

untimely execution had brought an end to the orgy of blood-letting that was the triumphal games.

Shrewdly noting his change in mood, Perion gazed up blandly, and added, "Little care I at whose trough I feed—so long as I be fed, Master . . ."

The Warlord grinned. "Aye, you yellow-livered leech, you'd turn your coat more often than you change your breeks, I doubt not, had you so large a supply of raiment. Ah, well, you'll serve as butt for humor."

Throughout the foregoing, the pale girl beside Drask had sat unmoving, unspeaking, her food untouched, remote and withdrawn as if not present at all. Now she lifted suddenly a cold, venomous gaze to Perion, and spoke. The icy tone of loathing in her bell-clear voice arrested the amusement of the Rovers.

"Barbarian, beware of that cunning worm."

Drask turned to observe her, lifting his eyebrow with a small smile. "So you are roused at last, my Lady?"

"Beware the Piper, I say. He betrays his Lord, my father, to serve you pirate scum. Next he will betray you, to serve some other." Drask smiled without deigning to reply, but Perion, suddenly in favor and drawing impudent boldness from it, capered on the dais step, scraped a low bow of mockery before the Princess.

She rose, slim, regal, pure among the squatting star-barbarians who had toppled her ancient kingdom into the mire and reft away her heritage in a storm of blood and fire. Her voice rang, sharp as a silver bugle, through the murmuring hall.

"You, Piper—my royal father's board was your trough. Now you are content to slop with these bristle-bearded Out-worlder pigs. *Well, I shall not!*"

Quick as a flash of light she whirled—and drove a keen small dagger at the base of Drask's throat as he sat beside her. Where the glittering steel needle had been

hidden none could guess—and so swift, so totally unexpected was her murderous stroke that none had wit enough to lift a hand to halt her.

None—but Perion!

For swifter even than her flashing stroke were his nimble feet. With the agile, flickering grace of an acrobat he was before her, his thin but wiry-strong hand closing like an iron vise on her white wrist. He checked the blade's descent just as the wicked needle-point grazed the nape of the Warlord's neck.

"Treason! Help—murder!" Perion yelled, grappling with the frenzied girl. She broke, weeping, her cold determination gone. And so suddenly had all this transpired that the others, even Drask himself, still sat frozen, stupefied.

"Let me kill him—" she shrieked, breaking free of Perion's grasp. He seized her around the waist, and lean and strong as the scrawny Piper was, the girl fought with the furious venom of a tigress. Clawing and spitting through her tears like a Bartoscan sandcat, she broke free of his grip, wriggled out of his arms and thrust him off-balance so that he fell sprawling, squealing into the Warlord's very lap. Drask, thunder-browed with rage, was just rising, tugging at his sword.

But she turned from her prey, leaving him untouched, and sprang to the further side of the dais, disheveled, panting, eyes flashing and firm breasts rising and falling. The slim blade was still clenched in her small white hand.

"Let all of Argion-folk turn their coats to grovel for scraps at the bloody bootheels of these star-scavengers—that is the business of Zargon, Lord of Punishments and Rewards, but it is none of mine! As for me and my House, I thank the Gods that the last of the Argion-Kings knows how to die with unstained honor!"

She drove the blade between her white breasts before any could lift a hand to stop her, quenching its polished glitter in crimson blood.

For a moment, she stood, tall and regal—then crumpled to the floor, sliding down the steps of the dais, a red-bedabbled, pitiful bundle. Even Perion, tangled in Drask's cloak, gaped, frozen with astonishment.

All over the great hall, men were stumbling to their feet, white-faced, in deathly silence. One of the dancing girls, a lithe and fawn-eyed nude whose white thighs had been splattered by a dribble of the Princess' blood, shrieked—and the stillness was broken. A roar of confusion arose, men babbling, yelling.

Cursing, Drask kicked Perion from his knees and straightened to his feet, staring blankly at the dead girl, silent amid the milling, shouting rabble boiling around the dais.

At last he spoke. "Now, by Thaxis of the Scarlet Spears, that was nobly done!"

So it was, thought Perion. We are all in Zargon's Balance . . .

"Tonguth! Wine—wine for all. The Hero-Toast for the last of the House of Argion!" Standing, the throng drank the ancient toast, each barbarian spilling a dabble of wine to appease the gods and to sate the thirsty spirit of the newly-dead. Then they stumbled back to their places as Drask somberly resumed his seat. The feast continued, but the febrile gaiety had gone out of it: men conversed quietly, or staring glumly into their cups. Tonguth, at a nearer table, gulped wine, spat sourly, and grumbled something into his bush of black beard.

Alone now on the dais, Drask saw and snapped out a command like a whipcrack.

"Speak up, black dog—what was that?"

Tonguth grimly swung his head. "I said it was an ill omen, Master. That's all. A bad sign, death at a feast. . . ."

Drask snorted contemptuously.

Mumbling in his cups, Tonguth continued, "What says the *Book of Jarsha* about 'a feast of knives, with blood for wine, and Death, swift-footed, follows for the

second course' . . . ?"

The Warlord spat.

"Priest's mewling prattle, dog—naught else. What have we to fear?" He surveyed the great hall boldly, from his proud place. "Argion is ours, her people cowed, resistance crushed, rebellion broken. Our mighty fleets ride in high orbit, and no force within ten thousand light-years can stand against their strength. Gods—devils—what have we to fear, my brothers?"

"Calastor."

The faint whisper of that name seemed to spring from the empty air of the great hall, and its echo rang against the silence like a stricken bell.

"Who spoke that name?" Drask roared. "Who dares name that sneaking, masked filth in my presence—who dares? Abdekiel—was it you?"

From a place far down the board a small, bland, obsequious-looking man rose, bowing, soft hands tucked in the wide sleeves of his dull gray robe. He was bald as a skull, his skin yellow as butter, features stolid, faintly smiling, impassive as a Buddha. Only the rapier-sharp glint of black eyes showed the measure of the man. Save for their cold, reptilian shrewdness he seemed a rotund, sleepy, harmless little man.

"Not my voice, dread Lord," he purred in silky tones, bowing again. "Yet, I think, wise words to heed and remember nonetheless."

A mutter arose among the Star Rovers, an uneasy grumble that passed through the hall like a moving shadow. In its wake faces paled, eyes swiveled to peer covertly into shadowy corners, shag-bearded barbarians furtively signed themselves with the sigils of a dozen outworld gods. The old shaman continued in his soft, sleek, colorless voice:

"Remember, Great One, no man knows Calastor, the White Wizard of Parlion,

nor how he comes or goes, nor when he shall raise his unseen hand to smite and blast. As he has sworn to smite *you*, Great Master."

Drask grimaced curtly. "Cease croaking, old vulture. I fear naught in this Galaxy nor the next—beast, man, or wizard. And least of all, this shadowy skulker. Any voice can speak words—for words are but air, and that is all that composes his threats! Nay, speak not of this ghostly assassin of Parlion, for I fear neither his words nor his magic."

Tonguth spoke up, eyes glinting superstitiously. "But, Master, recall what happened before we laid siege to Scather. The voice that spoke from emptiness—the two guards found dead—*frightened* to death! And whose was the hand that set off the nuclear armory, demolishing our advance squadron? *His!* You found his note pinned to the curtains of your bed that very night—"

"True, Tonguth—as I slept in the King's chamber, as victor and conqueror of Scather. Shadows—words—empty threats—nothing more. Only a fool would fear such—as only a fool fears magic, eh, shaman?"

The bland sorcerer bowed again. "But magic exists, dread Lord. The fool may fear, as you say, but the wise man fears as well . . . and takes sound precautions."

"Now, by Thaxis, am I tempted to set my fleets over against Parlion itself. Then should we see how shadow-magic fares against hot steel and laser-beams. . . ."

The shaman shrugged. "Yet what man knows the place of Parlion? The planets are numberless as the sand-grains of the shore, and the World of Wizards is marked down on no chart, Lord."

Tonguth gulped chill green wine. "Aye! Aye, Master, they say it is a shadow-world, invisible as a ghost! And Ca—the White Wizard—his ears and eyes are everywhere, his servants as numberless as the stars of the Nucleus. He has a thousand faces, thrice a thousand bodies, men say . . . and no man knows his

face. Why, for aught we know, he might be standing among us at the very moment, viewless as the empty air, armed to strike—"

"I say—*silence!*"

Drask's hard voice broke the rising mutter of his men. But . . . perhaps it was due to the wine they had drunk, or to Tonguth's ill-omened quotation from the Sacred Book, or the ignorant superstition that ruled their inner lives . . . but there, sprawled in the noontide glory of their strength and victory, a haunting fear rode each burly Rover. It was a small thing, a mood, a tone of voice . . . but as they mumbled amongst themselves, their eyes edged about, glancing half-fearfully, half-defiantly into the gloom of murky shadows that suddenly seemed to press close about the flickering, wind-tossed torches . . . a dim wave of darkness that seemed almost to smother the light. Imagination? Illusion—a trick of wine-bleared vision?

The mood of the feast had changed. Drask snatched up a goblet and drained it at a gulp, hurling the precious crystal thing into the shadows that clustered in a wall-niche. It burst against the stone into a hundred ringing shards.

"Let me teach you fools a lesson from the pages of history," he said loudly—perhaps too loudly, as if to drown out an inner fear. "The grand and glorious Empire of Carina was the greatest power this Galaxy has ever known. The Carina Emperors ruled with a sword of flame, hounding our forefathers to the dim-lit, scattered worlds of the Rim. Outlaws, exiles, criminals fleeing justice—the scum of the Galaxy. Yet there they stood, wrested a living from naked rock, tamed wild worlds and bent them to their will, and, with generations, forged a mighty fleet. This fleet they set up against the proud legions of the Empire and broke them down in thunder and ruin in a series of swift battles that broke through the shield of Imperial strength like hammer-blows. For a time the desperate Imperials bought their life with immense sums of tribute—for a time

they hired the Rim Barbarians, as they called us, to serve as border legions patrolling the Rim—a fiction to disguise abject terror! At length we *became* the legions, and the degenerate, swinish Imperials depended on us—until a whim of the mighty Warlord Shandalar the Red broke the Empire and the capital world was sacked and given over to the sword. Since that day our nomad fleets have stood as the greatest fighting force in ten million ages. Tied to no world, our fleets quest where they will, and never has a single world stood against us for long!"

His fist crashed against his mailed chest. "I am Drask of the Varkonna, Warlord of a thousand Chieftains, conqueror of twenty-one planets! No force, no world, no man in all the Galaxy dares stand in my path!"

The savage words rang out bravely and boldly, but the effect was ruined by a hidden voice that whispered:

"Except for . . . Calastor."

3. *TALISMAN OF GREEN MAGIC*

Drask paled. Consternation showed on the white faces of the Star Rovers. The invisible voice that seemed to haunt the great hall rang out again, mockery and menace blending in its weird, sibilant tones.

"Calastor strikes in the hour appointed . . . but it is not yet. Until that grim hour dawns . . . farewell."

As Drask stood, sword-hilt in hand, a dim shadow of terror seemed to pass from the hall . . . and was gone. The torch-flames brightened perceptibly. Sounds became clearer, as if the very presence of the voice had muffled all other audition. But, although the ghostly shadow was gone, the heart had gone out of

the feast. Frozen in their places, with eyes that glinted fear, the barbarians had no stomach for meat or drink.

Drask shrugged. "Words cannot frighten us, brothers! Nor can deeds. If this cowardly ghost dares show his face, we'll feed him Rim-world steel. What say you?"

His words rang out like a fierce trumpet-call, rousing fire in the chilled spirits of his men. The shaggy chieftains grinned, and as one man they ripped their swords out and let them flash in the torch-light, giving him the victor's salute.

"Hai-King!"

The warlord relaxed, grinning down at his men with a wolfish leer of bared teeth. And if the salute had not been as full-throated as he was used to, if some of the warriors unobtrusively signed their breast with the Sigil of Maryash, Lord of Protection, he gave no sign that he had noticed.

"Now am I done with feasting, and would sleep. First, I need a wench to warm my bed. You—Gurthan!—drag that corpse thither. Fling it to the *kogors*—the Princess of Argion shall share their pens instead of my bed this night."

His eye flashed over the dancing girls, and lingered on one slim maiden with hair of ashen silver. Perion recognized the slim, fawn-eyed girl as the one who had stood too near the dais, and who had shrieked when the blood of the Princess had besplattered her nude thighs with scarlet.

"You!" Drask commanded, pointing at the girl.

She paled, then blushed fiery-red. Her large, limpid eyes flashed desperately about the hall from side to side, as if seeking a means to escape. Guards stood at every door with crossed axes. She bowed her head, and mounted the dais quietly. Perion grinned impishly.

Now Drask turned to the scrawny little Piper. He plucked a fat purse from his

girdle, clinked it between his fingers, and tossed it at the Piper, who deftly snatched it from the air.

"There, Piper, a purse of iridium *dahlers* for your service. No reward is fitting to fully reward one who saves the life of a King, but fear not. You are in my service from this hour, and a fair share of our future booty will be yours. Take heart—there are many fat worlds in the wide Galaxy, waiting to be won!"

Perion bowed, speechless. There was a Prince's ransom in the purse! He tried to stammer out his thanks, glib tongue paralyzed for once, but Drask cut him off with a short gesture.

"Enough. Leave me—all of you. Come, girl!"

Drask bent and caught the girl's white shoulder in one lean hand, but she writhed from his grasp. He laughed and grasped her about the slim waist with brawny arms. She struck at his chest with small fists—and in one fist there was the sudden flash of steel!

Drask mouthed an oath and cuffed her hand away. A slim, small blade tinkled against the marble steps of the dais. The blade was broken: the miniature dagger she had held concealed in her fist had shivered against the massive iridium-and-cairngorm brooch that fastened the Warlord's furry cloak about his throat.

Drask stared at the blade, astonished. The Rover growled, Tonguth surging near, shouldering his way through his comrades to hover protectively by his Lord.

"Again?" Drask rumbled. "Twice in one night a wench attempts my life?"

His burly chieftain moaned, eyes rolling.

"Wh-what did I say, M-Master?" Tonguth muttered. "A feast of knives, in very truth—the words of the *Book*—"

The Warlord shrugged irritably. "Swallow that superstitious drivel, fool. You'll be turning priest next, and foreswearing manhood." He turned to the girl, who

stood panting, disheveled, wide-eyed, and cuffed her sharply. With a little cry she sank to her knees, huddling before him. Drask stooped to pick up the tiny dagger—then froze, snatching his hands away from the weapon as if it were red-hot and he feared to singe his fingers.

"Look!"

Those standing near—Perion, Abdekiel and Tonguth among them—saw that in the dagger's hilt a strange green stone glimmered. It flashed like a cat's eye in the silver setting, pulsing weirdly as if animated with some luminous pseudo-life.

The bland shaman drew in his breath sharply.

"You recognize it, shaman?" the Warlord asked sharply.

Abdekiel nodded. "Yes, Lord . . . although it has been years since last I saw its like."

"What is it—speak, sorcerer!" Tonguth urged.

In the fat yellow mask that was his face, the shaman's eyes gleamed with alert, reptilian intelligence. "The talisman of Niamh of Malkh, the World of Green Magic. It denotes that the girl is a member of Her sisterhood."

"The Green Goddess!" Drask mused, rubbing his jaw. "First this White Wizard, this skulking shadow, Calastor— and now the Lady of Malkh. Is She against me, too? Has the Emerald Queen joined forces with the Adepts of Parlion to unseat me? *Speak, girl!*"

Ringed in with her enemies, the slender dancing girl gazed up at him with wide, frightened eyes. And standing behind the others, still clutching his purse of coins, Perion thought swiftly, shrewd eyes dancing with mischief.

"Answer me, wench!" Drask seized the girl's wrist, crushing it with iron fingers. White teeth bit into a lush lower lip, but the girl remained silent, wincing against

the pain of his vise-like grip. Her firm, round breasts rose and fell as she panted. "Great Master—beware the emerald talisman!" Perion cried suddenly, pointing a trembling finger at the pulsing gem.

"What?"

"I have heard of the Lady of Green Magic, and somewhat of Her powers," the Piper said swiftly. "All of Her agents bear one of these stones—they are Her eyes and ears among the stars! Some sort of magical sympathy exists between the Goddess and each of these talisman-gems. Through them She observes Her agents at work—sees what *they* see—hears what *they* hear—and through that stone She may be watching us at this moment!"

With a hoarse oath, Drask snatched his hands away from the kneeling girl. Tonguth and Abdekiel recoiled from the gem, which pulsed like a clot of verdant flame there on the marble step.

For a moment they hovered, watching the lambent, shifting fires of the magic emerald. Then Perion said breathlessly, "Shatter it! Smash the jewel, Lord! She may come to the aid of Her maid and strike with magic fires *through* the stone!" From Tonguth's leathern girdle, Drask caught up an iron mace with a spiked ball for a head. He brought it down on the throbbing jewel—crushing it with brutal, smashing blows. The silver hilt bent into a smear of shapeless metal, flattened beneath the mace's hammer-blows. The jewel itself shattered into powder with a brief, blinding flash of intense emerald light that made them cry out. There was a puff of oily smoke from the dagger-hilt, as whatever cunningly-miniaturized micro-components the hilt contained shorted out beneath the mace's stroke . . . and then the throbbing fires of the shattered gem died, like a burning coal crushed beneath a bootheel into a smear of coal. Naught remained to fear, only a dull green powder. Tonguth released a long-pent breath and Drask relaxed.

"My thanks for your warning, Piper. Again you have served me well." He turned away. "Leave me now, Piper, Tonguth—all of you, save for the shaman. *Out!*"

They bowed out of the hall, leaving the girl alone with the Warlord and his first chieftain. Muttering between themselves, the remaining few barbarians slunk out, Perion scampering behind them, clutching his purse to his bony chest, glancing back at the pitiful figure of the kneeling girl with bright, malicious and inquisitive eyes. And when all were gone, the Warlord fixed his stern gaze on her. Beside him, the bald shaman eyed her curiously.

"Now, wench, what's your name?"

"Lurn."

"How long have you served the Green Lady?"

"I do not serve Her, great King. I know nothing of . . ."

Drask stirred the green dust with his foot. "Then where did you get this talisman?"

Her great eyes flashed with a touch of fear. Wetting her soft lips, she said: "I—don't know—I—"

He cuffed her across the face with a ringing slap.

"Don't lie to me, slut. Where did you get the dagger?"

"It was—during the loot of Argion, Lord—when your great ships were raining down death, and all the townspeople were going mad with panic and despair. I—I found it on a dead man . . . I took it; no one saw. . . . I thought I could sell the jewel, and . . ."

Drask glanced at the yellow-skinned conjuror beside him. Abdekiel smiled complacently.

"She lies, Dread Lord," he said pleasantly. "The Lady of Green Magic is only

served by women. No man could own the talisman."

Drask slapped her again, snapping her head back sharply. Lurn gasped at the shock. He twisted his hand into her long, thick hair, gathering a fistful and pulling her face forward almost into his. His hot eyes burned into her face as he spoke slowly, clearly.

"I warn you, wench. No more lies. A sword-blade heated white in the fire and touched against your belly will wring the truth out of you fast enough. *The truth, now!*"

He released her, and she shrank back.

"I . . . lied. I got the thing from . . . my mistress. She was killed in the bombings. I . . . robbed her body . . . for jewels. I took the dagger . . . to protect me against the gangs that were looting the rubble. I never knew the jewel was anything more than . . . a jewel. It's the truth—I swear it!"

Drask cocked an eyebrow at the shaman.

"Well, Abdekiel?"

The sorcerer bent over the girl, observing her with slitted eyes. Terrified, she returned his gaze with wide, black-lashed eyes like a startled fawn. Then he stretched out one soft hand and touched the tip of his forefinger to her brow . . . then to a place above her heart. Under his breath he muttered a few words in some uncouth, guttural tongue. A dim mist of light glowed in the white valley between her breasts: glowed and . . . faded.

He straightened, smiling. "Lord, she lies again," he said softly.

Drask balled his fist and struck out with a savage blow that stretched her out stunningly against the steps. Sobbing, she struggled to her knees again, an angry bruise empurpling her cheek and tears welling from her eyes.

"I'll not play games with you, slut," Drask snarled. "An electrode clamped to

your tongue will teach it truth soon enough. Now speak—my patience is exhausted!"

Lurn lifted a trembling hand to her mouth, and her fingers came away scarlet with blood. Then, before even Drask's eagle eye could observe her actions, she slipped a crystal phial from her gauze girdle about her loins—and drained it at a gulp. Drask reached for her, but she slid from his grasp and sprawled limply on the cold marble. The phial tinkled against the stone, a scintillating drop of jade fluid spilling from it to stain the pave.

He raised her, slapping her cheeks. But her face was closed, still, drained of life. The girl was either unconscious—or dead.

Abdekiel bent to examine her, rolling back one heavy-lashed lid to peer into her eye, listening to her heart. Then he bent, wheezing with effort, to dabble a fingertip in the jade liquid. He sniffed at it, and gingerly touched the tip of his tongue to the green stain on his hand.

"Well?" Drask demanded.

"She sleeps, Lord. Nor can she be wakened for hours."

"What was that stuff?"

The shaman shrugged. "A simple decoction of the green lotus, a mild narcotic native to the worlds of the Hercules Cluster. A rare, expensive potion for a dancing-girl to possess, in these days when space travel is declining and only princely merchants dare risk our Rover-fleets to ply between the stars."

"In other words, you believe she is indeed a servant of Niamh the Green Goddess?"

Abdekiel shrugged again. "What else, mighty Lord?"

Drask stood erect, bawling for the guard in the hall beyond.

"We shall put her away safely, and when she wakes perhaps a heated blade against her flesh will wring the truth from her . . ." He broke off, letting his hawk-fierce eyes wander slowly over her soft limbs as she lay helpless and unconscious before him, her almost-nude body open to his eyes. His gaze lingered, and a warm smile touched his lips.

"And perhaps . . . somehow I think questioning her will not be a boresome task, eh shaman?"

Abdekiel's thin lips twisted into an obsequious smile. "And when you are done with her, Mighty One?"

"Then I shall throw her to my men, for their pleasure. Ah! There's nothing more we can do tonight." He turned to the guard. "You—Ygurm! Take this wench and lock her in the Red Tower, above the Caravan Gate. Tell your Captain to mount a watch over her cell. If anything happens to her, I'll see the hearts of those who guarded her are cut out and fed to the *kogors*. Move!"

Ygurm closed both hands on his chest and bowed in the Rovers' salute. "Aye, Master!"

"Remember! No one—*no one*—is to see her, or speak to her. And when she wakes, bring word to me."

The guard picked up the girl, her head lolling lifelessly off his arm, her long ash-silver hair trailing to the floor, and bore her away.

"And now, Great One?" the shaman asked.

"The hour is late and I am weary. But I would have a word with you on these troubles. Come with me to my chambers." His black fur-cloak bellling out behind him, Drask led the way from the hall. They went through a long corridor past saluting guards, the shaman gliding at his heels, hands tucked in his deep sleeves.

The door to the Warlord's private chambers was a great slab of silverwood set

with massy studs of gold. A fire sizzled and crackled across the long, low-raftered room of gray stone, where logs of fragrant incense-wood blazed on brazen andirons wrought in the likeness of grinning gargoyles. Dragon-heads of carven stone leered from lintel and wall, with oil lamps of fretted silver hanging from their grinning jaws. Once eternal lights of atomic lamps had brightened these rooms, when lords of the Imperial Province of the Wyvern Stars had gathered here for council . . . but those days were past, and the rooms now served as temporary camp for the King of the space-roving barbarians.

Drask gestured the sorceror to a cushioned chair. He flung off his cloak of furs and removed his weapons-belt, throwing them into a corner. He sprawled across the silken bed, rubbing his brow wearily.

"Pour me wine, shaman. What of this Green Woman?"

Abdekiel filled an ornate gold chalice with sparkling yellow wine, handed it to his Master and tucked his arms into his gray robe. When he spoke, his voice was as colorless as his garments: a soft, sibilant undertone, hissing slightly over the softer consonants as do all from his twilight world of Shamanis.

"The Goddess of Malkh is as much a mystery as Calastor himself," he commented. "She is not of human stock—that much we know. Rumor has it that when the first Earthmen came from the legended Mother World, they found Her . . . alone on her dim, mystic planet . . . ageless as the everlasting stars."

Drask grunted, hooded eyes brooding on the firelight.

"Now the Adepts are a curious lot," Abdekiel continued thoughtfully, "but we know the cause for which they combat us. These Adepts of the White Order serve The Light. They have meddled with the affairs of the Galaxy for many centuries. Some say they strive to manipulate history for their own cryptic purpose . . . perhaps to build a New Empire out of the ruin of the Old. If that be

so, 'tis easy to comprehend the motive of their leader, this Calastor. He pits himself against the Star Rovers because they are the Scourge of the Stars. World after world, Dread Lord, you have crushed beneath your iron heel. On planet after planet, the wan, enfeebled light of civilization has wavered before your blast, and flickered out.

"But Niamh has never before opposed the Rovers. Perhaps She fears us, and would align Herself with the White Wizard before we overwhelm Her green star. If so, the girl, Lurn, may be here as spy. Or assassin. Or as both."

Drask swirled the wine, moodily peering into its glittering golden depths. Then he drained the chalice and tossed it away to clang hollowly against the tiled floor.

"Perhaps this girl knows Her purpose," Drask growled.

"I doubt not she belongs to the Green Sisterhood, but, from her youth, she is doubtless a mere novice and probably would not be partner to her Mistress' secret plans. However, in her we have the key that may unlock many secrets. . . ."

"Aye," Drask growled. "If the key break not under the pressure of prying open the lock."

Suddenly there came a cry, and the thud and scuffle of running feet pounding down the long corridor. The door burst open, showing the guard, Ygurm, his white and frightened face pale against brown scruff of beard and eyes bulging.

"Lord—Lord!"

Drask sprang from the bed. "What is it? Well, speak, man—don't stand there gasping as if Calastor himself were at your heels. What is it?"

"The girl—"

"What of her?" With one stride Drask was across the room. Seizing a handful of Ygurm's scarlet cape, he dragged the burly guard from his feet, shaking him as a *chorn* shakes a sand-rat, till his teeth rattled in his head.

"What's happened? If you've let her escape, you dull-witted cur, I swear by Thaxis' bowels I'll have you spitted on your own standard! *Speak!*"

"She's gone—gone—vanished into this air, before my eyes!" Ygurm stammered, cold terror flaming on his face.

4. *BAZAAR OF A HUNDRED WORLDS*

From the Tower of Nine Gods, the fourth trumpet rang, marking the hour. Aloft, both of the twin suns were ablaze in the morning sky . . . the fierce, yellow glare of Havory 36A mingling with the lesser pallor of 36B, her White Dwarf companion. A dark fleck against the vault of searing blue, a long horn-hawk circled tirelessly.

Below, in the bustling bazaar of Argion City, the foods and luxuries of a hundred worlds were for sale to any passerby whose pocket-pouch bore the weight of a few iridium *dahlers*. Here, fetched hither by green-robed Desert Pirates of the great mid-continental desert called The Central Sands, in long caravans of slow-pacing *slidars* with little iron bells woven in their golden manes to ward off desert goblins, were rich casks of Godilian musk-wine . . . superbly worked scimitars of ion-bathed steel from Zha the Jungle Planet, with green diamonds hewn from the airless rocks of The Dead Worlds set in their glittering hilts . . . rare idols of carven, scented wood from distant Clesh, the world the witches rule. The vast bazaar was one stupendous visual feast, blazing in the terrific glare, mirror-bright blades and helms and gems shattering the sunlight into a thousand twinkling stars. Gorgeous bales of crystal-cloth, spun by the intelligent Arachnidae of Algol IV, shimmered like iridescent mist. From the distant Mnom, the Dark World, whose ebon coast never knew the benison of solar

radiance but dwelt forever in the eternal shadow of the planet's companion, came bundles of weirdly glowing flowers, phosphor-roses burning gold and green, fire-lilies of pallid cream and milky blue flame.

As Perion strolled at his ease through the crowded, noisy bustle of the great bazaar, he seemed without a care in the world. Hands tucked carelessly in his girdle, the little piper swaggered about, whistling cheerfully, doffing his cap to an occasional Star Rover, and tossing a copper or two of the Warlord's bounty to leprous, persistent beggars who crouched in the shade like ragged, whining bundles of living filth.

He was very much the cock of the walk, this scrawny turncoat, basking in the full noon of Drask's regal favor. And he looked much more prosperous today. The ingrained filth was gone from face and hands . . . in fact, those who passed near him discovered with wonder that the little beggar walked in a perfumed cloud of expensive oils and unguents. His tattered rags were gone, replaced by glowing fabrics whose rich hues clashed absurdly, glittering with gemmed amulets and charms.

Behind him, as he strolled with princely insouciance and scattered his largess in an orgy of shopping, plodded a patient little mule to whose plump back was strapped an enormous wicker hamper.

As ever, the most popular corner of the bazaar was the slave-block. A fat, perspiring Spican with plum-purple skin and weird white eyes presided there, displaying his captive lovelies to a gaping throng. Tonguth, stout and bristle-bearded, a horned helm and fur cloak adorning his burly form, stood with fat placid Abdekiel in the forefront of the crowd as Perion approached. The Rover chieftain was running a gleaming and appreciative eye over the naked limbs of an Amazon-breasted Dorovan maid of truly heroic proportions, as the Spican auctioneer was loudly bawling a descriptive recommendation of her charms

(presumably aimed at those unfortunates in the rear who could not see, as few of the Dorovan's features were obscured from sight by her translucent veil). The oily shaman looked on with cold distaste.

"Have you ever seen such a bosom, my masters? Behold!—like the Twin Moons of Urnadon. And flesh of such texture?—like white velvet, stroked to living warmth with a rod of fire-crystal!" He ran a plum-colored hand down one generously-curved flank, like a fat purple spider, and rolled his white eyeballs in simulated ecstasy. "Smooth as finest marble, but soft as a zephyr's kiss. Nay, my masters, Cynomome of Spica *guarantees* your hands have never fondled such womanflesh in all your days. Come! Who will start the bidding—at three hundred *dahlers*?"

The spectators jostled nearer, ogling the woman's Junoesque form lasciviously. Abdekiel eyed them with chill loathing.

"Revolting," he hissed. "Men should control their lusts— not be controlled *by* them."

Tonguth grunted, licking his lips as his hot eyes explored the naked slave lingeringly. Then he caught Abdekiel's contemptuous glare of icy disgust—and snorted with sudden mirth.

"If yonder spectacle revolts your tender soul, shaman, why then do you linger, gawking with the rest? Take yourself off—go mumble your devotions over a rotting scroll, or burn a snake's guts before some idol—and leave *men* to the pleasures of men!"

The shaman's fat lips writhed in a sneering smile.

"I am not here to lust over this sickening display of animal appetites, but to find the missing dancing-slut your *men* let slip through their stupid fingers. And surely it has occurred to even your thick wits, my Lord Tonguth, that the least

obtrusive means of smuggling a girl from this trader's city—would be among a consignment of slaves?"

The burly Chieftain scratched his stubbled jowls, reflectively. "Clever," he said in reluctant admiration. "Yes, it might work at that. . . ."

"Work? Certainly it would work. A touch of paint to change the wench's coloring—dye for her ash-silver hair—and any spy, disguised as merchant or noble, could bear her from this city hidden amongst a few other human purchases, right past your very gaze, without a chance of detection."

Tonguth's roving eye, sliding over the throng, suddenly brightened. "Hai!" He grinned. "There's our lank-limbed new jester, the piper, ogling the womanflesh . . . *Piper!* Ho! Hither—stir your skinny legs when your betters call! Perion slid through the thinning crowd, his mule in tow.

"Good morn unto my Lord Tonguth!" he crowed merrily. "And to his Reverence, the shaman—cheerful-eyed as ever, by my soul!"

Abdekiel eyed the grinning little minstrel coldly, slitted black eyes glinting wickedly in his bald, bitter-yellow face, but disdained to return the greeting. Tonguth chuckled expansively.

"Up with the dawn, I see, eh, piper?" He glanced at the wicker basket strapped to the beast. "You could not wait to begin spending the Warlord's bounty, eh? And are you here to add a juicy morsel of female flesh to your tonnage of new purchases, which is already about to break yonder mule's spine?"

Perion simpered coyly, spreading his bony hands. "A man can look, lord! But I fear yonder beauties are too expensive for my purse, which is as slender as my shanks. . . ."

"Aye, scrawny, a *man* can look—but a capering goggler like you would better seek a fat *aska* for bedmate," the Chieftain said, cocking a thumb at a mangy

specimen of the Argionid domestic pet, sunning itself at the nearby alley-mouth. He boomed a heavy laugh, heartily amused at his own wit, and an obsequious cackle from Perion joined in the jest.

Abdekiel, placidly ignoring these drolleries, was engaged in looking over the wickerwork hamper with a coldly speculating eye. He cut in.

"What is in yonder basket?"

Perion beamed, thrusting out his small chest and rocking on his heels with pride.

"My purchases, lord shaman! A few trinkets to brighten my quarters. For, now that the royal sun allows me to bask in its glow, I needs must live up to my new station. . . ."

"A *few* trinkets?" Tonguth exclaimed. "That basket's fulsome enough to carry half the loot of Argion!"

"*What is in the hamper?*" Abdekiel repeated.

"A fine green-and-scarlet Faraz carpet," Perion began, ticking his treasures off on beringed fingers, one by one, "and a brass lamp from Shimar that burns perfumed oils . . . a flagon or two of almond liqueur from my native Hillis . . . a new cloak of scarlet, lined with the transparent silver-silk the one-eyed weavers of Pel-Tharma loom from their metallic trees . . . *but no! My lord!*"

His boasting broke suddenly into a squawk of dismay, as the shaman strode past him with a step remarkably swift for one of his bulk, and, drawing a sickle-curved steel blade from the depths of his dull gray robes, slashed through the binding and uncovered the basket.

"*Now, Piper-by the Scarlet Heart of Hell!*"

Crouched in the otherwise completely empty hamper, Lurn the dancing girl stared up at them with wide, frightened eyes.

There was a long interval of silence.

It would be difficult to say who, of the four, looked most astonished. They gasped with bugging eyes at the girl's white, oval face, pale beneath the mop of ash-silver hair. Tonguth's jaw dropped ludicrously. The shaman smiled a slow, placid smile, his cold slitted eyes disappearing in his fat yellow face.

Perion *howled*.

"My *goods!* My gorgeous Faraz carpet! My scarlet cloak! My lovely, lovely goods! Oh, you wicked girl, what have you done with them?" Dancing from one foot to another, face incandescent with rage and fury, the Piper seized the hamper violently and rudely dumped the dazed and frightened young girl out on the cobbled street. He paid no attention to the dancer, but thrust both arms into the empty basket, rummaging about vainly.

He lifted tragic eyes in a woebegone face to Tonguth and the shaman, who were watching him intently.

"Gone . . . all gone. All my lovely goods! *Aiee!* My little brass lamp that burns the sweet, sweet oil . . . my pretty carpet! What did you do with them, you—you thieving slut?"

A mute huddle on the cobbles, the girl looked back at him with huge fawn eyes of dimmest purple.

"How did you get in my basket? Where are all my goods? *Aieeee* . . . my flagons of sweet Hollis liqueur!"

He rocked back and forth, moaning his woe. Tonguth and the fat shaman exchanged a puzzled, suspicious glance. Abdekiel bent over the girl, addressing her softly, his oily voice purring.

"A good question. How *did* you get in the basket, girl? Did yonder scrawny clown conceal you—or did you hide yourself?"

She stared up at him, tears of terror trembling on her sooty lashes, but made no answer. With one fat hand he tenderly picked up her slim arm, and repeated his question once again in a soft, caressing voice. When she did not reply, but only stared with wide, frightened eyes, he exerted a subtle pressure with his fingertips on the nerve-centers at her elbow. Lurn winced and bit her lip, but said nothing. The shaman increased the pressure. "*Answer me!*"

"*Ah!*" she gasped. "Ill speak—touch me not!"

Abdekiel smiled, and released the girl's elbow. She staggered to her feet, panting.

"I—hid myself—I do not know this little man. I was— hiding yonder, in an alley. He—this man—came past to bargain with a wine-peddler of Shazar. His mule was blocking the mouth of the alley. I saw the great basket on its back—and I—emptied out his things and hid myself inside. In the bustling of the crowd, no one noticed. . . ."

Abdekiel lifted a protesting hand.

"I do not believe you," he said gently. "But, to go along with your absurd story for a moment, if you escaped by yourself and without the aid of our little juggler here—*how did you do it?*"

Tonguth shouldered near, rumbling angrily.

"Yes, speak up, girl!" he said gruffly.

"But I never said I escaped all by myself!" she protested. "Nor did I. I only said I climbed in this man's basket without his knowledge or complicity."

"Then—*who* helped you?"

Her white brow clouded, as she struggled to express herself.

"I—don't know. I was asleep—and then—"

"*Yes?*"

She shrugged, biting her lip. "It was all so confused. A shadowy figure in the darkness of the cell. A sweetish smoke—some vapor-drug, I think. I slept, and woke—here. In the alley, just before dawn. I was frightened—I hid. Until this little man came along with the mule . . ."

The shaman leaned close to her, his eyes narrowing to slits of icy jet, burning coldly into her own. With one subtle hand he touched her, brow and breast—and smiled.

"You lie. It was the Piper."

Perion, who had confusedly been trying to follow this rapid crossfire of question and counter-question, woke up suddenly with a cry of astonished outrage.

"*I? Help her?*" he shrilled unbelievably. "Lord Shaman, can a man believe his ears? *I* steal the Warlord's precious prisoner? What would I want with her? Who am I to meddle with such high affairs? . . . assassins and shadowy figures in the night, and . . . Nay, by the Brazen Bowels of Onolk! I am Lord Drask's humblest but most devoted servant. The *gods* are my witnesses!" he concluded, stoutly, folding his broomstick arms.

Slow-witted Tonguth regarded him with puzzlement . . . staring next at the white-faced girl, then at the cold, impassive face of the shaman.

"Warlock—is this possible? I mean, *could* he have rescued the girl? How? Is *he* a magician—this scrawny little pippin of a man? Do you mistake *him* for . . . the White One?"

For a moment, baffled fury blazed like hellfire from the fat yellow face of the shaman . . . then his features closed to their habitual placidity.

"I . . . am . . . not . . . sure."

Tonguth scratched one hairy jowl uneasily, not accustomed to such intellectual exercises. He shook his head doggedly.

"It just does not follow. This is the man who saved the Master's life but yesternight. If he's an enemy, a spy, or an agent of Cal—of *Him*—why prevent the Master from being murdered one moment . . . then steal his prisoner the next?"

Abdekiel's cold reptilian eyes clouded at this thought, and he wavered, indecision written across his impassive features. Then noticing a brawny Star Rover shouldering roughly through the circle of gaping onlookers, he rapped sharply:

"Those questions, Chieftain, I cannot answer . . . now. But we shall see. There are ways to find the gem of truth even in a swamp of falsehood such as we have here. *Ho—you there—Shangkar!*"

The Rover chopped his way through the crowd, using the flat of his axe and cursing sulphurously. The crowd scattered before him. He came before the Chieftain and Abdekiel, saluting casually.

"What's afoot here, Lords?" he demanded harshly.

Perion's keen eye shrewdly raked him from helm to heel. Where Drask was a lean brown hawk of a man, and Tonguth a burly bull, Shangkar was a lithe, fierce-eyed panther, all sliding sinewy muscle and tough whipcord. Hot eyes burned beneath a heavy brow crowned with a winged helm of plain bronze. A rich blue cloak swung from broad, naked shoulders. His lean face was cleanshaven, with cruel, thin lips. Naked save for a rude harness of leather and iron, his long body was burnt brown-orange by the sun, tawny as a range-lion. Abdekiel gave swift, terse commands. A grinning band of Rovers closed about the frightened girl and the little Piper. Shangkar's iron hand clamped down on the whimpering juggler's thin arm.

Abdekiel surveyed the group with an oily smirk of self-satisfaction.

"Take them before the Warlord, who sits this hour, I doubt not, in the Hall of Zargon, Lord of Punishments and Rewards, dispensing justice!"

Whimpering, Perion lifted an imploring hand.

"But what have I *done*, Lord Shaman, that I should be treated so? First my goods—ah, my little brass lamp!— are stolen from me by this thieving wench! Then am I seized up by these great grinning men and borne off as if I, myself, were a thief! I am innocent, Lord—innocent!"

Abdekiel shrugged elaborately, but doubt still glittered in his small, slitted eyes.

"Between appearances and words I cannot choose—as yet. But we shall see, small fool, what tunes you play when you stand in the place of judgment and face the wrath of Drask of the Varkonna . . ."

They made their way through the crowded, silent bazaar of a hundred worlds, past scores of dirty, gawking faces, towards the great palace that had been home to the Argion-Princes and now was camp of the Warlord of the Star Rovers.

Above, against a burning sky of fierce acetylene-blue, the long horn-hawk still circled. Its small, rapacious brain knew only hunger and mating-lust, and was never disturbed by the strange medley of emotions that boiled in the blood of men far below its lofty realm. . . .

5. *IN THE HALL OF ZARGON*

They stood in a great circular chamber of naked stone. Against the further wall loomed up into the dimness of the far, domed roof above a great idol formed in the likeness of a throned Titan. Before its stone feet, brazen tripods sent wavering up the pale green and scented smoke of burnt cinnamon, mingled with white spikenard from far Dolmentus.

Gigantic in the gloom, the face of Zargon stared broodingly down.

Chryselephantine, it was formed of two kinds of stone, welded together by fire-magic. Half of its kingly, bearded visage was in the fashion of a stern but smiling Rewarder. And this side of the God's face was hewn of Irian marble, blue in color, for that is the Hue of Mercy. The other side of the face was a snarling, fanged mask of rage, cunningly worked in the deep red alabaster which the Tigermen mine from the desert hills of Bartosca, growling beneath the electrical lash of the Winged People who are their masters.

The dual nature of Zargon was seen throughout his titanic idol. From one blue shoulder spread a sheltering eagle-wing; from the crimson, a clawed bat-pinion arched menacingly. One mighty hand clasped the Rod of Forgivingness; the other, a hideous, scaled bird-claw, held the jagged Mace of Punishment.

Upon his knees the blue and crimson idol bore the Balance of Justice, in which the souls of men are weighed in the hour of their death.

Throned on the rude King-bench of the Rovers, between Zargon's feet, the Warlord brooded ominously. The burning rapier of his gaze flickered from one to another of the faces before him in the center of the Hall. Perion skulked to one side of the others, knees atremble, sniveling with his face in his hands. Lurn stood tall and proud, having recovered her composure. Her eyes were downcast, but no token of submission was visible in her stance. Abdekiel, blandly smiling, arms tucked in his deep, mouse-gray sleeves, stood with the Rover Chieftains. By his side Tonguth glowered, his dull wits still struggling to piece sense out of a pattern of conflicting evidence.

There was silence now: all stories had been told, and retold. Drask surveyed the two chief players in this little drama with derision in his fierce hawk-gold eyes.

"So. We have had words, and words, and—words," Drask said, and there was a

sly, dangerous softness in his hard tones, like a steel blade sheathed in silk.

"Among all these arguments and explanations, however, I do not find a word of truth."

"Ah, the liqueurs of my native land . . . my little lamp!" Perion whimpered faintly.

Drask's basilisk-gaze swiveled to bathe the Piper in its icy glare. Perion wilted, hiding his face behind trembling fingers.

"Piper . . ." the Warlord purred.

"Mercy, Dread Lord—I did nothing! It was this girl . . . this wicked, wicked girl, who stole all my pretties and hid her great ugly body in my hamper!"

Not a muscle in the Warlord's iron visage moved, but inwardly he was as puzzled as the others. Instinct and reason told him the scrawny little sniveler lied. It was too fantastic to conceive the dancing girl capable of concealing herself so adroitly, that she should baffle his keenest huntsmen all night and well into the following morning. Spy though she was, he did not believe the wench had it in her to think so coolly, act so adeptly. *Or was she indeed a spy?* Perhaps her account of how she had come by the Green Goddess' talisman was, in point of fact, truth . . . which would mean she was *not* a spy and therefore was naught but a silly, quivering girl and, hence, could never have been capable of hiding . . . which would mean the *Piper* lied . . . but, to look at him, the little knave lacked guts for more than mere impudence and mischief . . . but, then again, his incredible daredeviltry in the arena yesterday—!

Drask stifled a groan. *Lie—lie—and counter-lie!* In this blind labyrinth of confusion, how could any man find the way to truth? He growled like a needled boar. Best toss the lot of them to the *kogors*, and have done with the whole tangled business!

"Abdekiel!" he growled.

The shaman waddled from the throng and came across the stone pave to bow obsequiously before the dais whereon the Warlord sat before the enthroned God of Judgment.

"Yes, great Lord?"

"Let us put yon little jester to the Test . . . and see if there be true wit beneath his jest."

The shaman smiled placidly, bowing again, and stepped across the floor with sandals slapping softly on the polished stone. Lurn flashed a frightened glance towards Perion, who shrank from the oily enchanter's outstretched hand.

A murmur ran through the assembled Rovers. *The Test of Truth . . . Now we shall see which is the lie.*

Slowly, the shaman extended one hand. The Piper stared at it, eyes wide with fascination, as the groundfowl stares into the hypnotic gaze of the horn-serpent. His face paled to the sallow hue of soiled linen.

Whispering a cantrip beneath his breath, the shaman slowly touched the tip of one forefinger to Perion's brow, between the eyes, to the place where occult science says the *Ajnaic chakra*, the Third Eye of Astral Vision, was located before it vanished after ages of devolution.

Then his hand dropped to the Piper's bony breast. He ripped open a blouse of blue silk, purchased but that very morning in the bazaar, exposing the pale unhealthy flesh of the Piper's bony chest, whereon dangled a cheap lead amulet of Maryash the Protector. His forefinger prodded the place just above the cardiac plexus where, the sages say, is located the astral organ called the *Anahataic chakra*, the Throne of Vital Energy. Under his breath, the shaman repeated uncouth words in some arcane tongue, in a weird sing-song rhythm.

Nothing whatever happened.

The shaman's cold reptilian eyes narrowed to icy slits of glittering jet. Again he repeated the *mantra*, buttery brow cortorted with spiritual effort.

Nothing. Where there should have appeared a vague, clotted mist of auric light, had untruth dwelt in the subject's heart or mind, was—nothing.

Ergo: Perion's story was true!

The hawk-eyes of the Warlord had missed none of this. He could read the results as well as Abdekiel, and he sat back uneasily, with fretful brow. Perion released a long-pent breath, looking rather as if he were on the brink of collapse.

"Well, shaman?" demanded the Warlord coldly.

The old enchanter stepped back, looking Perion up and down with a light of baffled hatred in his slant eyes.

"I could swear by the Iron Heart of Khali-Zoramatoth, Lord of Chaos, this little man lies like the dog he is!" the shaman said softly. "But—"

"—But he has passed the Test of Breast and Brow, eh?" Drask finished for him. Sardonic mockery rang in his harsh voice. "O worthy, learned shaman!"

The impassive features writhed, before icy self-control clamped down again, stamping them with a placid mask of indifference. The shaman bowed humbly.

"I have sought to the very limits of my art. I have sought by Phul, by Hagith, by the Scarlet Lake and the Eye of Ygg. My art has never failed before . . . and I would stake my soul upon the fact that this creature's heart stinks with putrid lies —!"

Drask's brazen rod of judgment rang on the marble pave, like the crack of doom, cutting off the shaman's words.

"And I thought you could read the truth in men's words," Drask said, flaying the

impassive-featured shaman with his merciless tongue. His words hissed like acid biting into gold. "Or so at least you claimed, when you entered my service . . . and for so-doing I have been pouring good yellow gold into your vulture-claws all this while!"

Tucked into the voluminous sleeves of his gray robe, Abdekiel's hands clawed and tore each other, as he strove to control his seething fury. When he spoke, his words were a soft, rasping purr.

"The Test is infallible, Dread Lord! By all my skill in magic, I know this beny thing speaks living truth . . . but my thoughts are even with your own, Sire: in my heart I know the treacherous pig lies like the cunning serpent that he is."

Gaining some confidence, having passed the mysterious magical test, Perion's impudence reasserted itself. Such were his ebullient spirits of mischief that terror could only cow him for the moment.

"*Lies*, is it, you fat blubber-worm! If I am thief, liar, spy and traitor—if I am here to betray and deceive my Lord Drask, you magic-mumbling old eunuch!—then why did I, yestereve, save your Master's life, at risk of my own, when that mad Argion-Princess sought to spill his blood with her dag? And did this deed—I, treacherous Perion—while all you great mangy Rovers sat dumb and still as stone images!"

Perion's shrill voice rang wildly through the echoing domed vault, but before the furious shaman could make reply, burly Tonguth spoke out.

"Agh! Master—make an end to all this quarrelsome niggling. Put a yard of cold steel through the Piper's weasel-guts, and let the problem solve itself!"

"Aye," Shangkar laughed, slapping his axe-hilt with a broad palm. "That'll end the question, quick enough!"

"*Silence!* I am Master here, not you clog-witted puppies."

Tonguth subsided, rumbling, and Shangkar glowered sullenly. Drask swept them with fierce hawk-eyes. Then his laughter rang harshly across their silence.

This is the solution I might have expected from such as you," he said, curling a contemptuous lip. "A knife in the belly . . . is that your answer to the problem—to *any* problem, eh?" He laughed again, mocking them from his high place. "It is this swift and scarlet solution to problems that keeps such as you where you belong, whimpering at the heels of such as I!" Imperiously, his cold voice rang out, lashing them with stinging sarcasm. "I, Drask, Lord of the Varkonna-clan, did not whelm half the Riftworlds without learning some modicum of reasoning. To realize bold dreams such as mine, to fulfill the great destiny of we who lesser men mockingly call 'the Rim-*Barbarians*'—I need men! *Clever* men, not oafs whose only way out of a problem is on a sword-edge! Men of intellect, cunning—wit. Men who possess the 'civilized' traits of imagination and vision. Men, in a word, who can use their heads for something more than just an empty receptacle in which to wag their tongues!"

"Men like this one, Dread Lord?" Abdekiel interposed smoothly, with an insinuating shrug towards the gaping Piper. "Men like yonder woman-gutted, whimpering clown?"

"Perhaps." Drask brooded on the little man, gold eyes hooded thoughtfully.

"Perhaps . . . I may have a use for even him. Men are tools, fat vulture, shaped and honed by Destiny to different purposes. In the hand of a master craftsman, each tool—however weak—may serve some use."

"Beware the tool turns not, and cuts the hand that wields it!" Shangkar growled.

"You need men about you that you can trust," Tonguth said flatly. "Call me dullwit if you will, Master, but I still say: shove a yard of steel through his guts, and let's have done!"

"You may be right. We cannot probe forever into this matter. And we do not seem to be turning up the truth." Drask stared thoughtfully at the Piper.

"I wish I knew that you lied, or if I could trust you," he said, half to himself.

Now desperation flared in the Piper's white face, and his eyes burned feverishly, confidence in the outcome of this inquisition ebbing from his spirit, even as the color ebbed from his paling features.

"Lord!" he cried, shaking his head wildly, torchlight glittering from the dull copper ring in his left earlobe and from the leaden periapt that dangled against his naked breast. "Lord," he babbled, spittle flying from his thin lips, eyes glaring as if he truly saw the headsman's scimitar hovering above his lean throat. "I do not lie! No traitor, I—but your most loyal and humblest servant! It was *her*—" he leveled a shaking finger at Lurn where she stood silent, white-faced.

"That thieving, clever-tongued wench—she hid herself in my hamper!"

Abdekiel's chill eye narrowed, as he watched the little Piper fighting for his very life with persuasive words. *Something—something—*what was it he had seen?

"—She herself has told you, Great Master, that it was not I!" Perion babbled on, falling to his bony knees, pleading with lifted hands. "Put *her* to the Test—put her to the *torture*, the great, ungainly slut! But blame not humble, lowly Perion—poor, spat-upon Perion, reft of all his treasures—his lovely little lamp, his F-Faraz carpet!"

Watching him narrowly, the Warlord frowned. If this were acting, he had never seen the like. He could almost find it in his cold heart to believe the wretch groveling there before the Balance of Zargon, kneeling in His holy place before His awful visage of two-colored stone—sobbing and gibbering for his life.

Surely his words are truth. This cannot be mere art, mere pretense—!

" . . . I swear! By the Balance of Zargon—the Blood of Thaxis' Scarlet Spear!"

the Piper shrilled . . . and again, with the violent motion of his head, the earring caught a vagrant glint of light.

And Abdekiel saw it. And the gleam flashed triumphant in his black, slit-eyes. *At last!* he thought, cold joy searing through him like a draught of heady wine. "Perhaps, after all, my art can uncover the truth you seek. Great One!" he said calmly, benignly. A chilling smile spread slowly over his colorless lips—and the strange, muted triumph in his tones arrested the attention of all, which had been fixed on the begging words of the Piper.

"Warlord—behold!"

With the speed of a striking serpent, his hand flashed out and tore the copper ring from the Piper's ear!

There was a long, breathless moment of silence—shock-surprise. Then—

"Ahhh!"

The gasp of surprise came from a dozen lips . . . and a shudder ran over the assemblage.

Before their eyes, the scrawny form of the Piper— *changed!*

6. *THE WHITE WIZARD—UNMASKED!*

Perion changed. His form seemed to ripple, to quiver against the air, as an image reflected in water wavers when its liquid mirror is touched by the wind's invisible hand. The outlines of the Piper's form blurred . . . faded . . . the colors running into each other in a vague, phantasmal, multi-hued shadow of light.

As they watched, struck dumb, blasted with awe and astonishment, the figure *grew* . . . taller . . . yet taller . . . six full feet and more, overtopping even Drask's

rawboned height. The scrawny limbs became clothed in hard, steely sheaths of muscle. The sunken chest and little potbelly were transformed into a torso swelling with mighty thews . . . a deep-arched chest . . . the lean, supple, rock-hard waist of a fighting man.

Clear gray eyes flashed in a square-jawed, high-cheeked face, a face whose broad intellectual brow and clean-shaven cheeks showed not the greasy, sallow pallor of Perion, but the leathern tan of a deep-space man, burnt mahogany by the void's unshieldable *lambda*-rays. A young, strong face . . . yet there still lurked within its mocking gray eyes something of Perion's irrepressible deviltry. The little cap with its bedraggled plume, too, had vanished. In its place a mop of straw-yellow hair, which contrasted startlingly against the deep tan of the man's face.

From throat to wrist and heel he was clothed in a tight-fitting garment of pure white, wrought from some sparkling and unfamiliar material whose glossy, metallic sheen and total lack of color made the suit curiously elusive to the eye—a blur of utter whiteness, a figure sculpted from pure light.

"By-Thaxis'-Thirsty-Spear! Is this—Perion?"

Smiling like a great cat, the shaman interposed smoothly. "May I present, Lord—not Perion of North Hollis—but Perion of *Parlion*," he smirked.

The tall, well-built young man grinned, with just a hint of the Piper's old swaggering humor in his smoke-gray eyes.

"A minor correction, my Lord Fat-Guts. Not Perion at all. Call me . . . *Calastor*."

A whisper of the dreaded name ran through the assembled Rovers like a swift wind rustling through a wheatfield.

Drask recoiled on his high seat, his iron face shaken, gray, his fierce eyes blank with disbelief.

"What magic—or madness—is this? The Piper—*Calastor*?"

"Aye, Drask! The White Wizard—no phantom at all, nor even a mocking shadow, but a beloved member of your entourage!" the athletic youth in dazzling white chuckled.

"But . . . how—?"

Abdekiel answered the query. He lifted one fat palm, displaying the copper earring.

"An illusion-charm, my Lord! Its components are tailored to warp the wavelength of light about the man who wears it, creating the illusion of a different appearance. It was an art known only to the ancient Imperial craftsmen of the Lost Age. I only recognized the instrument moments ago . . . for who noticed the gauds worn by a strutting clown? But years ago I saw its very mate, in the hands of a Master Mage of Trevelon, the Planet of Philosophers. When the charm is removed from the body of the man to whose atomic structure it is attuned, the illusion is destroyed, and he regains the natural appearance he wore before donning the device."

"And, as for the rest," Calastor cut in, "a bit of acting, some skill in disguising the voice"—he shrugged whimsically—"and the trick was done!"

"Incredible," the Warlord said slowly. "I would never have believed it possible."

"Hell's-work, I say," Tonguth muttered, signing himself superstitiously. "Hell's-work and Devil-magic!"

"Not so," Calastor replied. "Not magic, but science. I fear that you, good Tonguth, have a far closer and more intimate acquaintance with Hell than have I. No, it is a mere device. An almost microscopic machine, even as yon shaman so cleverly observed. Had it not been for his sharp eyes, I might well have carried off my deception even longer."

"And we have Truth from his lying lips at last, my Lord,* the shaman observed. "See? The instrument works to the same effect—casting the identical illusion—on whoever dons it. Lord, behold—"

He clipped the copper ring on his own lobe—and, for the second time, the miraculous transformation took place before their wondering eyes. But this time the operation was seen in reverse. Abdekiel shrank . . . blurred . . . his butter-yellow, placidly-smiling face withered and became the mocking, wizened, impish and not-overly-clean visage of Perion the Piper. His dull gray robes melted, colors shifting with eye-aching speed, changing into a duplicate of the gorgeous garments the Piper had last worn. Even Abdekiel's elephantine bulk and height dwindled, by some unimaginable optical magic, into Perion's spindle-legged smallness.

A second Piper stood beside the transformed first, laughing at them with shrewd, mischievous eyes. Superstitiously, the Rover chieftains recoiled from the illusion, muttering.

"What a weapon, by the Blood!" Drask mused, fingering his stiff spike of black beard. "No wonder this White Wizard eluded me for so long. Armed with a pouchful of such magic rings, he assumes a different appearance at will. Any man with such a device could spend months in the very stronghold of his most deadly enemy, without slightest risk of detection . . ."

Abdekiel unsnapped the illusion-ring from his ear and assumed his proper appearance.

"These devices, as I said, are tailored specifically to present different forms and are attuned to the vibratory scale of the individual atomic structure. I am only able to maintain the Perion-form briefly, and by effort of will."

"Then this explains all the terrors," said Drask. "The banquet-night, with the

shadow that fell over the feast, and mocking invisible whispers from the darkness —"

"The shadow was cast by another, subtler device," Abdekiel explained. "The voice was perhaps a trick done by a concealed button-sized microphone. I have no doubt that when we search through the Piper's gear in his quarters we shall find many such miraculous implements."

Tonguth came forward to stand beside the dais. "Well, Lord, all is explained . . . but best of all marvels, we *have* the wonder-worker now." He drew a heavy mace from his girdle, massive hands closing almost lovingly about its oaken handle. Grins flashed among the Barbarian warriors.

Mockery danced in Calastor's gray eyes.

"Have you indeed, black dog of the Rovers? Well, perhaps you do. And you, my noble Lord Drask of the Varkonna— you have me, but . . . can you hold me?"

Drask smiled humorlessly, as a wolf smiles, revealing his fangs. "I think we can," he said. And suddenly, by some magic of his own, the ugly shape of a Haemholtz coagulator appeared in one hand, its deadly snout a cold black eye staring directly at Calastor's heart.

"Try it!" the mocking voice rang out, filling the great dome with shuddering echoes. "Thicken my blood with your sonic beam—drive a blood-clot through my heart or brain—or, at least, I give you leave to try. But beware, my little Lord of Nothing . . ."

The White Wizard's mien changed. His clear baritone deepened to a sinister bass. His gray eyes grew cold, chill and hard as fractured steel—then blazed up suddenly with witch-fires. Slowly he extended his arms, tracing a weird rune upon the air. It hung in midair, a glowing pattern of dim red phosphorescence, gradually fading.

"*Fool!* Do you think all my power lies in one little ring—that I am helpless now? I, who have sought out and mastered one by one the Secret Laws of the Plenum . . . the dark and awful lore of god, mage, and demon . . . the mysteries that thunder in the flaming heart of stars, and that hide, shadow-shrouded, in the Darkness that reigns between the suns?"

With words of heavy thunder and eyes that flashed with strange unearthly fires he held them. Drask's hand slackened on the butt of his gun. The muzzle of the coagulator wavered—dropped.

"Shall I shake this palace to rubble around your ears, with a single Name of Power? Say, Warlord—shall I wreck the very fabric of this planet, returning it to the molten chaos from which the Hand of Heaven molded it, ten billion years ere you and I were born? *Speak!* Shall I summon forth from the deepest pits of Hell the phantoms of the hundred thousand men and women your scarlet hands have murdered? Fearless Lord Drask, who boasted you fear naught in Space or Time, neither god, man, nor devil—shall I call upon the vast Power of Parlion . . . shall I summon the Dissolver-of Worlds from his black realm of negative entropy beyond the very Universe of Stars? *Yai—shamdoth! Aaa krom Phandaloom, hadoth ka ph'ngglath Schemshamphor-asch—!*"

Weird, glittering, star-white, the mighty form of Calastor seemed to grow before their eyes, looming above the tallest man, veiled in weird runes of flame, terrible eyes blazing like two gray stars.

Tonguth fell to his knees, hands clapped over his eyes. The Rovers shrank back against the wall. Shangkar, white to the lips, threw one brawny arm across his face to blot out the awful vision.

Even—Drask! The Warlord withered, his jaw dropping, his face the hue of dirty wax, terror in his gold eyes. He lifted one trembling hand.

"N-nay, Wizard! Summon not your demons of the void!"

Abdekiel's voice cut across the scene like a whiplash. Cold, venomous contempt dripped from his words like smoking acid.

"What's this, my Lord, afeared? Quiver not at this vain fool's empty eloquence and visual trickery. Behold, I am prepared to defend you with my art—"

The shaman clapped his yellow hands—once—twice— thrice. Suddenly, the blue and crimson drapes that covered the stone walls of Zargon's Hall like an arras dropped to heap the stone pave with piled fabric. Standing in a row behind them all this while were now revealed a rank of archers with arrows nocked and bows drawn—archers masked against tricks of vision with black vizards.

Shoulder to shoulder they stood in a curved rank along the wall, blinded against illusions, arrows aimed at Calastor's voice. The bows were taut—a hundred arrows, aimed at the White Wizard's heart!

Still a towering figure surrounded with runes of flame, Calastor thundered, "Arrows, shaman? And are they more potent than a Haemholtz beam?"

"They kill as swiftly and as surely." Abdekiel's purring voice was amused, yet rang with vicious undertones of cold menace. "And for all of that, Trickster of Parlion, we have not yet tested a coagulator-ray against your vaunted invulnerability. We have had from you naught but tricks with light and voice, and many, many—oh, so very many!— *words*."

The robes of flame vanished. Calastor stood, a mere man, legs spread and great arms folded on his deep chest.

"Then test your arrows now, if you will. I am indeed invulnerable."

There was no trace of fear in his voice, nor faintest trace of mockery. His clear gray eyes, hooded, stared into the row of archers aiming at his breast. To one side, Lurn felt her heart leap into her mouth. How long could he hold them off

with only words? His verbal fencing, she guessed, was built on a profound knowledge of psychology and semantics, but surely, tricks of illusion aside, he was as mortal as any man!

"I think we shall," Abdekiel purred with tranquil face.! "Know, further, O Invulnerable One, each shaft is tipped with a barb wrought by fire-magic from purest *stellafer*, the Star-Metal. As you know, O Master of the Names of Power, no magic—or science—can turn *stellafer* aside, or ensorcel its strange element. Check, I think, thou master-player of Parlion!"

On the blackened bench, the Warlord slowly relaxed, tension draining from his taut muscles, a faint smile of admiration curling his bearded lips.

"Well played, shaman! By Thaxis of the Spears, you are a noble from the moment Calastor's arrow-riddled corpse lies at my feet. An arrowhead shall be your blazon! Red and white your tinctures: white for this hell-spawn's garment, red for his swinish blood. *Spill it for me now!*"

Terror clutched at Lurn. Was that a drop of perspiration on Calastor's brow? Was that the touch of fear, showing in the muscle that twitched at the corner of his mouth? Why was he silent? Why did he not draw another miracle from his endless store?

Satisfaction gleamed in Abdekiel's eyes. He made a bow, and hissed silkily, "All humblest thanks unto my gracious Lord. It was child's play—the cunning chess-master outplays the over-confident novice."

"He shall find defeat more painful here than in a game of chess," Drask said grimly.

Now Calastor smiled—but with some effort? And was there a trace of strain in his voice, as he said with an attempt at lightness, "Perhaps . . . we shall all play another match at a later time, my Lords. You said 'check,' O shaman? Then I cry

check, and—*mate!*"

Even as they digested his swift words, the tall figure of the White Wizard flickered—and faded—and vanished like a puff of smoke before a sudden wind. Calastor was— *gone!*

A hundred arrows slashed through empty air, striking home amid the guards and Chieftains who stood against the further wall! Shrieking, clutching at feathered shafts that stuck in throat and chest, men slumped and staggered—a milling chaos of bellowing, shouting fear.

Drask's oath rang even above the cries of the wounded and the cursing of the shaman . . . and another voice, laughing, mocking, echoed him from the empty air:

"Check—and mate, Warlord. And remember—I have taken your queen!"

The invisible voice had spoken true. For the dancing girl, too, had vanished!

7. *THE STAR OF TOMORROW*

The noontide sun blazed down on a windswept hillside a few leagues east of the Sea of Dragons. Below, sleek purple lizards splashed in green water, returning to the scarlet-sanded shore with wriggling fish in their long scaly jaws. But here on the hill's crest was only a bare knoll grown with tough, sighing tendrils of blue-green whipgrass, between the foam-crested waves and the empty sky above, where both suns burned clear and bright.

Calastor appeared, melting from thin air, the slim girl in his arms. She sank to the grass, still trembling with tension. Only seconds before she had seen the arrows flashing, the ring of grim, masked faces, the thunderous shouts and cries had beat on her ears—and now, the smooth sea, empty sky, and this placid

hilltop, bathed in the sunlight.

"Here we will be safe," Calastor said, seating himself on the grass beside her.

"Safe?" She laughed shakily. That will be a novelty! I've gone from one danger to the next so swiftly in the last day and night that I've nearly forgotten what the word means." She peered at the tall, gray-eyed young man with unrestrained curiosity.

"Now that I think of it," she said, "where *is* 'here'? And how did we get to this place?"

He shrugged. "It would take too long to explain—and you would not understand anyway, unless you have had the benefits of an education in plenum mechanics. We are a few miles from Argion-City."

"And how did you transport us here?" she demanded again.

"Well . . . let's say I bent space, making this hilltop so 'close' to the Hall of Zargon that we could travel between the two places with a single step."

She shivered a little. "Magic?"

"If you like."

The girl gazed at sea and shore and the ridges of blue-green hills that retreated towards the horizon.

"And where, from here?"

Calastor stretched out his long legs on the grass, resting on one elbow, regarding her quizzically. "That's a good question. I had planned to travel with the Star Rovers to the next world in their march of conquest, but rescuing you has destroyed my disguise, and also complicated things."

She flushed a little under his thoughtful eyes. "What do you mean?"

"You are a new problem. What am I supposed to *do* with you? Take you with

me, as I continue my plan to harry the Rovers until their morale crumbles? I can hardly do that . . . yet I cannot spare the time to transport you elsewhere."

"Why *time*? If you can 'walk' from one planet to the next with your weird magic —"

He shook his head impatiently. "That means of travel is limited to brief trips. It would take a mental focus thousands of orders stronger than mine to bend space across interstellar distances. No, we shall travel by my ship."

Lurn stared around at emptiness.

"What ship?"

Perion's mockery glinted in Calastor's laughing eyes.

"This one."

He did something with one of the several rings on his fingers, and Lurn stifled a shriek of surprise as a sudden shadow fell over them. Looking up, she saw a small spacecraft hovering on negative gravity above the hilltop. A lean, wolfish speedster of glittering white alloy: a racing-craft, from the slim, rakish lines of hull and needle-prow. A trap slid open beside the keel, and a boarding ramp extended to their feet.

"Come aboard the *Wolfhound* and we'll discuss our problem over some lunch."

They boarded the craft and went forward to the small cabin. Lurn was almost beyond wonder by now, nearly accustomed to these thought-swift changes and appearances. But the *Wolfhound* was a miracle of engineering beyond anything in her experience, a sleek, deadly fighter, a dream-ship that surpassed even the technology of the Lost Ages of the Empire. Calastor indicated the shower and invited her to refresh herself, while he busied himself in the small but admirably complete galley. While she was gone he again made the craft invisible to the Rover-fleet's detectors, and lifted her from the surface into orbit above Argion,

near the orbiting ships of Drask's mighty fleet.

When Lurn emerged from the shower, bathed, refreshed and relaxed, he lifted his eyebrows with surprise. Gone was the timid dancing girl with disheveled hair and tearstained cheeks, her lush young body scarce-veiled in floating tatters of soiled gauze. In her place stood a flushed young tomboy in tawny-yellow tunic, long legs tight-stockinged in golden-brown Altairian silk, small feet shod in sandals of *choate*-leather. Her eyes sparkled at his expression of surprise.

"Am I so different?" she asked demurely.

"I'd hardly know you!" he swore. "I see you've discovered my collection of costumes?"

She nodded, and slid into a seat before the lunch he had prepared—wine, cheese, olives, and spiced meats.

"Yes. I wonder that you need them, with your magic appearance-changing rings."

Pouring wine into her goblet, he shrugged. "There are times when I cannot use the illusion-casters . . . shipboard, for example, makes it difficult because of the conflicting magnetic fields."

"Then how had you planned to travel with the Rovers?"

"By pretending to be space-sick, and keeping to my cabin throughout the voyage. Which brings us back to the question of what I am to do with you . . ."

"I should return to Malkh. My talisman was destroyed, and My Lady will be wondering what has happened to me."

He finished his meal and sat back with a cigaret of blue Harza smoke-weed.

"That raises another question," he said, contemplating the veils of smoke. "In this struggle between the adepts of Parlion and the Rim-Barbarians, the Green Goddess represents an unknown quantity. Is She with us—is She against the

Warlord?"

Lurn veiled her eyes and said noncommittally, "Her motives are Her own, and I have not been in the Sisterhood long enough to know Her plans. I was simply detailed to join the dancers in Argion-Palace and to watch, listen, and serve as Her eyes and ears."

His attention sharpened.

"How—'not long in the Sisterhood?' All rumor says that those who serve Niamh of Malkh are sworn to Her service from childhood."

"Not I," Lurn said. "I came to Her by accident. On the world of my birth, my House pledged me in marriage to one whom I would rather die than wed. I stole a small yacht and fled . . . but the mechanisms were faulty. All our ships are breaking down for lack of any trained in the lore of repairing them. For weeks I drifted in the void, till gravity drew my vessel slowly into the fiery embrace of a green star. Although I knew it not, this star was parent to Malkh, the Green World of the Goddess. She it was who drew my ship, by what weird art I know not, from certain doom to the safety of Her realm. And, hearing my woeful tale, gave me refuge in Her Order."

"Then you are sworn to chastity and the unwedded state?"

Rather curiously, her eyes dropped and a flush stained her white cheeks.

"No, I am . . . but a novice. I have not yet taken the Vows."

Calastor grinned. "Well, I am glad of that."

"Why, Lord?" she inquired guilelessly. Now it was his turn to avert his gaze.

"Oh . . . I . . . do not approve of . . . chastity. On Parlion we are few—so few—and marriage is a sacred bond," he said, somewhat stumbingly.

Her gaze sobered. "That raises questions within *me*. If you intend to take me to

Malkh, I must reveal its location, which is secret. How do I know you Parlion-adepts are Her friends? I cannot dare assist one who may be My Lady's foe . . ."

"Let me allay your fears. Come."

He led her forward into the sleek, low-ceilinged control cabin. Softly-glowing panels of winking lights lined the metal walls and there was a faint humming of concealed engines. At his touch, the cabin darkened. Another touch to a panel, and a misted arch of light sprang into being. It spanned the dimness like a curved wing of granulated luminance, and Lurn recognized it as a miniature simulacrum of the Carina-Cygnus Arm of the Galaxy . . . a cunning illusion, cast in three dimensions.

"This, you know, is the Galactic Arm wherein we are now," Calastor said.

"Watch." One star flashed scarlet. "This is Scather, this red spark here at the edge of the Rift between Carina-Cygnus and the outer, Perseus Arm. The Rovers cut a bloody swath through the Rift-worlds, those lonely planets scattered in the gap between the two arms—then struck at Scather, only weeks ago."

A second star flashed red.

"This is Argion, the next world at which they struck. See how it lies inwards towards the depths of the Orion Spur from Scather, which lies on the edge of the Rift."

A third and fourth star flashed into crimson light, like tiny novas of sanguine radiance. And between the four red stars a thread of crimson light sprang, bridging them.

"This third star is the planet Xulthoom, the World of Mists. I was privy to their secrets in my guise as Perion the Piper just long enough to find that all Parlion's direst predictions were true, and that Xulthoom was the next target for their conquest after they complete the loot of Argion."

"And this fourth star?" Lurn asked.

"Notice how the three worlds, Scather, Argion, and Xulthoom, lie in a straight line pointing inwards of the Orion Spur?" he asked, by way of reply. "See the red line of light connecting them? The fourth star is directly in line with their last three conquests—although they have yet to leave Argion and hurl their fleets against the Planet of Mists. At all costs, I must keep them from dabbling their bloody hands on that fourth world . . ."

Calastor, brooding on the image of the arch of stars, did not notice how suddenly, as if recognizing that fourth world, Lurn blanched, color draining from her face. Faintly, she sank into one of the pilot chairs, shuddering as with some mysterious terror. But Calastor's attention was turned from her.

Recovering her composure, the girl said, "Well?"

The vision vanished, and soft lights filled the cabin once again. Calastor seated himself across from her and lit another blue cigaret.

"Eight centuries ago, the Barbarian legions extinguished the last flickering torch of the mighty Carina Empire . . . and ours is still an Age of Darkness. During all these years, the nomad fleet of the Rovers has drifted from world to world at whim, looting, wrecking, smashing the fabric of civilization. No central authority has arisen to restore the web of Imperial power. What have we instead? On your birth-world, space-technology has almost become a lost art: as the old Imperial machines wear out, there are none to repair them or to replace them with new. On Argion, a whole planet has slid back into a feudal age of peasant-and-lord, slavery has arisen again, old forgotten gods have returned . . . Within a generation, Argion will be a savage world, stumbling through the darkness, bereft of science, lost in superstition and barbarism. And this is true of other worlds as well, of Shazar and Netharna, Valthomé and Bellerophon, Ormish and Prydain, Chorver, Pharvis . . . half the worlds among the Near Stars are decaying

into feudal savagery, forgetting what fragments they yet retain of Civilization.

"Only Parlion holds out against the Night of Chaos falling slowly over the Galaxy. Our little world was settled in the high noon of the Empire, as an outpost of science. There, on that rocky, barren little world, the White Order strives to serve The Light. The Adepts have mastered the forgotten science of *historiodynamics*: the exact prediction of social changes. Over the centuries, our Order has struggled to keep alight the torch of technological civilization on many worlds. We are few, and weak in physical force. We have no fleet, no navy, no battery of mighty weapons with which to oppose the Barbarians. Instead, agents such as I battle against the Darkness with a forgotten weapon the Imperial Ancients called *Psychowarfare*."

"The war of mind against mind?" Lurn hazarded.

He nodded soberly. "Our weapons are suggestion . . . terror . . . mystery. We are vague, formless shadows, striking from the darkness and vanishing. Slowly, remorselessly, we are eroding the morale of the Rovers, playing on the superstitions that rule the Barbarian mind . . . trying with secret and subtle tactics to wreck them psychologically. But now our secret war has come into its final phase, and now we are fighting not just the Barbarians, but time itself."

She watched him with curious, fascinated attention.

"The Masters of my Order work towards one glorious goal: the creation of a New Empire. Weighing and measuring the balance and inner dynamics of socioeconomic forces, we have determined that only one world is perfect to become the Nucleus of this Empire we intend to guide into birth. This world is the fourth red star you saw flame on the projection."

Lurn's hand flew to her lips as she fought back a gasp of astonishment. But, again, Calastor's attention was elsewhere and he did not notice.

"If the Star Rovers are not turned from their course, they will strike next at Xulthoom, and whelm it swiftly, as the Hooded Men of Xulthoom have no armaments of defenses capable of holding off the Rover-fleets. And then, when they have looted the jewel-mines of the Misty World, they will strike on . . . and the Nucleus-World around which we shall build the New Empire lies directly in their path, only two parsecs further on into the Spur. *I must stop them, and soon!*"

His face a hard mask of determination, Calastor turned grimly to the girl.

"These are the secrets of Parlion. But I am revealing them freely to you, an agent of the Queen of Green Magic. We urgently need Her help. If She is truly opposed to Drask and his Star Rovers, as Her actions in secreting you as spy within his court would seem to suggest, then perhaps She will lend us more direct aid. Yes, I will take you to Malkh, the Green World—if you will join me in pleading for Her assistance!"

Lurn's dim purple eyes flashed with excitement.

"Yes! Oh, yes, Calastor! She is . . . strange and superhuman, sometimes frightening and enigmatic, I know—but She is kind and good as well. I *know* she will help, if you say to Her the things you have been saying to me! Come, show me your charts—"

He sprang to his feet and seized her white hand.

"Good girl! I knew I was right in trusting you! But we must hurry—speed is of the essence now, for Drask will very swiftly leave Argion for the World of Mist. His prestige has been injured when I escaped so easily from his grasp, and to recover from this humiliation in the eyes of his men, he must give them another rich conquest—and fast! Anyone who knows psychology can read him that well! And I must be on Xulthoom before his fleets begin their siege . . . I don't know just what I can do to frustrate his plans there, but with the aid of the Goddess

Niamh—"

A shrill alarm cut across his exuberant words. Face tensing suddenly, he sprang to the panels, riveting his attention on the glowing detector-screens. Lurn joined him, laying a slim hand on his rigid arm, gazing up into the frozen mask of his face, weird in the light of the screens.

"What is it? Tell me!"

"Drask has made his move even more swiftly than I had expected," he said dully. "Even now the Rovers are loading the loot of Argion aboard their fleets, making ready for departure. No time now to fly to the World of Green Magic to confer with your Mistress! Every moment counts. We must follow the fleet to Xulthoom, flying invisible and undetectable, shadowing them. But what I shall do to stop them, once we reach the Mist-World, I . . . do not . . . know!"

Lurn's soul froze within her at the chill note of despair in Calastor's voice, and she clutched his arm with white fingers, staring with him at the glowing screens.

8. *PHANTOMS OF XULTHOOM*

Terror hung like a black curtain over the stupendous castle of black stone.

The cold wind screamed like a banshee as it tore through the needle-spires of jagged gray rock that thronged the plain of dim-glittering metallic crystals. As far as the eye could see, the face of Xulthoom showed the same grim visage. Stretching to the horizons, the endless desert of dull, faintly sparkling crystals numbed the eye with eternal sameness.

Here and there, rising like a shattered column of some palace ruined in Time's dawn, the fang-sharp spires of naked rock rose, scoured clean by the forever-hissing ice-breathed wind.

This was Xulthoom . . . the planet that drove men mad.

The sky hung close, stiflingly close, pressing down until it seemed to Shangkar's restless, uneasy spirits as if it lay thick and soft against the very tops of the black minerals of this fantastic goblin-castle. Xulthoom's face was cloaked in eternal gray mist—mist torn and tattered by the endless winds that swept howling around and around the desert planet; mist that streamed in tendrils like clotted shadow; mist that took on strange shapes and forms to an eye that ached and blurred from the chill breath of the age-long gale.

Sometimes the mists of Xulthoom looked like great vaporous claws, hovering over the black towers to snatch away an unwary guard. Sometimes the whip of the ice-cold wind ripped the gray mist into uncanny likenesses: bat-winged dragons . . . hideously elongated faces that leered and peered with holes for eyes . . . floating forms, like ghosts of smoke-shaped demons . . . or slithering serpents of slimy fog. . . .

Shangkar cursed, pulling the great cloak of shaggy fur closer about his naked shoulders. It was bad enough to be on this weird, doom-haunted world at all—curse the luck that had made him draw guard-duty at this lonely post!

From the corner of his eye, the Barbarian could just make out the tall form of his companion guard, along the curve of the great crenellated wall. The ragged veils of mist that slid past obscured his comrade's hulking form from view . . . then the shrieking wind tore a long rent in the fog-veil, and it was strangely comforting to glimpse the black shape of a fellow human in all this terror-haunted darkness.

All about him rose the giant structure of Djormandark Keep, like a fantastic Castle of the Djinn. It was the only building on all the World of Mists, and no man knew what curious hands had raised so enigmatic a building on this accursed world. The Hooded Men who had ruled this world until yesterday whispered dark legends that Djormandark had been built by the Creatures of

Light who had controlled this Galaxy before the creation of men. Millions upon millions of years ago they had returned to the Fire-Mist beyond the Galaxy, from which they had flown in The Beginning of Things. When the first Earthmen had come hither, they had found an empty world, scoured by the merciless winds . . . gray crystal deserts . . . gray fangs of rocky spires . . . endlessly swirling gray mists . . . and Djormandark's unthinkably huge castle of black stone, a city-large fortress, a throng of turrets and weird domes, an eternal, age-old Citadel of Mystery, ruling this desert world of choking mists.

Shangkar growled, spitting grit from his sour mouth. He had seen the Hooded Men from whom they had wrenched control of this world . . . great tall, gaunt, leathery-skinned submen, faces forever hidden behind their cowled robes of woven cloth-of-metal. Perhaps it was the only way men could live on this accursed world, their flesh cloaked against the crystal grit and the dank winds, but their prowling, faceless forms only seemed to add an extra touch of terror to this ghostly world.

Shivering against the chill, Shangkar gazed with fierce cat-eyes, squinting against the blown dust, striving for the familiar sight of his comrade, whose dark form was hidden again by the fogs. Curse the incredible wealth of radium-rubies that drew men to this darkling world! Were it not for the priceless gems locked in the stony caverns far beneath this Keep, the weirdly radioactive jewels the Hooded Men mined in somber silence from the black rock, the Rovers would never have come in flame and thunder to conquer this Ghost-World!

Shangkar grinned sourly, remembering. Two short days from the hour they had hastily quit the trader's world, hurtling across space from Argion in their mighty, mile-long space fortresses, they had ringed the mist-veiled face of grim Xulthoom with hammering fury. Mighty laser-cannons probing through veils of fog, shattering into flaming gobbets the frail fleet of sky-sleds the Hooded Men

had futilely mustered against them . . . then the great personnel-carriers, shuttling between the orbiting fleet and the planet below . . . Barbarians howling with blood-lust, drifting down from the sky with their gravity harnesses . . . hacking with axe and blade and searing beam through the gibbering, hooting hordes of Hooded Men . . . clashing, struggling clots of bloody men, battering through the foe . . . across the walls, the domes and aerial bridges . . . down into the great gloomy fortress beneath . . . and victory at last, scarlet thunder-throated triumph, as Drask had stood, splattered with gore from throat to heel, a dripping longsword in one brown fist, his booted heel grinding into the throat of M'zzao, Lord of the Hooded Men, while from a thousand Rovers had rung the mighty call:

"HAI-KING!"

Shangkar spat. All too soon the joy of fierce, bloody combat had ended, the victory-feast, the torture of the Hooded Lords, the carousal of drunken, gorged battle-companions in the torchlit hall. . . .

Now, naught but long hours of duty in this black citadel. Now, long, empty hours of boredom in this grim castle of brooding terror. Long hours of duty on the wall, striving to hold your mind clean of the taint of madness as you stared out at the gray eternal sameness of this ghostly world . . . *and the strange things that happened.*

The shadows, glimpsed in hall and chamber, that were *not* phantom-figures born of fog and wind . . . the cold fingers that touched your throat at night, as you huddled in light, uneasy sleep, shivering against the dank chill . . . fingers which tore sleep from you with a start of terror and brought you yelling to your feet, tugging mace from belt, to face—*nothing.*

And the whispers.

No one remembered just when they had started. Faint, faint voices whispering about you . . . soon you found yourself straining every nerve to hear the words they gibbered, words you could *never—quite—make out!*

Morale was crumbling. The men off-duty fell into savage quarrels over the smallest trifles—a filched sleeping-fur, a missing gem, a casual but untactful word. Sudden berserk explosions of fury that left hacked corpses and frightened, bloody-handed men to face Drask's swift, grim justice and the headsman's cold blade. How much longer would they remain chained to this hell-world of whispering phantoms?

With a sudden start, Shangkar was jerked from his thoughts. The veil of thick, clotted mist had passed long minutes ago, but his eyes, staring ahead, unseeing, busy with brooding thoughts, had but now noticed that the familiar form of his fellow-guardman was—no longer there!

Cold sweat started from Shangkar's brow. Ripping his axe from its scabbard at his waist, he hurled along the curve of the crenellated, hip-high wall, boots thudding and slapping in the sudden silence. Silence? He stopped, gasping for breath, a glint of animal fear in his staring eyes.

The wind had stopped howling.

In the breathless silence, Shangkar dropped his eyes to the spreadeagled form that lay before him against the wet black stone.

It was so silent he could hear the uneven hammering of his heartbeat.

From the shadows, the white, white face of his comrade stared directly up at him with wide, unseeing eyes.

Shangkar dropped to his knees, sobbing for breath. He tore open his comrade's fur cloak, fumbling with icy fingers over the man's naked chest.

The face was white as clean paper. Every drop of blood had left it. And stamped

upon it was an indescribably horrible expression of unhuman, mind-shattering *fear*. Those glazed and sightless eyes had looked upon something so awful that the mind behind those eyes had shattered into madness upon the instant.

There was no mark upon the body. No pulse thudded in the motionless naked chest. The man was dead.

He had been . . . *frightened* . . . to death.

Shangkar turned away into the curve of the wall and vomited—over and over again, splattering the stones with sour acid, spasm after spasm of uncontrollable nausea tearing out his guts . . . until at last he huddled gasping and drained of strength, gagging at the sour taste in his dry mouth, his eyes wide with horror, staring blankly out into the gray drift of fog-faces.

It was then that the whispers began. . . .

Far below, in the great echoing hall, Drask sat on a huge throne of black stone, wrapped in furs against the chill. Even here, deep within the central keep, you could hear the wind that never stopped, howling like a mad dog beyond the yard-thick walls of solid rock.

Before him a great fire blazed on the stone pave, sending a wavering ruddy light but little warmth to ease the bone-deep chill. In one gloved hand he held a massive goblet of the fiery purple liquor of far Valthomé. In the other he restlessly rolled and tossed a superb radium-ruby. At dawn of yesterday, when they had at last broken through the doors of the mighty vaults, exposing a flood of the glittering gems, this one great ruby had rolled from the rest and struck against his boot. He had bent and picked it up, and now he mechanically played with the gorgeous jewel while he listened distractedly to Abdekiel's slow, purring voice.

". . . Shangkar is still sane. I have given him to drink of the Wine-of-Dreams, and he will pass the rest of the night in healing slumber. The shock of finding his comrade dead of terror almost shattered *his* mind as well. . . . There is some uncanny curse over this haunted world, my Lord. For the good of the men, we should leave, and leave at once!"

"We will leave when the last gem from the empty vaults has been transferred to the fleet, and not one moment before, you frightened pig!" the Warlord rasped irritably, draining his goblet at a draft and hurling the goblet from him, to clang like a golden bell against the cold pavestone somewhere in the shadows beyond the reach of the firelight.

Abdekiel's yellow face was an impassive mask in the red, wavering light.

"My Lord—we have been on this world but two days. In that small stretch of time eleven men have been slain in fights—fights that spring up from a word, a glance, nothing more. Six more you have executed for causing these fights. Seven others have gone raving mad . . . they say the shadows *whisper* to them!"

Drask grunted moodily, tossing the gem into the air and watching it twinkle in the fire-glow.

"Hortha, who died from sheer fright last night, without a mark on his body, is not the first to die so, although we have kept this from the men. He is the *fourteenth*. The fourteenth to be . . . *frightened* to death . . . within fourteen hours! One man, you see, my Lord, for each hour we remain here . . . and I doubt not the shadows will continue taking their grisly toll—"

"You croak like a hoarse vulture, old toad," Drask spat. "Do you have a woman's soft heart beneath that fat blubber?" Abdekiel's slitted eyes flashed venomously, but he chose not to answer the insult. "And one man has taken his own life: Diothar, who slit his throat with his own knife last night. He was no ignorant

boy, no stupid peasant—he was a Chieftain and Noble of the Varkonna, your own clan, my Lord! An Elder and Advisor of your own Council! Now he is dead—by his own hand! Lord—we *must* leave—before—before—"

"Silence!"

Goaded to fury, Drask sprang to his feet, dashing the radium-ruby against the stone pave in his rage.

And then there was a long, long moment of utter astounded silence, as the two men stared at the smoldering jewel. A sheath of red crystal had shattered from the jewel as it struck the stone pave. And exposed now to the eye, the gem was . . . a great emerald, slow-pulsing fires glowing deep within it, throbbing like a living heart.

An emerald talisman of the Green Goddess.

Drask drew in a long, uneven breath. There was no doubt whatever in his mind. The gem was identical with the other, smaller talisman that had pulsed with similar witch-fires in the hilt of the dancing-girl's dagger . . . that member of the Green Sisterhood who had spied upon him in distant Argion.

As they stood motionless, a calm, sweet voice filled the echoing silence . . . a fiercely sweet voice, chiming with cold mockery, vibrant with strange, seductive power . . . a voice that could never spring from a human throat . . . suave, metallic, singing like the music of little golden bells:

"Drask of the Varkonna, the Goddess commands! Harken and heed Her words. The Queen of Green Magic forbids that you advance one parsec further into the Orion Spur! Quit this world of Xulthoom without delay—leave forever this region of space, which is by the Goddess Niamh forever forbidden to the Star Rovers. Lead your nomad-fleets back to the bleak Rim-worlds from whence your forefathers came, and bend your savage talents to taming those cold worlds

upon the edge of the Galaxy. Know that if your fleets advance hither from Xulthoom one parsec deeper into the Spur, I shall destroy you and break your fleets forever."

The voice fell silent. From his holster, Drask tore a laser gun and leveled its searing thread of ruby fire at the speaking crystal that lay before him, pulsing against the black pave. It exploded like a thunder-clap. Oily green smoke boiled up into the shadows. Echoes boomed and gobbled away among the dim reaches of the ceiling. The stone pave hissed and seethed in a puddle of lava before the droning needle of energy.

Guards came racing into the hall, swords glinting in the firelight.

"My Lord! My Lord! What's amiss? We heard you fire—"

Drask snapped off the laser-beam and hurled the weapon from him with an oath, striking one blank-faced guard to his knees as it thudded against his shoulder.

The Warlord sank, white-faced and shaking, into the huge throne of black stone where before him for endless ages since the coming of the first Earthmen none but the Lords of the Hooded Men had ruled.

He clutched his shaking hands together with savage fury. The tendons stood out like bronze bands on his lean arms as he strove to quell the trembling of his fingers. At last he drew a long breath, having conquered the tremor. He sagged back in the throne, gazing wearily around him. Abdekiel lay huddled on the floor, face hidden in his fat yellow hands, whimpering with terror.

"Nothing is wrong, fools. What could be wrong? Am I not sole, unquestioned Master here? Have we aught to fear on this accursed world but—shadows—voices—whispers?"

His voice rang harshly, like a cracked bell against the moaning undertone of the shaman's whine. The guards looked at each other, white-faced.

"Get your stupid faces out of here, and bring me wine! And find Lord Tonguth, that black dog, in whatever kennel he is hiding in. Tell him to pass the word—tomorrow at dawn we quit this mad world forever."

They waited, blank-faced. Drask lifted a carven mask-like visage to glare at them with savage hawk-gold eyes.

"What are you waiting for, pigs?" he snarled.

Bewildered, one guard fumbled for a salute.

"Th-the Lord Tonguth, Sire—he will ask of us what destination you intend—"

Drask laughed, mockingly.

"Back to the Rim-Stars, that's what my Lord Tonguth wants to hear, I doubt not! Well, tell the tallow-gutted coward that we shall strike further into the Orion Spur—*two parsecs on*—to the next world on our plan of march. Now get out—and bring me wine, do you hear? *Wine!*"

They stumbled out, leaving Drask alone with the sobbing, huddled figure of the shaman . . . alone with shadows and whispers, and the dim flicker of the dying fire.

9. *MONSTERS AMONG THE STARS*

Dawn broke, cold and dim, over the mist-veiled crystalline deserts of Xulthoom. Although the planet swung in close orbit about its primary, only sixty million miles from Aar, its parent sun, this luminary was an aged, cooling red dwarf. Its somber, blood-crimson globe shed only dim light and little heat that escaped the merciless cold of outer space.

All night, goaded by the stinging lash of Drask's tongue and impatient blows from the flat of his sword, the grumbling pirate horde had toiled to load their

gear and booty aboard the shuttle-boats. The stupendous vaults of treasure, the heaped and piled loot of nameless eons they were forced to abandon to the Hooded Men, who stood silently watching, waiting for the departure of their savage conquerors. Although Tonguth felt a vast relief at the thought that they were at last lifting off this accursed demon-haunted planet, the avarice in his soul panged him at the vision of the uncountable wealth of radium-rubies their abrupt and unexpected departure forced them to leave behind.

For long hours the Chieftain supervised the movement of men, machines and loot. Like a weird flock of man-birds, scores of horn-helmeted Star Rovers drifted up from the goblin turrets of Djormandark Keep, weightless on their gravity belts, soaring up with flapping cloaks into the gaping, capacious holds of the personnel-carriers that hovered waiting in the ghostly fog-drift, ready to lift them into the bellies of the fleet ships in orbit beyond the misty atmosphere.

At last it was accomplished.

Wheezing wearily, dragging a thick forearm across his sweat-dewed brow, Tonguth toiled up the interdeck ramp of the *Red Hawk*, ancient flagship of the mighty nomad fleet. He entered the gigantic Control Center to join his comrades. Drask sat, staring moodily at the screens, sprawled out in his enormous acceleration chair, but the others had withdrawn a little from him, wary of his furious temper. Abdekiel the Shaman, bland as a fat Buddha, stood calmly beside Shangkar, as old, one-eyed Gorm, the master-pilot, communicated his instructions to the ship's computer-brain.

The shaman had swiftly recovered from his terror, Tonguth noted. Even though not present when the voice of the Green Goddess had spoken through Her crystal eye, Tonguth knew the whole story. Whispers of the awful warning had gone forth, passed like lightning from man to man, throughout the whole Rover garrison, until every last pirate had heard the grim tale.

Shangkar himself was now recovered from his terrible experience upon the black battlements. His fierce cat-eyes burned like coals in a tawny face still haggard from the ordeal. His bronzed hand twitched by his axe handle, and his cruel nature hungered to be revenged for the humiliation he had suffered before his companions. Smiling thinly, Abdekiel could almost read the thoughts seething with red rage through the brawny barbarian's skull: *"Set me within arm's reach of whatever man, god or spirit worked that foul sorcery on me, and I will write proof in scarlet blood of my manhood!"*

The bland smile deepened, curling Abdekiel's full, fleshy lips. His cool, calculating mind made a note of Shangkar's emotional state, tagged it and filed it for possible future use. Gross, cold-blooded schemer that he was, the oily shaman knew how to use men to his advantage . . . how to play subtly, secretly on their fears, hatreds and hungers. This enormous chess game of men and emotions was life itself to him, and the little pleasure he tasted from life's cup came from this endless, engrossing game.

Drask's face was grim, shut, unreadable. Tonguth did not seek to make conversation. He joined the others and watched the vast screen suspended above their heads from the second level of the domed chamber.

It was a magnificent, heart-stirring sight. The giant fleet was aligned and ready, a huge glittering crescent of mile-long superbattleships curving away from the *Red Hawk* to either side in mighty metal wings. The flagship surged ahead now, and the muted drone of her unthinkably powerful nuclear turbines filled the great dim-lit room with soft, monotonous thunder. In the dimness of the room, panel upon panel woke with a flickering pattern of signal-lights. Dark-robed pilot-cadets moved quietly from panel to panel, noting down various readings on clipboards, or whispering softly into throat-microphones.

In the center of the first level, old Gorm sat in the oval heart of a horseshoe console of master controls. Scattered about his central position in an open circle were lesser control stations . . . so vast was the *Red Hawk*, so infinitely complex the machines and systems that powered, lit and maneuvered her, that no one pilot alone could keep track of her multiplex operations.

Now on the giant screen the dim, fog-wrapped bulk of Xulthoom was receding like a thrown ball into the dead black of space—slowly at first, forming the illusion of a shallow bowl and blocking half the screen, then becoming convex to the eye, ringed about with black space . . . then swifter, swifter, falling back from their viewpoint as a shrinking globe.

Now the flare of coronal fires, as the gray planet eclipsed its dim red sun . . . then it seemed to fall away to one side of the blind, dimly-flaring primary, and rapidly dwindled from view, lost among the stars.

The mood of silent tension that had gripped all now broke as Xulthoom vanished from the screens. Whatever had been the price, they had escaped the weird powers that haunted that World of Eternal Mists.

"Thanks be to Maryash the Protector!" Tonguth grunted to the group in general, heaving his burly shoulders with relief. "I am happy to see the last of that planet of ghosts and darkness! Thraxis give us a healthier world ahead—sunlit and green, with soft women, hard gold, and red wine for our gullets!"

The shaman eyed him obliquely, with fastidious distaste, but Shangkar grinned and flexed his long arms.

"Aye! That filthy ball of fog and grit is no place for a fighting-man! What *is* the world ahead, Lord?"

Drask woke from dark, brooding dream, and called to a slave for wine. These days, Tonguth thought uneasily, the Warlord seemed to lean ever more heavily

on the winecup. Although he was never quite drunk, he seemed never quite sober either, and wine did not calm or fuddle him as it did other, lesser men. Nay . . . it but fed the seething fires of hatred that gnawed at his heart, inwardly consuming him . . .

"A fair enough world, from the charts," the Warlord grated harshly, thirstily downing a cup of Bellerophon's icy green mint-wine. "Little weaponry, so you can rest easy, my bold heroes. A simple, rustic world . . . happy village people . . . few cities . . . but the richest source in Powermetal any of the Orion stars can boast!"

He came to his feet heavily, his face grim and sallow in the flickering, dim light. Something about the quiet, cathedral-like air of the vast, murmurous, gently-lit Control Center, with its soft-spoken, robed and priest-like attendants moving about on mysterious errands of their own amid this hushed shadowy silence, obscurely annoyed him.

"Tonguth—Shaman! Attend me in my quarters: we have matters to discuss," he said abruptly, and stalked from the room, his cloak belling behind him like great wings.

The Warlord's quarters were adorned with barbaric splendor. The wealth of a score of shattered worlds had been ravished by bloody hands to ornament his suite. In the domed ceiling, a sparkling chandelier of six thousand blue-white diamonds hung like a glittering, miniature galaxy of jeweled lights. Fabulous tapestries of pure gold thread, spun soft as silk by a secret process, whose secret was jealously guarded by the Blind Weavers of 61 Cygni IV, draped the wall. The walls themselves were paneled in rare, expensive winewood from the Garden Worlds of Further Perseus.

Carelessly strewn over chairs and couches were rich, fantastic-hued furs from Arlomma the Ice Planet. Low tables and taborets of exquisitely-carven silverwood stood about, scattered casually. Every square inch of their surface was worked into microscopic, elaborately sculpted friezes and designs by the six-armed Spider Men of Golnoth and Beldanarba. They bore gorgeous goblets of rare fruits, glitteringly jeweled platters of cold meats and pastries, so delicately spiced and sauced as to tempt even the most sophisticated gourmet of half a score of worlds.

Drask paid no attention to these fabulous luxuries. Snatching up a haunch of boar meat, he paced and prowled restlessly, gnawing it, then tossing it aside to stain the glowing carpets from Valdorm.

"Sit, sit," he muttered irritably, as his companions entered behind him. Tonguth gingerly lowered his fur-clad bulk, to sit tailor-fashion on bright cushions before a low food-laden table.

"Eat—drink—we have matters to solve," Drask said.

Tranquilly seating himself in a tall chair of organic crystal, the shaman tucked both hands in his wide sleeves and watched Drask's restless pacing with calm eyes in which contempt flickered momentarily.

Tonguth carved off a slice of Chadorian venison with his belt-knife, wiped the blade clean on his fur kilt, and sheathed the blade, pouring a goblet of red-gold Netharna ale. He waited patiently for his Master to speak his thoughts. Tonguth's mind, in some ways as simple and single-purposed as that of the Warlord, also shared something of the detachment and philosophic calm of the shaman. He had the true barbarian's indifference to future worries . . . the problems of the moment, the troubles here and now, sufficed to occupy his thoughts. He had, also, the barbarian's iron patience, content to wait for future worries to come, rather than nervously anticipating them long before their inevitable arrival.

The ale and venison were delicious, and his long hours of sweaty labor in overseeing the loading of the fleet had made him famished. His obvious gusto as he attacked the food clashed with the Warlord's nervous temper, more than did Abdekiel's impassive tranquility.

"If you can leave your swinish guzzling, oaf," Drask snarled, "we'll get down to the matters impending. Shaman! You were present when that green bitch of Malkh dared voice her threats to me. And you know that every passing second of time carries us closer to the limit she set on our roving."

"Yes, Great One."

"Yonder black dog was whimpering in his kennel somewhere in the maze of Djormandark at the time, but he has doubtless heard. Three and one quarter light-years from Xulthoom, that is the distance! If we venture that far, She will strike, or so the voice declared."

Tonguth wiped his greasy jowls with the back of his hand. "Yet you are going on, Master?"

Drask laughed harshly.

"Aye, by all the gods! Space cannot have *two* Masters—either I am Lord, or that female witch is Mistress. But what nags and niggles at my mind is *why* . . . why does She now, after centuries of silence and indifference, lift Her hand against the Rovers?"

"Lord, are we wise to continue on in the face of Her anger . . . ?" Tonguth ventured.

Drask exploded. "Are *you* wise to flaunt your puling cowardice in the face of *my* anger, you black-bristled pig?"

Red-faced, the hulking Chieftain scrambled to his feet, going for his sword.

"No man questions *my* courage—" he roared.

"You dare draw your steel to me, insolent dog?" Drask thundered, livid to the lips, one hand clawing for the butt of his deadly laser-gun.

"Anger solves no problems, my Lords," Abdekiel's cold, suave voice interposed, icy contempt scathing in his purring tones. Drask whirled, panting.

"None of your gutless maxims, you croaking vulture!" He lifted the jewel-set laser, its cold black eye staring at Abdekiel's imperturbable face. The shaman lifted one soft yellow hand.

"You see what your enemies have brought you to, Lord Drask? *Think*. One of your chieftains lies rotting in the vaults of Djormandark Keep, dead by his own hand, palsied with terror—terror induced by either Calastor's clever science, or Niamh's age-old magic. Now you have been goaded to the brink of slaying two more of your councilors. *Think*, Lord!"

Drask subsided slowly, sinking across a great, canopied bed. He let the pistol drop, and gestured wearily for wine. Tonguth slid his blade back into its sheath.

"I beg your pardon humbly, Sire," he began.

"Enough," Drask said. "Pour me wine—and guzzle some yourself. Let us conserve our strength for battling our enemies. I am short of temper . . . but I am possessed by the feeling we are walking into a trap! Yet I dare not—*cannot* permit myself to show fear of this green monster. Has She allied herself with the powers of Parlion? If so, *why*—in the name of the Eleven Hells?"

He gulped wine thirstily, staining his purple leather tunic. Sloshing the liquor about in the half-empty cup, he stared moodily into it, as if he hoped to read therein the face of future things.

In the thoughtful silence that ensued, Tonguth blundered.

"The shaman here claims all Calastor's magic is illusion and mirage, and such-

like shadows of the mind. This Green Lady . . . perhaps Her sorcery is the same, mind-shadows without substance. If this be so, Master, why should you fear to —"

"*Fear?* Never use that word to me, you spawn of slime-pits! I fear neither man, beasts, nor howling ghost—nor have I, since first my mother whelped me! Fear is for such as you, black dog, puking in your dirty beard at the first hint of something your dull wits cannot understand!"

Tonguth flushed, bristling, a growl starting in his great throat. Abdekiel's keen wits noted that whatever master-psychologist was at work here had indeed worked his black arts well. Never before would Tonguth have dared show by word or sign the least token of anger against Drask's lashing tongue, but now . . . He rose smoothly, to interpose an adroit, soothing word—

In that moment, the alarm shrieked.

Not the little bell that summoned the watch, or called men to stations—this was the great, iron-throated monster that called only when the fleet was under attack, and it was loud enough to wake the dead from their dusty sleep!

The three raced into the control dome, Drask and Tonguth cursing—and, on the threshold, they froze.

The mighty screen showed a sight fearful enough to chill any man's gusto.

Ahead was a broad sweep of space, jeweled with winking stars. Dead-center glowed softly a small yellow sun, with the tiny green crescent of their target, the Nucleus-world, hanging pendant to it. But between the fleet and the yellow star—There were seven of them, black serpentine shapes hovering in the chill vacuum of deep space on stupendous, slowly-beating wings, fanged like world-huge bats of space. In that endless, dizzy moment, as reason swayed and tottered on the red brink of madness, Abdekiel somehow found time to wonder what those giant bat-

wings beat against, in the airless void? Light-wavicles, perhaps, or even quanta-bundles . . . he knew not . . . but knew at a glance that these seven monsters were in motion, sliding ponderously through the stars directly at the Barbarian fleet. . . .

"*Space-dragons!*" Tonguth whispered. "I have heard legends of them, but never saw them in the flesh till now. Their wing-span must be a full million miles! Look at those mouths . . . vast enough to engulf a moon at a single gulp!"

"It is not possible . . . space-life," the shaman hissed, face draining to a sickly, dead hue. "Their bodies must be mailed and armored with fantastic density, to endure the biting cold of the airless void."

"Those wings are vast enough to enshadow a world," old Gorm moaned from his control console. "What shall we do, Lord? My radarscopes give but a blur of 'noise'—but vision alone tells me they are traveling straight towards us, and at a speed equal to our own. Shall we turn aside?"

"Not yet—not yet!" Drask's voice rang harshly against the throbbing silence. "We turn aside for nothing! *Man the laser-cannons!* Perhaps we can blast them out of space!"

"They will be upon us in another instant," Shangkar growled, clasping his axe futilely, eyes blazing with desperate fury.

Long snake-necks extended, eyes blazing venomous green fire, fanged maws gaping open, the seven space-dragons closed with the nomad-fleet—and half a hundred laser-cannons bellowed with incandescent fury, ravening beams of raw energy pouring through the void, lighting half a solar system with their blasts of inconceivable heat.

No substance known in all the mighty Universe of Stars could withstand such an assault for more than seconds. The massive shield of a planet would itself vomit

forth stupendous plumes of incandescent gas before those batteries of disintegrating force.

The space-pirates held their breaths, waiting, hoping—

Then panic truly struck.

For the dragons came imperturbably on, in the face of the blinding beams of naked energy. Not a single league-long scale of their impregnable bodies was injured by the dazzling fury of the rays!

10. *THE COUNCIL OF WIZARDS*

Lurn felt as if the last few days had been a weird, fantastic dream. Events so curious and different, jammed into so brief a span of time, lent a sense of nightmarish unreality to her experiences.

First, Drask's discovery of her secret role as spy for the Goddess, then imprisonment, miraculous escape, the incredible unmasking of Perion as the mysterious and mighty White Wizard of Parlion . . . then their swift departure from the trader's world and the race through space to weird, ghostly Xulthoom. She had watched with awe and amazement Calastor's heroic struggle to destroy the Star Rovers and prevent their inexorable attack on the Nucleus-world.

For two days and nights the White Wizard remained awake, strapped to a battery of fantastic machines, a curious crystal helmet fastened to his head. With the aid of obscure antisomnificant drugs from remote Delaquoeth the World of the Narcotic-Blenders, he had conquered fatigue and sleep, staving off exhaustion for fifty-three hours, while his amazingly-developed brain, amplified by mechanistic means, probed the Mist-World far below their invisible, orbiting ship.

To her, this was magic of the most inexplicable kind. But he had carefully explained the scientific principles behind what he was attempting to perform.

"We of the White Adepts know that the ultimate weapon is a medium for the conquest of the human mind," he had explained to her as they ate a simple, hurried meal. "Men have always realized this, and from the dawn of history have invented various means of overcoming the minds of others . . . from the indirect attempts of poetry, music, propaganda, semantics, and psychology, through more blunt and overwhelming devices: hypnosis, narcotics, and the like."

He had gestured towards the complex device into which he would soon be strapped again. "The ultimate perfection is simplicity itself. Mastery of a human mind can only be achieved through fullest use of another human mind. This instrument amplifies and focuses my mental images, broadcasting them to receptive minds on Xulthoom below. I am trying to play upon the primitive terrors and superstitions which are integral to the nature of the Barbarian, and his chief weakness."

He grinned, a flash of mischief momentarily relieving the pallor of weariness and strain in his face.

"The Warlord's choice of Xulthoom as the next milestone in his pattern of conquest played directly into my hands—thanks be to Shalakh, Lord of Luck! With its repellent Hooded Men, the brooding mystery of the age-old castle, the mind-torturing monotony of the crystalline desert, the ever-whining wind, the illusion-making mists, it seems almost created and designed with my plan in mind! So I envision for them black phantoms . . . whispering voices . . . icy, clutching fingers . . . and the tight-beam broadcasts the artificial emotion of terror into the consciousness of the Rovers, until by now they are starting at every shadow, every sound, their tempers exploding into murderous rage at the slightest opposition or fancied insult. A few more days of this and I will have the

entire fleet at each others' throats!"

"It still sounds like sorcery to me, the more you try to explain it by science," Lurn confessed, pouring him another cup of steaming, fragrant *kaf*.

"Not really. The phenomenon we call 'thought' is simply a coded pattern of electrical impulses. The human brain is really nothing more or less than a marvelously compact and efficient electrochemical battery. The Adepts of Parlion discovered by sheer accident the dynamics that led up to the perfection of this device." He nodded at the crystal helmet "They were exploring the full length of the electromagnetic spectrum, seeking to fill in the blank spots in our mastery of the full range of waveforms of radiant energy—"

He broke off, seeing the bafflement in her great wondering eyes—lovely eyes, it suddenly occurred to him, and in a hauntingly beautiful face.

"It begins to sound like magic when I begin to use these technical terms, eh? Well, let me put it this way. Light travels in waves, Lurn, like the ripples on a still pond. The *color* of this light is controlled by the distance between the ripples. Ripples very close together strike the nerves in our eyes in a steady stream. *Rat-tat-tatatat*. We see a color—purple. Ripples further apart—'slower' waves, *rat . . . tat . . . tat*—we see blue. The slower the wave, and we go through the colors, blue, green, yellow, to red. Are you understanding this?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Listen carefully, then. For upon this is based *all* of the magic and miracles of Parlion. This is the secret of our power." (. . . *Speaking of color*, he thought, bemused, *her eyes are dimmest, shadowy purple. . . .*) Firmly exerting control over his wandering thoughts, he continued his revelations.

"Now, beyond the colors we can see, light continues to vibrate—in both directions, 'slower' at one end, to what we call infrared rays, down all the way to

radio waves. The distance between one 'wavecrest' and the next, in the radio-section of the spectrum, is astonishingly large, measured in kilometers. While up above the octave of visible light, at the purple end as you might say, are ultraviolet rays—the invisible part of sunlight that tans your skin. Above that—and the waves are getting closer together all the time, remember—come *x*-rays, *gamma* and *lambda* radiation, cosmic rays and, presumably, even higher wavelengths. You see, girl, all forms of energy seem to belong to the spectrum. The difference between radio, light, and cosmic rays is just a matter of *frequency*—the 'quickness' or 'slowness' with which the waves 'hit' an object."

"Yes, I see. But I *don't* see what this has to do with your magic powers."

He grinned. "All right. Now, I have just said there seems no reason why still swifter-frequency, unknown forms of radiation could not exist above the known wavelengths—or below them, for that matter. In fact, the Adepts did discover these unknown wavelengths above cosmic rays, very early in Parlion's history. They are called the *transcosmics*, or 'Cherenski Radiation' after their discoverer. And, to get technical about it, their frequencies lie in the vicinity of ten-to-the-twenty-fifth-power cycles per second—and the wavelengths are measured in the range of point-oh-oh-one Siegbahn Units. *These are the frequencies erf telepathic thought*, and they went undiscovered for ten thousand years of history. Up there in the millionth-of-an-Angstrom band was hidden the wavelengths of the human mind, and of *life itself*, long known to be electrical but never measured until the age of the Interregnum, long after the Empire of the Galaxy had fallen. It was perhaps the most momentous discovery in science since the perfection of man's use of atomic power."

Now Lurn was fascinated, following with rapt absorption the White Wizard's account of this unknown page of scientific history. *The secret of Parlion—the secret behind magic!* "X-rays penetrate solid matter. This is due to their

wavelength. The shorter the wavelength the greater the penetration. X-rays are stopped by a layer of lead or cadmium. Cosmics, with even shorter wavelengths, pass through lead as if it were empty air. Very little, short of a few miles of planetary crust, stops the cosmics. *Nothing stops the transcosmics.*

"Our so-called magic is simply a technical control over thought. Through mental surgery, power-cells in the brain are stimulated to extraordinary efficiency. Gland-stimulation by sonic-beams gives us more mental power. My magic is *of the mind*. The old shaman was mistaken when he assumed the illusion-ring that gave me the likeness of Perion the Piper altered *light*, creating a *visual* illusion. It helped me manipulate the Rovers' *minds*, creating a *mental* illusion. Yonder apparatus magnifies the strength of my mental waves—pushes them up to fantastic heights, somewhat over a quantum energy of between ten and one hundred billion electron volts. This is necessary, because with my one mind I am telepathing mental illusions into hundreds of minds across near-interplanetary distances."

"But the way you 'bent' space, when you transported us from the Hall of Zargon to the seaside hill where your invisible ship was waiting. *That* was not a mental illusion, surely!" Lurn protested.

"No illusion, girl, but still a mental feat. Distance, you see, is an imaginary distinction between one 'point' and another—affected by size, velocity, viewpoint, and duration of observation. Lizaar of Algon nearly three centuries ago demonstrated that space is not rigid, but *plastic* (these are very imprecise terms, but I have no time to teach you the language of plenum mechanics)—to a mind of near-infinite size, velocity, or of supertemporal viewpoint, distance would be purely an illusion of limited sense. To put it very, very simply, what I did was to *convince* my conscious mind we were on that hilltop—and we were. Parlion has evolved a system of mental discipline beyond any other known."

Leaving her with these marvels to digest, he had then returned to the crystal helmet and continued his telepathic seige of Xulthoom.

When Drask shattered the radium-ruby, and the Goddess spoke, it was nearly as astounding a surprise to Calastor as to the Warlord or the shaman. The other phantom terrors of Xulthoom had been the work of Calastor's superb mentality, intensified beyond the limits of human capability by the artificial resonance-accelerator and projector embodied in the crystal helmet.

But this was intervention from an Unknown.

An unwelcome intervention, too, as it spurred the frayed temper of the Warlord, motivating him to abandon looting the World of Mists and to initiate his long-dreaded assault on the Nucleus-world of the future empire.

When that decision had been put into action, Calastor abandoned his mental bombardment, quit the mind-multiplying machine and went swiftly to the controls. The slim cruiser leapt from her orbit and hurtled through the void to a region of space well clear of the interference of planetary magnetic fields. Calastor was going to attempt telepathic communication with Parlion across the awful gulf of interstellar space. Well he knew so terrific an effort might burn out his brain, but the only way he could destroy the Star Rovers lay in summoning aid from the White Order.

Before he could attempt communication, something began to happen—

The first sign of it was noticed by Lurn. The girl felt a curious, gathering tension in the cabin. Her skin crawled. Her scalp prickled. The very air seemed charged with electrical excitement, as it does before a sudden thunderstorm.

Lurn shrieked!

Seven ghostly figures materialized within the cabin.

They faded into visibility with magical swiftness and ease, like developing a photograph. One moment you are dipping a blank white film in the chemical solution; in the next instant the film bears a picture.

"Lurn—fear nothing! These are friends," Calastor said, slipping his arm reassuringly about her slim shoulders. He strode forward to greet their mysterious visitors.

They were seven men, naked except for loincloths of immaculate white fabrics. At first glance they seemed old—and *old*. Some were diminutive, others tall and gaunt. Some were bald, others wore snowy manes of untrimmed hair. A few were clean-shaven, others wore long, patriarchal white beards. Strangely, at second glance, Lurn could not tell whether they were very old . . . or agelessly young. Their eyes were clear, sharp, alert. Warm good humor sparkled there, but there was also the sense of scalpel-keen minds: intellects vast and cool and awesome. But no visible signs of age showed in their straight, erect posture. The old men had faces smooth and unlined, where ancients Lurn had seen on other planets wore visages of sagging, worn-out tissues, pouched, tired eyes and flabby, pendulous jowls. These men had the faces of youths, and only the faintly visible tracery of millions of tiny wrinkles betrayed any greater age.

Their bodies, too, did not bear the ravages of time. Smooth-muscled, slim, tanned and healthy, they moved with the lithe vigor of the young and strong.

These were the Arch Adepts of the Order, the super-magicians of fabulous Parlion.

"Greetings, O Calastor!" the foremost of the seven addressed the young man in ringing tones. "It was not needed that you attempt to communicate with us, for we have been observing the progress of your mission—with *this*."

On his outstretched palm appeared, in the blinking of an eye, what seemed to

Lurn to be a large sphere of cloudy crystal, filled with vague, drifting lights. Then it seemed to her wondering eyes that it was an immaterial orb of dense, misty light, a rigid globe of force held under mental control.

"By means of the Space-Eye," the thin old man said, indicating the static globe of energy resting in his palm, "we have followed the course of events and were made aware of your need of our assistance. Hence are we come."

"I . . . have failed, Magister," Galastor confessed. The ancient smiled.

"No. You have done all that could be expected—indeed, far more than we could have hoped! Given more time, even now, your mental conquest of the Rovers should succeed. But now events are moving too swiftly to be corrected by the tactics of Psychowar. The Rovers are leaving Xulthoom even as we speak. Within hours they will lie in orbit about the green orb of the Nucleus-world. Come, enter full linkage with us; we must confer."

As Lurn watched, she witnessed the most strange council ever seen—a Council of Magic, in which the mightiest Adepts of mental magic the Galaxy had ever known entered rapport. Calastor and the seven ancients formed a ring. No words were spoken in this eerie council, but thought-currents flashed between the Adepts. So swift, so intense were the currents of this telepathic dialogue that the very atmosphere of the cabin seethed with mental forces. No telepath, even Lurn seemed to "overhear" scraps and snippets of thought, as the eight men exchanged ideas, opinions, and discussed plans.

"—one last illusion, projected by eight minds in—"

"—full linkage! Never before attempted—"

"—Tension index per capita: 39.04—"

"—Enough? Surely! Hysteria—revolt—"

"Illusion: (query)—human? Animal?"

"—*something so huge*—"

"—(*query*): *mythological?—primal terror*—"

"—(*affirmation*): *inconceivably large*—"

"—*beast-image—night-fears*—"

"—*analysis of the Barbarian id*—"

"—*agreed, then?*"

"— (*affirmation*)—"

"—(*affirmation: complete*)."

They broke apart, and the taut mental atmosphere of electric tension dissolved. Calastor stepped to the controls. The *Wolfhound* sprang forward in lightning acceleration.

When the Rover fleet left its orbit about Xulthoom, the slim craft of the White Wizard followed, invisibly, undetectably. An hour or two later, after the Magister had given the weary Calastor a short but deeply refreshing hypnotic sleep, the Council of Adepts convened in full Linkage again to mentally project the images of fantastic dragons of space into the minds of the star-pirates.

Through the magic of the Space-Eye, the Adepts observed as terror smote the hearts of the Rovers—as ravening beams and bolts of blazing force slashed at the slowly oncoming forms of the space-dragons . . .

Drask swore, clenching his fists till the nails bit into his hard palms. The dragons floated on towards the fleet, huge bat-wings beating with ponderous slowness against the bitter black of interplanetary space. They came on in the teeth of the searing laser-bolts. Could nothing stop them?

Suddenly, the shaman laughed.

The sound was jarringly incongruous in the tension of the moment. Drask flashed a glance at Abdekiel, wondering if his mind had snapped.

"I understand all now, Lord," the shaman said, smiling imperturbably. "From the haunting terrors of Xulthoom to these mysterious space-monsters."

"What are you talking about?"

The shaman gestured with a plump hand. "Note, Sire, the laser-beams neither consume the dragons nor rebound from their impenetrable hides! Instead, the rays *vanish* into the monstrous bodies. If the space-beasts were invulnerable to our weapons, the rays would be shattered upon contact with their scales—would shower off the mailed forms in a pyrotechnic display clearly visible even at this distance. They do not. No—the rays are passing harmlessly through the monsters!"

Wonderingly, Drask peered closely at the images on the screens. Somewhere behind him, Shangkar began to curse in a hard undertone.

"They are *illusion*, Lord. Mirages with no physical, material existence. Moreover, I begin to suspect they are not purely visible—but *mental*. This is the work of Calastor. And so, I assume, were the ghosts and voices that plagued us upon Xulthoom. How it is done, I do not know—hypnosis, telepathy—but we have nothing to fear from these creatures. They are *monsters of the mind*, naught more. The fleet can pass straight through them without harm."

Drask smiled coldly. "We should have guessed this, shaman, from the fact that they did not clearly register on the radar. *Gorm!*" He snapped a brusque command to the grizzled old pilot. "Radio the news of this discovery to the fleet. Tell them to allay their fears, and continue forward according to the assault-plan, ignoring the illusion of the monsters."

(—"That does it, Magister! Nothing to do now but pin everything on one final try!"

(—"We understand, youth. We are with you—strike now!"")

Shangkar pointed.

"Look! The dragons are gone!"

Drask laughed harshly. The last impediment to his conquest had proved an immaterial shadow cast upon the mind. Then he froze, uncertainly—

In the cavernous dimness of the giant domed control room, nine shadowy figures faded into existence.

Calastor, Lurn, and the Seven Sages of Parlion stood facing the astounded Star Rovers in the control room of the enormous battleship. Abandoning all other plans, they had bent space—to confront and destroy the leaders of the Barbarian fleet in person.

If possible.

11. *HAND OF THE GODDESS*

Bellowing an oath, Tonguth ripped his laser gun from its holster, pointing the weapon at the foremost figure. An aged, nearly naked man turned gravely humorous eyes upon him. With suddenly numb fingers, the Chieftain fought to beam the old man down . . . but the sparkling black eyes seemed to grow and grow until they filled Tonguth's mind.

The pistol floated out of his lax grip and drifted up into dimness.

Nerves in his legs suddenly failing to respond to his will, Tonguth staggered—blundered—fell forward, cursing feebly.

"At them, you dogs! Ray them down!" Drask snarled—and a score of grim-faced Rover leaders surged forward, snatching at their weapons. But the Sages turned the full power of their amazing minds upon the Barbarians, and the scene became one of fantastic nightmare.

Some Rovers dropped unconscious, as if they had run head first into an invisible wall. Others suddenly lost control of their limbs, and flopped and floundered on the deck like men helpless in the grip of paralysis. One burly Barbarian went floating up into the air, black fur cloak flapping like vast shaggy wings. Another seemed to go mad and attacked his comrades. Steel rang against steel, as in a blind, cursing rage he sought to slaughter the men around him.

While the Sages were battling against the Rover chiefs, Calastor sprang across the room to seize the Warlord—but found himself face to face with a snarling tiger of ferocity. Shangkar faced him, Shangkar the lean cat-like berserker whom Calastor had nearly driven mad with illusions and horrors on the midnight battlements of Djormandark Keep.

In the red, seething furnace of his brain, Shangkar knew only that *this* was the tantalizing phantom whose mysterious spell had broken his spirit. He remembered the shadowy terrors of that awful night, and the bitter humiliations he had suffered through Calastor's magic . . . how he had wept like a halfwitted child, and vomited his guts empty because of whispering shadows . . . and now his burning mind held only one wish: to hack to bloody ruin the laughing, mocking author of his humiliation.

He hurled himself at Calastor, howling with fury. From his belt he tore a long-handled double-bladed axe, tied to his wrist with a leathern thong. As he whirled it around his head the blade sang as it clove thin air.

Calastor was unarmed. But Lurn seized up a sword one of the fallen Rover chiefs had let fall and threw it towards him.

"Calastor-!"

He snatched it from the air, just in time to face Shangkar's attack.

The axe grazed the upturned flat of Calastor's blade and glanced away, ringing. But the impact of the blow drove Calastor to his knees. In a flash, Shangkar was upon him, axe raised above his helmed head, eyes flaring catlike with fury, blade whistling down to shatter the White Wizard's skull.

One of Calastor's booted legs shot out, thudding against Shungkar's leg as the Barbarian straddled his prone figure. The warrior tumbled to one side, his whistling axe narrowly missing Calastor's yellow thatch, clanging as it drove into the deck-plate.

Then Calastor sprang lithely to his feet. Panting, the two faced each other. They circled warily, cat-crimson eyes burning into keen eyes of cool gray. Then steel met—rebounded—met again, in a ringing iron music. Shangkar fought with great, smashing blows, the full, tigerish strength of his steely thews hurled into each blow. Calastor's sword was thin but strong—made for nimble fencing, not for warding off axe-blows. If he met the full weight of the axe squarely it would shatter his blade into splinters of flying steel. So he fought to turn the axe with deft, adroit, glancing counter-blows that demanded his full attention.

He was blind and deaf to the maelstrom of screaming men that surged about him, as the shaggy Rovers fought against the immaterial magic of the Sages. For Calastor, the limits of the Universe had shrunk into a circle a few yards wide—bounded by the glittering wheel of Shangkar's whirling axe. Again and again the furious, full-bodied strength of the Rover's hammer-blows drove him to his knees, or forced him staggering back. For long, long moments of the duel he fought only on the defensive, struggling to hold his own. Curiously quixotic, it never occurred to him to use his magic mind-powers against the snarling,

spitting warrior. This was man against man, steel-thewed body against body, keen steel against steel—a ritual older than civilization itself.

Then the tide turned. With a dancer's supple grace, Calastor swayed back to elude one of Shangkar's ferocious swinging blows—and while the snarling warrior was off-balance, the White Wizard's blade snaked in and drew a red furrow along Shangkar's shoulder.

"Stand still and fight like a man," Shangkar spat, aiming another smashing sweep at the Wizard's yellow head. But either fatigue was dulling the sharp edge of his speed, or the dripping shoulder-wound was eroding his timing, for Calastor again eluding the whistling blow—and etched a crimson gash across the warrior's naked, heaving chest.

The next darting stroke of the slim sword laid open the tanned skin of Shangkar's brow.

He swung the great axe again and again. Sometimes it was met and turned by an adroit, grazing blow of Calastor's sword, in a hissing shower of sparks. And sometimes the lithe Wizard dodged the blow, striking with his steel fang at Shangkar's unprotected cheek, or belly, or arm. Ere long the great brown tiger-body was smeared with gore. None of the wounds were crippling, but they were indeed painful, driving a hot needle of agony into Shangkar's brain each time he strove with the axe. With every flex of straining muscles, the wounds tore open a bit more.

And he was tiring now. Sweat shone over his rippling arms and panting chest. And the blood from his slashed brow was dribbling blindingly into his eyes, blurring his vision. Somewhere deep within the seething chaos of his brain, Shangkar recalled a sun-drenched scene in the great arena of Argion City—a nude, heroic Argionid swordsman pitted against a giant *thard*—and how Shangkar, secure on the stone benches, had laughed as blood from a scratched

brow had blinded the hero and brought him to an inevitable doom—

The end came suddenly.

Staggering off-balance, Shangkar swung suddenly with every screaming atom of his strength. The massive axe came down fully on a lifted blade—and Calastor's sword shattered into glittering fragments, leaving only the handle and a long shard of broken blade in his hand.

Shangkar grinned, a feline baring of teeth.

"Now—"

Calastor, instead of springing back—sprang forward, closing with the giant form of the bloody warrior. And, for that one, fatal split second, Shangkar's blurred vision failed him.

Calastor, with all his strength, drove the needle-sharp shard of his broken sword home, sheathing it in Shangkar's heart.

For a long, gasping instant the Barbarian stared down at the sword's cross-hilt, protruding from his breast. He plucked at it numbly, strength draining from his hands. Forgotten, the axe thudded to the deck. Then he opened his mouth to say something—whether curse or prayer none ever knew. But instead of words, a gout of scarlet blood issued from his lips. Eyes glazing, the dead man fell face-forward to the bloody deck.

"Move, Wizard, and she dies."

The duel had seemed endless, but had only occupied a few minutes of time. And in that brief span, as Calastor had fought with Shangkar and the Sages had warred mentally against the Rovers, the Warlord had not failed to take advantage of these distractions. He had moved like a striking snake, seizing Lurn as she stood to one side, watching with frightened eyes and parted lips the duel of Wizard and warrior.

Drask's iron arms had closed about the girl, holding her against his body, one hand suspending a dagger against her white throat. Now, protected by his living shield, Drask grinned with cold, ironic humor at Calastor.

"Tell your people to surrender," he snarled, "or the girl dies. *Fast*— I'll tear out her throat before your eyes if you don't obey!"

Exhausted by the duel, numbed by Lurn's peril, Calastor's mind whirled, thinking furiously. Then—

"AIIIIIIIIII!"

The full-throated terror in the cry arrested all attention. Staggering to his feet, Tonguth leveled a trembling finger at the mighty screen above their heads. All turned, to behold a sight beyond all thought or imagination.

Stupendous, dwarfing the stars, the Green Goddess looked down at them from space.

Millions of miles long, the body of the Green Woman floated in the void. Her form was that of a superbly beautiful woman, human save that Her flesh was like green jade. Her full-breasted, long-legged body was the epitome of incredible grace and beauty. From throat to heel, Her inconceivably vast body was swathed in drifting veils of emerald gauze . . . weightless draperies, vast as a nebula, that drifted in a cloud of dim emerald mist about Her. Her face was inhumanly godlike, eyes of dark emerald fire beneath level brows, the classic features of a sculptor's dream of divinity. Her hair floated about Her mask-like face in a halo of emerald smoke, long coils of glittering green hair unfolding about Her like the tresses of a Medusa . . . a web of green magic, sparkling with a thousand minute points of light, as if half a galaxy of stars were caught in the floating haze of Her mane.

"Another illusion, like the dragons of space!" the fat shaman screamed, from the

further wall where he had cowered to avoid the battle. "A trick of the mind—nothing more!"

But now the first fringe of the Rover fleet was almost upon the gigantic green figure. All within the control room stood motionless as the hurtling ships drove into the moon-sized illusion of one of Her outstretched hands—

Stars of atomic light flared within that vast palm, as seven ships exploded. Expanding clouds of incandescent gas lighted the void for an instant before dispersing.

"That is no illusion!" Drask roared. "Gorm! command the fleet to break formation and avoid the thing—*fire lasers at will!*"

Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, Lurn broke from his grip and fled to Calastor. His strong arm protectingly encircled her waist.

Now the huge, scattered crescent of mile-long nomad ships broke into circling squads. Intense thread of white, eye-searing fire scorched space as laser after laser focused upon the body of the stupendous Woman.

A serene smile hovered on the lips of the Green Goddess. One giant hand floated out, crashing through a cloud of the Rover-vessels. Dazzling star-like explosions lit the moving hand as ship after ship disrupted upon contact.

Her mighty arm swung slowly through the heart of the Barbarian fleet, shattering a score of ships into flaming vapor. Between one heartbeat and the next, ten thousand Barbarians died in instantaneous novas of intolerable light.

Raging, sick fear gnawing at his heart, Drask strode to the control console.

"Evasive action, fools!"

"Master!" Tonguth rumbled. "The beams have no effect on Her!— Look!"

His sagging face the color of lead, Abdekiel's cold voice soared above the panic-

stricken hubbub.

"The form is *solid*. Your beams are being reflected—the gods alone know how!"

Calastor shot a swift glance at the arched vision screen above them. It was true! As the narrow beams slashed into the monstrous green limbs of the Woman, they exploded back upon themselves in eye-searing gouts of pyrotechnic fury.

Inconceivable as it seemed, the million-mile-long body was solid flesh!

"Forward! Destroy Her!" Drask raged, white-lipped. But the fleet, nearly one-third of the ships utterly destroyed, was collapsing, swirling in chaotic disorder.

Gorm turned a frightened face to his Master. "They refuse to obey!"

"Look!" Tonguth clawed at Drask's arm, drawing his attention to the screen.

"They are running—back towards the Rift!"

It was true. Calastor felt a flush of triumph. His arm tightened about Lurn's slim waist. In total revolt against the Warlord, their spirit broken, their morale wrecked, the scattered remnants of the once-mighty fleet were fleeing at top velocity back out of the Orion stars.

The Nucleus-world was safe!

The old Magister turned to the other Sages.

"Return to the *Wolfhound* and harry the broken fleet safely out into the free space of the Rift. Do not permit them to take refuge at Xulthoom, or Argion, or any other world. The Future Empire will not be fully secure until the last Barbarian has returned to the Rim."

Bowing to the command of their senior, the six Adepts faded into thin air.

Now a wordless howl from one of the Chieftains summoned their attention to the giant form in the vision screen.

"She is—disintegrating!"

It was an uncanny sight: the million-mile-body of the Green Goddess drifted among the stars, slowly melting away even as they watched. Her purpose accomplished, Her great form was returning to the primal atoms of space from which the incomparable force of Her will had formed the titanic simulacrum. Portions of the limbs and torso had already evaporated. Before their startled gaze, more of Her body sloughed away into melting vapor.

Now only the enormous, classic face remained, ringed about with a vast, slowly-vanishing cloud of jade-green vapor. The inhumanly beautiful, inhumanly severe features smiled at them—then collapsed into roiling mists.

"Though all else fails me, I still have—*revenge!*" Drask grated with a metallic laugh. The ugly snout of his jeweled laser was aimed at Calastor and Lurn.

Swiftly thrusting Lurn behind him, Calastor swung into action—*but suddenly an impenetrable, prisoning sphere of force snapped into being around him!*

He was not alone. Similar globes flashed into existence about Drask, Abdekiel, Tonguth and the old Magister. Eyes flashing with astonishment, Calastor stretched out his hands to touch the orb of transparent energy that enclosed him.

Strange—and strange! Although his hands could not push through the glassy curve of impalpable force, neither could they touch the orb's surface. It was (—his reeling mind struggled for a suitable comparison—) like stretching out your hands to the full reach of your arms: although nothing impedes your touch, you still cannot reach any further.

Then he turned, discovering that Lurn was also imprisoned with him in the mystery-sphere.

"Wh-what is it?" she whimpered.

"I don't know. I—"

He, Lurn, and the sphere *vanished*.

As the astounded, shaken Barbarians stood numbly looking on, the five orbs of force snapped out of existence—taking with them the Warlord, the Chieftain, the shaman, and the Magister, as well as Lurn and Calastor.

Where they had stood but an instant before . . . was *nothing*.

12. TO THE GREEN STAR

One split second before the force-globe winked out of material existence, Calastor's superbly developed mind sensed the oncoming transition. It was a subtle thing—a gathering electric tension in the air, as if the sensory tendrils of his mentality brushed against an event rushing upon them out of the impenetrable mystery of Future Time.

His arms closed protectively about the girl as the ship seemed to vanish from about them. And, even in the suspense and terror of this flashing moment, he was very aware of the warmth of her cheek against his face, of the soft vibrant curve of her strong young body braced against his own, of the heady, intoxicating perfume of her ashen-silver hair in his nostrils, and the muffled thunder of her pulse, rising to match his own.

When the sphere flickered into being about the Warlord, he exploded in a spasm of rage. Lashing out with clubbed fists against his immaterial prison, he encountered—*unyielding nothingness*. Then, leveling the drawn laser gun still clasped in one fist, he fired full against the curve of glass-like force. The dazzling pencil of energy met the insubstantial surface of the glistening bubble of force—and shattered back in a stinging shower of foot-long sparks that seared the flesh of Drask's hands, arms and thighs setting his fur cloak to smoldering in a dozen places. With a curse of pain, he dropped the dead pistol, slapping at his

furs. The pistol struck the curve of the force-bubble, and slid down it to tangle his feet.

The reaction of the others formed variations on Drask's—with the single exception of the wise old Magister of Parlion. He alone of them all *knew* what was happening. He, singly, retained his unruffled serenity of mind, the urbane calm of his demeanor unbroken even when the ship and space itself seemed to flash out of existence around his sphere. The others gave way to their emotions—Tonguth blubbing in the clasp of superstitious terror, kicking and fighting against the unyielding, impalpable walls of their globular prisons; the shaman, helplessly frozen in a terror of utter despair, recognizing the presence of a magical power a billion years beyond his own grasp of the art, shrinking into a quivering huddle on the floor of his orb, face hidden in his fat, waxen-pale hands. He moaned and sobbed in the last extremity of panic, awaiting his inevitable doom.

When the five spheres flashed out of the material plane, the six prisoners seemed to have left the bounds of time behind them, as well as space. For a mind-numbing succession of overlapping sense-impression besieged their staggering intellects, seemingly without interval.

First, there was a moment of terrible vertigo, as the pull of the battleship's artificial gravity ceased to exert its influence upon their bodies. They seemed to hang in utter weightlessness for a long, timeless moment—

A sensation of inconceivably intense blackness—

A moment of bitter, absolute cold—

The giddy feeling of speed—as if they flashed with some incomprehensible velocity beyond belief, from one extremity of space to its antipodes—

Then a dazzling instant of—did their consciousness ebb into sleep, for a flashing

moment, as a candle flickers and is extinguished by rushing speed? For when they regained awareness again, their lightning-swift flight had ended, and the five globes seemed to hover above a strange, dim world. . . .

A garden-girt, twilit meadowscape revolved before their vision as they floated . . . rolling hills and gentle, grassy plains where strange flowers nodded under fantastic, slowly undulating trees. Green-plumed birds sang above sparkling jade-lipped fountains. Air-lotus floated, drifting on the perfumed breeze, high above jewel-pebbled paths. Young girls with calm, dreaming faces, and clad in shadowy green, vaguely monastic robes, played chaste games among the towering boles of tall flowering trees with green-furred trunks whereon hybrid, serpentine vines wriggled slowly. It was a scene of haunting, mystic, dream-like beauty . . . lulling, serene, untroubled, towards which they drifted gradually. Above arched a dim sky like a stupendous inverted hollow cup of dimmest jade . . . the fairy-like planet swam in shadowy, weirdly green twilight . . .

In the curve of Calastor's arm, Lurn gasped faintly.

"Malkh! —But it cannot be! The Planet of Green Magic lies three score light-years from the Nucleus-world. It would take *weeks* to traverse the distance—"

Galastor smiled. "The Goddess, it seems, has means to escape the inconvenience of obedience to the natural laws of time and space," he observed.

Then, as they floated on above the turning sphere, the flashing minarets of Diomahl, the City of Jade, rose before them in the dreaming twilight. Scintillant walls of smooth green glass encircled the small capital of this paradisaical worldlet. Swelling domes of green crystal glowed in the waning light. And everywhere fantastic and enormous jewels flashed and sparkled from door-lintel,

arch and rooftop, peak and wall and spire.

From his sphere, Drask stared down, smiling wolfishly. Cupidity gleamed in his hawk-eyes, extinguishing even fear, before so lavish a display of wealth—incredible wealth, if, indeed, those giant crystals were truly emeralds as they seemed. He tried to estimate their worth, but surrendered in the vain attempt, his imagination reeling. Some of the crystals were as tall as a full-grown man.

Now they fell slowly through misty dimness, their force-bubbles drifting down to touch lightly upon the emerald sward as gently as wafting snowflakes. And, at the touch, the hard, impenetrable fields of force against which neither fist nor laser had achieved a thing—vanished. Stumbling a little in the pull of gravity, they stood in the mystic green glow and stared about them.

They stood in faerie gardens wreathed and hung with dim coils of green mist. Weird, phosphorescent blossoms burned with cold fires among the shadowy bushes. No sound disturbed the silence of these idyllic groves. No wind ruffled the dreamy pools of limpid jade, bordered by enormous gauze-petaled flowers and drooping, feathery willows.

Calastor stood quietly, drinking in the twilit loveliness of the scene, his arm still about Lurn's white shoulders. Seeing him, Drask flushed, one hand clawing at his holster. But the pistol had fallen from his hand earlier to the bottom of the globe, and must have vanished with the orb of force.

With shattering suddenness, a silvery, mocking voice, inhumanly sweet, inhumanly cold, spoke from vacant air at his side:

"Here we use no pistols, Barbarian, nor are machines of any purpose welcome on this world."

Drask tensed, eyes probing the shadowy garden as if to spy among the gloomy shrubbery a concealed transmitter. His action was automatic. He knew the gulf

of interstellar space itself formed no barrier to that chill, sardonic voice . . . for it was the same voice that had spoken to him in the mighty hall of Djormandark, on far-distant Xulthoom.

"However, I have a curious desire to look upon the mighty Conqueror who flouted my commands. Advance, Barbarian. I will speak to you in the Jade Tower . . . enter Diomahl My city without . . . fear."

A peal of crystal laughter followed the last word, which the voice emphasized with cruel irony.

Although the fantastic flight across space had all but numbed his sense of terror, Tonguth's eyes bulged as the silvery voice spoke out of empty air.

"An ill omen . . . ill, indeed," he rumbled dully, shaking his great head like a shaggy ox. "As the *Book of Jarsha* warns: 'A voice is heard, where none are seen to speak' . . . what is the rest? How does it go—?"

"Be silent, dog," Drask muttered, but Calastor's calm voice rose behind them, softly quoting the ominous verse:

"A voice is heard, where none are seen to speak.

An Eye beholds, though walls may intervene.

A Hand shall smite, though thousands stand to guard—"

"Babble," Drask snarled. "We are set against a cunning enemy, not some superstitious Terror from an ancient book!"

"An ancient . . . *prophetic* . . . book, Drask of the Varkonna," the aged Magister of Parlion commented softly. And, at the same moment, in the minds of each occurred a memory that weirdly matched the verse Calastor had just quoted.

The Voice that had spoken to them from empty air in the garden . . . the emerald Eye that had blazed up at Drask from the shadowy hall of the black castle on

Xulthoom . . . and the moon-vast Hand that had shattered through the ranks of the warfleets in the depths of space!

"COME."

The Voice called again, in ringing tones that set their feet in motion despite mind or will. In a dreamlike trance, the conflict between them forgotten, the Warlord and his two men, Calastor, the girl and the Magister of Parlion set off through the weird green darkness of the garden.

Bell-shaped domes of dim glass and slender minarets of the City of Jade sparkled before them above the dark tree-tops. They made for the city in mutual silence. In truth, they walked through the very heart of silence, for a tranquil stillness reigned undisturbed in this enchanted oasis. . . silence somehow made palpable, as if underscored by the faint liquid music of little streams, the languid, silken rustle of graceful, long-leaved bushes and the occasional ghostly patter of small animal feet among the pools of inky shadow cast by the vague trees. Drask, Tonguth and Abdekiel cast uneasy glances in the velvet gloom as they walked.

Their vague unease grew stronger. They felt the pressure of invisible eyes peering craftily at them from bough and bush. Mocking echoes of half-heard laughter whispered from the shadows, lifting their nape-hair and sending a tingling chill of fear up their spines.

Tonguth, staring over his shoulder at the sudden rustling of a bush, walked straight into the fluttering embrace of a giant flower the height of a man. The enormous bell-shaped chalice of the blossom burst at his touch, drenching him from head to foot in a cold, stinging, dewy cloud of perfumed nectar. The heavy, cloying scent clung to his wet furs, making him wrinkle his nostrils in distaste at the dainty sweetness that hung about him—and rousing another peal of whispered, elfin mirth from the shadow-shrouded garden.

Drask growled at Tonguth warningly . . . and then Abdekiel floundered into a similar mishap. Since the globes of force had snatched them from the control room of the nomad fleet flagship, the shaman had shrunken in upon himself. The cold, acid force of his mind had withered, ebbed. His great bald Buddha-face of yellow fat had shriveled. Now, as he stumbled along, mumbling to himself, a sudden start of superstitious terror flayed him as he saw a nodding clump of waxen lily-pale flowers whose pallid blossoms *turned* slowly as he passed . . . swiveled as if to *watch* him. Turning to gape with terror at this unearthly sight he walked into a tree with stunning force.

Tonguth stopped short, running a dry tongue over dry lips. He gripped his sword-hilt so tightly his knuckles whitened from the pressure.

"I . . . could swear that tree was not there, just a moment before," he said hoarsely.

"No, it was not," Calastor agreed gravely.

Running a flabby hand over his bruised face, the shaman turned haggard eyes on them.

"She . . . *plays* with us . . . like a great emerald cat. . . ." he whispered.

Then a soft, half-heard music began . . . a liquid rippling as from some insubstantial, airy harp. The sleepy tune drifted about them gently, caressingly. They could almost discern a pattern in the melody . . . but never quite. It seemed to draw them forward . . . forward. . . . The hypnotic music pulled their stumbling feet on, as the trees gave way and the sparkling crystal gates of Diomahl, the City of Green Magic, lay open before them.

The music rose to a surge of invisible harps—and with it a dense, emerald fog enshrouded them, cutting off their sight. Calastor reached out through the blinding mists that swirled and boiled about them, struck through with drifted

rays of green radiance . . . and felt Lurn clasp his hand.

"I—cannot—see!" the Warlord said, raggedly.

"Do not move, or we will lose each other. Remain calm," the serene voice of the Magister advised. Although they stood still, so violently did the green smoke whirl and wheel about them that they seemed to feel the giddy vertigo of some unseen motion. And then—

One second they were stumbling and staggering in the spinning world of green mist; in the next instant it was whipped away, vanishing into—nowhere. Dazed, blinking, they looked about them.

The garden was—gone!

They stood in the center of a great domed hall whose faceted walls of sheerest emerald lifted above them into vague, infinite heights. Far above their heads, the vaulted roof was lost in thronged shadows. The walls of the vast empty hall shimmered with ghostly pale light, as if the stupendous chamber were carved from the hollow heart of some inconceivable super-emerald.

The immense acre of floor was paved in some mirror-like, glistening, translucent green stone in which tiny star-like atoms of light sparkled in microscopic galaxies.

Now the light strengthened. They could see that the emerald walls were faintly veined, like marble, with a dim tracery of thread-thin gold . . . a sprawling web of glittering light that spread over the crystal facets of the wall like some weird arabesque, some monstrous labyrinth of glowing lines, spelling out a cosmic riddle, or tracing the potent figures of some galactic Pentacle of Power over the entire inner surface of the vast room. . . .

It held their eyes—even the attention of the serene Magister. The pattern seemed almost recognizable, gripping their fascinated attention, forcing their eyes to

trace and retrace the curious, near-meaningful angles of the golden maze, therein to read the secret meaning of the design whose structure and pattern just barely seemed to elude their minds, a meaning that hovered on the borders of conscious thought, like a half-forgotten Word of stupendous import that trembled almost on the tips of their tongues.

A burst of crystal laughter rang against their concentration, shattering it to a thousand shards of broken thought.

The chiming bells of icy amusement shocked them like a sudden sluice of chill water, snapping the thread of their thought, breaking abruptly the weird, hypnotic pull of the wall-pattern, and they spun about to see—

Her.

"You are welcome to Diomahl," said the Goddess of Green Magic.

13. *BEFORE THE EMERALD THRONE*

Somehow they had not noticed it before, but a dozen yards from where they stood a great boulder of glittering green crystal rose sheer from the mirror-like pave. It heaved its sparkling, jagged, rough-hewn mass up to tower above them in the dim, mysterious light. Like a boulder-vast jewel it was, or an iceberg of mystic green, splintered by the action of time into a million flashing facets.

The uppermost tier was sculptured into the shape of a rugged, throne-like chair. Upon this sat—Niamh.

From throat to heel She was draped in lucent, misty voluminous robes of delicate gauze, in hue the faintest shade of pearly, opaline green. Against the ambiguous and elusive color of Her draperies, Her flesh formed a striking contrast. For truly was She called "The Green Goddess" . . . the flawless skin of long, slender hands

and calm, classic, inhumanly perfect face were as if molded from pallid green jade. The rest of Her body was hidden, swathed in opalescent gauze, although they could discern the rise and fall of Her breasts, and the long, cat-like curve of hip, thigh and leg where the tenuous fabric was caught up more tightly about Her. The first thing that seized them with awe, however, was Her incredible size. She loomed above them like some stupendous statue, a Colossus of pure jade. Even seated, they could see that when She rose to Her full height She must stand nearly three times the height of a full-grown man.

In this unusual mingling of female grace and beauty with male majesty and strength, the Green Woman seemed like some Warrior-Queen of heroic legend, some superb Amazon.

Her hair was darkest emerald, yet more delicate than silk. It seemed, to Calastor's amazed thoughts, like emerald jewels spun into gossamer by the magic loom of some Necromancer. As tenuous as a vapor, it was unbound, floating about her massive head like a dim halo of misty green flames . . . and where a curling thread of drifting strand caught the light, it flashed with metallic luster, glittering with pinpoints of jeweled radiance, as if, webbed within the mesh of Her locks, glittered a thousand netted stars of emerald flame.

It was, however, Her face that seized their fascinated attention. Gaping despite himself, Drask of the Varkonna knew he had never before looked on a face of such super-human beauty. Like a great mask of exquisite milky jade, smoothly molded by a sculptor of supernal genius, it was the apex of perfection, beyond comparison with mortal beauty. A deep, broad and lofty brow, unmarred by the slightest wrinkle, rose above level, winging brows. Large eyes, tip-tilted, set deep and wide-apart, whose pupils were dazzling-dark, weird disks of blackish emerald, within whose depths of gloom far fires glimmered. And darkly emerald, too, the proud arched bow of Her full, velvet lips.

Niamh's face blended pride with a godlike serenity . . . fiery, inconceivably violent passions, banked beneath a chill and awful peace. Her beauty was so intense, so overwhelming, that it was almost a thing of terror. Observing it, Calastor knew at last what the Ancient poet meant by "*the awful beauty of the dispassionate Divine.*"

When She spoke, it startled them all. Rapt, they had stared at the dazzling glory of Her, seated motionless, towering above them like some idol, throned on a giant jewel, as if She were insensate stone. The unwavering, lifeless perfection of Her face was shattered when She spoke, for emotion animated it. It was as if, suddenly, a great statue were to speak.

"I have summoned you here to observe My justice, and to hear My judgment." Her voice, too, was beyond the human. Sweet, clear, sharp—a singing music, inhumanly pure. A voice that could only be uttered from a throat of crystal, Calastor mused.

"Drask, Warlord of the Star Rovers, Chief of the Clan Varkonna—step before Me."

His eyes narrowing, the Warlord boldly swaggered forward, spreading his legs in an insolent poise and resting his hands on his hips as he tilted back his head to look up into the superhuman face above him.

"You are virile, strong, a leader. Intelligence is yours— of a kind—and the power to stir and command men. Greatness could have been yours, yes, and a lofty name to ring down the annals of time."

"Greatness *is* mine, Lady," he said boldly. "By what right, what authority, do you presume to judge me—"

She laughed, a crystalline mockery, chiming with cold mirth.

"By *My* right. By *My* authority!"

Drask flushed hotly. "If *power* is your argument for authority—"

"O, Drask—you of all men here should believe in the ancient law that 'Might is Right.' Has not your glorious career been one bloody chronicle of the unhampered exercise of brute power? Strong you are, I have said, but ruthless in the employment of that strength. You have no conception of the natural rights of men less strong than you. Hence, your whim, your slightest desire, was sufficient authority for the most cruel and brutal acts! The gifts which you inherited, your position of kingship over your people, the unlimited strength that was yours in the great war-fleets of your fathers, your talents of mind and body—all, *all* of these have you misused, to the detriment, the destruction of others."

Her words rang through the mighty chamber like a clarion, cowing the fierce Barbarian.

"On twenty-two planets of man have you sought, with all your lusty force, to crush out the last, flickering sparks of culture and civilization. On Xulthoom, the World of Eternal Mist, I commanded you to advance no further. This command you disobeyed, although I threatened that its disobedience would be punished. Do you remember My words?"

"I—yes, you green Monster!" Drask raged. "You swore to destroy me and my fleet forever! But I yield to no idle threats—I am master of the spaceways. I—and none other!"

Her eyes half-closed, ominously.

"And *I* am Mistress here, O little man. But My threats were not idle, were they? Your fleets *are* destroyed. Broken, decimated. Scattered. Fleeing. Is this not truth?"

His hawk-gold eyes flamed with frustrated fury. "Yes," he growled. "And now you intend to kill me?"

Niamh smiled, a cold flexing of the lips, nothing more.

"No."

Calastor's eyes widened.

Lurn gasped.

Drask, strangling his fury, gaped.

"No?" he repeated, warily.

She extended one mighty hand, the first movement of Her body since they had come into Her presence, and they all instinctively shrank back.

From Her outstretched palm a ray of bright leaf-green light sped, bathing Drask's booted feet in its lambent glow, then flaring out as if it had never been.

Drask struggled to move, but could not. Sweat broke out upon his brow. It was as if his heels had been welded into the mirror-pave.

"No," She repeated serenely. "You shall never die. I grant you *everlasting life*. This is the judgment of Niamh."

Lurn drew in her breath sharply, and caught at Calastor's white-clad arm. He followed her startled glance, to see—

The Warlord's boots *whitened* as if touched to marble by the bolt of green radiance, *then became transparent as clear glass!* Drask paled, his strong face suddenly haggard. His eyes flickered from side to side, like a hunted animal's.

"Everlasting life. . . ." he repeated dully.

The curious transparency was creeping up his long legs. They were like columns of sheer crystal.

"Your mind and ego shall never perish, until the vast Universe of Stars ends at last in the eventual energy-death of balanced entropy," the Goddess said, in tones coldly dispassionate. "Prisoned in living, indestructable crystal, your identity

shall endure for all Eternity to come, and you shall have unending ages to contemplate how prodigally you have wasted the gifts that heredity and fortune gave into your hands."

The weird crystal transformation crept remorselessly up Drask's trembling body. It was now above his hips. From the waist down, he was like a glass statue, frozen immobile. His face tightened under the lash of unendurable terror. Death, torture, execution . . . all these he was strong enough to bear. But not the inhuman doom meted out to him by Her justice.

"No! Goddess—mercy!"

"As much mercy shall be yours as you gave to the undefended worlds crushed beneath your bloody heel," She said coldly. "And for ages to come, remember all your triumphs, one by one. The helpless planets you looted and sacked . . . the garden-world of Athnolan . . . placid Onaldus with its blue hills and yellow skies . . . Mindanell, the Planet of Fernsmen, and quiet Freihoffer, Scather, and Argion, and shadowy Xulthoom of the Hooded Men."

The glassy tide crept to his shoulders, spreading down his arms. His face was paper-white, utterly drained of color. He raised his face to the sky, mouth stretched wide in a soundless howl of agony—*and froze with that expression forever stamped on living crystal.*

The transmutation was complete.

Where one moment before had stood a breathing creature of flesh and blood, now towered a crystal statue of eternal stone.

So Drask of the Varkonna, the most feared Warlord of the Rovers since the dark age of Shandalar the Red, came at last to his doom . . . a doom that would become a whispered legend for a thousand years.

They stood in a breathless silence. The face of the Goddess, far above them,

brooded down on Her awful handiwork.

And the shaman *screamed*.

Gasping and slobbering out hysterical words, he fell groveling at the foot of the Emerald Throne. Gone now, once and for all, was the Buddha-like mask of impenetrable calm that had hidden for years the scorching furnace of ambition, greed, envy and lust that was his secret heart.

"Spare me . . . mercy, O Mighty One! I will repent . . . punish not my . . . O Gods of . . ."

Her cool, amused voice cut off his babblings like a swift knife-stroke.

"Shaman of the Fourth Circle, Abdekiel of Yoth Zembis the Planet of Sorcerers, fear not—your punishment shall be a different one."

His face ghastly with terror, he looked up at Her and the Green Goddess smiled down at his wet, quivering face.

"You are unlike Drask in all ways," She said softly. A faint beam of hope gleamed in the little slitted eyes of the shaman. He wet his thick lips with a darting tongue.

"Yes! Yes!" Abdekiel stammered eagerly. "He was brutal, cruel—I am not! I am timid—helpless—I obeyed his commands—I could do naught else! I—"

"You gutless *worm!*" Forgetting his own superstitious awe, burly, bluff Tonguth stamped forward, booted heels ringing on the shimmering pave. "Face up to your punishment like a man—cease whimpering and slithering about on your fat guts like some slimy serpent! My Master, Drask, was what you *lusted* to be and would have been, had you enough iron manhood in your blood to stiffen your spine! Stand up and take what comes!"

The fat shaman only groveled, hiding his face between fat hands from Tonguth's wrath. The Chieftain spat contemptuously.

" 'A gutless worm' . . . apt, Barbarian," the Goddess said, with a cryptic smile. "Abdekiel, as I said, you are no Drask. Where he was at least bold, strong and courageous, you are a weakling. Lust for power and conquest boils in your brain no less fiercely than in his. But where he reached out and *took* with fearless hands, caring not if blood be shed in the process, nor even if some of it be his own . . . *your* way is different. The poison in the chalice . . . the sly, whispered word . . . the insidious hints . . . lacking even the manhood of the dagger in the back from behind. Drask was a force of destruction, a thing to fear. You are utterly despicable!"

She reached out her mighty green arm.

"Become as Tonguth hailed you—a crawling worm! *This* is the judgment of Niamh. . . ."

The green ray of weird light sprang from her extended palm to bathe the huddled, moaning figure of the shaman.

There came a flash of blinding light.

When they blinked the dazzle from their eyes, the sprawling form of Abdekiel was gone . . . and, in its place, they saw a repulsive thing: the huge, glistening, bulging form of a giant worm flopped and writhed in sluggish torment, weaving its hideous blind head from side to side as if to seek escape, wallowing in the stinking slime its squalid flesh exuded!

"Live, a human intellect, imprisoned in this loathsome slug! And now, begone—you foul my floors!"

Her great hand gestured, and the repulsive thing was wafted by invisible force through the air, vanishing into dimness, beyond Diomahl into the most distant forests of the Green World.

Now Tonguth stood alone in the place of judgment. All fear was shorn from him

now—he was beyond horrors. He stood tall, shoulders thrown back, hands by his sides—yet not arrogantly, as had Drask, but quietly, waiting. And his face was calm, accepting whatever fate was decreed for him without protest or argument. Something there was of a certain nobility about the bearded Barbarian, unglimped until that moment.

She regarded him, from Her awful height.

"Tonguth var-Yordha, Chieftain of the Clan of Yordhanna."

"Aye, Majesty," Tonguth acknowledged. His tone was humble, but he did not bend his head.

"You are strong, hardy, bold. Bravery is yours, yes, and cruelty as well. Your hands are bloody with the gore of many hundreds. Your soul reeks with the stains of murder, rapine, pillage. But your cruelty is the honest cruelty of the savage, who knows no better. Your murders were done in battle, man to man or ship to ship. Your life is steeped in violence . . . but I have no quarrel with violence. War and death are a part of Nature. The strong batter down the weak, so that the race may breed true and clean. Crimes of excess are not yours. The lust for unlimited conquest and unending power that goaded the Warlord Drask to inhuman extents is not in you. In you I find a strong, crude and warlike manhood—but war, I say, is not of itself an evil thing, but a part of the universal process."

Tonguth faced her unblinking, but doubt and puzzlement showed in his expression.

She smiled—nor was it Her coldly august smile as of before. This smile—did it hint at a trace of softer, more human warmth? Perhaps.

"Moreover, I find in you one high, redeeming and even noble trait. Unselfishly, with a devotion and a loyalty I could almost find within Myself to praise, did

you serve him whom fate made your Master. Devotion misguided and ignorant—doglike—but still unselfish."

Tonguth said slowly, "What does this mean, Lady?"

"It means I find but little evil in you. Go. You are free."

Tonguth blinked, as one dazed, and turned a baffled look at Calastor, Lurn, and the Magister, who stared back at him blankly, but with a dawning trace of a smile. He turned again to the Goddess.

"No . . . punishment?"

She laughed, this time with only a touch of mockery. "Oh, yes, Barbarian. Punishment—of a kind. Tonguth of the Yordhanna, I bestow upon you Lordship over the Star Rovers, or what is left of them. You are their King—but not Warlord, for they and you are done now with conquest."

He swung his great shaggy head, like a dazed bear. "I—am—King?" he repeated slowly.

"By my will. You will not find it to your own, I warrant. For now you must lead your broken people back to the Rim of the Galaxy from whence they sprang, ages ago. You shall guide them to their forgotten kingdoms, quell the disobedience in them, force them to tame again those cold and barren worlds as did their ancestors. Those worlds are yours and your descendants' forever. Farm them. Build cities. *And leave them never again!*"

"Aye . . . aye, Lady, but . . . this is reward . . . kingship . . . not *punishment!*"

She regarded him with quiet amusement that softened the cold planes of Her unearthly face, infusing it for a moment with a very human warmth.

"Nay, Tonguth, for it is punishment of a very special and very cruel kind, as you shall discover in years to come! For now *you* must learn to lead, rather than being led. You must think . . . and plan for what is best . . . and command, where

you have been commanded. While your people feast and enjoy their feasting, you shall stay awake night after night, in council-chamber and judgment-hall, puzzling out the baffling and enigmatic rules of justice, and mercy, and reason, and foresight, and . . . kingliness. *This is your doom. This is the judgment of Niamh.*"

"And I am . . . free to go?" he said thoughtfully, as if still not fully comprehending.

She nodded, rippling the floating veils of Her metallic mane.

"And take with you this gift," She said, "this crystal statue of curiously lifelike design, the work of an Immortal Hand. Set it up in the center of your city. It is more than a work of art, my little friend. It shall stand, for your people and forever, a monument to the folly of cruel and limitless ambition . . . an indestructible symbol of the doom that awaits the conqueror. Treat it reverently, for it bears within it a human soul in unbelievable and unending torment. Look upon it daily . . . and remember the falling ships, the blasting beams, the proud cities crushed to gore-splashed rubble, the hordes of naked slaves led to the block or the arena of death. Do *not* hide it away, as the guilty man hides from the sting of conscience, but have it ever before your eyes. For this, too, is part of your . . . punishment."

A globe of force snapped into existence, encompassing both Tonguth and the glassy thing that had been Drask the mighty Warlord. It floated up weightlessly from the shining pave . . . up into the green, shadowy dimness of the air that glowed with vague, submerged light . . . up, up into the astounding height of the Jade Tower . . . and was gone.

Calastor knew that it was sent on its mysterious way, flashing faster than light, faster than thought itself, through the unthinkable immensity of interstellar

space, to join the shattered remnants of the Star Rover's fleet . . . bearing within its sphere of force the crystal hell that imprisoned a tortured soul, and the mortal flesh that was a living man, and, perhaps, now somewhat more of a man . . . a man with a new-born conscience . . . a man learning the beginnings of the terrible responsibility each man bears for his brother man. . . .

A man at last beginning to think.

"And now, you three are left," the Goddess' cool voice broke in on his wondering thoughts. "Now we come to your judgment. . . ."

14. *THE FUTURE-FLAME*

Unbidden, the old Magister stepped forward to stand before the great cliff of emerald that was Her throne. The frail, aged and nearly naked little man with his silvery beard and long metal staff formed a weird contrast with the green-skinned Titaness, robed in Her superhuman majesty and might . . . yet, vastly different as the two were to the eye, there was a kind of sympathy, a union, between them. Somehow, in supraphysical ways, they were akin—akin in the calm poise and certainty of the magical forces over which they both held mastery. She regarded him meditatively for a long interval; then Her darkling gaze strayed to Calastor and Lurn. She smiled.

"You please Me, girl. You have done well—far better, indeed, than I could have hoped."

From the shelter of Calastor's arm, Lurn said faintly, "It seems to me that I have failed You in everything, Mistress, which I was appointed to perform."

"Nonsense! While you served at Drask's court, I was able to see and to hear—and to form very precise estimates of the three men who have recently received

their punishments. And Drask's discovery of you—together with your subsequent escape, at the hands of this youth—were unplanned events, but proved excellent psychological weapons in My plan to break down the morale of the Rovers, and of Drask himself." She met Calastor's quizzical look with a half-smile. "Yes, young wizard, I too was working according to the scheme of Parlion."

Drawing Herself up fully, She said to the old Magister: "You see, Pallikrates of Parlion, I too, in my way, serve The Light."

"I know," he said quietly.

"Seven billion years ago, when this three-dimensional Universe of yours, this tiny segment of the Full Plenum, was created, I was exiled to this plane of existence by Those who dwell beyond, the Ones of Power, the Gods of Infinite Time, to Whose ranks I belong. My—crime—was that of the Warlord Drask, in a way. Those over whose destinies I was set as Regent suffered from My neglect, from my—casual indifference. Hither was I sent, to spend eons in your little Cosmos until such time as, of Myself, I should learn *what* My crime had been. For My punishment was—that I should punish *Myself*. Like Drask, like Tonguth, I must discover My conscience. Know, mortals, that when the Gods are punished, they must punish—themselves!"

Her gaze brooded unseeingly far above their heads, staring into dim remoteness.

"My prison, then, is this Universe of yours, which to your small and limited senses seems so rich in marvel and in variety. Conceive, if you can, the suffering of a God deprived for eons beyond number the joys of *associating with an equal!* And here must I remain, until such time as They who opened the interdimensional gates and placed Me here consider that I have sufficiently expiated My sins, and return to bring Me once again into the mighty spaces and among the stupendous cities where I shall find My home at last. . . ."

Her voice seemed to Calastor infinitely weary, and infinitely sad. So might Prometheus speak, bearing the pangs of eternal torment, chained on Caucasus, for the crime of aiding men against the will of the Gods . . . or clever, mischievous Loki, bound for ages beneath the slow drip of searing venom.

"I know now," She continued, in tones that rang soft and clear with serene music, the note of sorrow gone, "that My way of redemption is to assist your little races. And thus I have watched the millenia pass . . . the great Carina Empire rise and fall . . . and of My wisdom I know a second Empire must come." Suddenly She rose lithely to Her full height, stepping down from Her great emerald chair, gesturing.

"Come!"

Niamh moved into the shadowy depths of the enormous hall, and they followed behind. Looming some sixteen feet above them in the dim green light that was like that of the sea-bottom, she seemed some mysterious tritones or gigantic Nereid of the deeps, into whose weird underwater palace of enchantment they had chanced.

She paused at the brink of a tremendous well whose inky shaft fell without break as far as the eye could see . . . down . . . down . . . as if it yawned to the very center of this magic world.

The lip of this well was a curve of milky jade, seemingly of one piece, for the eye could discern no mark of jointure. Yet imagination shrank from conceiving a boulder of jade rock so huge as to yield to the sculptor a ring of such enormity. Measuring the well's mouth with a dazed eye, Calastor knew that his spaceship could pass into the ebon shaft without touching the sides!

Now She stamped her great foot commandingly, and at that moment a dim, distant light bloomed in the depths, casting a vague haze about them. This green

radiance increased in its intensity, as if a mass of luminous matter were silently and at enormous speed rushing *up* the well-shaft.

Flame!

From the huge curved jade mouth of the well a mighty banner of flame burst! A lambent, cold phosphorescence it was, glowing and vibrant, an undulating nimbus of weird, chartreuse light . . . and as they stared, entranced, into the quivering depths of the green flame, pictures formed! Visions rose before them. They caught a whirling, kaleidoscopic view of the Empire at its superb zenith, the fabulous splendor of the Imperial Court, the wealth and grandeur of the mighty Capital, the city that had blanketed the entire surface of a planet with a magnificent crown of white spires and palaces.

They watched the high noon of Carina-Cygnus fade, the richly glowing colors tarnish, the Imperial panoply and pomp become worn and tattered.

And they watched it fall. . . .

"You see, Pallikrates of Parlion, I have no need of your curious future-predicting science, *historiodynamics*. I have My own means of reading the form and direction of things to come!"

In the shimmering tapestry of chartreuse phosphorescence, new visions took shape: they watched as the nomad fleets of the Star Rovers passed like a spark carried by the wind from world to world, touching planets to flame as they passed.

"I could not save the Old Empire, no more than could you," the Green Goddess said. "For it had outlived its time. The pith and vigor was gone from it, and, like a once-mighty oak blighted by centuries into a withered husk, it was only good to feed the flames. *But*, although the Old Empire must pass . . . if civilization is to flourish within this Galaxy, room must be made for a *New* Empire to rise.

And, like a tender seedling that shall someday, with the nourishing years, rise to rival the mighty fallen oak, it must be carefully nurtured and warded from harm."

Within the flame, a small minor star glowed into being. It flashed towards them, until the minute blue crescent of a verdant planet could be seen, swinging in slow orbit about the star. By Calastor's side, Lurn stiffened strangely.

"Like you Adepts of Parlion, I, too, chose *this* world as the most promising Nucleus about which the Empire of the Future should grow. All factors of socio-economics, all of a million and one currents of change and history weighed in the balance, told Me that this world and none other must be the center of its coming age."

Her great eyes smiled down at Lurn's pale face.

"Chance played into my hands, for lo! the Heiress of the Nucleus-world came hither to join My Order. And her genes bear the peculiar balance of wit and talent I deem most needful for the future Imperial Line."

"Now—by all the gods of Time!" Calastor roared in complete astonishment.

Lurn smiled timorously.

"I . . . told you I had fled from an . . . unwelcome marriage, forced upon me by my House," she said in a halting voice.

Calastor swore. "True. True! But you *didn't* tell me, girl, that you were the Princess of your planet!"

Her huge purple eyes, dimmed and moist, fell and a faint flush stained her cheeks.

"N-no . . . I didn't dare," she confessed in a low voice.

"That was why you started and seemed almost to speak, back there in the *Wolfhound*, on our way to Xulthoom, when I showed you the next world at

which the Barbarians planned to strike—and told you why it was so important to us!" he went on.

She nodded.

"Well, I am damned. By the Thirsty Spears of Thaxis—of all the lovely girls in the Galaxy, I have to fall in love with the mother of the New Empire!"

"W-would you say that again?" she whispered, lifting her eyes to his.

He flushed angrily. "Certainly. I have fallen in love with you—*Empress!*"

She said nothing, but . . . her face was very close to his . . . and her warm, soft lips were slightly parted . . . and there seemed no reason why he should not kiss her . . . at least just this once, for the first time, even though it might be the last.

He did.

After a while, he lifted his face and saw that the Goddess was watching him with amusement.

"Do you have any scruples, youth, about marriage with an Empress?" She asked. He shook his head.

"Not really."

"Good. For the genes you bear are needed to compliment those of the Lady Lurn. The both of you superbly healthy young animals are the penultimate fruits of a very long and exacting plan of selective breeding. Your children and your children's children will make splendid monarchs, men and women of magnificent will and stature and intelligence that will frequently be labeled genius."

Calastor looked from Her amused face, to see much the same expression on the old-yet-young face of the Magister.

"I take it this has all been arranged, then?" he asked, with just a flash of Perion's

impudence.

"In a manner of speaking . . . yes, child," Pallikrates said quietly. "But not by we two, precisely. Say it was—your destiny."

"Well," Calastor said finally, his arm about Lurn's soft shoulders, casting a bemused glance at the mighty face of Niamh, "we can tell our children *this* was certainly one marriage that was made in Heaven. Or at least, a Goddess had a hand in it!"

EPILOGUE

They stood together on the crest of a rounded hill, along toward sunset. His arm was about her shoulders, and they stood without speaking, looking down into the valley.

Behind them, hovering just above the hill's crest, the lean, rakish shape of the *Wolfhound* caught the ruddy westering light, in long sanguine reflections that glimmered in its mirror-smooth metal hull.

Before them, the long, shallow slope of the hill stretched away in a thick green carpet of sweet grass that flowed silkenly in the early evening breeze. The heady perfume of meadow flowers came to them, borne on the fresh, sharp breeze that also carried to them the distant, raucous cry of gulls winging along the beach and the lazy slap and wash of waves from the sea that lay just beyond the green, darkling hills to the west.

Against the dim green bosom of the valley, like a bright brooch, the city lay— young, lusty, still growing, with walls of whitewashed stone. Smoke from evening cook-fires rose from many chimneys, and they could see the clear pastel colors of the plastered walls of low houses and small buildings: salmon and blue

and a sunny yellow, topped with peaked roofs of dark red tile.

A small blue stream, crimson now as it reflected the sunset sky in all its glory, meandered lazily in zig-zags across the distant fields where ripe yellow corn grew and rustled in the breeze.

Home.

To Calastor, whose only home had been a spaceship's grimly utilitarian cabin, or the bleak rocky vales of barren Parlion, it looked very peaceful. Quiet. Restful.

Before the Goddess had transported them in the sphere of force to the *Wolfhound's* cabin, She had warned him not to be so deceived.

"Think not, young wizard, that your adventuring is done, and that naught lies ahead for you and your lady but domestic tranquility, fat babies, and a sleepy old age, tucked in a warm chimney-corner out of the wind.

"Much lies yet ahead of you. You must realize and master the world that is yours. Choose men of worth and mettle, call them to your standard, fire them with ringing words—and ringing deeds. Yours is no sweetly rustic, quaintly charming little planetary kingdom. No—but a brawling, lusty and barbaric young world. There will be tribes and kings, clans and nations for you to break—and then remold together into a stronger unity. Oh, you will have your fill of fighting, Calastor, before you have done! You will be weary enough, by the end, of adventures and wars, battles and heroic deeds of derring-do, never fear.

"And, by some miracle, you must forge the strong foundations of an industrial technology out of simple farmers, fishers, and bandit-chiefs. Parlion waits to divulge her long-hoarded treasury of scientific secrets. She must find a booming, vigorous young technological civilization ready to use them, when the day dawns at last.

"You, or your sons, or *their* sons, shall lead the first legions into space, first

settling and colonizing the worlds within the home system—then out across immensity to the planets of thrice ten thousand stars. By strategy or force, cunning or conquest, you shall bring the standards of the old Imperial planets beneath your bright new banner—and hold them.

"You have a Galaxy to civilize once again. And you had best get started!"

Remembering Her words, he smiled. Quiet little valley, eh? Charming little old-fashioned walled city? Ah, this little world little dreamed, there in the mystic twilight, of the exciting things that would soon be happening to it!

But She was right—as always! It *was* time to get started,

He wondered how he would ever find time to do everything that had to be accomplished.

Well . . . that was what *sons* were for!

Hand in hand, they went down the hillside through the long, sighing grass, and into the city.