

DOORWAY INTO TIME

by C. L. Moore

HE came slowly, with long, soft, ponderous strides, along the hallway of his treasure house. The gleanings of many worlds were here around him; he had ransacked space and time for the treasures that filled his palace. The robes that moulded their folds richly against his great rolling limbs as he walked were in themselves as priceless as anything within these walls, gossamer fabric pressed into raised designs that had no meaning, this far from the world upon which they had been created, but - in their beauty - universal. But he was himself more beautiful than anything in all that vast collection. He knew it complacently, a warm contented knowledge deep in the center of his brain.

His motion was beautiful, smooth power pouring along his limbs as he walked, his great bulk ponderous and graceful. The precious robes he wore flowed open over his magnificent body. He ran one sensuous palm down his side, enjoying the texture of that strange, embossed delicacy in a fabric thinner than gauze. His eyes were proud and half shut, flashing many-colored under the heavy lids. The eyes were never twice quite the same color, but all the colors were beautiful.

He was growing restless again. He knew the feeling well, that familiar quiver of discontent widening and strengthening far back in his mind. It was time to set out once more on the track of something dangerous. In times past, when he had first begun to stock this treasure house, beauty alone had been enough. It was not enough any longer. Danger had to be there too. His tastes were growing capricious and perhaps a little decadent, for he had lived a very long time.

Yes, there must be a risk attending the capture of his next new treasure. He must seek out great beauty and great danger and subdue the one and win the other, and the thought of it made his eyes change color and the blood beat faster in mighty rhythms through his veins. He smoothed his palm again along the embossed designs of the robe that moulded itself to his body. The great, rolling strides carried him noiselessly over the knife-edged patterns of the floor.

Nothing in life meant much to him any more except these beautiful things which his own passion for beauty had brought together. And even about these he was growing capricious now. He glanced up at a deep frame set in the wall just at the bend of the corridor, where his appreciative eyes could not fail to strike the objects it enclosed at just the proper angle. Here was a group of three organisms fixed in an arrangement that once had given him intense pleasure. On their own world they might have been living creatures, perhaps even intelligent. He neither knew nor cared. He did not even remember now if there had been eyes upon their world to see, or minds to recognize beauty. He cared only that they had given him acute pleasure whenever he turned this bend of the corridor and saw them frozen into eternal perfection in their frame.

But the pleasure was clouded as he looked at them now. His half-shut eyes changed color, shifting along the spectrum from yellow-green to the cooler

purity of true green. This particular treasure had been acquired in perfect safety; its value was impaired for him, remembering that. And the quiver of discontent grew stronger in his mind. Yes, it was time to go out hunting again ...

And here, set against a panel of velvet, was a great oval stone whose surface exhaled a light as soft as smoke, in waves whose colors changed with languorous slowness. Once the effect had been almost intoxicating to him. He had taken it from the central pavement of a great city square upon a world whose location he had forgotten long ago. He did not know if the people of the city had valued it, or perceived its beauty at all. But he had won it with only a minor skirmish, and now in his bitter mood it was valueless to his eyes.

He quickened his steps, and the whole solid structure of the palace shook just perceptibly underfoot as he moved with ponderous majesty down the hall. He was still running one palm in absent appreciation up and down the robe across his mighty side, but his mind was not on present treasures any more. He was looking to the future, and the color of his eyes had gone shivering up the spectrum to orange, warm with the anticipation of danger. His nostrils flared a little and his wide mouth turned down at the corners in an inverted grimace. The knife-edged patterns of the floor sang faintly beneath his footsteps, their sharp intricacies quivering as the pressure of his steps passed by.

He went past a fountain of colored fire which he had wrecked a city to possess. He thrust aside a hanging woven of unyielding crystal spears which only his great strength could have moved. It gave out showers of colored sparks when he touched it, but their beauty did not delay him now.

His mind had run on ahead of him, into that room in the center of his palace, round and dim, from which he searched the universe for plunder and through whose doorways he set out upon its track. He came ponderously along the hall toward it, passing unheeded treasures, the gossamer of his robes floating after him like a cloud.

On the wall before him, in the dimness of the room, a great circular screen looked out opaquely, waiting his touch. A doorway into time and space. A doorway to beauty and deadly peril and everything that made livable for him a life which had perhaps gone on too long already. It took strong measures now to stir the jaded senses which once had responded so eagerly to more stimuli than he could remember any more. He sighed, his great chest expanding tremendously. Somewhere beyond that screen, upon some world he had never trod before, a treasure was waiting lovely enough to tempt his boredom and dangerous enough to dispel it for just a little while.

The screen brightened as he neared the wall. Blurred shadows moved, vague sounds drifted into the room. His wonderful senses sorted the noises and the shapes and dismissed them as they formed; his eyes were round and luminous now, and the orange fires deepened as he watched. Now the shadows upon the screen moved faster. Something was taking shape. The shadows leaped backward into three-dimensional vividness that wavered for a moment and then sharpened into focus upon a desert landscape under a

vivid crimson sky. Out of the soil a cluster of tall flowers rose swaying, exquisitely shaped, their colors shifting in that strange light. He glanced at them carelessly and grimaced. And the screen faded.

He searched the void again, turning up scene after curious scene and dismissing each with a glance. There was a wall of carved translucent panels around a city he did not bother to identify. He saw a great shining bird that trailed luminous plumage, and a tapestry woven gorgeously with scenes from no earthly legend, but he let all of them fade again without a second look, and the orange glow in his eyes began to dull with boredom.

Once he paused for a while before the picture of a tall, dark idol carved into a shape he did not recognize, its strange limbs adorned with jewels that dripped fire, and for an instant his pulse quickened. It was pleasant to think of those jewels upon his own great limbs, trailing drops of flame along his halls. But when he looked again he saw that the idol stood deserted upon a barren world, its treasure his for the taking. And he knew that so cheap a winning would be savorless. He sighed again, from the depths of his mighty chest, and let the screen shift its pictures on.

It was the faraway flicker of golden lightning in the void that first caught his eyes, the distant scream of it from some world without a name. Idly he let the screen's shadows form a picture. First was the lightning, hissing and writhing from a mechanism which he spared only one disinterested glance. For beside it two figures were taking shape, and as he watched them his restless motions stilled and the floating robe settled slowly about his body. His eyes brightened to orange again. He stood very quiet, staring.

The figures were of a shape he had not seen before. Remotely like his own, but flexible and very slender, and of proportions grotesquely different from his. And one of them, in spite of its difference, was - he stared thoughtfully. Yes, it was beautiful. Excitement began to kindle behind his quietness. And the longer he stared the clearer the organism's subtle loveliness grew. No obvious flamboyance like the fire-dripping jewels or the gorgeously plumed bird, but a delicate beauty of long, smooth curves and tapering lines, and colors in softly blended tints of apricot and creamy white and warm orange-red. Folds of blue-green swathing it were probably garments of some sort. He wondered if it were intelligent enough to defend itself, or if the creature beside it, making lightnings spurt out of the mechanism over which it bent, would know or care if he reached out to take its companion away.

He leaned closer to the screen, his breath beginning to come fast and his eyes glowing with the first flush of red that meant excitement. Yes, this was a lovely thing. A very lovely trophy for his halls. Briefly he thought of it arranged in a frame whose ornaments would echo the soft and subtle curves of the creature itself, colored to enhance the delicacy of the subject's coloring. Certainly a prize worth troubling himself for - if there were danger anywhere near to make it a prize worth winning ...

He put one hand on each side of the screen and leaned forward into it a little, staring with eyes that were a dangerous scarlet now. That flare of lightning looked like a weapon of some sort. If the creatures had intelligence - it would be amusing to test the limits of their minds, and the

power of the weapon they were using ...

He watched a moment longer, his breath quickening. His mighty shoulders hunched forward. Then with one shrug he cast off the hampering garment of gossamer and laughed deep in his throat and lunged smoothly forward into the open doorway of the screen. He went naked and weaponless, his eyes blazing scarlet. This was all that made life worth living. Danger, and beauty beyond danger ...

Darkness spun around him. He shot forward through dimensionless infinity along a corridor of his own devising.

The girl leaned back on her metal bench and crossed one beautiful long leg over the other, stirring the sequined folds of her gown into flashing motion.

"How much longer, Paul?" she asked.

The man glanced over his shoulder and smiled.

"Five minutes. Look away now - I'm going to try it again." He reached up to slip a curved, transparent mask forward, closing his pleasant, dark face away from the glare. The girl sighed and shifted on the bench, averting her eyes.

The laboratory was walled and ceiled in dully reflecting metal, so that the blue-green blur of her gown moved as if in dim mirrors all around her when she changed position. She lifted a bare arm to touch her hair, and saw the reflections lift too, and the pale blur that was her hair, shining ashes of silver and elaborately coiffed.

The murmur of well-oiled metal moving against metal told her that a lever had been shifted, and almost instantly the room was full of golden glare, like daylight broken: into hissing fragments as jagged as lightning. For a long moment the walls quivered with light and sound. Then the hissing died, the glare faded. A smell of hot metal tainted the air.

The man sighed heavily with satisfaction and lifted both hands to pull the mask off. Indistinctly behind the glass she heard him say:

"Well, that's done. Now we can-"

But he never finished, and the helmet remained fixed on his shoulders as he stared at the wall they were both facing. Slowly, almost absentmindedly, he pushed aside the glass across his face, as if he thought it might be responsible for the thing they both saw. For above the banked machinery which controlled the mechanism he had just released, a shadow had fallen upon the wall. A great circle of shadow ...

Now it was a circle of darkness, as if twilight had rushed timelessly into midnight before them as they watched, and a midnight blacker than anything earth ever knew. The midnight of the ether, of bottomless spaces between worlds. And now it was no longer a shadow, but a window opening upon that midnight, and the midnight was pouring through ...

Like smoke the darkness flowed in upon them, dimming the glitter of machinery, dimming the girl's pale hair and pale, shining shoulders and the

shimmer of her gown until the man looked at her as if through veil upon veil of falling twilight.

Belatedly he moved, making a useless gesture of brushing the dark away with both hands before his face.

"Alanna-" he said helplessly. "What's happened? I- I can't see- very well-"

He heard her whimper in bewilderment, putting her own hands to her eyes as if she thought blindness had come suddenly upon them both. He was too sick with sudden dizziness to move or speak. This, he told himself wildly, must be the blindness that foreruns a swoon, and his obedient mind made the floor seem to tilt as if the faintness and blindness were inherent in himself, and not the result of some outward force.

But before either of them could do more than stammer a little, as their minds tried desperately to rationalize what was happening into some weakness of their own senses, the dark was complete. The room brimmed with it, and sight ceased to exist.

When the man felt the floor shake, he thought for an unfathomable moment that it was his own blindness, his own faintness again, deceiving his senses. The floor could not shake, as if to a ponderous tread. For there was no one here but themselves - there could not be great footfalls moving softly through the dark, making the walls shudder a little as they came ...

Alanna's caught breath was clear in the silence. Not terror at first; but surprised inquiry. She said, "Paul- Paul, don't-"

And then he heard the beginning of her scream. He heard the beginning, but incredibly, he never heard the scream's end. One moment the full-throated roundness of her cry filled the room; pouring from a throat stretched wide with terror; the next, the sound diminished and vanished into infinite distances, plummeting away from him and growing thin and tiny while the echo of its first sound still rang through the room. The impossibility of such speed put the last touch of nightmare upon the whole episode. He did not believe it.

The dark was paling again. Rubbing his eyes, still not sure at all that this had not been some brief aberration of his own senses, he said, "Alanna- I thought-"

But the twilight around him was empty.

He had no idea how long a while elapsed between that moment and the moment when he stood up straight at last, facing the wall upon which the shadow still lay. In between there must have been a period of frantic search, of near hysteria and self-doubt and reeling disbelief. But now, as he stood looking up at the wall upon which the shadow still hung blackly, drawing into itself the last veils of twilight from the corners of the room, he ceased to rationalize or disbelieve.

Alanna was gone. Somehow, impossibly, in the darkness that had come upon them a Something with great silent feet that trod ponderously, shaking the walls, had seized her in the moment when she said, "Paul-"

thinking it was himself. And while she screamed, it had vanished into infinite distances out of this room, carrying her with it.

That it was impossible he had no time to consider. He had time now only to realize that nothing had passed him toward the door, and that the great circle upon the wall before him was - an entrance? - out of which Something had come and into which Something must have retreated again - and not alone ...

And the entrance was closing.

He took one step toward it, unreasoning and urgent, and then stumbled over the boxed instrument which he had been testing just before insanity entered the room. The sight and feel of it brought back his own sanity a little. Here was a weapon; it offered a grip upon slipping reality to know that he was not wholly helpless. Briefly he wondered whether any weapon at all would avail against That which came in impossible darkness on feet that made no sound, though their tread shook the foundations of the building ...

But the weapon was heavy. And how far away from the parent machine would it work? With shaking fingers he groped for the carrying handle. He staggered a little, lifting it, but he turned toward the end of the room where the great circle drank in the last of its twilight and began imperceptibly to pale upon the wall. If he were to follow, to take That which had gone before him by surprise, he must go swiftly ...

One glance at the lever of the parent machine, to be sure it was thrown full over, for the weapon itself drank power from that source alone - if it would drink power at all in the unfathomable distances to which he was going ... One last unbelieving glance around the room, to be quite sure Alanna was really gone-

The lower arc of the circle was a threshold opening upon darkness. He could not think that he would pass it, this flat shadow upon the flat and solid wall, but he put out one hand uncertainly and took a step forward, and another, bent to the weight of the box he carried ...

But there was no longer any weight. Nor was there any light nor sound - only wild, whirling motion that spun him over and over in the depths of his blindness. Spun interminably - spun for untimed eons that passed in the flash of an eye. And then-

"Paul! Oh, Paul!"

He stood reeling in a dim, round room walled with strange designs he could not quite focus upon. He had no sense that was not shaken intolerably; even sight was not to be relied upon just now. He thought he saw Alanna in the dimness, pale hair falling over her pale, shining shoulders, her face distorted with bewilderment and terror ...

"Paul! Paul, answer me! What is it? What's happened?"

He could not speak yet. He could only shake his head and cling by blind instinct to the weight that dragged down upon one arm. Alanna drew her

bare shoulders together under the showering hair and hugged herself fearfully, the creamy arms showing paler circles where her fingertips pressed them hard. Her teeth were chattering, though not from cold.

"How did we get here?" she was saying. "How did we get here, Paul? We'll have to go back, won't we? I wonder what's happened to us?" The words were almost aimless, as if the sound of speech itself were more important to her now than any sense of what she was saying. "Look behind you, Paul - see? We came out of - there."

He turned. A great circle of mirror rose behind him on the dim wall, but a mirror reversed, so that it reflected not themselves, but the room they had just left.

Clearer than a picture - he looked into it - his laboratory walls shining with dull reflections, his batteries and dials, and the lever standing up before them that meant the heavy thing he carried would be deadly - perhaps. Deadly? A weapon in a dream? Did they even know that the Something which dwelt here was inimical?

But this was ridiculous. It was too soon yet to accept the fact that they were standing here at all. In reality, of course, they must both be back in the laboratory, and both of them dreaming the same strange dream. And he felt, somehow, that to treat all this as a reality would be dangerous. For if he accepted even by implication that such a thing could be true, then perhaps - perhaps ... Could acceptance make it come true?

He set his weapon down and rubbed his arm dazedly, looking around. Words did not come easily yet, but he had to ask one question.

"That- that thing, Alanna. What was it? How did you-"

She gripped her own bare arms harder, and another spasm of shuddering went over her. The blue-green sequins flashed chilly star-points from her gown as she moved. Her voice shook too; her very mind seemed to be shaking behind the blank eyes. But when she spoke the words made approximate sense. And they echoed his own thought.

"I'm dreaming all this, you know." Her voice sounded far away. "This isn't really happening. But- but something took me in its arms back there." She nodded toward the mirrored laboratory on the wall. "And everything whirled, and then-" A hard shudder seized her. "I don't know..."

"Did you see it?"

She shook her head. "Maybe I did. I'm not sure. I was so dizzy - I think it went away through the door. Would you call it a door?" Her little breath of laughter was very near hysteria. "I- I felt its feet moving away."

"But what was it? What did it look like?"

"I don't know, Paul."

He closed his lips on the questions that rushed to be asked.

Here in the dream, many things were very alien indeed. Those patterns on

the wall, for instance. He thought he could understand how one could look at something and not be sure at all what the something was. And Alanna's heavy spasms of shuddering proved that shock must have blanked her mind protectively to much of what had happened. She said:

"Aren't we going back now, Paul?" And her eyes flickered past him to the pictured laboratory. It was a child's question; her mind was refusing to accept anything but the barest essentials of their predicament. But he could not answer. His first impulse was to say, "Wait - we'll wake up in a minute." But suppose they did not? Suppose they were trapped here? And if the Thing came back... Heavily, he said:

"Of course it's a dream, Alarum. But while it lasts I think we'll have to act as if it were real. I don't want to-" The truth was, he thought, he was afraid to. "But we must. And going back wouldn't do any good as long as we go on dreaming. It would just come after us again."

It would come striding through the dream to drag them back, and after all people have died in their sleep - died in their dreams, he thought.

He touched the unwieldy weapon with his toe, thinking silently, "This will help us - maybe. If anything can, it will. And if it won't - well, neither will running away." And he glanced toward the high, distorted opening that must be a doorway into some other part of this unimaginable, dream-created building. It had gone that way, then. Perhaps they should follow. Perhaps their greatest hope of waking safely out of this nightmare lay in acting rashly, in following with the weapon before it expected them to follow. It might not guess his own presence here at all. It must have left Alanna alone in the dim room, intending to return, not thinking to find her with a defender, or to find the defender armed ...

But was he armed? He grinned wryly.

Perhaps he ought to test the weapon. And yet, for all he knew, the Thing's strange, alien gaze might be upon him now. He was aware of a strong reluctance to let it know that he had any defense against it. Surprise - that was important. Keep it a secret until he needed a weapon, if he ever did need one. Very gently he pressed the trigger of the lens that had poured out lightnings in the faraway sanity of his laboratory. Would it work in- a dream? For a long moment nothing happened. Then, faintly and delicately against his palm he felt the tubing begin to throb just a little. It was as much of an answer as he dared take now. Some power was there. Enough? He did not know. It was unthinkable, really, that he should ever need to know. Still-

"Alanna," he said, "I think we'd better explore a little. No use just standing here waiting for it to come back. It may be perfectly friendly, you know. Dream creatures often are. But I'd like to see what's outside."

"We'll wake up in a minute," she assured him between chattering teeth. "I'm all right, I think, really. Just- just nervous." He thought she' seemed to be rousing from her stupor. Perhaps the prospect of action - any action - even rashness like this, was better for them both than inactivity. He felt surer of himself as he lifted the heavy weapon.

"But Paul, we can't!" She turned, half-way to the door, and faced him. "Didn't I tell you? I tried that before you came. There's a corridor outside, with knives all over the floor. Patterns of them, sharp-edged spirals and shapes. Look." She lifted her sparkling skirt a little and put out one foot. He could see the clean, sharp lacerations of the leather sole. His shoulders sagged a bit. Then:

"Well, let's look anyhow. Come on."

The corridor stretched before them, swimming in purple distances, great gothic hollows and arches melting upon arches. There were things upon the walls. Like the patterns in the room behind them, many were impossible to focus upon directly, too different from anything in human experience to convey meaning to the brain. The eye perceived them blankly, drawing no conclusions. He thought vaguely that the hall looked like a museum, with those great frames upon the walls.

Beside the door another tall frame leaned, empty. About six feet high, it was deep enough for a man to lie down in, and all around its edges an elaborate and beautiful decoration writhed, colored precisely like Alanna's blue-green gown. Interwoven in it were strands of silver, the color of her pale and shining hair.

"It looks like a coffin," Alanna said aimlessly. Some very ugly thought stirred in Paul's mind. He would not recognize it; he pushed it back out of sight quickly, but he was gladder now that he had brought this lightning-throwing weapon along.

The hall shimmered with strangeness before them. So many things he could not quite see clearly, but the razor-edged decorations of the floor were clear enough. It made the mind reel a little to think what utter alienage lay behind the choice of such adornment for a floor that must be walked upon - even in a dream. He thought briefly of the great earth-shaking feet in the darkness of his laboratory. Here in the dream they walked this knife-edged floor. They must.

But how?

The spirals of the pattern lay in long loops and rosettes. After a moment, eyeing them, he said, "I think we can make it, Alanna. If we walk between the knives - see, there's space if we're careful." And if they were not careful, if they had to run ... "We've got to risk it," he said aloud, and with those words admitted to himself for perhaps the first time an urgency in this dream, risk and danger ...

He took a firmer grip upon his burden and stepped delicately into the hollow of a steely spiral. Teetering a little, clutching at his arm to steady herself, Alanna came after him.

Silence - vast, unechoing hollows quivering with silence all around them. They advanced very slowly, watching wide-eyed for any signs of life in the distances, their senses strained and aching with the almost subconscious awareness of any slightest motion in the floor that might herald great feet ponderously approaching. But that which had opened the doorway for them had gone now, for a little while, and left them to their own devices.

Paul carried the lens of his weapon ready in his free hand, the lightest possible pressure always on its trigger so that the tubing throbbed faintly against his palm. That reassurance that contact still flowed between his faraway laboratory and this unbelievable hall was all that kept him forging ahead over the razory mosaics.

They went slowly, but they passed many very strange things. A tremendous transparent curtain swung from the vaulted ceiling in folds as immovable as iron. They slipped through the little triangle of opening where the draperies hung awry, and a shower of fiery sparkles sprang out harmlessly when they brushed the sides. They passed a fountain that sent up gushes of soundless flame from its basin in the center of the corridor floor. They saw upon the walls, in frames and without them, things too alien to think about clearly. That very alienage was worrying the man. In dreams one rehearses the stimuli of the past, fears and hopes and memories. But how could one dream of things like these? Where in any human past could such memories lie?

They skirted an oval stone set in the floor, the metal patterns swirling about it. They were both dizzy when they looked directly at it. Dangerous dizziness, since a fall here must end upon razor edges. And once they passed an indescribable something hanging against a black panel of the wall, that brought tears to the eyes with its sheer loveliness, a thing of unbearable beauty too far removed from human experience to leave any picture in their minds once they had gone past it. Only the emotional impact remained, remembered beauty too exquisite for the mind to grasp and hold. And the man knew definitely now that this at least was no part of any human memory, and could be in itself no dream.

They saw it all with the strange clarity and vividness of senses sharp with uncertainty and fear, but they saw it too with a dreamlike haziness that faded a little as they went on. To the man, a terrible wonder was dawning. Could it, after all, be a dream? Could it possibly be some alien reality into which they had stumbled? And the import of that frame outside the door they had left - the frame shaped like a coffin and adorned with the colors of Alanna's gown and hair ... Deep in his mind he knew what that frame was for. He knew he was walking through a museum filled with lovely things, and he was beginning to suspect why Alanna had been brought here too. The thing seemed unthinkable, even in a dream as mad as this, and yet-

"Look, Paul." He glanced aside. Alanna had reached up to touch a steel-blue frame upon the wall, its edges enclosing nothing but a dim rosy shimmer. She was groping inside it, her face animated now. No thought had come to her yet about that other frame, evidently. No thought that from this dream neither of them might ever wake ...

"Look," she said. "It seems empty, but I can feel something - something like feathers. What do you suppose-"

"Don't try to suppose," he said almost brusquely. "There isn't any sense to any of this."

"But some of the things are so pretty, Paul. See that- that snowstorm ahead, between the pillars?"

He looked. Veiling the hallway a little distance away hung a shower of patterned flakes, motionless in midair. Perhaps they were embroideries upon some gossamer drapery too sheer to see. But as he looked he thought he saw them quiver just a little. Quiver, and fall quiet, and then quiver again, as if- as if-

"Paul!"

Everything stopped dead still for a moment. He did not need Alanna's whisper to make his heart pause as he strained intolerably to hear, to see, to feel ... Yes, definitely now the snowstorm curtain shook. And the floor shook with it in faint rhythms to that distant tremor-

This is it, he thought. This is real.

He had known for minutes now that he was not walking through a dream. He stood in the midst of impossible reality, and the Enemy itself came nearer and nearer with each great soundless footfall, and there was nothing to do but wait. Nothing at all. It wanted Alanna. He knew why. It would not want himself, and it would brush him away like smoke in its juggernaut striding to seize her, unless his weapon could stop it. His heart began to beat with heavy, thick blows that echoed the distant footsteps.

"Alanna," he said, hearing the faintest possible quiver in his voice. "Alanna, get behind something - that pillar over there. Don't make a sound. And if I tell you - run!"

He stepped behind a nearer pillar, his arm aching from the weight of his burden, the lens of it throbbing faintly against his palm with its promise of power in leash. He thought it would work.

There was no sound of footfalls as the rhythm grew stronger. Only by the strength of those tremors that shook the floor could he judge how near the Thing was drawing. The pillar itself was shaking now, and the snowstorm was convulsed each time a mighty foot struck the floor soundlessly. Paul thought of the knife-edged patterns which those feet were treading with such firm and measured strides.

For a moment of panic he regretted his daring in coming to meet the Thing. He was sorry they had not stayed cowering in the room of the mirror - sorry they had not fled back down the whirling darkness through which they came. But you can't escape a nightmare. He held his lensed weapon throbbing like a throat against his palm, waiting to pour out lightning upon-what?

Now it was very close. Now it was just beyond the snowstorm between the pillars. He could see dim motion through their veil ...

Snow swirled away from its mighty shoulders, clouded about its great head so that he could not see very clearly what it was that stood there, tall and grotesque and terrible, its eyes shining scarlet through the veil. He was aware only of the eyes, and of the being's majestic bulk, before his hand of its own volition closed hard upon the pulse of violence in his palm.

For one timeless moment nothing happened. He was too stunned with the

magnitude of the thing he faced to feel even terror at his weapon's failure; awe shut out every other thought. He was even a little startled when the glare of golden daylight burst hissing from his hand, splashing its brilliance across the space between them.

Then relief was a weakness that loosened all his muscles as he played the deadliness of his weapon upon the Enemy, hearing the air shriek with its power, seeing the stone pillars blacken before those lashes of light. He was blinded by their glory; he could only stand there pouring the lightnings forth and squinting against their glare. The smell of scorched metal and stone was heavy in the air, and he could hear the crash of a falling column somewhere, burned through by the blast of the flame. Surely it too must be consumed and falling ... Hope began to flicker in his brain.

It was Alanna's whimper that told him something must still be wrong. Belatedly he reached up to close the glass visor of the mask he still wore, and by magic the glare ceased to blind him. He could see between the long, writhing whips of light - see the pillars falling and the steel patterns of the floor turn blue and melt away. But he could see it standing between those crumbling pillars now ...

He could see it standing in the full bath of the flames, see them splash upon its mighty chest and sluice away over its great shoulders like the spray of water, unheeded, impotent. Its eyes were darkening from crimson to an angry purple as it lurched forward one ponderous, powerful stride, brushing away the sparks from its face, putting out a terrible ire.

"Alanna-" said the man in a very quiet voice, pitched below the screaming of the flame. "Alanna - you'd better start back. I'll hold it while I can. You'd better run, Alanna ..."

He did not know if she obeyed. He could spare no further attention from the desperate business at hand, to delay it - to hold it back even for sixty seconds - for thirty seconds - for one breath more of independent life. What might happen after that he could not let himself think. Perhaps not death - perhaps something far more alien and strange than death ...

He knew the struggle was hopeless and senseless, but he knew he must struggle on while breath remained in him.

There was a narrow place in the corridor between himself and it. The lightning had weakened one wall already. He swung it away from the oncoming colossus and played the fire screaming to and fro upon blackened stones, seeing mortar crumble between them and girders bending in that terrible heat.

The walls groaned, grinding their riven blocks surface against surface. Slowly, slowly they leaned together; slowly they fell. Stone dust billowed in a cloud to hide the final collapse of the corridor, but through it the scream of lightnings sounded and the shriek of metal against falling stone. And then, distantly, a deeper groaning of new pressure coming to bear.

The man stood paralyzed for a moment, dizzy with an unreasonable hope that he had stopped the Enemy at last, not daring to look too closely for fear of failure. But hope and despair came almost simultaneously into his

mind as he watched the mass of the closed walls shuddering and resisting for a moment - but only for a moment.

With dust and stone blocks and steel girders falling away from its tremendous shoulders, it stepped through the ruined arch. Jagged golden lightnings played in its face, hissing and screaming futilely. It ignored them. Shaking off the debris of the wall, it strode forward, eyes purple with anger, great hands outstretched.

And so the weapon failed. He loosed the trigger, hearing its shriek die upon the air as the long ribbons of lightning faded. It was instinct, echoing over millenniums from the first fighting ancestor of mankind, that made him swing the heavy machine overhead with both hands and hurl it into the face of the Enemy. And it was a little like relinquishing a living comrade to let the throb of that fiery tubing lose contact with his palm a last.

Blindly he flung the weapon from him, and in the same motion whirled and ran. The knife-edged floor spun past below him. If he could hit a rhythm to carry him from loop to empty loop of the pattern, he might even reach the room at the end of the passage - There was no sanctuary anywhere, but unreasoning instinct made him seek the place of his origin here.

Ahead of him a flutter of blue-green sequins now and then told him that Alanna was running too, miraculously keeping her balance on the patterned floor. He could not look up to watch her. His eyes were riveted to the spirals and loops among which his precarious footing lay. Behind him great feet were thudding soundlessly, shaking the floor.

The things that happened then happened too quickly for the brain to resolve into any sequence at all. He knew that the silence which had flowed back when the screaming lightnings died was suddenly, shockingly broken again by a renewed screaming. He remembered seeing the metal patterns of the floor thrown into sharp new shadows by the light behind him, and he knew that the Enemy had found the trigger he had just released, that his weapon throbbed now against an alien hand.

But it happened in the same instant that the doorway of the entrance room loomed up before him, and he hurled himself desperately into the dimness after Alanna, knowing his feet were cut through and bleeding, seeing the dark blotches of the tracks she too was leaving. The mirror loomed before them, an unbearable picture of the lost familiar room he could not hope to enter again in life.

And all this was simultaneous with a terrifying soundless thunder of great feet at his very heels, of a mighty presence suddenly and ponderously in the same room with them, like a whirlwind exhausting the very air they gasped to breathe. He felt anger eddying about him without words or sound. He felt monstrous hands snatch him up as if a tornado had taken him into its windy grasp. He remembered purple eyes glaring through the dimness in one brief instant of perception before the hands hurled him away.

He spun through empty air. Then a howling vortex seized him and he was falling in blindness, stunned and stupefied, through the same strange

passageway that had brought him here. Distantly he heard Alanna scream.

There was silence in the dim, round room in the center of the treasure house, except for a muffled howling from the screen. He who was master here stood quietly before it, his eyes half shut and ranging down the spectrum from purple to red, and then swiftly away from red through orange to a clear, pale, tranquil yellow. His chest still heaved a little with the excitement of that minor fiasco which he had brought upon himself, but it was an excitement soon over, and wholly disappointing.

He was a little ashamed of his momentary anger. He should not have played the little creatures' puny lightnings upon them as they fell down the shaft of darkness. He had misjudged their capacity, after all. They were not really capable of giving him a fight worth while.

It was interesting that one had followed the other, with its little weapon that sparkled and stung, interesting that one fragile being had stood up to him.

But he knew a moment's regret for the beauty of the blue-and-white creature he had flung away. The long, smooth lines of it, the subtle coloring ... Too bad that it had been worthless because it was helpless too.

Helpless against himself, he thought, and equally against the drive of its own mysterious motives. He sighed.

He thought again, almost regretfully, of the lovely thing he had coveted hurtling away down the vortex with lightnings bathing it through the blackness.

Had he destroyed it? He did not know. He was a little sorry now that anger for his ruined treasures had made him lose his temper when they ran. Futile, scuttling little beings - they had cheated him out of beauty because of their own impotence against him, but he was not even angry about that now. Only sorry, with vague, confused sorrows he did not bother to clarify in his mind. Regret for the loss of a lovely thing, regret that he had expected danger from them and been disappointed, regret perhaps for his own boredom, that did not bother any longer to probe into the motives of living things. He was growing old indeed.

The vortex still roared through the darkened screen. He stepped back from it, letting opacity close over the surface of the portal, hushing all sound. His eyes were a tranquil yellow. Tomorrow he would hunt again, and perhaps tomorrow.

He went out slowly, walking with long, soundless strides that made the steel mosaics sing faintly beneath his feet.