

THE DARK LAND

In her great bed in the tower room of Joiry Castle, Jirel of Joiry lay very near to death. Her red hair was a blaze upon the pillow above the bone-whiteness of her face, and the lids lay heavily over the yellow fire of her eyes. Life had gushed out of her in great scarlet spurts from the pike-wound deep in her side, and the whispering women who hovered at the door were telling one another in hushed murmurs that the Lady Jirel had led her last battle charge. Never again would she gallop at the head of her shouting men, swinging her sword with all the ferocity that had given her name such weight among the savage warrior barons whose lands ringed hers. Jirel of Joiry lay very still upon her pillow.

The great two-edged sword which she wielded so recklessly in the heat of combat hung on the wall now where her yellow eyes could find it if they opened, and her hacked and battered armor lay in a heap in one corner of the room just as the women had flung it as they stripped her when the grave-faced men-at-arms came shuffling up the stairs bearing the limp form of their lady, heavy in

her mail. The room held the hush of death. Nothing in it stirred. On the bed Jirel's white face lay motionless among the pillows.

Presently one of the women moved forward and gently pulled the door to against their watching.

"It is unseemly to stare so," she reproved the others. "Our lady would not desire us to behold her thus until Father Gervase has shriven her sins away."

And the coifed heads nodded assent, murmurous among themselves. In a moment or two more a commotion on the stairs forced the massed watchers apart, and Jirel's serving-maid came up the steps holding a kerchief to her reddened eyes and leading Father Gervase. Someone pushed open the door for them, and the crowd parted to let them through.

The serving-maid stumbled forward to the bedside, mopping her eyes blindly. Behind her something obscurely wrong was happening. After a moment she realized what it was. A great stillness had fallen stunningly upon the crowd. She lifted a bewildered gaze toward the door. Gervase was staring at the bed in the blankest amazement.

"My child," he stammered, "where is your lady?"

The girl's head jerked round toward the bed. It was empty.

The sheets still lay exactly as they had covered Jirel, not pushed back as one pushes the blankets on arising. The hollow where her body had lain still held its shape among the yet warm sheets, and no fresh blood spattered the floor; but of the Lady of Joiry there was no sign.

Gervase's hands closed hard on his silver crucifix and under the fringe of gray hair his face crumpled suddenly into grief.

"Our dear lady has dabbled too often in forbidden

things," he murmured to himself above the crucifix. "Too often "

Behind him trembling hands signed the cross, and awed whispers were already passing the word back down the crowded stairs: "The devil himself has snatched Jirel of Joiry body and soul out of her death-bed."

Jirel remembered shouts and screams and the din of battle, and that stunning impact in her side. Afterward nothing but dimness floating thickly above a bedrock of savage pain, and the murmur of voices from very far away. She drifted bodiless and serene upon a dark tide that was ebbing seaward, pulling her out and away while the voices and the pain receded to infinite distances, and faded and ceased.

Then somewhere a light was shining. She fought the realization weakly, for the dark tide pulled seaward and her soul desired the peace it seemed to promise with a longing beyond any words- to tell. But the light would not let her go. Rebellious, struggling, at last she opened her eyes. The lids responded sluggishly, as if they had already forgotten obedience to her will. But she could see under the fringe of lashes and she lay motionless, staring quietly while life flowed back by slow degrees into the body it had so nearly left.

The light was a ring of flames, leaping golden against the dark beyond them. For a while she could see no more than that circlet of fire. Gradually perception returned behind her eyes, and reluctantly the body that had hovered so near to death took up the business of living again. With full comprehension she stared, and as she realized what it was she looked upon, incredulity warred with blank amazement in her dazed mind.

Before her a great image sat, monstrous and majestic upon a throne. Throne and image were black and shining. The figure was that of a huge man, wide-shouldered, tremendous, many times life size. His face was bearded, harsh, with power and savagery, and very regal, haughty as Lucifer's might have been. He sat upon his enormous black throne staring arrogantly into nothingness. About his head the flames were leaping. She looked harder, unbelieving. How could she have come here? What was it, and where? Blank-eyed, she stared at that flaming crown that circled the huge head, flaring and leaping and casting queer bright shadows over the majestic face below them.

Without surprise, she found that she was sitting up. In her stupor she had not known the magnitude of her hurt,

and it did not seem strange to her that no pain attended the motion, or that her pike-torn side was whole again beneath the doeskin tunic which was all she wore. She could not have known that the steel point of the pike had driven the leather into her flesh so deeply that her women had not dared to remove the garment lest they open the wound afresh and their lady die before absolution came to her. She only knew that she sat here naked in her doeskin tunic, her bare feet on a fur rug and cushions heaped about her. And all this was so strange and inexplicable that she made no attempt, to understand.

The couch on which she sat was low and broad and black, and that fur rug in whose richness her toes were rubbing luxuriously was black too, and huger than any beast's pelt could be outside dreams.

Before her, across an expanse of gleaming black floor the mighty image rose, crowned with flame. For the rest, this great, black, dim-lighted room was empty. The flame-reflections danced eerily in the shining floor. She lifted her eyes, and saw with a little start of surprise that there was no ceiling. The walls rose immensely overhead, terminating in jagged abruptness above which a dark sky arched, sown with dim stars.

This much she had seen and realized before a queer glittering in the air in front of the image drew her roving eyes back. It was a shimmer and dance like the dance of dust motes in sunshine, save that the particles which glittered in the darkness were multicolored, dazzling. They swirled and swarmed before her puzzled eyes in a queer dance that was somehow taking shape in the light of the flames upon the image's head. A figure was forming in the midst of the rainbow shimmer. A man's figure, a tall, dark-visaged, heavy-shouldered man whose outlines among the dancing-motes took on rapid form and solidity, strengthening by moments until in a last swirl the gaily colored dazzle dissipated and the man himself stood wide-legged before her, fists planted on his hips, grinning darkly down upon the spell bound Jirel.

He was the image. Save that he was of flesh and blood, life size, and the statue was of black stone and gigantic,

there was no difference. The same harsh, arrogant, majestic face turned its grim smile upon Jirel. From under scowling black brows, eyes that glittered blackly with little red points of intolerable brilliance blazed down upon her. She could not meet that gaze. A short black beard outlined the harshness of his jaw, and through it the white flash of his smile dazzled her.

This much about the face penetrated even Jirel's dazed amazement, and she caught her breath in a sudden gasp, sitting up straighter among her cushions and staring. The dark stranger's eyes were eager upon the long, lithe lines of her upon the couch. Red sparkles quickened in their deeps, and his grin widened.

"Welcome," he said, in a voice so deep and rich that involuntarily a little burr of answer rippled along Jirel's nerves. "Welcome to the dark land of Romne."

"Who brought me here?" Jirel found her voice at last. "And why?"

"I did it," he told her. "I-Pav, king of Romne. Thank me for it, Jirel of Joiry. But for Pav you had lain among the worms tonight. It was out of your death-bed I took you, and no power but mine could have mended the pike-hole in your side or put back into you the blood you spilled on Triste battlefield. Thank me, Jirel!"

She looked at him levelly, her yellow eyes kindling a little in rising anger as she met the laughter in his.

"Tell me why you brought me here."

At that he threw back his head and laughed hugely, a bull bellow of savage amusement that rang in deep echoes from the walls and beat upon her ears with the sound of organ notes. The room shook with his laughter; the little flames around the image's head danced to it.

"To be my bride, Joiry!" he roared. "That look of defiance ill becomes you, Jirel! Blush, lady, before your bridegroom!"

The blankness of the girl's amazement was all that saved her for the moment from the upsurge of murderous fury which was beginning to seethe below the surface of her consciousness. She could only stare as he laughed down at her, enjoying to the full her mute amaze.

"Yes," he said at last, "you have traveled too often in forbidden lands, Jirel of Joiry, to be ignored by us who live in them. And there is in you a hot and savage strength which no other woman in any land I know possesses. A force to match my own, Lady Jirel, None but you is fit to be my queen. So I have taken you for my own."

Jirel gasped in a choke of fury and found her voice again.

"Hell-dwelling madman!" she spluttered. "Black beast out of nightmares! Let me waken from this crazy dream!"

"It is no dream," he smiled infuriatingly. "As you died in Joiry Castle I seized you out of your bed and snatched you body and soul over the space-curve that parts this land from yours. You have awakened in your own dark kingdom, O Queen of Romne!" And he swept her an ironical salute, his teeth glittering hi the darkness of his beard.

"By what right " blazed Jirel.

"By a lover's right," he mocked her. "Is it not better to share Romne with me than to reign among the worms, my lady? For death was very near to you just now. I have saved your lovely flesh from a cold bed, Jirel, and kept your hot soul rooted there for you. Do I get no thanks for that?"

Yellow fury blazed in her eyes.

"The thanks of a sword-edge, if I had one," she flared. "Do you think to take Joiry like some peasant wench to answer to your whims? I'm Joiry, man! You must be mad!"

"I'm Pav," he answered her somberly, all mirth vanishing hi a breath from his heavy voice. "I'm king of Romne and lord of all who dwell therein. For your savageness I chose you, but do not try me too far, Lady Jirel!"

She looked up into the swart, harsh face staring down on her, and quite suddenly the nearest thing she had ever known to fear of a human being came coldly over her; perhaps the fear that if any man alive could tame her fierceness, this man could. The red prickles had gone out of his eyes, and something hi her shuddered a little from that black, unpupiled stare. She veiled the hawk-yellow of her own gaze and set her lips hi a straight line.

"I shall call your servants," said Pav heavily. "You must be clothed as befits a queen, and then I shall show you your land of Romne."

She saw the black glare of his eyes flick sidewise as if in search, and in the instant that his gaze sought them there appeared about her in the empty air the most curious phenomenon she had ever seen. Queer, shimmering blue-nesses swam shoulder-high all around her, blue and translucent like hot flames, and like flames their outlines flickered. She never saw them clearly, but their touch upon her was like the caress a flame might give if it bore no heat: swift, brushing, light.

All about her they seethed, moving too quickly for the eyes to follow; all over her the quick, flickering caress ran. And she felt queerly exhausted as they moved, as if strength were somehow draining out of her while the blue flames danced. When their bewildering ministrations ceased the strange weariness abated too, and Jirel in blank surprise looked down at her own long, lovely body sheathed in the most exquisite velvet she had ever dreamed of. It was black as a starless night, softer than down, rich and lustrous as it molded her shining curves into sculptured beauty. There was a sensuous delight in the soft swirl of it around her feet as she moved, in the dark caress of it upon her flesh when motion stirred the silken surfaces against her skin. For an instant she was lost in pure feminine ecstasy.

But that lasted only for an instant. Then she heard Pav's deep voice saying, "Look!" and she lifted her eyes to a room whose outlines were melting away like smoke. The great image faded, the gleaming floor and the jagged, roofless walls turned translucent and misty, and through their melting surfaces mountains began to loom in the distance, dark trees and rough, uneven land. Before the echoes of Pav's deeply vibrant "Look!" had shivered wholly into silence along her answering nerves, the room had vanished and they two stood alone in the midst of the dark land of Romne.

It was a dark land indeed. As far as she could see, the air swallowed up every trace of color, so that in somber grays and blacks the landscape stretched away under her

eyes. But it had a curious clarity, too, in the dark, translucent air. She could see the distant mountains black and clear beyond the black trees. Beyond them, too, she caught a gleam of still black water, and under her feet the ground was black and rocky. And there was a curiously circumscribed air about the place. Somehow she felt closed in as she stared, for the horizon seemed nearer than it should be, and its dark circle bound the little world of grayness and blackness and clear, dark air into a closeness she could not account for.

She felt prisoned in and a little breathless, for all the wide country spreading so clearly, so darkly about her. Perhaps it was because even out at the far edge of the sky everything was as distinct in the transparent darkness of the air as the rocks at her very feet, so that there was no sense of distance here at all.

Yes, it was a dark land, and a strange land, forbidding, faintly nightmarish in the color-swallowing clarity of its air, the horizons too near and too clear in the narrowness of their circle.

"This," said Pav beside her, in his nerve-tingling voice that sent unconquerable little shudders of answer along her resounding nerves, "this

is your land of Romne, O Queen! A land wider than it looks, and one well befitted to your strength and loveliness, my Jirel. A strange land, too, by all earthly standards. Later you must learn how strange. The illusion of it-

"Save your breath, King of Romne," Jirel broke in upon his deep-voiced speech. "This is no land of mine, and holds no interest for me save in its way out. Show me the gate back into my own world, and I shall be content never to see Romne or you again."

Pav's big hand shot out and gripped her shoulder un-gently. He swung her round in a swirl of velvet skirts and a toss of fire-colored hair, and his dark, bearded face was savage with anger. The little red dazzles danced in his unpupiled black eyes until she could not focus her own hot yellow gaze upon them, and dropped her eyes from his in helpless fury.

"You are mine!" he told her in a voice so deep and low

that her whole body tingled to its vibration. "I took you out of Joiry and your death-bed and the world you knew, and you are mine from this moment on. Strong you may be, but not so strong as I, Jirel of Joiry, and when I command, henceforth obey!"

Blind with fury, Jirel ripped his hand away and fell back one step in a swirl of black skirts. She tossed her head up until the curls upon it leaped like flames, and the scorching anger in her voice licked up in matching flames, so hotly that her speech was broken and breathless as she choked in a half-whisper.

"Never touch me again,, you black hell-dweller! Before God, you'd never have dared if you'd left me a knife to defend myself with! I swear I'll tear the eyes out of your head if I feel the weight of your hand on me again! Yours, you filthy wizard? You'll never have me-never, if I must die to escape you! By my name I swear it!"

She choked into silence, not for lack of words but because the mounting fury that seethed up in her throat drowned out all further sound. Her eyes were blazing yellow with scorching heat, and her fingers flexed like claws eager for blood.

The King of Romne grinned down at her, thumbs hooked in his belt and derision gleaming whitely in the whiteness of his smile. The little beard jutted along his jaw, and red lights were flickering in the fathomless darkness of his eyes.

"You think so, eh, Joiry!" he mocked her, deep-voiced. "See what I could do!"

He did not shift a muscle, but even through her blinding fury she was aware of a sudden altering in him, a new power and command. His red-gleaming eyes were hot upon hers, and with sick anger she realized anew that she could not sustain that gaze. There was something frightening in the unpupiled blackness of it, the blazing, unbearable strength that beat out from it in heavy command. It was a command all out of proportion to his moveless silence, a command that wrenched at her intolerably. She must obey -she must. . . .

Suddenly a fresh wave of soul-scorching heat surged

over her, blindingly, terribly, in such a burst that the whole dark land of Romne blazed into nothingness and she lost all grip upon reality. The rocky ground swirled sidewise and vanished. The dark world dissolved around her. She was not flesh and blood but a white-hot incandescence of pure rage. Through the furnace heat of it, as through a shimmer of flame, she saw the body that her own violence had wrenched her out of. It stood straight in its gown of velvety blackness, facing Pav's unmoving figure defiantly. But as she watched, a weakening came over it. The stiffness went out of its poise, the high red head drooped. Helplessly she watched her own forsaken body moving forward step by reluctant step, as if the deserted flesh itself resented the subjection so forced upon it. She saw herself come to Pav's feet. She saw her black-sheathed body bend submissively, ripple pliantly to its knees. In a stillness beyond any ultimate climax of incarnate fury, she saw herself abased before Pav, her head bowed, her body curving into lines of warm surrender at his feet.

And she was afraid. For from somewhere a power was beating of such intolerable magnitude that even the inferno of her fury was abashed before it. Her body's obedience lost all significance in the rush of that terrible force. She would have thought that it radiated from Pav had it been possible for any human creature to sustain such an incredible force as that she was so fleetingly aware of.

For the briefest instant the knowledge of that power was all around her, terrifyingly, thunderously. It was too tremendous a thing to endure in her state of unbodied vulnerability. It scorched her like strong flame. And she was afraid-for Pav was the center of that inferno's might, and he could be no human thing who radiated such an infinity of power. What was he? What could he be?

In that instant she was horribly afraid-soul-naked in the furnace blast of something too tremendous . . . too terrible. ...

Then the moment of separation ceased. With a rush and a dazzle she was back in her kneeling body, and the knowledge of that power faded from about her and the humiliation of her pose burned again hotly in her throat.

Like a spring released she leaped to her feet, starting back and blazing into Pav's smiling face so hotly that her whole body seemed incandescent with the rage that flooded back into it. That moment of terror was fuel to feed the blaze, for she was not naked now, not bodiless and undefended from the force she had so briefly sensed, and anger that she had been exposed to it, that she had felt terror of it, swelled with the fury of her abasement before Pav. She turned eyes like two pits of hell-blaze upon her tormenter. But before she could speak:

"I admit your power," said Pav in a somewhat surprised voice. "I could conquer your body thus, but only by driving out the blaze that is yourself. I have never known before a mortal creature so compounded that my will could not conquer his. It proves you a fit mate for Pav of Romne. But though I could force you to my command, I shall not. I desire no woman against her will. You are a little human thing, Jirel, and your fullest

strength against mine is like a candle in the sun-but in these last few minutes I have learned respect for you. Will you bargain with me?"

"I'd bargain sooner with the Devil," she whispered hotly. "Will you let me go, or must I die to be free?"

Somberly he looked down at her. The smile had vanished from Ms bearded mouth, and a dark majesty was brooding upon the swarthy face turned down to hers. His eyes flashed red no longer. They were black with so deep a blackness that they seemed two holes of fathomless space -two windows into infinity. To look into them sent something in Jirel sick with sudden vertigo. Somehow, as she stared, her white-blazing fury cooled a little. Again she felt subtly that here was no human thing into whose eyes she gazed. A quiver of fright struggled up through her fading anger. At last he spoke.

"What I take I do not lightly give up. No, there is in you a heady violence that I desire, and will not surrender. But I do not wish you against your will."

"Give me a chance then, at escape," said Jirel. Her boiling anger had died almost wholly away under his somber, dizzying gaze, in the memory of that instant when inferno itself had seemed to beat upon her from the power

of his command. But there had not abated in her by any fraction of lessening purpose the determination not to yield. Indeed, she was strengthened against him by the very knowledge of his more than human power-the thing which in her unbodied nakedness had burned like a furnace blast against the defenseless soul of her was terrible enough even in retrospect to steel all her resolution against surrender. She said in a steady voice,

"Let me seek through your land of Romne the gateway

back into my own world. If I fail "

"You cannot but fail. There is no gateway by which you could pass."

"I am unarmed," she said desperately, grasping at straws in her determination to find some excuse to leave him. "You have taken me helpless and weaponless into-your power, and I shall not surrender. Not until you have shown yourself my roaster-and I do not think you can. Give me a weapon and let me prove that!"

Pav smiled down on her as a man smiles on a rebellious child.

"You have no idea what you ask," he said. "I am not" -he hesitated-"perhaps not wholly as I seem to you. Your greatest skill could not prevail against me."

"Then let me find a weapon!" Her voice trembled a little with the anxiety to be free of him, to find somehow an escape from the intolerable blackness of his eyes, the compulsion of his presence. For every moment that those terrible eyes beat so hotly upon her she felt her resistance weaken more, until she knew that if she did not leave him soon all strength would melt

away in her and her body of its own will sink once more into surrender at his feet. To cover her terror she blustered, but her voice was thick. "Give me a weapon! There is no man alive who is not somehow vulnerable. I shall learn your weakness, Pav of Romne, and slay you with it. And if I fail-then take me."

The smile faded slowly from Pav's bearded lips. He stood in silence, looking down at her, and the fathomless darkness of his eyes radiated power like heat in such insupportable strength that her own gaze fell before it and

she stared down at her velvet skirt-hem on the rocks. At last he said,

"Go, then. If that will content you, seek some means to slay me. But when you fail, remember-you have promised to acknowledge me your lord."

"If I fail!" Relief surged up in Jirel's throat. "// I fail!"

He smiled again briefly, and then somehow all about his magnificent dark figure a swirl of rainbow dazzle was dancing. She stared, half afraid, half in awe, watching the tall, black tangibility of him melting easily into that multicolored whirling she had seen before, until nothing was left but the dazzling swirl that slowed and faded and dissipated upon the dark air-and she was alone.

She drew a deep breath as the last of the rainbow shimmer faded into nothing. It was a heavenly relief not to feel the unbearable power of him beating unceasingly against her resistance, not to keep tense to the breaking-point all the strength that was in her. She turned away from the spot where he had vanished and scanned the dark land of Romne, telling herself resolutely that if she found no gateway, no weapon, then death itself must open the way out of Romne. There was about Pav's terrible strength something that set the nerves of her humanity shuddering against it. In her moment of soul-nakedness she had sensed that too fully ever to surrender. The inferno of the thing that was Pav burning upon her unbodied consciousness had been the burning of something so alien that she knew with every instinct in her that she would die if she must, rather than submit. Pav's body was the body of a man, but it was not-she sensed it intuitively-as a man alone that he desired her, and from surrender to the dark intensity of what lay beyond the flesh her whole soul shuddered away.

She looked about helplessly. She was standing upon stones, her velvet skirts sweeping black jagged rock that sloped down toward the distant line of trees. She could see the shimmer of dark water between them, and above and beyond their swaying tops the black mountains loomed. Nowhere was there any sign of the great chamber where the image sat. Nowhere could she see anything but de-

serted rocks, empty meadows, trees where no birds sang. Over the world of grayness and blackness she stood staring.

And again she felt that sense of imprisonment in the horizon's dark, close bounds. It was a curiously narrow land, this Romne. She felt it intuitively, though there was no visible barrier closing her in. In the clear, dark air even the mountains' distant heights were distinct and colorless and black.

She faced them speculatively, wondering how far away their peaks lay. A dark thought was shadowing her mind, for it came to her that if she found no escape from Romne and from Pav the mountains alone offered that final escape which she was determined to take if she must. From one of those high, sheer cliffs she could leap. ...

It was not tears that blurred the black heights suddenly. She stared in bewilderment, lifted dazed hands to rub her eyes, and then stared again. Yes, no mistake about it, the whole panorama of the land of Romne was melting like mist about her. The dark trees with their glint of lake beyond, the rocky foreground, everything faded and thinned smokily, while through the vanishing contours those far mountains loomed up near and clear overhead. Dizzy with incomprehension, she found herself standing amid the shreds of dissipating landscape at the very foot of those mountains which a moment before had loomed high and far on the edge of the horizon. Pav had been right indeed- Romne was a strange land. What had he said-about the illusion of it?

She looked up, trying to remember, seeing the dark slopes tilting over her head. High above, on a ledge of outcropping stone, she could see gray creepers dropping down the rocky sides, the tips of tall trees waving. She stared upward toward the ledge whose face she could not see, wondering what lay beyond the vine-festooned edges. And:

In a thin, dark fog the mountainside melted to her gaze. Through it, looming darkly and more darkly as the fog thinned, a level plateau edged with vines and thick with heavy trees came into being before her. She stood at the very edge of it, the dizzy drop of the mountain falling sheer

behind her. By no path that feet can tread could she have come to this forested plateau.

One glance she cast backward and down from her airy vantage above the dark land of Romne. It spread out below her in a wide horizon-circle of black rock and black waving tree-tops and colorless hills, clear in the clear, dark air of Romne. Nowhere was anything but rock and hills and trees, clear and distinct out to the horizon in the color-swallowing darkness of the air. No sight of man's occupancy anywhere broke the somberness of its landscape. The great black hall where the image burned might never have existed save in dreams. A prison land it was, narrowly bound by the tight circle of the sky.

Something insistent and inexplicable tugged at her attention then, breaking off abruptly that scanning of the land below. Not understanding why, she answered the compulsion to turn. And when she had turned she stiffened into rigidity, one hand halting in a little futile reach after the knife that no longer swung at her side; for among the trees a figure was approaching.

It was a woman-or could it be? White as leprosy against the blackness of the trees, with a whiteness that no shadows touched, so that she seemed like some creature out of another world reflecting in dazzling pallor upon the background of the dark, she paced slowly forward. She was thin-deathly thin, and wrapped in a white robe like a winding-sheet. The black hair lay upon her shoulders as snakes might lie.

But it was her face that caught Jirel's eyes and sent a chill of sheer terror down her back. It was the face of Death itself, a skull across which the white, white flesh was tightly drawn. And yet it was not without a certain stark beauty of its own, the beauty of bone so finely formed that even in its death's-head nakedness it was lovely.

There was no color upon that face anywhere; White-lipped, eyes shadowed, the creature approached with a leisured swaying of the long robe, a leisured swinging of the long black hair lying in snake-strands across the thin white shoulders. And the nearer the-the woman?-came

the more queerly apart from the land about her she seemed. Bone-white, untouched by any shadow save in the sockets of her eyes, she was shockingly detached from even the darkness of the air. Not all of Romne's dim, color-veiling atmosphere could mask the staring whiteness of her, almost blinding in its unshadowed purity.

As she came nearer, Jirel sought instinctively for the eyes that should be fixed upon her from those murky hollows in the scarcely fleshed skull. If they were there, she could not see them. An obscurity clouded the dim sockets where alone shadows clung, so that the face was abstract and sightless-not blind, but more as if the woman's thoughts were far away and intent upon something so absorbing that her surroundings held nothing for the hidden eyes to dwell on.

She paused a few paces from the waiting Jirel and stood quietly, not moving. Jirel had the feeling that from behind those shadowy hollows where the darkness clung like cobwebs a close and critical gaze was analyzing her, from red head to velvet-hidden toes. At last the bloodless lips of the creature parted and from them a voice as cool and hollow as a tomb fell upon Jirel's ears in queer, reverberating echoes, as if the woman spoke from far away in deep caverns underground, coming in echo upon echo out of the depths of unseen vaults, though the air was clear and empty about her. Just as her shadowless whiteness gave the illusion of a reflection from some other world, so the voice seemed also to come from echoing distances. Its hollowness said slowly,

"So here is the mate Pav chose. A red woman, eh? Red as his own flame. What are you doing here, bride, so far from your bridegroom's arms?"

"Seeking a weapon to slay him with!" said Jirel hotly. "I am not a woman to be taken against her will, and Pav is no choice of mine."

Again she felt that hidden scrutiny from the pits of the veiled eyes. When the cool voice spoke it held a note of incredulity that sounded clearly even in the hollowness of its echo from the deeps of invisible tombs.

"Are you mad? Do you not know what Pav is? You actually seek to destroy him?"

"Either him or myself," said Jirel angrily. "I know only that I shall never yield to him, whatever he may be."

"And you came-here. Why? How did you know? How did you dare?" The voice faded and echoes whispered down vaults and caverns of unseen depth

ghostily, "-did you dare-did you dare-you dare...."

"Dare what?" demanded Jirel uneasily. "I came here because-because when I gazed upon the mountains, suddenly the world dissolved around me and I was-was here." .

This time she was quite sure that a long, deep scrutiny swept her from head to feet, boring into her eyes as if it would read her very thoughts, though the cloudy pits that hid the woman's eyes revealed nothing. When her voice sounded again it held a queer mingling of relief and amusement and stark incredulity as it reverberated out of its hollow, underground places.

"Is this ignorance or guile, woman? Can it be that you do not understand even the secret of the land of Romne, or why, when you gazed at the mountains, you found yourself here? Surely even you must not have imagined Romne to be-as it seems. Can you possibly have come here unarmed and alone, to my very mountain-to my very grove -to my very face? You say you seek destruction?" The cool voice murmured into laughter that echoed softly from unseen walls and caverns in diminishing sounds, so that when the woman spoke again it was to the echoes of her own fading mirth. "How well you have found your way! Here is death for you-here at my hands! For you must have known that I shall surely kill you!"

Jirel's heart leaped thickly under her velvet gown. Death she had sought, but not death at the hands of such a thing as this. She hesitated for words, but curiosity was stronger even than her sudden jerk of reflexive terror, and after a moment she contrived to ask, in a voice of rigid steadiness,

"Why?"

Again the long, deep scrutiny from eyeless sockets. Under it Jirel shuddered, somehow not daring to take her

gaze from that leprously white, skull-shaped face, though the sight of it sent little shivers of revulsion along her nerves. Then the bloodless lips parted again and the cool, hollow voice fell echoing on her ears,

"I can scarcely believe that you do not know. Surely Pav must be wise enough in the ways of women-even such as I-to know what happens when rivals meet. No, Pav shall not see his bride again, and the white witch will be queen once more. Are you ready for death, Jirel of Joiry?"

The last words hung hollowly upon the dark air, echoing and re-echoing from invisible vaults. Slowly the arms of the corpse-creature lifted, trailing the white robe in great pale wings, and the hair stirred upon her shoulders like living things. It seemed to Jirel that a light was beginning to glimmer through the shadows that clung like cobwebs to the skull-face's sockets, and somehow she knew chokingly that she could not bear to gaze upon what was dawning there if she must throw herself backward off the cliff to escape it. In a voice that strangled with terror she cried,

"Wait!"

The pale-winged arms hesitated in their lifting; the light which was dawning behind the shadowed eye-sockets for a moment ceased to brighten through the veiling. Jirel plunged on desperately,

"There is no need to slay me. I would very gladly go if I knew the way out."

"No," the cold voice echoed from reverberant distances. "There would be the peril of you always, existing and waiting. No, you must die or my sovereignty is at an end."

"Is it sovereignty or Pav's love that I peril, then?" demanded Jirel, the words tumbling over one another in her breathless eagerness lest unknown magic silence her before she could finish.

The corpse-witch laughed a cold little echo of sheer scorn.

"There is no such thing as love," she said, "-for such as I."

"Then," said Jirel quickly, a feverish hope beginning to rise behind her terror, "then let me be the one to slay. Let

me slay Pav as I set out to do, and leave this land kingless, for your rule alone."

For a dreadful moment the half-lifted arms of the figure that faced her so terribly hesitated in midair; the light behind the shadows of her eyes flickered. Then slowly the winged arms fell, the eyes dimmed into cloud-filled hollows again. Blind-faced, impersonal, the skull turned toward Jirel. And curiously, she had the idea that calculation and malice and a dawning idea that spelled danger for her were forming behind that expressionless mask of white-fleshed bone. She could feel tensing and peril in the air—a subtler danger than the frank threat of killing. Yet when the white witch spoke there was nothing threatening in her words. The hollow voice sounded as coolly from its echoing caverns as if it had not a moment before been threatening death.

"There is only one way in which Pav can be destroyed,"

she said slowly. "It is a way I dare not attempt, nor would

any not already under the shadow of death. I think not

even Pav knows of it. If you " The hollow tones hesitated for the briefest instant, and Jirel felt, like the breath

of a cold wind past her face, the certainty that there was

a deeper danger here, in this unspoken offer, than even

in the witch's scarcely stayed death-magic. The cool voice

went on, with a tingle of malice in its echoing.

"If you dare risk this way of clearing my path to the throne of Romne, you may go free."

Jirel hesitated, so strong had been that breath of warning to the danger-accustomed keenness of her senses. It was not a genuine offer-not a true path of escape. She was sure of that, though she could not put her finger on the flaw she sensed so strongly. But she knew she had no choice.

"I accept, whatever it is," she said, "my only hope of winning back to my own land again. What is this thing you speak of?"

"The-the flame," said the witch half hesitantly, and again Jirel felt a sidelong scrutiny from the cobwebbed sockets, almost as if the woman scarcely expected to be believed. "The flame that crowns Pav's image. If it can

be quenched, Pav-dies." And queerly she laughed as she said it, a cool little ripple of scornful amusement. It was somehow like a blow in the face, and Jirel felt the blood rising to her cheeks as if in answer to a tangible slap. For she knew that the scorn was directed at herself, though she could not guess why.

"But how?" she asked, striving to keep bewilderment out of her voice.

"With flame," said the white witch quickly. "Only with flame can that flame be quenched. I think Pav must at least once have made use of those little blue fires that flicker through the air about your body. Do you know them?"

Jirel nodded mutely.

"They are the manifestations of your own strength, called up by him. I can explain it no more clearly to you than that. You must have felt a momentary exhaustion as they moved. But because they are essentially a part of your own human violence, here in this land of Romne, which is stranger and more alien than you know, they have the ability to quench Pav's flame. You will not understand that now. But when it happens, you will know why. I cannot tell you.

"You must trick Pav into calling forth the blue fire of your own strength, for only he can do that. And then you must concentrate all your forces upon the flame that burns around the image. Once it is his existence, you can control the blue fire, send it out to the image. You must do this. Will you? Will you?"

The tall figure of the witch leaned forward eagerly, her white skull-face thrusting nearer in an urgency that not even the veiled, impersonal eye-sockets could keep from showing. And though she had imparted the information that the flame held Pav's secret life in a voice of hollow reverberant mockery, as if the statement were a contemptuous lie, she told of its quenching with an intensity of purpose that proclaimed it unmistakable truth. "Will you?" she demanded again in a voice that shook a little with nameless violence.

Jirel stared at the white-fleshed skull in growing disquiet. There was a danger here that she could feel almost tangibly. And somehow it centered upon this thing which the corpse-witch was trying to force her into promising. Somehow she was increasingly sure of that. And rebellion suddenly flamed within her. If she must die, then let her do it now,

meeting death face to face and not in some obscurity of cat's-paw witchcraft in the attempt to destroy Pav. She would not promise.

"No," she heard her own voice saying in sudden violence. "No, I will not!"

Across the skull-white face of the witch convulsive fury swept. It was the rage of thwarted malice, not the disappointment of a plotter. The hollow voice choked behind grinning lips, but she lifted her arms like great pale wings again, and a glare of hell-fire leaped into being among the shadows that clung like cobwebs to her eye-sockets. For a moment she stood towering, white and terrible, above the earthwoman, in a tableau against the black woods of unshadowed bone-whiteness, dazzling in the dark air of Romne, terrible beyond words in the power of her gathering magic.

Then Jirel, rigid with horror at the light brightening so ominously among the shadows of these eyeless sockets, saw terror sweep suddenly across the convulsed face, quenching the anger in a cold tide of deadly fear.

"Pav!" gasped the chill voice hollowly. "Pav comes!"

Jirel swung round toward the far horizon, seeking what had struck such fear into the leprously white skull-face, and with a little gasp of reprieve saw the black figure of her abductor enormous on the distant skyline. Through the clear dark air she could see him plainly, even to the sneering arrogance upon his bearded face, and a flicker of hot rebellion went through her. Even in the knowledge of his black and terrible power, the human insolence of him struck flame from the flint of her resolution, and she began to burn with a deep-seated anger again which not even his terror could quench, not even her amazement at the incredible size of him.

For he strode among the tree-tops like a colossus, gigantic, heaven-shouldering, swinging in league-long strides across the dark land spread out panorama-like under that

high ledge where the two women stood. He was nearing in great distance-devouring steps, and it seemed to Jirel that he diminished in stature as the space between them lessened. Now the treetops were creaming like black surf about his thighs. She saw anger on his face, and she heard a little gasp behind her. She whirled in quick terror, for surely now the witch would slay her with no more delay, before Pav could come near enough to prevent.

But when she turned she saw that the pale corpse-creature had forgotten her in the frantic effort to save herself. And she was working a magic that for an instant wiped out from Jirel's wondering mind even her own peril, even the miraculous oncoming of Pav. She had poised on her toes, and now in a swirl of shroud-like robes and snaky hair she began to spin. At first she revolved laboriously, but in a few moments the jerky whirling began to smooth out and quicken and she was revolving without effort, as if she utilized a force outside Jirel's understanding, as if some invisible whirlwind spun her faster and faster in its vortex, until she was a blur of shining, unshadowed whiteness wrapped in the dark snakes of her hair-until she was nothing but a pale mist against the forest darkness- until she had vanished utterly.

Then, as Jirel stared in dumb bewilderment, a little chill wind that somehow seemed to blow from immeasurably far distances, from cool, hollow, underground places, brushed her cheek briefly, without ruffling a single red curl. It was not a tangible wind. And from empty air a hand that was bone-hard dealt her a stinging blow in the face. An incredibly tiny, thin, far-away voice sang in her ear as if over gulfs of measureless vastness,

"That for watching my spell, red woman! And if you do not keep our bargain, you shall feel the weight of my magic. Remember!"

Then in a great gush of wind and a trample of booted feet Pav was on the ledge beside her, and no more than life-size now, tall, black, magnificent as before, radiant with arrogance and power. He stared hotly, with fathomless blackness in his eyes, at the place where the mist that was the witch had faded. Then he laughed contemptuously.

"She is safe enough-there," he said. "Let her stay. You should not have come here, Jirel of Joiry."

"I didn't come," she said in sudden, childish indignation against everything that had so mystified her, against his insolent voice and the arrogance and power of him, against the necessity for owing to him her rescue from the witch's magic. "I didn't come. The-the mountain came! All I did was look at it, and suddenly it was here."

His deep bull-bellow of laughter brought the blood angrily to her cheeks.

"You must learn that secret of your land of Romne," he said indulgently. "It is not constructed on the lines of your old world. And only by slow degrees, as you grow stronger in the magic which I shall teach you, can you learn the full measure of Romne's strangeness. It is enough for you to know now that distances here are measured in different terms from those you know. Space and matter are subordinated to the power of the mind, so that when you desire to reach a place you need only concentrate upon it to bring it into focus about you, succeeding the old landscape in which you stood.

"Later you must see Romne in its true reality, walk through Romne as Romne really is. Later, when you are my queen."

The old hot anger choked up in Jirel's throat. She was not so afraid of him now, for a weapon was in her hands which even he did not suspect. She knew his vulnerability. She cried defiantly,

"Never, then! I'd kill you first."

His scornful laughter broke into her threat.

"You could not do that," he told her, deep-voiced: "I have said before that there is no way. Do you think I could be mistaken about that?"

She glared at him with hot, yellow eyes, indiscretion hovering on her lips. Almost she blurted it out, but not quite. In a choke of anger she turned her face away, going prickly and hot at the deep laughter behind her.

"Have you had your fill of seeking weapons against me?" he went on, still in that voice of mingling condescension and arrogance.

She hesitated a moment. Somehow she must get them both back into the hall of the image. In a voice that trembled she said at last,

"Yes."

"Shall we go back then, to my palace, and prepare for the ceremony which will make you queen?"

The deep voice was still shuddering along her nerves as the mountain behind them and the great dark world below melted together in a mirage through which, as through a veil, a flame began to glow; the flame about an image's head—an image gigantic in a great black hall whose unroofed walls closed round them in magical swiftness. Jirel stared, realizing bewilderedly that without stirring a step she had somehow come again into the black hall where she had first opened her eyes.

A qualm of remembrance came over her as she recalled how fervently she had sworn to herself to die somehow, rather than return here into Pav's power. But now she was armed. She need have no fear now. She looked about her.

Black and enormous, the great image loomed up above them both. She lifted a gaze of new respect to that leaping diadem of flame which crowned the face that was Pav's. She did not understand what it was she must do now, or clearly how to do it, but the resolve was hot in her to take any way out that might lie open rather than submit to the dark power that dwelt in the big, black man at her side.

Hands fell upon her shoulders then, heavily. She whirled in a swirl of velvet skirts into Pav's arms, tight against his broad breast. His breath was hot in her face, and upon her life the beating of savage suns burned the intolerable blackness of his eyes. She could no more meet their heat than she could have stared into a sun. A sob of pure rage choked up in her throat as she thrust hard with both hands against the broad black chest to which she was crushed. He loosed her without a struggle. She staggered with the suddenness of it, and then he had seized her wrist in an iron grip, twisting savagely. Jirel gasped in a wrench of pain and dropped helplessly to one knee. Above her the heavy and ominous voice of Romne's king said in its deep-

est, most velvety burr, so that she shook to the very depths in that drum-beat of savage power,

"Resist me again and things can happen here too dreadful for your brain to grasp even if I told you. Beware of me, Jirel, for Pav's anger is a terrible thing. You have found no weapon to conquer me, and now you must submit to the bargain you yourself proposed. Are you ready, Jirel of Joiry?"

She bent her head so that her face was hidden, and her mouth curved into a twist of fiercely smiling anticipation.

"Yes," she said softly.

Then abruptly, amazingly, upon her face a cold wind blew, heavy with the odor of chill hollowness underground, and in her ears was the thin and tiny

coldness of a voice she knew, echoing from reverberant vaults over gulfs unthinkable,

"Ask him to clothe you in bridal dress. Ask him! Ask him now!"

Across the screen of her memory flashed a face like a white-fleshed skull to whose eye-sockets cobwebby shadows clung, whose pale mouth curled in a smile of bitter scorn, maliciously urging her on. But she dared not disobey, for she had staked everything now on the accomplishment of the witch's bargain. Dangerous it might be, but there was worse danger waiting here and now, in Pav's space-black eyes. The thin shrill ceased and the tomb-smelling wind faded, and she heard her own voice saying,

"Let me up, then. Let me up-I am ready, Only am I to have no bridal dress for my wedding? For black ill becomes a bride."

He could not have heard that thin, far-calling echo of a voice, for his dark face did not change and there was no suspicion in his eyes. The iron clutch of his fingers loosened. Jirel swung to her feet lithely and faced him with downcast eyes, not daring to unveil the yellow triumph that blazed behind her lashes.

"My wedding gown," she reminded him, still in that voice of strangled gentleness.

He laughed, and his eyes sought in empty air. It was

the most imperiously regal thing conceivable, that assured glance into emptiness for what, by sheer knowledge of his own power, must materialize in answer to the king of Romne's questing. And all about her, glowing into existence under the sun-hot blackness of Pav's eyes, the soft blue flames were suddenly licking.

Weakness crawled over her as the blueness seethed about her body, brushing, caressing, light as fire-tongues upon her, murmurous with the soft flickering sounds of quiet flame. A weariness like death was settling into her very bones, as if life itself were draining away into the caressing ministrations of those blue and heatless flames. She exulted in her very weakness, knowing how much of her strength must be incarnate, then, in the flames which were to quench Pav's flame. And they would need strength -all she had.

Then again the cold wind blew from hollow tombs, as if through an opened door, and upon the intangible breath of it that did not stir one red curl upon her cheek, though she felt its keenness clearly, the thin, small echo of the corpse-witch's voice cried, tiny and far over spaces beyond measurement,

"Focus them on the Flame-now, now! Quickly! Ah- fool!"

And the ghost of a thin, cool laugh, stinging with scorn, drifting through the measureless voids. Reeling with weakness, Jirel obeyed. The derision in that tiny, far-away voice was like a spur to drive her, though ready anger surged up in her throat against that strange scorn for which she could find no reason. As strongly as before she felt the breath of danger when the corpse-witch spoke, but she ignored it now, knowing in her heart that Pav

must die if she were ever to know peace again, let his dying cost her what it might.

She set her teeth in her red underlip and in the pain of it drove all her strength into a strong focusing upon the flame that burned around the great imaged Pav's head. What would happen she did not know, but in the fog of her weakness, stabbed by her bitten lip's pain, she fought with all the force she had to drive those flames curling

like caresses about her body straight toward the flame-crown on the image's majestic brow.

And presently, in little tentative thrusts, the blue tongues that licked her so softly began to turn away from the velvety curves of her own body and reach out toward the image. Sick with weakness as the strength drained out of her into the pulling names, she fought on, and in an arc that lengthened and stretched away the flames began to forsake her and reach flickeringly out toward the great black statue that loomed overhead.

From far away she heard Pav's deep voice shouting on a note of sudden panic,

"Jirel, Jirel! Don't! Oh, little fool, don't do it!"

It seemed to her that his voice was not that of a man afraid for his own life, but rather as if it was peril to herself he would avert. But she could pay him no heed at all now. Nothing was real but the sharp necessity to quench the image's flame, and she poured all the strength that was left to her into the rainbow of flickering blueness that was arching up toward the image.

"Jirel, Jirel!" the deep voice of Pav was storming from

somewhere in the fog of her weakness. "Stop! You don't know "

A blast of cold wind drowned the rest of his words, and:

"S-s-s! Go on!" hissed the corpse-witch's voice tinily in her ear. "Don't listen to him! Don't let him stop you! He can't touch you while the blue flames burn! Go on! Go on!"

And she went on. Half fainting, wholly blind now to everything but that stretching arc of blue, she fought. And it lengthened as she poured more and more of her strength into it, reached up and out and grew by leaping degrees until the blue flames were mingling with the red, and over that blazing crown a dimness began to fall. From somewhere in the blind mist of her exhaustion Pav's voice shouted with a note of despair in its shudderingly vibrant depths,

"Oh, Jirel, Jirel! What have you done?"

Exultation surged up in her. The hot reserves of her anger against him flooded over and strength like wine boiled up through her body. In one tremendous burst of

fierce energy she hurled every ounce of her newly-won power against the flame. Triumphant she saw it nicker. There was a moment of guttering twilight; then abruptly the light went out and red flame and blue vanished in a breath. A crashing darkness like the weight of falling skies dropped thunderously about her.

Sick to the very soul with reactionary weakness as the tremendous effort relaxed at last, she heard from reeling distances Pav's voice call wordlessly. All about her the dark was heavy, with a crushing weight that somehow made her whole body ache as if with the pressure of deep seas. In the heaviness of it she scarcely realized that the voice was shouting at all; but even through the dimness of her failing senses she knew that there was something tremendously wrong with it. In a mighty effort she rallied herself, listening.

Yes-he was trying to speak, trying to tell her something that she knew intuitively was of infinite importance. But his voice was ceasing to be a human voice, becoming less and less articulate and more and more a mighty roaring like the voice of incalculable power. In such a voice a typhoon might speak, or a dynamo more tremendous than any man ever made.

"Jirel-Jirel-why did you . . ." So much she made out before the words rushed together and melted into that thunderous roar which was the very voice of infinity itself. The darkness was full of it-one with it-intolerable violence upon her ears, intolerable pressure of the black dark upon her body.

Through the roaring void a keen wind blew hollow with the smell of tombs. Jirel, trying to whirl to face it, found herself incapable of motion, a finite and agonized thing in the midst of crashing black thunder whose sound was torment in her brain, whose weight was crushing her very atoms in upon themselves until consciousness flickered within her like a guttering candle flame.

But there was no need to turn. Directions had ceased to be. The wind smote her turned cheek, but before her, as if through an opened door from which coldness streamed, she was aware of a white-shrouded figure float-

ing upon the blackness; an unshadowed figure, staringly white, not touched by anything the blackness could muster against it. Even through the terrible roaring of pure power the corpse-witch's voice struck low and cool in its echo from reverberant caverns; even through the blinding dark her skull-face gleamed, the cobwebbed eyes lurid in the depths of their clinging shadows with a light that glowed from deep within the leprosy-white skull. The witch was laughing.

"O fool!" she lilted in a hollow ripple of scorn as cool as caverns underground. "Poor, presumptuous fool! Did you really think to bargain with us of the outer worlds? Did you really believe that Pav-Pav!-could die? No-in your little human brain how could you have known that all the Romne you saw was illusion, that Pav's human body was no real thing? Blind, hot, earthly woman, with your little hates and vengeance, how could you have reigned queen over a Romne that is Darkness itself-as you see it now? For this roaring night which engulfs you, without dimensions, without form,

lightless, inchoate- this is Romne! And Romne is Pav. The land that you walked through, the mountains and plains you saw-all these were no less Pav than the human body he assumed. Nor was his height and black-bearded arrogance any more Pav himself than were the rocks and trees and black waters of Romne. Pav is Romne, and Romne is Pav-one terrible whole out of which all you saw was wrought.

"Yes, shudder, and presently, when I am through with you-die. For no human thing could live in the Romne that is real. When in your foolish vengeance you quenched the flame that burned on the image's head, you sealed your own doom. Only in the power of that flame could the illusion of the land of Romne hold itself steady about you. Only that flame in its tangible light held Romne and Pav in the semblance of reality to you, or kept the weight of the Dark from crushing your puny soul in the soft white flesh you call a body. Only the sound of my voice does it now. When I cease to speak, when the breath of my tomb-breeze ceases to blow around you--then you die."

The cool voice broke into soft and scornful laughter

while darkness reeled about Jirel and the roaring was a tumult unbearable in her very brain. Was it indeed the voice of what had been Pav? Then the low, chill voice echoed on,

"But before you die I would have you look upon what you sought to slay. I would have you see the Darkness that is Pav and Romne, clearly and visibly, so that you might understand what manner of lover I had. And you thought to rival me! Do you think, in your pride of human endurance, you could so much as gaze for one instant upon the inferno that is--Pav!"

In that one ringing word the chill wind ceased, the voice echoed into silence from its heights of scorn, and in the darkness, black upon the black, with no sense that human flesh possesses-neither sight nor hearing nor touch-yet with hideous clarity, she saw.

She saw the Darkness. It was tremendous beyond the power of any human perceptions to endure save in the brief flash she had of it. A thunderous Darkness whose roar was vaster than anything like mere sound. The inferno of it was too hot to bear. The human Pav's eyes had blazed like black suns, intolerably, but that had been only a reflection of this infinite might. This Darkness was the incarnate blaze, and all her consciousness reeled and was in agony before it.

She thought she could not endure to look-even to exist so near to that terrible heat of darkness, but no closing of eyes could shut it out. In the fleeting instant while she saw -through closed eyes and numbed senses, conscious in every fiber of the blaze so close-a vibration from the great Thing that was beyond shape and size and matter shivered through her in a scorch of heat too hot to touch her flesh, though her soul shuddered fainting away. It was not anything like a voice, but there was intelligence in it. And in her brain she received dimly what it said.

"Sorry-would have had you-could have loved you- but go now-go instantly, before you die. . . ."

And somehow, in a way that left her mind blank with the tremendous power of it, that infinite force was commanding obedience even out of the stunning Dark. For

the Darkness was Romne, and Romne was Pav, and the command ran like a shudder of dark lightning from edge to edge, expelling her from its heart in an explosion of black inferno.

Instantly, blindingly, in the numbing shock of that thunderous power, the darkness ceased to engulf her. Light

in a dazzle that stunned her very brain burst all around.

She was spun by forces so mighty that their very tremendousness saved her from destruction, as an insect might

pass unharmed through a tornado. Infinity was a whirlpool

around her, and

Flagstones pressed cool and smooth against her bare feet. She blinked dizzily. Joiry's chapel walls were rising grayly about her, familiar and dun in the dim light of dawn. She stood here in her doeskin tunic upon the flagstones and breathed in deep gusts, staring about her with dazed eyes that dwelt like lingering caresses upon the familiar things of home.