

## JIREL MEETS MAGIC

Over Guischarde's fallen drawbridge thundered Joiry's warrior lady, sword swinging, voice shouting hoarsely inside her helmet. The scarlet plume of her crest rippled in the wind. Straight into the massed defenders at the gate she plunged, careering through them by the very impetuosity of the charge, the weight of her mighty warhorse opening up a gap for the men at her heels to widen. For a while there was tumult unspeakable there under the archway, the yells of fighters and the clang of mail on mail and the screams of stricken men. Jirel of Joiry was a shouting battle-machine from which Guischarde's men reeled in bloody confusion as she whirled and slashed and slew in the narrow confines of the gateway, her great stallion's iron hoofs weapons as potent as her own whistling blade.

In her full armor she was impregnable to the men on foot, and the horse's armor protected him from their vengeful blades, so that alone, almost, she might have won the gateway. By sheer weight and impetuosity she carried the battle through the defenders under the arch. They gave way before the mighty warhorse and his screaming rider.

Jirel's swinging sword and the stallion's trampling feet cleared a path for Joiry's men to follow, and at last into Guischarde's court poured the steel-clad hordes of Guischarde's conquerors.

Jirel's eyes were yellow with blood-lust behind the helmet bars, and her voice echoed savagely from the steel cage that confined it, "Giraud! Bring me Giraud! A gold piece to the man who brings me the wizard Giraud!"

She waited impatiently in the courtyard, reining her excited charger in mincing circles over the flags, unable to dismount alone in her heavy armor and disdainful of the threats of possible arbalesters in the arrow-slits that looked down upon her from Guischarde's frowning gray walls. A crossbow shaft was the only thing she had to fear in her impregnable mail.

She waited in mounting impatience, a formidable figure in her bloody armor, the great sword lying across her saddlebow and her eager, angry voice echoing hoarsely from the helmet, "Giraud! Make haste, you varlets! Bring me Giraud!" There was such bloodythirsty impatience in that hollowly booming voice that the men who were returning from searching the castle hung back as they crossed the court toward their lady in reluctant twos and threes, failure eloquent upon their faces.

"What!" screamed Jirel furiously. "You; Giles! Have you brought me Giraud? Watkin! Where is that wizard Giraud? Answer me, I say!"

"We've scoured the castle, my lady," said one of the men fearfully as the angry voice paused. "The wizard is gone."

"Now God defend me!" groaned Joiry's lady. "God help a poor woman served by fools! Did you search among the slain?"

"We searched everywhere, Lady Jirel. Giraud has escaped us."

Jirel called again upon her Maker in a voice that was blasphemy in itself.

"Help me down, then, you hell-spawned knaves," she grated. "I'll find him myself. He must be here!"

With difficulty they got her off the sidling horse. It took two men to handle her, and a third to steady the charger. All the while they straggled with straps and buckles she cursed them hollowly, emerging limb by limb from the casing of steel and swearing with a soldier's fluency as the armor came away. Presently she stood free on the bloody flagstones, a slim, straight lady, keen as a blade, her red hair a flame to match the flame of her yellow eyes. Under the armor she wore a tunic of link-mail from the Holy Land, supple as silk and almost as light, and a doeskin shirt to protect the milky whiteness of her skin.

She was a creature of the wildest paradox, this warrior lady of Joiry, hot as a red coal, chill as steel, satiny of body and iron of soul. The set of her chin was firm, but her mouth betrayed a tenderness she would have died, before admitting. But she was raging now.

"Follow me, then, fools!" she shouted. "I'll find that God-cursed wizard and

split his head with this sword if it takes me until the day I die. I swear it. I'll teach him what it costs to ambush Joiry men. By heaven, he'll pay with his life for my ten who fell at Massy Ford last week. The foul spell-brewer! He'll learn what it means to defy Joiry!"

Breathing threats and curses, she strode across the court, her men following reluctantly at her heels and casting nervous glances upward at the gray towers of Guischart. It had always borne a bad name, this ominous castle of the wizard Giraud, a place where queer things happened, which no man entered uninvited and whence no prisoner had ever escaped, though the screams of torture echoed often from its walls. Jirel's men would have followed her straight through the gates of hell, but they stormed Guischart at her heels with terror in their hearts and no hope of conquest.

She alone seemed not to know fear of the dark sorcerer. Perhaps it was because she had known things so dreadful that mortal perils held no terror for her—there were whispers at Joiry of their lady, and of things that had happened there which no man dared think on. But when Guischart fell, and the wizard's defenders fled before Jirel's mighty steed and the onrush of Joiry's men, they had plucked up

heart, thinking that perhaps the ominous tales of Giraud had been gossip only, since the castle fell as any ordinary lord's castle might fall. But now—there were whispers again, and nervous glances over the shoulder, and men huddled together as they re-entered Guischart at their lady's hurrying heels. A castle from which a wizard might vanish into thin air, with all the exits watched, must be a haunted place, better burned and forgotten. They followed Jirel reluctantly, half ashamed but fearful.

In Jirel's stormy heart there was no room for terror as she plunged into the gloom of the archway that opened upon Guischart's great central hall. Anger that the man might have escaped her was a torch to light the way, and she paused in the door with eager anticipation, sweeping the corpse-strewn hall at a glance, searching for some clue to explain how her quarry had disappeared. "He can't have escaped," she told herself confidently. "There's no way out. He must be here somewhere." And she stepped into the hall, turning over the bodies she passed with a careless foot to make sure that death had not robbed her of vengeance.

An hour later, as they searched the last tower, she was still telling herself that the wizard could not have gone without her knowledge. She had taken special pains about that. There was a secret passage to the river, but she had had that watched. And an underwater door opened into the moat, but he could not have gone that way without meeting her men. Secret paths and open, she had found them all and posted a guard at each, and Giraud had not left the castle by any door that led out. She climbed the stairs of the last tower wearily, her confidence shaken.

An iron-barred oaken door closed the top of the steps, and Jirel drew back as her men lifted the heavy cross-pieces and opened it for her. It had not been barred from within. She stepped into the little round room inside, hope fading completely as she saw that it too was empty, save for the body of a page-boy lying on the uncarpeted floor. Blood had made a congealing pool about him, and as Jirel looked she saw something which roused her flagging hopes.

Feet had trodden in that blood, not the mailed feet of armed men, but the tread of shapeless cloth shoes such as surely none but Giraud would have worn when the castle was besieged and falling, and every man's help needed. Those bloody tracks led straight across the room toward the wall, and in that wall—a window.

Jirel stared. To her a window was a narrow slit deep in stone, made for the shooting of arrows, and never covered save in the coldest weather. But this window was broad and low, and instead of the usual animal pelt for hangings a curtain of purple velvet had been drawn back to disclose shutters carved out of something that might have been ivory had any beast alive been huge enough to yield such great unbroken sheets of whiteness. The shutters were unlatched, swinging slightly ajar, and upon them Jirel saw the smear of bloody fingers.

With a little triumphant cry she sprang forward. Here, then, was the secret way Giraud had gone. What lay beyond the window she could not guess. Perhaps an unsuspected passage, or a hidden room. Laughing exultantly, she swung open the ivory shutters.

There was a gasp from the men behind her. She did not hear it. She stood quite still, staring with incredulous eyes. For those ivory gates had opened upon no dark stone hiding-place or secret tunnel. They did not even reveal the afternoon sky outside, nor did they admit the shouts of her men still subduing the last of the defenders in the court below. Instead she was looking out upon a green woodland over which brooded a violet day like no day she had ever seen before. In paralyzed amazement she looked down, seeing not the bloody flags of the courtyard far below, but a mossy carpet at a level with the floor. And on that moss she saw the mark of blood-stained feet. This window might be a magic one, opening into strange lands, but through it had gone the man she swore to kill, and where he fled she must follow.

She lifted her eyes from the tracked moss and stared out again through the dimness under the trees. It was a lovelier land than anything seen even in dreams; so lovely that it made her heart ache with its strange, unearthly enchantment-green woodland hushed and brooding in the hushed violet day. There was a promise of peace there, and forgetfulness and rest. Suddenly the harsh, shouting, noisy world behind her seemed very far away and chill. She moved forward and laid her hand upon the ivory shutters, staring out.

The shuffle of the scared men behind her awakened Jirel from the enchantment that had gripped her. She turned. The dreamy magic of the woodland loosed its hold as she faced the men again, but its memory lingered. She shook her red head a little, meeting their fearful eyes. She nodded toward the open window. "Giraud has gone out there," she said. "Give me your dagger, Giles. This sword is too heavy to carry far."

"But lady-Lady Jirel-dear lady-you can't go out there-Saint Guilda save us! Lady Jirel!"

Jirel's crisp voice cut short the babble of protest.

"Your dagger, Giles. I've sworn to slay Giraud, and slay him I shall, hi whatever land he hides. Giles!"

A man-at-arms shuffled forward with averted face, handing her his dagger. She gave him the sword she carried and thrust the long-bladed knife into her belt. She turned again to the window. Green and cool and lovely, the woodland lay waiting. She thought as she set her knee upon the sill that she must have explored this violet calm even had her oath not driven her; for there was an enchantment about the place that drew her irresistibly. She pulled up her other knee and jumped lightly. The mossy ground received her without a jar. For a few moments Jirel stood very still, watching, listening. Bird songs trilled intermittently about her, and breezes stirred the leaves. From very far away she thought she caught the echoes of a song when the wind blew, and there was something subtly irritating about its simple melody that seemed to seesaw endlessly up and down on two notes. She was glad when the wind died and the song no longer shrilled in her ears.

It occurred to her that before she ventured far she must mark the window she had entered by, and she turned

curiously, wondering how it looked from this side. What she saw sent an inexplicable little chill down her back. Behind her lay a heap of moldering ruins, moss-grown, crumbling into decay. Fire had blackened the stones in ages past. She could see that it must have been a castle, for the original lines of it were not yet quite lost. Only one low wall remained standing now, and in it opened the window through which she had come. There was something hauntingly familiar about the lines of those moldering stones, and she turned away with a vague unease, not quite understanding why. A little path wound away under the low-hanging trees, and she followed it slowly, eyes alert for signs that Giraud had passed this way. Birds trilled drowsily in the leaves overhead, queer, unrecognizable songs like the music of no birds she knew. The violet light was calm and sweet about her.

She had gone on in the bird-haunted quiet for many minutes before she caught the first hint of anything at odds with the perfect peace about her. A whiff of wood-smoke drifted to her nostrils on a vagrant breeze. When she rounded the next bend of the path she saw what had caused it. A tree lay across the way in a smother of shaking leaves and branches. She knew that she must skirt it, for the branches were too tangled to penetrate, and she turned out of the path, following the trunk toward its broken base.

She had gone only a few steps before the sound of a curious sobbing came to her ears. It was the gasp of choked breathing, and she had heard sounds like that too often before not to know that she approached death in some form or another. She laid her hand on her knife-hilt and crept forward softly.

The tree trunk had been severed as if by a blast of heat, for the stump was charred black and still smoking. Beyond the stump a queer tableau was being enacted, and she stopped quite still, staring through the leaves.

Upon the moss a naked girl was lying, gasping her life out behind the hands in which her face was buried. There was no mistaking the death-sound in that failing breath,

although her body was unmarked. Hair of a strange green-gold pallor streamed over her bare white body, and by the fragility and tenuosity of that body Jirel knew that she could not be wholly human.

Above the dying girl a tall woman stood. And that woman was a magnet for Jirel's fascinated eyes. She was generously curved, sleepy-eyed. Black hair bound her head sleekly, and her skin was like rich, dark, creamy velvet. A violet robe wrapped her carelessly, leaving arms and one curved shoulder bare, and her girdle was a snake of something like purple glass. It might have been carved from some vast jewel, save for its size and unbroken clarity. Her feet were thrust bare into silver sandals. But it was her face that held Jirel's yellow gaze.

The sleepy eyes under heavily drooping lids were purple as gems, and the darkly crimson mouth curled in a smile so hateful that fury rushed up in Jirel's heart as she watched. That lazy purple gaze dwelt aloofly upon the gasping girl on the moss. The woman was saying in a voice as rich and deep as thick-piled velvet,

"nor will any other of the dryad folk presume to work forbidden magic in my woodlands for a long, long while to come. Your fate shall be a deadly example to them, Irsla. You dared too greatly. None who defy Jarisme live. Hear me, Irsla!"

The sobbing breath had slowed as the woman spoke, as if life were slipping fast from the dryad-girl on the moss; and as she realized it the speaker's arm lifted and a finger of white fire leaped from her outstretched hand, stabbing the white body at her feet. And the girl Irsla started like one shocked back into life.

"Hear me out, dryad! Let your end be a warning to-"

The girl's quickened breath slowed again as the white brilliance left her, and again the woman's hand rose, again the light-blade stabbed. From behind her shielding hands the dryad gasped.

"Oh, mercy, mercy, Jarisme! Let me die!"

"When I have finished. Not before. Life and death are mine to command here, and I am not yet done with you. Your stolen magic-"

She paused, for Irsla had slumped once more upon the moss, breath scarcely stirring her. As Jarisme's light-dealing hand rose for the third time lire! leapt forward. Partly it was intuitive hatred of the lazy-eyed woman, partly revolt at this cat-and-mouse play with a dying girl for victim. She swung her arm in an arc that cleared the branches from her path, and called out in her clear, strong voice,

"Have done, woman! Let her die in peace."

Slowly Jarisme's purple eyes rose. "They met Jirel's hot yellow glare. Almost physical impact was in that first meeting of their eyes, and hatred flashed between them instantly, like the flash of blades-the instinctive hatred of total opposites, born enemies. Each stiffened subtly, as cats do in the

instant before combat. But Jirel thought she saw in the purple gaze, behind all its kindling anger, a faint disquiet, a nameless uncertainty.

"Who are you?" asked Jarisme, very softly, very dangerously.

Something in that unsureness behind her angry eyes prompted Jirel to answer boldly.

"Jirel of Joiry. I seek the wizard Giraud, who fled me here. Stop tormenting that wretched girl and tell me where to find him. I can make it worth your while."

Her tone was imperiously mandatory, and behind Jarisme's drooping lips an answering flare of anger lighted, almost drowning out that faint unease.

"You do not know me," she observed, her voice very gentle. "I am the sorceress Jarisme, and high ruler over all this land. Did you think to buy me, then, earth-woman?"

Jirel smiled her sweetest, most poisonous smile.

"You will forgive me," she purred. "At the first glance at you I did not think your price could be high. . . ."

A petty malice had inspired the speech, and Jirel was sorry as it left her lips, for she knew that the scorn which blazed up in Jarisme's eyes was justified. The sorceress made a contemptuous gesture of dismissal.

"I shall waste no more of my time here," she said. "Get back to your little lands, Jirel of Joiry, and tempt me no further."

The purple gaze rested briefly on the motionless dryad at her feet, flicked Jirel's hot eyes with a glance of scorn which yet did not wholly hide that curious uncertainty in its depths. One hand slid behind her, oddly as if she were seeking a door-latch in empty air. Then like a heat-shimmer the air danced about her, and in an instant she was gone.

Jirel blinked. Her ears had deceived her as well as her eyes, she thought, for as the sorceress vanished a door closed softly somewhere. Yet look though she would, the green glade was empty, the violet air untroubled. No Jarisme anywhere-no door. Jirel shrugged after a moment's bewilderment. She had met magic before.

A sound from the scarcely breathing girl upon the moss distracted her, and she dropped to her knees beside the dying dryad. There was no mark or wound upon her, yet Jirel knew that death could be only a matter of moments. And dimly she recalled that, so legend said, a tree-sprite never survived the death of its tree. Gently she turned the girl over, wondering if she were beyond help. At the feel of those gentle hands the dryad's lids quivered and rose. Brook-brown eyes looked up at Jirel, with green swimming in their deeps like leaf-reflections in a woodland pool.

"My thanks to you," faltered the girl in a ghostly murmur. "But get you back to your home now-before Jarisme's anger slays you."

Jirel shook her red head stubbornly.

"I must find Giraud first, and kill him, as I have sworn to do. But I will wait. Is there anything I can do?"

The green-reflecting eyes searched hers for a moment. The dryad must have read resolution there, for she shook her head a little.

"I must die-with my tree. But if you are determined- hear me. I owe you-a debt. There is a talisman-braided in my hair. When I-am dead-take it. It is Jarisme's sign. All her subjects wear them. It will guide you to her-and to Giraud. He is ever beside her. I know. I think it was her anger at you--that made her forget to take it from me, after she had dealt me my death. But why she did not slay you-I do not know. Jarisme is quick-to kill. No matter -listen now. If you must have Giraud-you must take a risk that no one here-has ever taken-before. Break this talisman-at Jarisme's feet. I do not know-what will happen then. Something-very terrible. It releases powers -even she can not control. It may-destroy you too. But -it is-a chance. May you-have-all good-"

The faltering voice failed. Jirel, bending her head, caught only meaningless murmurs that trailed away to nothing. The green-gold head dropped suddenly forward on her sustaining arm. Through the forest all about her went one long,

quivering sigh, as it an intangible breeze ruffled the trees. Yet no leaves stirred.

Jirel bent and kissed the dryad's forehead, then laid her very gently back on the moss. And as she did so her hand in the masses of strangely colored hair came upon something sharp and hard. She remembered the talisman. It tingled in her fingers as she drew it out—an odd little jagged crystal sparkling with curious aliveness from the fire burning in its heart.

When she had risen to her feet, leaving the dead dryad lying upon the moss which seemed so perfectly her couch, she saw that the inner brilliance streaming in its wedge-shaped pattern through the crystal was pointing a quivering apex forward and to the right. Irsila had said it would guide her. Experimentally she twisted her hand to the left. Yes, the shaking light shifted within the crystal, pointing always toward the right, and Jarisme. One last long glance she gave to the dryad on the moss. Then she set off again down the path, the little magical thing stinging her hand as she walked. And as she went she wondered. This strong hatred which had flared so instinctively between her and the sorceress was hot enough to burn any trace of fear from her mind, and she remembered that look of uncertainty in the purple gaze that had shot such hatred at her. Why? Why had she not been slain as Irsila was slain, for defiance of this queer land's ruler?

For a while she paced unheedingly along under the trees. Then abruptly the foliage ceased and a broad meadow lay before her, green in the clear, violet day. Beyond the meadow the slim shaft of a tower rose dazzlingly white, and toward it in steady radiance that magical talisman pointed.

From very far away she thought she still caught the echoes of that song when the wind blew, an irritating monotony that made her ears ache. She was glad when the wind died and the song no longer shrilled in her ears.

Out across the meadow she went. Far ahead she could make out purple mountains like low clouds on the horizon, and here and there in the distances clumps of woodland dotted the meadows. She walked on more rapidly now, for she was sure that the white tower housed Jarisme, and with her Giraud. And she must have gone more swiftly than she knew, for with almost magical speed the shining shaft drew nearer.

She could see the arch of its doorway, blue-violet within. The top of the shaft was battlemented, and she caught splashes of color between the teeth of the stone scarps, as if flowers were massed there and spilling blossoms against the whiteness of the tower. The singsong music was louder than ever, and much nearer. Jirel's heart beat a bit heavily as she advanced, wondering what sort of a sorceress this Jarisme might be, what dangers lay before her in the path of her vow's fulfillment. Now the white tower rose up over her, and she was crossing the little space before the door, peering in dubiously. All she could see was dimness and violet mist.

She laid her hand upon the dagger, took a deep breath and stepped boldly in under the arch. In the instant her feet left the solid earth she saw that this violet mist filled the whole shaft of the tower, that there was no floor. Emptiness engulfed her, and all reality ceased.

She was falling through clouds of violet blankness, but in no recognizable direction. It might have been up, down, or sidewise through space. Everything had vanished in

the violet nothing. She knew an endless moment of vertigo and rushing motion; then the dizzy emptiness vanished in a breath and she was standing in a gasping surprise upon the roof of Jarisme's tower.

She knew where she was by the white battlements ringing her round, banked with strange blossoms in muted colors. In the center of the circular, marble-paved place a low couch, cushioned in glowing yellow, stood in the midst of a heap of furs. Two people sat side by side on the couch. One was Giraud.

Black-robed, dark-visaged, he stared at Jirel with a flicker of disquiet in his small, dull eyes. He said nothing.

Jirel dismissed him with a glance, scarcely realizing his presence. For Jarisme had lowered from her lips a long, silver flute. Jirel realized that

the queer, maddening music must have come from that gleaming length, for it no longer echoed in her ears. Jarisme was holding the instrument now in midair, regarding Jirel over it with a purple-eyed gaze that was somehow thoughtful and a little apprehensive, though anger glowed in it, too.

"So," she said richly, in her slow, deep voice. "For the second time you defy me."

At these words Giraud turned his head sharply and stared at the sorceress' impassive profile. She did not return his gaze, but after a moment he looked quickly back at Jirel, and in his eyes too she saw that flicker of alarm, and with it a sort of scared respect. It puzzled her, and she did not like being puzzled. She said a little breathlessly,

"If you like, yes. Give me that skulking potion-brewer beside you and set me down again outside this damned tower of trickery. I came to kill your pet spellmonger here for treachery done me in my own world by this creature who dared not stay to face me."

Her peremptory words hung in the air like the echoes of a gong. For a while no one spoke. Jarisme smiled more subtly than before, an insolent, slow smile that made Jirel's pulses hammer with the desire to smash it down the woman's lush, creamy throat. At last Jarisme said, in a voice as rich and deep as thick-piled velvet,

"Hot words, hot words, soldier-woman! Do you really imagine that your earthly squabbles matter to Jarisme?"

"What matters to Jarisme is of little moment to me," Jirel said contemptuously. "All I want is this skulker here, whom I have sworn to kill." Jarisme's slow smile was maddening. "You demand it of me-Jarisme?" she asked with soft incredulity. "Only fools offend me, woman, and they but once. None commands me. You will have to learn that."

Jirel smiled thinly. "At what price, then, do you value your pet cur?"

Giraud half rose from the couch at that last insult, his dark face darker with a surge of anger. Jarisme pushed him back with a lazy hand.

"This is between your-friend-and me," she said. "I do not think, soldier"-the appellation was the deadliest of insults in the tone she used-"that any price you could offer would interest me."

"And yet your interest is very easily caught." Jirel flashed a contemptuous glance at Giraud, restive under the woman's restraining hand.

Jarisme's rich pallor flushed a little. Her voice was sharper as she said, "Do not tempt me too far, earthling."

Jirel's yellow eyes defied her. "I am not afraid."

The sorceress' purple gaze surveyed her slowly. When Jarisme spoke again a tinge of reluctant admiration lightened the slow scorn of her voice.

"No-you are not afraid. And a fool not to be. Fools annoy me, Jirel of Joiry." She laid the flute down on her knee and lazily lifted a ringless hand. Anger was glowing in her eyes now, blotting out all trace of that little haunting fear. But Giraud caught the rising hand, bending, whispering urgently in her ear. Jirel caught a part of what he said, "-what happens to those who tamper with their own destiny-" And she saw the anger fade from the sorceress' face as apprehension brightened there again. Jarisme looked at Jirel with a long, hard look and shrugged her ample shoulders.

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes, Giraud. It is wisest so."

And to Jirel, "Live, then, earthling. Find your way back to your own land if you can, but I warn you, do not trouble me again. I shall not stay my hand if our paths ever cross in the future."

She struck her soft, white palms together sharply. And at the sound the roof-top and the violet sky and the banked flowers at the parapets whirled around Jirel in dizzy confusion. From very far away she heard that clap of peremptory hands still echoing, but it seemed to her that the great, smokily colored blossoms were undergoing an inexplicable transformation. They quivered and spread and thrust upward from the edges of the tower to arch over her head. Her feet were pressing a mossy ground, and the sweet, earthy odors of a garden rose about her. Blinking, she stared around as the world slowly

steadied.

She was no longer on the roof-top. As far as she could see through the tangled stems, great flowering plants sprang up in the gloaming of a strange, enchanted forest. She was completely submerged in greenery, and the illusion of under-water filled her eyes, for the violet light that filtered through the leaves was diffused and broken into a submarine dimness. Uncertainly she began to grope her way forward, staring about to see what sort of a miracle had enfolded her.

It was a bower in fairyland. She had come into a tropical garden of great, muted blooms and jungle silences. In the diffused light the flowers nodded sleepily among the leaves, hypnotically lovely, hypnotically soporific with their soft colors and drowsy, never-ending motion. The fragrance was overpowering. She went on slowly, treading moss that gave back no sound. Here under the canopy of leaves was a little separate world of color and silence and perfume. Dreamily she made her way among the flowers.

Their fragrance was so strongly sweet that it went to her head, and she walked in a waking dream. Because of this curious, scented trance in which she went she was never quite sure if she had actually seen that motion among the leaves, and looked closer, and made out a huge, incredible serpent of violet transparency, a giant replica of

the snake that girdled Jarisme's waist, but miraculously alive, miraculously supple and gliding, miraculously twisting its soundless way among the blossoms and staring at her with impassive, purple eyes.

While it glided along beside her she had other strange visions too, and could never remember just what they were, or why she caught familiar traces in the tiny, laughing faces that peered at her from among the flowers, or half believed the wild, impossible things they whispered to her, their laughing mouths brushing her ears as they leaned down among the blossoms.

The branches began to thin at last, as she neared the edge of the enchanted place. She walked slowly, half conscious of the great transparent snake like a living jewel writhing along soundlessly at her side, her mind vaguely troubled in its dream by the fading remembrance of what those little, merry voices had told her. When she came to the very edge of the bowery jungle and broke out into clear daylight again she stopped in a daze, staring round in the brightening light as the perfumes slowly cleared from her head.

Sanity and realization returned to her at last. She shook her red head dizzily and looked round, half expecting, despite her returning clarity, to see the great serpent gliding across the grass. But there was nothing. Of course she had dreamed. Of course those little laughing voices had not told her that-that-she clutched after the vanishing tags of remembrance, and caught nothing. Ruefully she laughed and brushed away the clinging memories, looking round to see where she was.

She stood at the crest of a little hill. Below her the flower-fragrant jungle nodded, a little patch of enchanted greenery clothing the slopes of the hill. Beyond and below green meadows stretched away to a far-off line of forest which she thought she recognized as that in which she had first met Jarisme. But the white tower which had risen in the midst of the meadows was magically gone. Where it had stood, unbroken greenery lay under the violet clarity of the sky.

As she stared round in bewilderment a faint prickling stung her palm, and she glanced down, remembering the talisman clutched in her hand. The quivering light was streaming in a long wedge toward some point behind her. She turned. She was in the foothills of those purple mountains she had glimpsed from the edge of the woods. High and shimmering, they rose above her. And, hazily in the heat-waves that danced among their heights, she saw the tower.

Jirel groaned to herself. Those peaks were steep and rocky. Well, no help for it. She must climb. She growled a soldier's oath in her throat and turned wearily toward the rising slopes. They were rough and deeply slashed with ravines. Violet heat beat up from the reflecting rocks, and tiny, brilliantly



colored things scuttled from her path -orange lizards and coral red scorpions and little snakes like bright blue jewels.

It seemed to her as she stumbled upward among the broken stones that the tower was climbing too. Time after time she gazed upon it, and time after time when she lifted her eyes after a grueling struggle up steep ravines, that mocking flicker of whiteness shimmered still high and unattainable on some distant peak. It had the mistiness of unreality, and if her talisman's guide had not pointed steadily upward she would have thought it an illusion to lead her astray.

But after what seemed hours of struggle, there came the time when, glancing up, she saw the shaft rising on the topmost peak of all, white as snow against the clear violet sky. And after that it shifted no more. She took heart now, for at last she seemed to be gaining. Every laborious step carried her nearer that lofty shining upon the mountain's highest peak.

She paused after a while, looking up and wiping the moisture from her forehead where the red curls clung. As she stood there something among the rocks moved, and out from behind a boulder a long, slinking feline creature came. It was not like any beast she had ever seen before. Its shining pelt was fabulously golden, brocaded with queer

patterns of darker gold, and down against its heavy jaws curved two fangs whiter than ivory. With a grace as gliding as water it paced down the ravine toward her.

Jirel's heart contracted. Somehow she found the knife-hilt in her hand, though she had no recollection of having drawn it. She was staring hard at the lovely and terrible cat, trying to understand the haunting familiarity about its eyes. They were purple, like jewels. Slowly recognition dawned. She had met that purple gaze before, insolent under sleepy lids. Jarisme's eyes. Yes, and the snake in her dream had watched her with a purple stare too. Jarisme? She closed her hand tightly about the crystal, knowing that she must conceal from the sorceress her one potent weapon, waiting until the time came to turn it against its maker. She shifted her knife so that light glinted down the blade. They stood quite still for a moment, yellow-eyed woman and fabulous, purple-eyed cat, staring at each other with hostility eloquent in every line of each. Jirel clenched her knife tight, warily eyeing the steel-clawed paws on which the golden beast went so softly. They could have ripped her to ribbons before the blade struck home.

She saw a queer expression flicker across the somber purple gaze that met hers, and the beautiful cat crouched a little, tail jerking, lip twitched back to expose shining fangs. It was about to spring. For an interminable moment she waited for that hurtling golden death to launch itself upon her, tense, rigid, knife steady in her hand. . . .

It sprang. She dropped to one knee in the split second of its leaping, instinctively hiding the crystal, but thrusting up her dagger in defense. The great beast sailed easily over her head. As it hurtled past, a peal of derisive laughter rang in her ears, and she heard quite clearly the sound of a slamming door. She scrambled up and whirled in one motion, knife ready. The defile was quite empty in the violet day. There was no door anywhere. Jarisme had vanished.

A little shaken, Jirel sheathed her blade. She was not afraid. Anger burned out all trace of fear as she remembered the scorn in that ringing laugh. She took up her

course again toward the tower, white and resolute, not looking back.

The tower was drawing near again. She toiled upward. Jarisme showed no further sign of her presence, but Jirel felt eyes upon her, purple eyes, scornful and sleepy. She could see the tower clearly, just above her at the crest of the highest peak, up to which a long arc of steps curved steeply. They were very old, these steps, so worn that many were little more than irregularities on the stone. Jirel wondered what feet had worn them so, to what door they had originally led.

She was panting when she reached the top and peered in under the arch of the

door. To her surprise she found herself staring into a broad, semicircular hallway, whose walls were lined with innumerable doors. She remembered the violet nothingness into which she had stepped the last time she crossed the sill, and wondered as she thrust a tentative foot over it if the hall were an illusion and she were really about to plunge once more into that cloudy abyss of falling. But the floor was firm.

She stepped inside and paused, looking round in some bewilderment and wondering where to turn now. She could smell peril in the air. Almost she could taste the magic that hovered like a mist over the whole enchanted place. Little warning prickles ran down her back as she went forward very softly and pushed open one of those innumerable doors. Behind it a gallery stretched down miles of haze-shrouded extent. Arrow-straight it ran, the arches of the ceiling making an endless parade that melted into violet distance. And as she stood looking down the cloudy vista, something like a puff of smoke obscured her vision for an instant-smoke that eddied and billowed and rolled away from the shape of that golden cat which had vanished in the mountain ravine.

It paced slowly down the hall toward her, graceful and lovely, muscles rippling under the brocaded golden coat and purple eyes fixed upon her with a scornful stare. Jirel's hand went to the knife in her belt, hatred choking up in her throat as she met the purple eyes. But in the corridor a voice was echoing softly, Jarisme's voice, saying,

"Then it is war between us, Jirel of Joiry. For you have defied my mercy, and you must be punished. Your punishment I have chosen-the simplest, and the subtlest, and the most terrible of all punishments, the worst that could befall a human creature. Can you guess it? No? Then wonder a while, for I am not prepared yet to administer it fully ... or shall I kill you now? Eh-h-h? ..."

The curious, long-drawn query melted into a purring snarl, and the great cat's lip lifted, a flare of murderous light flaming up in the purple eyes. It had been pacing nearer all the while that light voice had echoed in the air. Now its roar crescendoed into a crashing thunder that rang from the walls, and the steel springs of its golden body tightened for a leap straight at Jirel's throat. Scarcely a dozen paces away, she saw the brocaded beauty of it crouching, taut and poised, saw the powerful body quiver and tighten-and spring. In instinctive panic she leaped back and slammed the door in its face. Derisive laughter belled through the air. A cloud of thin smoke eddied through the crack around the door and puffed in her face with all the insolence of a blow. Then the air was clear again. The red mist of murder swam before Jirel's eyes. Blind with anger, breath beating thickly in her throat, she snatched at the door again, ripping the dagger from her belt. Through that furious haze she glared down the corridor. It was empty. She closed the door a second time and leaned against it, trembling with anger, until the mist had cleared from her head and she could control her shaking hand well enough to replace the dagger.

When she had calmed a little she turned to scan the hall, wondering what to do next. And she saw that there was no escape now, even had she wished, for the door she had entered by was gone. All about her now closed the door-studded walls, enigmatic, imprisoning. And the very fact of their presence was an insult, suggesting that Jarisme had feared she would flee if the entrance were left open. Jirel forced herself into calmness again. She was not afraid, but she knew herself in deadly peril.

She was revolving the sorceress' threat as she cast about for some indication to guide her next step. The simplest

and subtlest and most terrible of punishments-what could it be? Jirel knew much of the ways of torture-her dungeons were as blood-stained as any of her neighbors'-but she knew too that Jarisme had not meant only the pain of the flesh. There was a subtler menace in her words. It would be a feminine vengeance, and more terrible than anything iron and fire could inflict. She knew that. She knew also that no door she could open now would lead to freedom, but she could not stay quiet, waiting. She glanced along the rows of

dark, identical panels. Anything that magic could contrive might lie behind them. In the face of peril more deadly than death she could not resist the temptation to pull open the nearest one and peer within.

A gust of wind blew in her face and rattled the door. Dust was in that wind, and bitter cold. Through an inner grille of iron, locked across the opening, she saw a dazzle of whiteness like sun on snow in the instant before she slammed the door shut on the piercing gust. But the incident had whetted her curiosity. She moved along the wall and opened another.

This time she was looking through another locked grille into a dimness of gray smoke shot through with flame. The smell of burning rose hit her nostrils, and she could hear faintly, as from vast distances, the sound of groans and the shivering echo of screams. Shuddering, she closed the door.

When she opened the next one she caught her breath and stared. Before her a thick crystal door separated her from bottomless space. She pressed her face to the cold glass and stared out and down. Nothingness met her gaze. Dark and silence and the blaze of unwinking stars. It was day outside the tower, but she looked into fathomless night. And as she stared, a long streak of light flashed across the blackness and faded. It was not a shooting star. By straining her eyes she could make out something like a thin sliver of silver flashing across the dark, its flaming tail fading behind it in the sky. And the sight made her ill with sudden vertigo. Bottomless void reeled around her, and she fell back into the hallway, slamming the door upon that terrifying glimpse of starry nothingness.

It was several minutes before she could bring herself to try the next door. When she did, swinging it open timorously, a familiar sweetness of flower perfume floated out and she found herself gazing through a grille of iron bars deep into that drowsy jungle of blossoms and scent and silence which she had crossed at the mountain's foot. A wave of remembrance washed over her. For an instant she could hear those tiny, laughing voices again, and she felt the presence of the great snake at her side, and the wild, mirth-ridden secrets of the little gray voices rang in her ears. Then she was awake again, and the memory vanished as dreams do, leaving nothing but tantalizing fragments of forgotten secrets drifting through her mind. She knew as she stared that she could step straight into that flowery fairyland again if the bars would open. But there was no escape from this magical place, though she might look through any number of opening doors into far lands and near.

She was beginning to understand the significance of the hall. It must be from here that Jarisme by her magical knowledge journeyed into other lands and times and worlds through the doors that opened between her domain and those strange, outland places. Perhaps she had sorcerer friends there, and paid them visits and brought back greater knowledge, stepping from world to world, from century to century, through her enchanted doorways. Jirel felt certain that one of these enigmatic openings would give upon that mountain pass where the golden cat with its scornful purple eyes had sprung at her, and vanished, and laughed backward as the door slammed upon it, and upon the woodland glade where the dryad died. But she knew that bars would close these places away even if she could find them.

She went on with her explorations. One door opened upon a steamy fern-forest of gigantic growths, out of whose deeps floated musky, reptilian odors, and the distant sound of beasts bellowing hollowly. And another upon a gray desert stretching flat and lifeless to the horizon, wan under the light of a dim red sun.

But at last she came to one that opened not into alien lands but upon a stairway winding down into solid rock whose walls showed the mark of the tools that had hollowed them. No sound came up the shaft of the stairs, and a gray light darkened down their silent reaches. Jirel peered in vain for some hint of what lay below. But at last, because inactivity had palled upon her and she knew that all ways were hopeless for escape, she entered the doorway and went slowly down the steps. It occurred to her that possibly she might find Jarisme below, engaged in some obscure magic in the lower regions, and she was eager

to come to grips with her enemy.

The light darkened as she descended, until she was groping her way through obscurity round and round the curving stairs. When the steps ended at a depth she could not guess, she could tell that she had emerged into a low-roofed corridor only by feeling the walls and ceiling that met her exploring hands, for the thickest dark hid everything. She made her slow way along the stone hall, which wound and twisted and dipped at unexpected angles until she lost all sense of direction. But she knew she had gone a long way when she began to see the faint gleam of light ahead.

Presently she began to catch the faraway sound of a familiar song—Jarisme's monotonous little flute melody on two notes, and she was sure then that her intuition had been true, that the sorceress was down here somewhere. She drew her dagger in the gloom and went on more warily.

An arched opening ended the passage. Through the arch poured a blaze of dancing white luminance. Jirel paused, blinking and trying to make out what strange place she was entering. The room before her was filled with the baffling glitter and shimmer and mirage of reflecting surfaces so bewilderingly that she could not tell which was real and which mirror, and which dancing light. The brilliance dazzled in her face and dimmed into twilight and blazed again as the mirrors shifted. Little currents of dark shivered through the chaos and brightened into white sparkle once more. That monotonous music came to her through the quivering lights and reflections, now strongly, now faintly in the distance.

The whole place was a chaos of blaze and confusion. She could not know if the room were small or large, a cavern or a palace hall. Queer reflections danced through the dazzle of it. She could see her own image looking back at her from a dozen, a score, a hundred moving planes that grotesquely distorted her and then flickered out again, casting a blaze of light in her blinded eyes.

Dizzily she blinked into the reeling wilderness of planes.

Then she saw Jarisme in her violet robe watching her from a hundred identical golden couches reflected upon a hundred surfaces. The figure held a flute to its lips, and the music pulsed from it in perfect time with the pulsing of the sorceress' swelling white throat. Jirel stared round in confusion at the myriad Jarismes all piping the interminable monotones. A hundred sensual, dreamy faces turned to her, a hundred white arms dropped as the flute left a hundred red mouths that Jarisme might smile ironic welcome a hundredfold more scornful for its multiplicity.

When the music ceased, all the flashing dazzle suddenly stilled. Jirel blinked as the chaos resolved itself into shining order, the hundred Jarismes merging into one sleepy-eyed woman lounging upon her golden couch in a vast crystal-walled chamber shaped like the semicircular half of a great, round, domed room. Behind the couch a veil of violet mist hung like a curtain shutting off what would have formed the other half of the circular room.

"Enter," said the sorceress with the graciousness of one who knows herself in full command of the situation. "I thought you might find the way here. I am preparing a ceremony which will concern you intimately. Perhaps you would like to watch? This is to be an experiment, and for that reason a greater honor is to be yours than you can ever have known before; for the company I am assembling to watch your punishment is a more distinguished one than you could understand. Come here, inside the circle."

Jirel advanced, dagger still clenched in one hand, the other closed about her bit of broken crystal. She saw now that the couch stood in the center of a ring engraved in the floor with curious, cabalistic symbols. Beyond it the cloudy violet curtain swayed and eddied within itself, a vast, billowing wall of mist. Dubiously she stepped over the circle and stood eyeing Jarisme, her yellow gaze hot with rigidly curbed emotion. Jarisme smiled and lifted the flute to her lips again.

As the irritating two notes began their seesawing tune Jirel saw something amazing happen. She knew then that the flute was a magic one, and the song magical too. The notes took on a form that overstepped the boundaries of the

aural and partook in some inexplicable way of all the other senses too. She could feel them, taste them, smell them, see them. In a queer way they were visible, pouring in twos from the flute and dashing outward like little needles of light. The walls reflected them, and those reflections became swifter and brighter and more numerous until the air was full of flying slivers of silvery brilliance, until shimmers began to dance among them and over them, and that bewildering shift of mirrored planes started up once more. Again reflections crossed and dazzled and multiplied in the shining air as the flute poured out its flashing double notes.

Jirel forgot the sorceress beside her, the music that grated on her ears, even her own peril, in watching the pictures that shimmered and vanished in the mirrored surfaces. She saw flashes of scenes she had glimpsed through the doors of Jarisme's hallway. She saw stranger places than that, passing in instant-brief snatches over the silvery planes. She saw jagged black mountains with purple dawns rising behind them and stars in unknown figures across the dark skies; she saw gray seas flat and motionless beneath gray clouds; she saw smooth meadows rolling horizon-ward under the glare of double suns. All these and many more awoke to the magic of Jarisme's flute, and melted again to give way to others.

Jirel had the strange fancy, as the music went on, that it was audible in those lands whose brief pictures were flickering across the background of its visible notes. It

seemed to be piercing immeasurable distances, ringing across the cloudy seas, echoing under the double suns, calling insistently in strange lands and far, unknown places, over deserts and mountains that man's feet had never trod, reaching other worlds and other times and crying its two-toned monotony through the darkness of interstellar space. All of this, to Jirel, was no more than a vague realization that it must be so. It meant nothing to her, whose world was a flat plane arched by the heaven-pierced bowl of the sky. Magic, she told herself, and gave up trying to understand.

Presently the tempo of the fluting changed. The same two notes still shrilled endlessly up and down, but it was no longer a clarion call ringing across borderlands into strange worlds. Now it was slower, statelier. And the notes of visible silver that had darted crazily against the crystal walls and reflected back again took on an order that ranked them into one shining plane. Upon that plane Jirel saw the outlines of a familiar scene gradually take shape. The great door-lined hall above mirrored itself in faithful replica before her eyes. The music went on changelessly.

Then, as she watched, one of those innumerable doors quivered. She held her breath. Slowly it swung open upon that gray desert under the red sun which she had seen before she closed it quickly away behind concealing panels. Again as she looked, that sense of utter desolation and weariness and despair came over her, so uncannily dreary was the scene. Now the door stood wide, its locked grille no longer closing it, and as the music went on she could see a dazzle like a jagged twist of lightning begin to shimmer in its aperture. The gleam strengthened. She saw it quiver once, twice, then sweep forward with blinding speed through the open doorway. And as she tried to follow it with her eyes another moving door distracted her.

This time the steamy fern-forest was revealed as the panels swung back. But upon the threshold sprawled something so frightful that Jirel's free hand flew to her lips and a scream beat up in her throat. It was black-shapeless and black and slimy. And it was alive. Like a heap of putrescently shining jelly it heaved itself over the door-

sill and began to flow across the floor, inching its way along like a vast blind ameba. But she knew without being told that it was horribly wise, horribly old. Behind it a black trail of slime smeared the floor.

Jirel shuddered and turned her eyes away. Another door was swinging open. Through it she saw a place she had not chanced upon before, a country of bare red rock strewn jaggedly under a sky so darkly blue that it might have been black, with stars glimmering hi it more clearly than stars of earth. Across

this red, broken desert a figure came striding that she knew could be only a figment of magic, so tall it was, so spidery-thin, so grotesquely human despite its bulbous head and vast chest. She could not see it clearly, for about it like a robe it clutched a veil of blinding light. On those incredibly long, thin legs it stepped across the door-sill, drew its dazzling garment closer about it, and strode forward. As it neared, the light was so blinding that she could not look upon it. Her averted eyes caught the motion of a fourth door.

This time she saw that flowery ravine again, dim in its underwater illusion of diffused light. And out from among the flowers writhed a great serpent-creature, not of the transparent crystal she had seen in her dream, but iridescently scaled. Nor was it entirely serpent, for from the thickened neck sprang a head which could not be called wholly unhuman. The thing carried itself as proudly as a cobra, and as it glided across the threshold its single, many-faceted eye caught Jirel's in the reflection. The eye flashed once, dizzily, and she reeled back in sick shock, the violence of that glance burning through her veins like fire. When she regained control of herself many other doors were standing open upon scenes both familiar and strange. During her daze other denizens of those strange worlds must have entered at the call of the magic flute.

She was just in time to see an utterly indescribable thing flutter into the hall from a world which so violated her eyes that she got no more than a glimpse of it as she flung up outraged hands to shut it out. She did not lower that shield until Jarisme's amused voice said in an undertone, "Behold your audience, Jirel of Joiry," and she realized that the music had ceased and a vast silence was pressing against her ears. Then she looked out, and drew a long breath. She was beyond surprise and shock now, and she stared with the dazed incredulity of one who knows herself in a nightmare.

Ranged outside the circle that enclosed the two women sat what was surely the strangest company ever assembled. They were grouped with a queer irregularity which, though meaningless to Jirel, yet gave the impression of definite purpose and design. It had a symmetry so strongly marked that even though it fell outside her range of comprehension she could not but feel the Tightness of it.

The light-robed dweller in the red barrens sat there, and the great black blob of shapeless jelly heaved gently on the crystal floor. She saw others she had watched enter, and many more. One was a female creature whose robe of peacock iridescence sprang from her shoulders in great drooping wings and folded round her like a bat's leathery cloak. And her neighbor was a fat gray slug of monster size, palpitating endlessly. One of the crowd looked exactly like a tall white lily swaying on a stalk of silver pallor, but from its chalice poured a light so ominously tinted that she shuddered and turned her eyes away.

Jarisme had risen from her couch. Very tall and regal in her violet robe, she rose against the back-drop of mist which veiled the other half of the room. As she lifted her arms, the incredible company turned to her with an eager expectancy. Jirel shuddered. Then Jarisme's flute spoke softly. It was a different sort of music from the clarion that called them together, from the stately melody which welcomed them through the opening doors. But it harped still on the two seesawing notes, with low, rippling sounds so different from the other two that Jirel marveled at the range of the sorceress' ability on the two notes.

For a few moments as the song went on, nothing happened. Then a motion behind Jarisme caught Jirel's eye. The curtain of violet mist was swaying. The music beat at it and it quivered to the tune. It shook within itself, and paled and thinned, and from behind it a light began to glow. Then on a last low monotone it dissipated wholly and Jirel was staring at a vast globe of quivering light which loomed up under the stupendous arch that soared outward to form the second half of the chamber. As the last clouds faded she saw that the thing was a huge crystal sphere,

rising upon the coils of a translucent purple base in the shape of a serpent. And in the heart of the globe burned a still flame, living, animate, instinct with a life so alien that Jirel stared in utter bewilderment. It was a thing she knew to be alive-yet she knew it could not be alive. But she recognized even in her daze of incomprehension its relation to the tiny fragment of crystal she clutched in her hand. In that too the still flame burned. It stung her hand faintly in reminder that she possessed a weapon which could destroy Jarisme, though it might destroy its wielder in the process. The thought gave her a sort of desperate courage.

Jarisme was ignoring her now. She had turned to face the great globe with lifted arms and shining head thrown back. And from her lips a piercingly sweet sound fluted, midway between hum and whistle. Jirel had the wild fancy that she could see that sound arrowing straight into the heart of the vast sphere bulking so high over them all. And in the heart of that still, living flame a little glow of red began to quiver.

Through the trembling air shrilled a second sound. From the corner of her eye Jirel could see that a dark figure had moved forward into the circle and fallen to its knees at the sorceress' side. She knew it for Giraud. Like two blades the notes quivered in the utter hush that lay upon the assembly, and in the globe that red glow deepened.

One by one, other voices joined the chorus, queer, uncanny sounds some of them, from throats not shaped for speech. No two voices blended. The chorus was one of single, unrelated notes. And as each voice struck the globe, the fire burned more crimson, until its still pallor had flushed wholly into red. High above the rest soared Jaris-me's knife-keen fluting. She lifted her arms higher, and the voices rose in answer. She lowered them, and the blade-like music swooped down an almost visible arc to a lower key. Jirel felt that she could all but see the notes spearing straight from each singer into the vast sphere that dwarfed them all. There was no melody in it, but a sharply definite pattern as alien and unmistakable as the symmetry of their grouping in the room. And as Jarisme's arms rose, lifting the voices higher, the flame burned more deeply red, and paled again as the voices fell. Three times that stately, violet-robed figure gestured with lifted arms, and three times the living flame deepened and paled. Then Jarisme's voice soared in a high, triumphant cry and she whirled with spread arms, facing the company. In one caught breath, all voices ceased. Silence fell upon them like a blow. Jarisme was no longer priestess, but goddess, as she fronted them in that dead stillness with exultant face and blazing eyes. And in one motion they bowed before her as corn bows under wind. Alien things, shapeless monsters, faceless, eyeless, unrecognizable creatures from unknowable dimensions, abased themselves to the crystal floor before the splendor of light in Jarisme's eyes. For a moment of utter silence the tableau held. Then the sorceress' arms fell.

Ripplingly the company rose. Beyond Jarisme the vast globe had paled again into that living, quiet flame of golden pallor. Immense, brooding, alive, it loomed up above them. Into the strained stillness Jarisme's low voice broke. She was speaking in Jirel's native tongue, but the air, as she went on, quivered thickly with something like waves of sound that were pitched for other organs than human ears. Every word that left her lips made another wave through the thickened air. The assembly shimmered before Jirel's eyes in that broken clarity as a meadow quivers under heat waves.

"Worshippers of the Light," said Jarisme sweetly, "be welcomed from your far dwellings into the presence of the Flame. We who serve it have called you to the worship, but before you return, another sort of ceremony is to be held, which we have felt will interest you all. For we have called it truly the simplest and subtlest and most terrible of all punishments for a human creature.

"It is our purpose to attempt a reversal of this woman's physical and mental self in such a way as to cause her body to become rigidly motionless while her mind-her soul-looks eternally backward along the path it has traveled. You who

are human, or have known humanity, will understand what deadly torture that can be. For no human creature, by the laws that govern it, can have led a life whose intimate review is anything but pain. To be frozen into eternal reflections, reviewing all the futility and pain of life, all the pain that thoughtless or intentional acts have caused others, all the spreading consequences of every act-that, to a human being, would be the most dreadful of all torments."

In the silence that fell as her voice ceased, Giraud laid a hand on Jarisme's arm. Jirel saw terror in his eyes.

"Remember," he uttered, "remember, for those who tamper with their known destiny a more fearful thing may come than-"

Jarisme shrugged off the restraining hand impatiently. She turned to Jirel. "Know, earthling," she said in a queerly strained voice, "that in the books of the future it is written that Jarisme the Sorceress must die at the hands of the one human creature who defies her thrice-and that human creature a woman. Twice I have been weak, and spared you. Once in the forest, once on the roof-top, you cast your puny defiance in my face, and I stayed my hand for fear of what is written. But the third time shall not come. Though you are my appointed slayer, you shall not slay. With my own magic I break Fate's sequence, now, and we shall see!"

In the blaze of her purple eyes Jirel saw that the moment had come. She braced herself, fingers closing about the fragment of crystal in her hand uncertainly as she hesitated, wondering if the time had come for the breaking of her talisman at the sorceress' feet. She hesitated too long, though her waiting was only a split second in duration. For Jarisme's magic was more supremely simple than Jirel could have guessed. The sorceress turned a blazing purple gaze upon her and sharply snapped her plump fingers in the earthwoman's face. At the sound Jirel's whole world turned inside out about her. It was the sheerest physical agony. Everything vanished as that terrible shift took place. She felt her own body being jerked inexplicably around in a reversal like nothing that any living creature could ever have experienced before. It was a backward-facing in a direction which could have had no existence until that instant. She felt the newness in the second before sight came to her-a breathless, soundless, new-born now in which she was the first dweller, created simultaneously with the new plane of being. Then sight broke upon her consciousness.

The thing spread out before her was so stupendous that she would have screamed if she had possessed an animate ' body. All life was open to her gaze. The sight was too immeasurable for her to grasp it fully-too vast for her human consciousness to look upon at all save in flashing shutter-glimpses without relation or significance. Motion and immobility existed simultaneously in the thing before her. Endless activity shuttling to and fro-yet the whole vast panorama was frozen in a timeless calm through which a mighty pattern ran whose very immensity was enough to strike terror into her soul. Threaded through it the backward trail of her own life stretched. As she gazed upon it such floods of conflicting emotion washed over her that she could not see anything clearly, but she was fiercely insisting to her inner consciousness that she would not-would not-look back, dared not, could not-and all the while her sight was running past days and weeks along the path which led inexorably toward the one scene she could not bear to think of.

Very remotely, as her conscious sight retraced the backward way, she was aware of overlapping planes of existence in the stretch of limitless activity before her. Shapes other than human, scenes that had no meaning to her, quivered and shifted and boiled with changing lives-yet lay motionless in the mighty pattern. She scarcely heeded them. For her, of all that panoramic impossibility one scene alone had meaning-the one scene toward which her sight was racing now, do what she would to stop it-the one scene that she knew she could never bear to see again.

Yet when her sight reached that place the pain did not begin at once. She gazed almost calmly upon that little interval of darkness and flaring light,



the glare of torches shining upon a girl's bent red head and on a man's long body sprawled motionless upon flagstones. In the deepest stillness she stared. She felt no urge to look farther, on beyond the scene into the past. This was the climax, the center of all her life-this torch-lit moment on the flagstones. Vividly she was back again in the past, felt the hardness of the cold flags against her knees, and the numbness of her heart as she stared down into a dead man's face. Tunelessly she dwelt upon that long-ago heartbreak, and within her something swelled unbearably.

That something was a mounting emotion too great to have name, too complexly blending agony and grief and hatred and love-and rebellion; so strong that all the rest of the stupendous thing before her was blotted out in the gathering storm of what seethed in her innermost consciousness. She was aware of nothing but that overwhelming emotion. And it was boiling into one great unbearable explosion of violence in which rage took precedence over all. Rage at life for permitting such pain to be. Rage at Jarisme for forcing her into memory. Such rage that everything shook before it, and melted and ran together in a heat of rebellion, and-something snapped. The panorama reeled and shivered and collapsed into the dark of semi-oblivion.

Through the clouds of her half-consciousness the agony of change stabbed at her. Half understanding, she welcomed it, though the piercing anguish of that reversal was so strong it dragged her out of her daze again and wrung her anew in the grinding pain of that change which defied all natural laws. In heedless impatience she waited for the torture to pass. Exultation was welling up in her, for she knew that her own violence had melted the spell by which Jarisme held her. She knew what she must do when she stood free again, and conscious power flowed intoxicatingly through her.

She opened her eyes. She was standing rigidly before the great fire-quicken globe. The amazing company was grouped around her intently, and Jarisme, facing her, had taken one angry, incredulous step forward as she saw her own spell break. Upon that tableau Jirel's hot yellow eyes opened, and she laughed in grim exultation and swung up her arm. Violet light glinted upon crystal. In the instant Jarisme saw what she intended, convulsive terror wiped all other expression from her face. A cry of mingled inarticulateness thundered up from the transfixed crowd. Giraud started forward from among them, frantic hands clawing out toward her.

"No, no!" shrieked Jarisme. "Wait!"

It was too late. The crystal dashed itself from Jirel's down-swinging arm, the light in it blazing. With a splintering crash it struck the floor at the sorceress' sandaled feet and flew into shining fragments.

For an instant nothing happened. Jirel held her breath, waiting. Giraud had flung himself flat on the shining floor, reaching out for her in a last desperate effort. His hands had flown out to seize her, and found only her ankles. He clung to them now with a paralyzed grip, his face hidden between his arms. Jarisme cowered motionless, arms clasped about her head as if she were trying to hide. The motley throng of watchers was rigid in fatalistic quiet. In tense silence they waited.

Then in the great globe above them the pale flame flickered. Jarisme's gaspingly caught breath sounded loud in the utter quiet. Again the flame shook. And again. Then abruptly it went out. Darkness stunned them for a moment; then a low muttering roar rumbled up out of the stillness, louder and deeper and stronger until it pressed unbearably upon Jirel's ears and her head was one great aching surge of sound. Above that roar a sharply crackling noise broke, and the crystal walls of the room trembled, reeled dizzily -split open in long jagged rents through which the violet day poured in thin fingers of light. Overhead the shattering sound of falling walls roared loud. Jarisme's magic tower was crumbling all around them. Through the long, shivering cracks in the walls the pale violet day poured more strongly, serene in the chaos.

In that clear light Jirel saw a motion among the throng. Jarisme had risen to her full height. She saw the sleek black head go up in an odd, defiant,

desperate poise, and above the soul-shaking tumult she heard the sorceress' voice scream,

"Urda! Urda-sla!"

In the midst of the roar of the falling walls for the briefest instant a deathly silence dropped. And out of that silence, like an answer to the sorceress' cry, came a Noise, an indescribable, intolerable loudness like the crack of cyclopean thunder. And suddenly in the sky above them, visible through the crumbling crystal walls, a long black wedge opened. It was like a strip of darkest midnight splitting the violet day, a midnight through which stars shone unbearably near, unbearably bright.

Jirel stared up in dumb surprise at that streak of starry night cleaving the daylight sky. Jarisme stood rigid, arms outstretched, defiantly fronting the thunderous dark whose apex was drawing nearer and nearer, driving downward like a vast celestial spear. She did not flinch as it reached toward the tower. Jirel saw the darkness sweep forward like a racing shadow. Then it was upon them, and the earth shuddered under her feet, and from very far away she heard Jarisme scream.

When consciousness returned to her, she sat up painfully and stared around. She lay upon green grass, bruised and aching, but unharmed. The violet day was serene and unbroken once more. The purple peaks had vanished. No longer was she high among mountains. Instead, the green meadow where she had first seen Jarisme's tower stretched about her. In its dissolution it must have returned to its original site, flashing back along the magical ways it had traveled as the sorceress' magic was broken. For the tower too was gone. A little distance away she saw a heap of marble blocks outlining a rough circle, where that white shaft had risen. But the stones were weathered and cracked like the old, old stones of an ancient ruin.

She had been staring at this for many minutes, trying to focus her bewildered mind upon its significance, before the sound of groaning which had been going on for some time impressed itself on her brain. She turned. A little way off, Giraud lay in a tangle of torn black robes. Of Jarisme and the rest she saw no sign. Painfully she got to her feet and staggered to the wizard, turning him over with a disdainful toe. He opened his eyes and stared at her with a cloudy gaze into which recognition and realization slowly crept.

"Are you hurt?" she demanded.

He pulled himself to a sitting position and flexed his limbs experimentally. Finally he shook his head, more in answer to his own investigation than to her query, and got slowly to his feet. Jirel's eyes sought the weapon at his hip. "I am going to kill you now," she said calmly. "Draw your sword, wizard." The little dull eyes flashed up to her face. He stared. Whatever he saw in the yellow gaze must have satisfied him that she meant what she said, but he did not draw, nor did he fall back. A tight little smile drew his mouth askew, and he lifted his black-robed arms. Jirel saw them rise, and her gaze followed the gesture automatically. Up they went, up. And then in the queerest fashion she lost all control of her own eyes, so that they followed some invisible upward line which drew her on and on skyward until she was rigidly staring at a fixed point of invisibility at the spot where the lines of Giraud's arms would have crossed, where they extended to a measureless distance. Somehow she actually saw that point, and could not look away. Gripped in the magic of those lifted arms, she stood rigid, not even realizing what had happened, unable even to think in the moveless magic of Giraud.

His little mocking chuckle reached her from immeasurably far away.

"Kill me?" he was laughing thickly. "Kill me, Giraud? Why, it was you who saved me, Joiry! Why else should I have clung to your ankles so tightly? For I knew that when the Light died, the only one who could hope to live would be the one who slew it-nor was that a certainty, either. But I took the risk, and well I did, or I would be with Jarisme now in the outer dark whence she called up her no-god of the void to save her from oblivion. I warned her what would happen if she tampered with Fate. And I would rather-yes, much rather-be here, in this pleasant violet land which I

shall rule alone now. Thanks to you, Joiry! Kill me, eh? I think not!" That thick, mocking chuckle reached her remotely, penetrated her magic-stilled mind. It echoed round and round there, for a long while, before she realized what it meant. But at last she remembered, and her mind woke a little from its inertia, and such anger swept over her that its heat was an actual pain. Giraud, the runaway sorcerer, laughing at Joiry! Holding Jirel of Joiry in his spell! Mocking her! Blindly she wrenched at the bonds of magic, blindly urged her body forward. She could see nothing but that non-existent point where the lifted arms would have crossed, in measureless distances, but she felt the dagger-hilt in her hand, and she lunged forward through invisibility, and did not even know when the blade sank home. Sight returned to her then in a stunning flood. She rubbed dazed eyes and shook herself and stared round the green meadow in the violet day uncomprehendingly, for her mind was not yet fully awake. Not until she looked down did she remember. Giraud lay there. The black robes were furled like wings over his quiet body, but red in a thick flood was spreading on the grass, and from the tangled garments her dagger-hilt stood up. Jirel stared down at him, emotionless, her whole body still almost asleep from the power of the dead man's magic. She could not even feel triumph. She pulled the blade free automatically and wiped it on his robes. Then she sat down beside the body and rested her head in her hands, forcing herself to awaken. After a long while she looked up again, the old hot light rising in her eyes, life flushing back into her face once more. Shaking off the last shreds of the spell, she got to her feet, sheathing the dagger. About her the violet-misted meadows were very still. No living creature moved anywhere in sight. The trees were motionless in the unstirring air. And beyond the ruins of the marble tower she saw the opening in the woods out of which her path had come, very long ago. Jirel squared her shoulders and turned her back upon her vow fulfilled, and without a backward glance set off across the grass toward the tree-hid ruins which held the gate to home.