

The Sky People

by Poul Anderson

The Rover Fleet got there just before sunrise. From its height, five thousand feet, the land was bluish gray, smoked with mists. Irrigation canals caught the first light as if they were full of mercury. Westward the ocean gleamed, its far edge dissolved into purple and a few stars.

Loklann sunna Holber leaned over the gallery rail of his flagship and pointed a telescope at the city. It sprang to view as a huddle of walls, flat roofs, and square watchtowers. The cathedral spires were tinted rose by a hidden sun. No barrage balloons were up. It must be true what rumor said, that the Perio had abandoned its outlying provinces to their fate. So the portable wealth of Meyco would have flowed into S' Anton, for safekeeping-which meant that the place was well worth a raid. Loklann grinned.

Robra sunna Stam, the Buffalo's mate, spoke. "Best we come down to about two thousand," he suggested. "Just to be sure the men aren't blown sideways, to the wrong side of the town walls."

"Aye." The skipper nodded his helmeted head. "Two thousand, so be it."

Their voices seemed oddly loud up here, where only the wind and a creak of rigging had broken silence. The sky around the royers was dusky immensity, tinged red gold in the east. Dew lay on the gallery deck. But when the long wooden horns blew signals, it was somehow not an interruption, nor was the distant shouting of orders from other vessels, thud of crew fleet, clatter of windlasses and hand-operated compressor pumps. To a Sky Man, those sounds belonged in the upper air.

Five great craft spiraled smoothly downward. The first sunrays flashed off gilt figureheads, bold on sharp gondola prows, and rioted along the extravagant designs painted on gas bags. Sails and rudders were unbelievably white across the last western darkness.

"Hullo, there," said Loklann. He had been studying the harbor through his telescope. "Something new. What could it be?"

He offered the tube to Robra, who held it to his remaining eye. Within the glass circle lay a stone dock and warehouses, centuries old, from the days of the Perio's greatness. Less than a fourth of their capacity was used now. The normal clutter of wretched little fishing craft, a single coasting schooner. . . and yes, by Oktai the Stormbringer, a monster thing, bigger than a whale, seven masts that were impossibly tall!

"I don't know." The mate lowered the telescope. "A foreigner? But where from? Not in all this continent-"

"I never saw any arrangement like that," said Loklann. "Square sails on the topmasts, fore-and-aft below." He stroked his short beard. It burned like spun copper in the morning light; he was one of the fairhaired blue-eyed men, rare even among the Sky People and unheard of elsewhere. "Of course," he said, "we're no experts on water craft. We only see them in passing." A not unamiable contempt rode his words: sailors made good slaves, at least, but naturally the only fit vehicle for a fighting man was a rover abroad and a horse at home.

"Probably a trader," he decided. "We'll capture it if possible."

He turned his attention to more urgent problems. He had no map of 5' Anton, had never even seen it before. This was the farthest south any Sky People had yet gone plundering, and almost as far as any had ever visited-in bygone days aircraft were still too primitive and the Perio too strong. Thus Loklann must scan the city from far above, through drifting white vapors, and make his plan on the spot. Nor could it be very complicated, for he had only signal flags and a barrel-chested hollerer with a megaphone to pass orders to the other vessels.

"That big plaza in front of the temple," he murmured. "Our contingent will land there. Let the Stormcloud men tackle that big building east of it. . . see. . . it looks like a chief's dwelling. Over there, along the north wall, typical barracks and parade ground-Coyote can deal with the soldiers. Let the Witch of Heaven men land on the docks, seize the seaward gun emplacements and that strange vessel, then join the attack on the garrison. Fire Elk's crew should land inside the east city gate and send a detachment to the south gate, to bottle in the civilian population. Having occupied the plaza, I'll send reinforcements wherever they're needed. All clear?"

He snapped down his goggles. Some of the big men crowding about him wore chain armor, but he preferred a cuirass of harden leather, Mong style; it was nearly as strong and a lot lighter. He was armed with a pistol, but had more faith in his battle ax. An archer could shoot almost as fast as a gun, as accurately-and firearms were getting fabulously expensive to operate as sulfur sources dwindled.

He felt a tightness which was like being a little boy again, opening presents on Midwinter Morning. Oktai knew what treasures he would find, of gold, cloth, tools, slaves, of battle and high deeds and eternal fame. Possibly death. Someday he was sure to die in combat: he had sacrificed so much to his josses, they wouldn't grudge him war-death and a chance to be reborn as a Sky Man.

"Let's go!" he said.

He sprang up on a gallery rail and over. For a moment the world pinwheeled, now the city was on top and now again his Buffalo streaked past. Then he pulled the ripcord and his harness slammed him to steadiness. Around him it bloomed with scarlet parachutes. He gauged the wind and tugged a line, guiding himself down.

Don Miwel Carabán, calde of S' AntOn d' Inio, arranged a lavish feast for his Maurai guests. It was not only that this was a historic occasion, which might even mark a turning point in the long decline. (Don Miwel, being that rare combination, a practical man who could read, knew that the withdrawal of Perio troops to Brasil twenty years ago was not a "temporary adjustment." They would never come back. The outer provinces were on their own.) But the strangers must be convinced that they had found a nation rich, strong, and basically civilized: that it was worthwhile visiting the Meycan coasts to trade, ultimately to make alliance against the northern savages.

The banquet lasted till nearly midnight. Though some of the old irrigation canals had choked up and never been repaired, so that cactus and rattlesnake housed in abandoned puebls, Meyco Province was still fertile. The slant-eyed Mong horsemen from Tekkas had killed off innumerable peons when they raided five years back; wooden pitchforks and obsidian hoes were small use against saber and arrow. It would be another decade before population was back to normal and the periodic famines resumed. Thus Don Miwel offered many courses, beef, spiced ham, olives, fruits, wines, nuts, coffee, which last the Sea People were unfamiliar with and didn't much care for, et cetera. Entertainment followed-music, jugglers, a fencing exhibition by some of the young nobles.

At this point the surgeon of the Dolphin, who was rather drunk, offered to show an Island dance. Muscular beneath tattoos, his brown form went through a series of contortions which pursed the lips of the dignified Dons. Miwel himself remarked, "It reminds me somewhat of our peons' fertility rites," with a strained courtesy that suggested to Captain Ruori Rangi Lohannaso that peons had an altogether different and not very nice culture.

The surgeon threw back his queue and grinned. "Now let's bring the ship's wahines ashore to give

them a real hula," he said in Maurai-Inglist.

"No," answered Ruori. "I fear we may have shocked them already. The proverb goes, 'When in the Solmon Islands, darken your skin.'"

"I don't think they know how to have any fun," complained the doctor.

"We don't yet know what the taboos are," warned Ruori. "Let us be as grave, then, as these spike-bearded men, and not laugh or make love until we are back on shipboard among our wahines."

"But it's stupid! Shark-toothed Nan eat me if I'm going to-"

"Your ancestors are ashamed," said Ruori. It was about as sharp a rebuke as you could give a man whom you didn't intend to fight. He softened his tone to take out the worst sting, but the doctor had to shut up. Which he did, mumbling an apology and retiring with his blushes to a dark corner beneath faded murals.

Ruori turned back to his host. "I beg your pardon, S'flor," he said, using the local tongue. "My men's command of Spaflo is even less than my own."

"Of course." Don Miwel's lean black-cald form made a stiff little bow. It brought his sword up, ludicrously like a tail. Ruori heard a smothered snort of laughter from one of his officers. And yet, thought the captain, were long trousers and ruffled shirt any worse than sarong, sandals, and clan tattoos? Different customs, no more. You had to sail the Maurai Federation, from Awaii to his own N'Zealann and west to Mlaya, before you appreciated how big this planet was and how much of it a mystery.

"You speak our language most excellently, S'ñor," said Doflita Tresa Carabán. She smiled. "Perhaps better than we, since you studied texts centuries old before embarking, and the Spaflo has changed greatly since."

Ruori smiled back. Don Miwel's daughter was worth it. The rich black dress caressed a figure as good as any in the world; and, while the Sea People paid less attention to a woman's face, he saw that hers was proud and well-formed, her father's eagle beak softened to a curve, luminous eyes and hair the

color of midnight oceans. It was too bad these Meycans-the nobles, at least- thought a girl should be reserved solely for the husband they eventually picked for her. He would have liked her to swap her pearls and silver for a lei and go out in a ship's canoe, just the two of them, to watch the sunrise and make love.

However-

"In such company," he murmured, "I am stimulated to learn the modern language as fast as possible."

She refrained from coquetting with her fan, a local habit the Sea People found alternately hilarious and irritating. But her lashes fluttered. They were very long, and her eyes, he saw, were goldflecked green. "You are learning cab'llero manners just as fast, S'nor," she said.

"Do not call our language 'modern', I pray you," interrupted a scholarly looking man in a long robe. Ruori recognized Bispo Don Carlos Ermosillo, a high priest of that Esu Canto who seemed cognate with the Maurai Lesu Haristi. "Not modern, but corrupt. I too have studied old books, printed before the War of Judgment. Our ancestors spoke the true Spafol. Our version of it is as distorted as our present-day society." He sighed. "But what can one expect, when even among the well-born, not one in ten can write his own name?"

"There was more literacy in the high days of the Perio," said Don Miwel. "You should have visited us a hundred years ago, S'nor Captain, and seen what our race was capable of."

"Yet what was the Perio itself but a successor state?" asked the Bispo bitterly. "It unified a large area, gave law and order for a while, but what did it create that was new? Its course was the same sorry tale as a thousand kingdoms before, and therefore the same judgment has fallen on it."

Doflita Tresa crossed herself. Even Ruori, who held a degree in engineering as well as navigation, was shocked. "Not atomics?" he exclaimed.

"What? Oh. The old weapons, which destroyed the old world. No, of course not." Don Carlos shook his head. "But in our more limited way, we have been as stupid and sinful as the legendary forefathers, and the results have been parallel. You may call it human greed or el Dio's punishment as you will; I think the two mean much the same thing."

Ruori looked closely at the priest. "I should like to speak with you further, S'nor," he said, hoping it was the right title. "Men who know history, rather than myth, are rare these days."

"By all means," said Don Carlos. "I should be honored."

Doñita Tresa shifted on light, impatient feet. "It is customary to dance," she said.

Her father laughed. "Ah, yes. The young ladies have been getting very impatient, I am sure. Time enough to resume formal discussions tomorrow, S'flor Captain. Now let the music begin!"

He signalled. The orchestra struck up. Some instruments were quite like those of the Maurai, others wholly unfamiliar. The scale itself was different. . . they had something like it in Stralia, but- A hand fell on Ruori's arm. He looked down at Tresa. "Since you do not ask me to dance," she said, "may I be so immodest as to ask you?"

"What does 'immodest' mean?" he inquired.

She blushed and tried to explain, without success. Ruori decided it was another local concept which the Sea People lacked. By that time the Meycan girls and their cavaliers were out on the ballroom floor. He studied them for a moment. "The motions are unknown to me," he said, "but I think I could soon learn."

She slipped into his arms. It was a pleasant contact, even though nothing would come of it. "You do very well," she said after a minute. "Are all your folk so graceful?"

Only later did he realize it was a compliment for which he should have thanked her; being an Islander, he took it at face value as a question and replied, "Most of us spend a great deal of time on the water. A sense of balance and rhythm must be developed or one is likely to fall into the sea."

She wrinkled her nose. "Oh stop," she laughed. "You're as solemn as S' Osé in the cathedral."

Ruori grinned back. He was a tall young man, brown as all his race but with the gray eyes which many bore in memory of Ingliss ancestors. Being a N'Zealanner, he was not tattooed as lavishly as some Federation men. On the other hand, he had woven a whalebone filigree into his queue, his sarong was the finest batik, and he had added thereto a fringed shirt. His knife, without which a Maurai felt obscenely helpless, was in contrast: old, shabby until you saw the blade, a tool.

"I must see this god 5' Osd," he said. "Will you show me? Or no, I would not have eyes for a mere statue."

"How long will you stay?" she asked.

"As long as we can. We are supposed to explore the whole Meycan coast. Hitherto the only Maurai contact with the Menken continent has been one voyage from Awaii to Californi. They found desert and a few savages. We have heard from Okkaidan traders that there are forests still further north, where yellow and white men strive against each other. But what lies south of Californi was unknown to us until this expedition was sent out. Perhaps you can tell us what to expect in Su-Merika."

"Little enough by now," she sighed, "even in Brasil."

"Ah, but lovely roses bloom, in Meyco."

Her humor returned. "And flattering words in N'Zealann," she chuckled.

"Far from it. We are notoriously straightforward. Except, of course, when yarning about voyages we have made."

"What yarns will you tell about this one?"

"Not many, lest all the young men of the Federation come crowding here. But I will take you aboard my ship, Doñita, and show you to the compass. Thereafter it will always point toward 5' AntOn d' Inio. You will be, so to speak, my compass rose."

Somewhat to his surprise, she understood, and laughed. She led him across the floor, supple between his hands.

Thereafter, as the night wore on, they danced together as much as decency allowed, or a bit more, and various foolishness which concerned no one else passed between them. Toward sunrise the orchestra was dismissed and the guests, hiding yawns behind well-bred hands, began to take their departure.

"How dreary to stand and receive farewells," whispered Tresa. "Let them think I went to bed already." She took Ruori's hand and slipped behind a column and so out on to a balcony. An old serving woman, stationed to act as duenna for couples that wandered out, had wrapped up in her mantle against the cold and fallen asleep. Otherwise the two were alone among jasmines. Mists floated around the palace and blurred the city; far off rang the "Todos buen" of pikemen tramping the outer walls. Westward the balcony faced darkness, where the last stars glittered. The seven tall topmasts of the Maurai Dolphin caught the earliest sun and glowed.

Tresa shivered and stood close to Ruoni. They did not speak for a while.

"Remember us," she said at last, very low. "When you are back with your own happier people, do not forget us here."

"How could I?" he answered, no longer in jest.

"You have so much more than we," she said wistfully. "You have told me how your ships can sail unbelievably fast, almost into the wind. How your fishers always fill their nets, how your whale ranchers keep herds that darken the water, how you even farm the ocean for food and fiber and-" she fingered the shimmering material of his shirt. "You told me this was made by craft out of fishbones. You told me that every family has its own spacious house and every member of it, almost, his own boat. . . that even small children on the loneliest island can read, and own printed books . . . that you have none of the sicknesses which destroy us. . . that no one hungers and all are free- Oh, do not forget us, you on whom el DIO has smiled!"

She stopped, then, embarrassed. He could see how her head lifted and nostrils dilated, as if resenting him. After all, he thought, she came from a breed which for centuries had given, not received charity.

So he chose his words with care: "It has been less our virtue than our good fortune, Doflita. We suffered less than most in the War of Judgment, and the fact of Judgment, and the fact of our being chiefly Islanders prevented our population from outrunning the sea's rich ability to feed us. So we-no, we did not retain any lost ancestral arts. There are none. But we did re-create an ancient attitude, a way of thinking, which has made the difference-science."

She crossed herself. "The atom!" she breathed, drawing from him.

"No, no, Doflita," he protested. "So many nations we have discovered lately believe that science was the cause of the old world's ruin. Or else they think that it was a collection of cut-and-dried formulas for making tall buildings or talking at a distance. But neither belief is true. The scientific method is only a means of learning. It is a . . . a perpetual starting afresh. And that is why you people here in Meyco can help us as much as we can help you, why we have sought you out and will come knocking hopefully at your doors again in the future."

She frowned, though something began to glow within her. "I do not understand," she said.

He cast about for an example. At last he pointed to a series of small holes in the balcony rail. "What used to be here?" he asked.

"Why . . . I do not know. It has always been like that."

"I think I can tell you. I have seen similar things elsewhere. It was a wrought-iron grille. But it was pulled out a long time ago and made into weapons or tools. No?"

"Quite likely," she admitted. "Iron and copper have grown very scarce. We have to send caravans across the whole land, to Támico ruins, in great peril from bandits and barbarians, to fetch our metal. Time was when there were iron rails within a kilometer of this place. Don Carlos has told me."

He nodded. "Just so. The ancients exhausted the world. They mined the ores, burned the oil and coal, eroded the land until there was nothing left. I exaggerate, of course. There are still mineral deposits here and there. But not enough. The old civilization used up all the capital, so to speak. Now sufficient

forest and soil have come back so the world could try to reconstruct the machine culture-except that there aren't enough minerals and fuels. For centuries men have been forced to tear up the old artifacts, if there was to be any metal at all. By and large, the knowledge of the ancients hasn't been lost; it has simply become unusable, because we are so much poorer than they."

He leaned forward, earnestly. "But knowledge and discovery do not depend on wealth," he said. "Perhaps because we did not have so much metal to cannibalize in the Islands, we turned elsewhere. The scientific method is just as applicable to wind and sun and living matter as it was to oil, iron, or uranium. By studying genetics we learned how to create seaweeds, plankton, fish that would serve our purposes. Scientific forest management gives us adequate timber, organic-synthesis bases, some fuel. The sun pours down energy which we know how to concentrate and use. Wood, ceramics, even stone can replace metal for most purposes. The wind, through such principles as the airfoil or the Venturi law or the Hilsch tube, supplies force, heat, refrigeration; the tides can be harnessed. Even in its present early stage, paramathematical psychology helps control population, as well as- No, I am talking like an engineer now, falling into my own language. I apologize.

"What I wanted to say was, that if we can only have the help of other people, such as yourselves, on a world-wide scale, we can match our ancestors, or surpass them. . . not in their own ways, which were often short-sighted and wasteful, but in achievements uniquely ours-"

His voice trailed off. She wasn't listening. She stared over his head, into the air, and horror stood on her face.

Then trumpets howled on battlements, and the cathedral bells crashed to life.

"What the nine devils!" Ruori turned on his heel and looked up. The zenith had become quite blue. Lazily over S' AntOn floated five orca shapes. The new sun glared off a jagged heraldry painted along their flanks. He estimated dizzily that each of them must be three hundred feet long.

Blood-colored things petaled out below them and drifted down upon the city.

"The Sky People!" said a small broken croak behind him. "Sant'sima Marl, pray for us now!"

III

Loklann hit flagstones, rolled over, and bounced to his feet. Beside him a carved horseman presided over fountain waters. For just an instant he admired the stone, almost alive; they had nothing like that in Canyon, Zona, Corado, any of the mountain kingdoms. And the temple facing this plaza was white skywardness.

The square had been busy, farmers and handicrafters setting up their booths for a market day. Most of them scattered in noisy panic. But one big man roared, snatched up a stone hammer, and dashed in his rags to meet Loklann. He was covering the flight of a young woman, probably his wife, who held a baby in her arms. Through the shapeless sack dress Loklann saw that her figure wasn't bad. She would fetch a price when the Mong slave dealer next visited Canyon. So could her husband, but there wasn't time now, still encumbered with a chute-Loklann whipped out his pistol and fired. The man fell to one knee, gaped at the blood seeping between fingers clutched to his belly, and collapsed. Loklann flung off his harness. His boots thudded after the woman. She shrieked when fingers closed on her arm and tried to wriggle free, but the brat hampered her. Loklann shoved her toward the temple. Robra was already on its steps.

"Post a guard!" yelled the skipper. "We may as well keep all the prisoners in here, till we're ready to plunder it."

An old man in priest's robes tottered to the door. He held up one of the cross-shaped Meycan josses, as if to bar the way. Robra brained him with an ax blow, kicked the body off the stairs, and urged the woman inside.

It sleeted armed men. Loklann winded his oxhorn bugle, rallying them. A counterattack could be expected any minute. . .

Yes, now.

A troop of Meycan cavalry clanged into view. They were young, proud-looking men in baggy pants, leather breastplate and plumed helmet, blowing cloak, fire-hardened wooden lances but steel sabres. Very much like the yellow nomads of Tekkas, whom they had fought for centuries. But so had the Sky People. Loklann pounded to the head of his line, where his standard bearer had raised the Lightning Flag. Half the Buffalo's crew fitted together sections of pike tipped with edged ceramic, grounded the butts, and waited. The charge crested upon them. Their pikes slanted down. Some horses spitted themselves, others reared back screaming. The pikemen jabbed at their riders. The second paratroop line stepped in, ax and sword and hamstringing knife. For a few minutes murder boiled. The Meycans broke. They did not flee, but they retreated in confusion. And then the Canyon bows began to snap.

Presently only dead and hurt cluttered the square. Loklann moved briskly among the latter. Those who weren't too badly wounded were hustled into the temple. Might as well collect all possible slaves and cull them out later.

From afar he heard a dull boom. "Cannon," said Robra, joining him. "At the army barracks."

"Well, let the artillery have its fun, till our boys get in among 'em," said Loklann sardonically. -

"Sure, sure." Robra looked nervous. "I wish they'd let us hear from them, though. Just standing around here isn't so good."

"It won't be long," predicted Loklann.

Nor was it. A runner with a broken arm staggered to him. "Stormcloud," he gasped. "The big building you sent us against full of swordsmen . . . they repulsed us at the door-"

"Huh! I thought it was just the king's house," said Loklann. He laughed. "Well, maybe the king was giving a party. Come on, then, I'll go see for myself. Robra, take over here." His finger swept out thirty men to accompany him. They jogged down streets empty and silent except for their own bootfalls and weapon-jingle. The housefolk must be huddled terrified behind those blank walls. So much the easier to round them up later, when the fighting was done and the looting began.

A roar broke loose. Loklann led a dash around a last corner. Opposite him he saw the palace, an old

building, red-tiled roof and mellow walls and many glass windows. The Stormcloud men were fighting at the main door. Their dead and wounded from the last attack lay thick.

Loklann took in the situation at a glance. "It wouldn't occur to those lardheads to send a detachment through some side entrance, would it?" he groaned. "Jonak, take fifteen of our boys and batter in a lesser door and hit the rear of that line. The rest of you help me keep it busy meanwhile."

He raised his red-spattered ax. "A Canyon!" he yelled. "A Canyon!," His followers bellowed behind him and they ran to battle.

The last charge had just reeled away bloody and breathless. Half a dozen Meycans stood in the wide doorway. They were all nobles:

grim men with goatees and waxed mustaches, in formal black, red cloaks wrapped as a shield on their left arms and long slim swords in their right hands. Behind them stood others, ready to take the place of the fallen.

"A Canyon!" shouted Loklann as he rushed.

"Quel Dz'o wela!" cried a tall grizzled Don. A gold chain of office hung around his neck. His blade snaked forth.

Loklann flung up his ax and parried. The Don was fast, riposting with a lunge that ended on the raider's breast. But hardened six-ply leather turned the point. Loklann's men crowded on either side, reckless of thrusts, and hewed. He struck the enemy sword, it spun from the owner's grasp. "Ah, no Don Miwel!" cried a young person beside the calde. The older man snarled and threw out his hands and somehow clamped them on Loklann's ax. He yanked it away with a troll's strength. Loklann stared into eyes that said death. Don Miwel raised the ax. Loklann drew his pistol and fired point blank.

As Don Miwel toppled, Loklann caught him, pulled off the gold chain, and threw it around his own neck. Straightening, he met a savage thrust. It glanced off his helmet. He got his ax back, planted his feet firmly, and smote.

The defending line buckled.

Clamor lifted behind Loklann. He turned and saw weapons gleam beyond his own men's shoulders. With a curse he realized- there had been more people in the palace than these holding the main door. The rest had sallied out the rear and were now on his back!

A point pierced his thigh. He felt no more than sting, but rage flapped black before his eyes. "Be reborn as the swine you are!" he roared. Half unaware, he thundered loose. Somehow he cleared a space for himself, lurched aside and oversaw the battle.

The newcomers were mostly palace guards, judging from their gaily striped uniforms, pikes and machetes. But there were allies, a dozen men such as Loklann had never seen or heard of. They had the brown skin and black hair of Injuns, but their faces were more like a white man's; intricate blue designs covered their bodies, which were clad only in wrap-arounds and flower wreaths. They wielded knives and clubs with wicked skill.

Loklann tore his trouser leg open to look at his wound. It wasn't much. More serious was the beating his men were taking. He saw Mork sunna Brenn rush with uplifted sword at one of the dark strangers, a big man who had added a rich-looking blouse to his skirt. Mork had killed four men at home for certain, in lawful fights, and no one knew how many abroad. The dark man waited, a knife between his teeth, hands hanging loose. As the sword came down, the dark man simply wasn't there. Grinning around his knife, he chopped at the sword wrist with the edge of a hand. Loklann distinctly heard bones crack. Mork yelled. The foreigner hit him in the Adam's apple. Mork went to his knees, spat blood, caved in, and was still. Another Sky Man charged, ax aloft. The stranger-somehow-avoided the weapon, caught the moving body on his hip, and helped it along. The Sky Man hit the pavement with his head and did not move again.

Now Loklann saw that the newcomers were a ring around others who did not fight. Women. By Oktai and man-eating Ulagu, these bastards were leading out all the women in the palace! And the fight against them had broken up, surly raiders stood back holding their wounds.

Loklann ran forward. "A Canyon! A Canyon!" he shouted. "Ruori Rangi Lohannaso," said the big stranger politely. He rapped a string of orders. His party began to move away.

"Hit them, you scum!" bawled Loklann. His men rallied and straggled after. Rearguard pikes prodded them back. Loklann led a rush to the front of the hollow square.

The big man saw him coming; gray eyes focused on the calde's chain and became full of winter. "So you killed Don Miwel," said Ruori in Español. Loklann understood him, having learned the tongue from prisoners and concubines during many raids further north. "You lousy son of a skua."

Loklann's pistol came out. Ruori's hand blurred. Suddenly the knife stood in the Sky Man's right biceps. He dropped his gun. "I'll want that back!" shouted Ruori. Then, to his followers:

"Come, to the ship."

Loklann stared at blood rivering down his arm. He heard a clatter as the refugees broke through the weary Canyon line. Jonak's party appeared in the main door-which was now empty, its surviving defenders having left with Ruori.

A man approached Loklann, who still regarded his arm. "Shall we go after 'em, skipper?" he said, almost timidly. "Jonak can lead us after 'em."

"No," said Loklann.

"But they must be escorting a hundred women. A lot of young women too."

Loklann shook himself, like a dog coming out of a deep cold stream. "No. I want to find the medic and get this wound stitched. Then we'll have a lot else to do. We can settle with those outlanders later, if the chance comes. Man, we've a city to sack!"

There were dead men scattered on the wharfs, some burned. They looked oddly small beneath the warehouses, like rag dolls tossed away by some weeping child. Cannon fumes lingered to bite nostrils.

Atel Hamid Seraio, the mate, who had been left aboard the Dolphin with the enlisted crew, led a band to meet Ruori. His salute was in the Island manner, so casual that even at this moment some of the Meycans looked shocked. "We were about to go after you, captain," he said.

Ruori looked toward that forest which was the Dolphin's rig. "What happened here?" he asked.

"A band of those devils landed up that way, near the battery. They took the emplacements while we were still wondering what it was all about. Some of them went off toward that racket in the north quarter, I believe where the army lives. But the rest of the gang attacked us. Well, with our gunwale ten feet above the dock, and us trained to repel pirates, they didn't have much luck. I gave them a dose of flame."

Ruori winced from the blackened corpses. Doubtless they had deserved it, but he didn't like the idea of pumping burning blubber oil across live men.

"Too bad they didn't try it from the seaward side," added Atel with a sigh. "We've got such a lovely harpoon catapult. I used one just like it several years ago off Hinja, when a Sinese buccaneer came too close. His junk sounded like a whale."

"Men aren't whales!" snapped Ruori.

"All right, captain, all right, all right." Atel backed away from his violence, a little frightened. "No ill-speaking meant."

Ruori recollected himself and folded his hands. "I spoke in needless anger," he said formally. "I laugh at myself."

"It's nothing, captain. As I was saying, we beat them off and they finally withdrew. I imagine they'll be

back with reinforcements. What shall we do?"

"That's what I don't know," said Ruori in a bleak tone. He turned to the Meycans, who stood with stricken uncomprehending faces. "Your pardon is prayed, Dons and Doflitas," he said in Spaflo. "He was only relating to me what had happened."

"Don't apologize!" Tresa Carabán spoke, stepping out ahead of the men. Some of them looked a bit offended, but they were too tired and stunned to reprove her forwardness, and to Ruori it was only natural that a woman act as freely as a man. "You saved our lives, captain. More than our lives."

He wondered what was worse than death, then nodded. Slavery, of course, ropes and whips and a lifetime's unfree toil in a strange land. His eyes dwelt upon her, the long hair disheveled past smooth shoulders, gown ripped, weariness and a streak of tears across her face. He wondered if she knew her father was dead. She held herself straight and regarded him with an odd defiance.

"We are uncertain what to do," he said awkwardly. "We are only fifty men. Can we help your city?"

A young nobleman, swaying on his feet, replied: "No. The city is done. You can take these ladies to safety, that is all."

Tresa protested: "You are not surrendering already, S'flor DOnoju!"

"No, Doflita," the young man breathed. "But I hope I can be shriven before returning to fight, for I am a dead man."

"Come aboard," said Ruori curtly.

He led the way up the gangplank. Liliu, one of the ship's five wahines, ran to meet him. She threw arms about his neck and cried, "I feared you were all slain!"

"Not yet." Ruori disengaged her as gently as possible. He noticed Tresa standing stiff, glaring at them

both. Puzzlement came-did these curious Meycans expect a crew to embark on a voyage of months without taking a few girls along?-then he decided that the wahines' clothing, being much like his men's, was against local mores. To Nan with their silly prejudices. But it hurt that Tresa drew away from him.

The other Meycans stared about them. Not all had toured the ship when she first arrived. They looked in bewilderment at lines and spars, down fathoms of deck to the harpoon catapult, capstans, bowsprit, and back at the sailors. The Maurai grinned encouragingly. So far most of them looked on this as a lark. Men who skin dove after sharks, for fun, or who sailed outrigger canoes alone across a thousand ocean miles to pay a visit, were not put out by a little fight.

But they had not talked with grave Don Miwel and merry Don Wan and gentle Bispo Ermosillo, and then seen those people dead on a dance floor, thought Ruori in bitterness.

The Meycan women huddled together, ladies and servants, to weep among each other. The palace formed a solid rank around them. The nobles, and Tresa, followed Ruori up on the poop deck.

"Now," he said, "let us talk. Who are these bandits?"

"The Sky People," whispered Tresa.

"I can see that." Ruori cocked an eye on the aircraft patrolling overhead. They had the sinister beauty of as many barracuda. Here and there columns of smoke reached up toward them. "But who are they? Where from?"

"They are Nor-Merikans," she answered in a dry little voice, as if afraid to give it color. "From the wild highlands around the Corado River, the Grand Canyon it has cut for itself-mountaineers. There is a story that they were driven from the eastern plains by Mong invaders, a long time ago; but they grew strong again in the hills and deserts, so they have defeated some Mong tribes and become friendly with others. For a hundred years they have harried our northern borders. This is the first time they have ventured so far south. V~Te never expected them-I suppose their spies learned most of our soldiers are up by the RIo Gran, chasing a rebel force -they sailed southwesterly, above our land-" She shivered.

The young DOnoju spat: "They are heathen dogs! They know nothing but to rob and burn and kill!" He sagged. "What have we done that they are loosed on us?"

Ruori rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "They can't be quite such savages," he murmured. "Those blimps are better than anything my own Federation has tried to make. The fabric. . . some tricky synthetic? It must be, or it wouldn't contain hydrogen any length of time. Surely they don't use helium! But for hydrogen production on that scale, you need industry. A good empirical chemistry, at least. They might even electrolyze it . . . good Lesu!"

He realized he had been talking to himself in his home language. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I was wondering what we might do. This ship carries no flying vessels."

Again he looked upward. Atel handed him his binoculars. He focused on the nearest blimp. The huge gas bag and the gondola beneath-itself as big as many a Maurai ship-formed an aero dynamically clean unit. The gondola seemed to be light, woven cane about a wooden frame, but strong. Three-fourths of the way up from its keep a sort of gallery ran clear around, on which the crew might walk and work. At intervals along its rail stood musclepowered machines. Some must be for hauling, but others suggested catapults. So the blimps of various chiefs fought each other occasionally, in the northern kingdoms. That might be worth knowing. The Federation's political psychologists were skilled at the divide-and-rule game. But for now.

The motive power was extraordinarily interesting. Near the gondola bows two lateral spars reached out for some fifty feet, one above the other. They supported two pivoted frames on either side, to which square sails were bent. A similar pair of spars pierced the after hull: eight sails in all. Shark-fin control surfaces were braced to the gas bag. A couple of small retractible windwheels, vaned and pivoted, jutted beneath the gondola, evidently serving the purpose of a false keel. Sails and rudders were trimmed by lines running through block and tackle to windlasses on the gallery. By altering their set, it should be possible to steer at least several points to windward. And, yes, the air moves in different directions at different levels. A blimp could descend by pumping out enough cells in its gas bag, compressing the hydrogen into storage tanks; it could rise by reinflating or by dropping ballast. (Though the latter trick would be reserved for home stretches, when leakage had depleted the gas supply.) Between sails, rudders, and its ability to find a reasonably favoring wind, such a blimp could go roving across several thousand miles, with a payload of no few tons. Oh, a lovely craft!

Ruori lowered his glasses. "Hasn't the Perio built any air vessels, to fight back?" he asked.

"No," mumbled one of the Meycans. "All we ever had was balloons. We don't know how to make a fabric which will hold the lifting-gas long enough, or how to control the flight, so-" His voice trailed off.

"And being a non-scientific culture, you never thought of doing systematic research to learn those

tricks," said Ruori.

Tresa, who had been staring at her city, whirled about upon him. "It's easy enough for you!" she screamed. "You haven't stood off Mong in the north and Raucanians in the south for century after century . . . you haven't had to spend twenty years and ten thousand lives making canals and aqueducts, so a few less people would starve. . . you aren't burdened with a peon majority who can only work, who cannot look after themselves because they have never been taught how because their existence is too much of a burden for our land to afford it . . . it's easy enough for you to float about with your shirtless doxies and poke fun at us! What would you have done, S'flor almighty captain?"

"Be still," reproved young DOnoju. "He saved our lives."

"So far!" she said, through teeth and tears. One small dancing shoe stamped the deck.

For a bemused moment, irrelevantly, Ruori wondered what a doxie was. It sounded uncomplimentary. Could she mean the wahines? But was there a more honorable way for a woman to earn a good dowry than by hazarding her life, side by side with the men of her people on a mission of discovery and civilization? What did Tresa expect to tell her grandchildren about on rainy nights?

Then he wondered further why she should disturb him so. He had noticed it before, in some of the Meycans, an almost terrifying intensity between man and wife, as if a spouse was somehow more than a respected friend and partner. But what other relationship was possible? A psychological specialist might know; Ruori was lost.

He shook an angry head, to clear it, and said aloud: "This is no time for inurbanity." He had to use a Spaflo word with not quite the same connotation. "We must decide. Are you certain there is no hope of repelling the pirates?"

"Not unless S' AntOn himself passes a miracle," said DOnoju in a dead voice.

Then, snapping erect: "There is only one thing you can do for us, S'flor. If you will leave now, with the women- There are high born ladies among them, who must not be sold into captivity and disgrace. Bear them south to Port Wanawato, where the calde will look after their welfare."

"I do not like to run off," said Ruori, looking at the men fallen on the wharf.

"S'flor, these are ladies! In el Dio's name, have mercy on them!" Ruori studied the taut, bearded faces. He did owe them a great deal of hospitality, and he could see no other way he might ever repay it. "If you wish," he said slowly. "What of yourselves?"

The young noble bowed as if to a king. "Our thanks and prayers will go with you, my lord captain. We men, of course, will now return to the battle." He stood up and barked in a parade-ground voice: "Attention! Form ranks!"

A few swift kisses passed on the main deck, and then the men of Meyco had crossed the gangplank and tramped into their city.

Ruori beat the tall rail with a clenched fist. "If there was some way," he mumbled. "If I could do something!" Almost hopefully:

"Do you think the bandits might attack us?"

"Only if you remain here," said Tresa. Her eyes were chips of green ice. "Would to Marl you had not pledged yourself to sail!"

"If they come after us at sea-

"I do not think they will. You carry a hundred women and a few trade goods. The Sky People will have their pick of ten thousand women, as many men, and all our city's treasures. Why should they take the trouble to pursue you?"

"Aye . . . aye. . . ."

"Go," she said coldly. "You dare not linger."

He faced her. It had been like a blow. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Do you think the Maurai are cowards?"

She hesitated. Then, with a stubborn, reluctant honesty: "No."

"So why do you scoff me?"

"Oh, go away!" She knelt by the rail, bowed head in arms and surrendered to herself.

Ruori left her and gave his orders. Men scrambled into the rigging. Furled canvas broke loose and cracked in a young wind. Beyond the jetty, the ocean glittered blue, with small whitecaps; gulls skimmed across heaven. Ruori saw only the glimpses he had had before, as he led the retreat from the palace.

A weaponless man, lying with his head split open. A girl, hardly twelve years old, who screamed as two raiders carried her into an alley. An aged man fleeing in terror, zigzagging, while four archers took potshots at him and howled laughter when he fell transfixed and dragged himself along on his hands. A woman sitting dumb in the street, her dress torn, next to a baby whose brains had been dashed out. A little statue in a niche, a holy image, with a faded bunch of violets at its feet, beheaded by a casual war-hammer. A house that burned, and shrieks from within.

Suddenly the aircraft overhead were not beautiful.

To reach up and pull them out of the sky!

Ruori stopped dead. The crew surged around him. He heard a short-haul chantey, deep young voices with the merriment of always having been free and well fed, but it echoed in a far corner of his brain.

"Casting off!" sang the mate.

"Not yet! Not yet! Wait!"

Ruori ran toward the poop, up the ladder and past the steersman to Doflita Tresa. She had risen again, to stand with bent head past which the hair swept to hide her face.

"Tresa," panted Ruori. "Tresa, I've an idea. I think-there may be a chance-perhaps we can fight back after all!"

She looked up. Her fingers closed on his arm till he felt the nails draw blood. Words tumbled from him: "It will depend. . . on luring them to us. At least a couple of their vessels. . . must follow us to sea. I think then-I'm not sure of the details, but it may be. we can fight . . . even drive them off-"

Still she stared at him. He felt a hesitation. "Of course," he said, "we may lose the fight. And we do have the women aboard."

"If you lose," she asked, so low he could scarcely hear it, "will we die or be captured?"

"I think we will die."

"That is well." She nodded, shivering. "Yes. Fight, then."

"There is one thing I am unsure of. How to make them pursue us." He paused. "If someone were to let himself. . . be captured by them-and told them we were carrying off a great treasure- would they believe that?"

"They might well do so." Life had come back to her voice, even eagerness. "Let us say, the calde's hoard. None ever existed, but the robbers would believe my father's cellars were stuffed with gold."

"Then someone must go to them," said Ruori. He turned his back to her, twisted his fingers together and slogged toward a conclusion he did not want to reach. "But it could not be just anyone. They would club a man in among the other slaves, would they not? I mean, would they listen to him at all?"

"Probably not. Very few of them know Spaflo. By the time a man who babbled of treasure was understood, they might all be halfway home." Tresa scowled. "What shall we do?"

Ruori saw the answer, but he could not get it past his throat.

"I am sorry," he mumbled. "My idea was not so good after all. Let us be gone."

The girl forced her way between him and the rail to stand in front of him, touching as if they danced again. Her voice was altogether steady. "You know a way."

"I do not!"

"I have come to know you well, in one night. You are a poor liar. Tell me."

He looked away. Somehow, he got out: "A woman-not any woman, but a very beautiful one-would she not soon be taken to their chief?"

Tresa stood aside. The color drained from her face.

"Yes," she said at last. "I think so."

"But then again," said Ruori wretchedly, "she might be killed. They do so much wanton killing, those men. I cannot let anyone who was given into my protection risk death."

"You heathen fool," she said through tight lips, "do you think the chance of being killed matters to me?"

"What else could happen?" he asked, surprised. And then: "Oh, yes, of course, the woman would be a slave if we lost the battle

afterward. Though I should imagine, if she is beautiful, she would not be badly treated."

"And is that all you-" Tresa stopped. He had never known it was possible for a smile to show pure hurt. "Of course. I should have realized. Your people have other ways of thinking."

"What do you mean?" he fumbled.

A moment more she stood with clenched fists. Then, half to herself: "They killed my father, yes, I saw him dead in the doorway. They would leave my city a ruin peopled by corpses."

Her head lifted. "I shall go," she said.

"You?" He grabbed her shoulders. "No, surely not you! One of the others-"

"Should I send anyone else? I am the calde's daughter."

She pulled herself free of him and hurried across the deck, down the ladder toward the gangway. Her face was turned from the ship. A few words drifted back: "Afterward, if there is an afterward, there is always the convent."

He did not understand. He stood on the poop, staring after her and abominating himself until she was lost to sight. Then he said, "Cast off," and the ship stood out to sea.

V

The Meycans fought doggedly, street by street and house by house, but after a couple of hours their surviving soldiers had all been driven into the northeast corner of S' AntOn. They themselves hardly knew that, but a Sky chief had a view from above: one rover was now tethered to the cathedral, with a rope ladder for men to go up and down, and the other vessel, skeleton-crewed, brought their news to it.

"Good enough," said Loklann. "We'll keep them boxed in with a quarter of our force. I don't think they'll sally! Meanwhile the rest of us can get things organized; let's not give these creatures too much time to hide themselves and their silver. In the afternoon, when we're rested, we can land parachuters behind the city troops, drive them out into our lines and destroy them."

He ordered the Buffalo grounded, that he might load the most precious loot at once. The men, by and large, were too rough, good lads, but apt to damage a robe or a cup or a jeweled cross in their haste; and sometimes those Meycan things were too beautiful even to give away, let alone sell.

The flagship descended as much as possible. It still hung at a thousand feet, for hand pumps and aluminum-alloy tanks did not allow much hydrogen compression. In colder, denser air it would have been suspended even higher. But ropes snaked from it to a quickly assembled ground crew. At home there were ratcheted capstans outside every lodge, so that as little as four women could bring down a rover. One hated the emergency procedure of bleeding gas, for the Keepers could barely meet demand, in spite of a new sunpower unit added to their hydroelectric station, and charged accordingly. (Or so the Keepers said, but perhaps they were only taking advantage of being inviolable, beyond all kings, to jack up prices. Some chiefs, including Loklann, had begun to experiment with hydrogen production for themselves, but it was a slow thing to puzzle out an art that even the Keepers only half understood.)

Here, enough strong men replaced machinery. The Buffalo was soon pegged down in the cathedral plaza, which it almost filled. Loklann inspected each rope himself. His wounded leg ached, but not too much to walk on. More annoying was his right arm, which hurt worse from stitches than from the original cut. The medic had warned him to go easy with it. That meant fighting lefthanded, for it should never be told that Loklann sunna Holber stayed out of combat. But he would only be half himself.

He touched the knife which had spiked him. At least he'd gotten a fine steel blade for his pains. And.

.. hadn't the owner said they would meet again, to settle who kept it? There were omens in such words. It could be a pleasure to reincarnate that Ruori.

"Skipper. Skipper, sir."

Loklann glanced about. Yuw Red-Ax and Aalan sunna Rickar, men of his own lodge, had hailed him. They grasped the arms of a young woman in black velvet and silver. The beweaponed crowd, moiling about, was focusing itself on her; raw whoops lifted over the babble.

"What is it?" said Loklann brusquely. He had much to do. "This wench, sir. A looker, isn't she? We picked her up down near the waterfront."

"Well, shove her into the temple with the rest till- Oh." Loklann rocked back on his heels, narrowing his eyes to meet a steady green glare. She was certainly a looker.

"She kept hollering the same words over and over. Shef, rey, oinbro gran- I finally wondered if it didn't mean 'chief,'" said Yuw, "and then when she yelled khan I was pretty sure she wanted to see you. So we didn't use her at all ourselves," he finished virtuously.

"Aba tu Spaflo!" said the girl.

Loklann grinned. "Yes," he replied in the same language, his words heavily accented but sufficient. "Well enough to know you are calling me 'thou.'" Her pleasantly formed mouth drew into a thin line. "Which means you think I am your inferior-or your god, or your beloved."

She flushed, threw back her head (sunlight ran along crow'swing hair) and answered: "You might tell these oafs to release me."

Loklann said the order in Angliz. Yuw and Aalan let go. The marks of their fingers were bruised into her arms. Loklann stroked his beard. "Did you want to see me?" he asked.

"If you are the leader, yes," she said. "I am the calde's daughter, Doflita Tresa Carabán." Briefly, her voice wavered. "That is my father's chain of office you are wearing. I came on behalf of his people, to ask for terms."

"What?" Loklann blinked. Someone in the warrior crowd laughed.

It must not be in her to beg mercy, he thought; her tone remained brittle: "Considering your sure losses if you fight to a finish, and the chance of provoking a counterattack on your homeland, will you not accept a money ransom and a safe-conduct, releasing your captives and ceasing your destruction?"

"By Oktai," murmured Loklann. "Only a woman could imagine we-" He stopped. "Did you say you came back?"

She nodded. "On the people's behalf. I know I have no legal authority to make terms, but in practice-"

"Forget that!" he rapped. "Where did you come back from?"

She faltered. "That has nothing to do with-"

There were too many eyes around. Loklann bawled orders to start systematic plundering. Then he turned to the girl. "Come aboard the airship with me," he said. "I want to discuss this further."

Her eyes closed, for just a moment, and her lips moved. Then she looked at him, he thought of a cougar he had once trapped, and said in a flat voice: "Yes. I do have other arguments."

"Any woman does," he laughed, "but you more than most!"

"Not that!" she flared. "I meant- No. Marl, pray for me." As he pushed a way through his men, she followed him.

They went past furled sails, to a ladder let down from the gallery. A hatch stood open to the lower hull, showing storage space and leather fetters for slaves. A few guards were posted on the gallery deck. They leaned on their weapons, sweating from beneath helmets, swapping jokes; when Loklann led the girl by, they yelled good-humored envy.

He opened a door. "Have you ever seen one of our vessels?" he asked. The upper gondola contained a long room, bare except for bunk frames on which sleeping bags were laid. Then a series of partitions defined cabinets, a sort of galley, and at last, in the very bow, a room with maps, tables, navigation instruments, speaking tubes. Its walls slanted so far outward that the glazed windows would give a spacious view when the ship was aloft. On a shelf, beneath racked weapons, sat a small idol, tusked and four-armed. A pallet was rolled on the floor.

"The bridge," said Loklann. "Also the captain's cabin." He gestured at one of four wicker chairs, lashed into place. "Be seated, Doflita. Would you like something to drink?"

She sat down but did not reply. Her fists were clenched on her lap. Loklann poured himself a glass of whiskey and tossed off

half at a gulp. "Ahhh! Later we will get some of your own wine for you. It is a shame you have no art of distilling here."

Desperate eyes lifted to him, where he stood over her. "S'flor," she said, "I beg of you, in Canto's name-well, in your mother's then-spare my people."

"My mother would laugh herself ill to hear that," he said. Then, leaning forward: "See here, let us not spill words. You were escaping, but you came back. Where were you escaping to?"

"I- Does that matter?"

Good, he thought, she was starting to crack. He hammered: "It does. I know you were at the palace this dawn. I know you fled with the dark foreigners. I know their ship departed an hour ago. You must have been on it, but left again. Not so?"

"Yes." She began to tremble.

He sipped molten fire and asked reasonably: "Now tell me, Doflita, what you have to bargain with? You cannot have expected we would give up the best part of our booty and a great many valuable slaves, for a mere safe-conduct. All the Sky kingdoms would disown us. Come now, you must have more to offer, if you hope to buy us off."

"No . . . not really-"

His hand exploded against her cheek, so her head jerked from the blow. She huddled back, touching the red mark, as he growled:

"I have no time for games. Tell me! Tell me this instant, what thought drove you back here from safety, or down in the hold you go. You'd fetch a good price when the traders next visit Canyon. There are many homes waiting for you: a woods runner's cabin in Oregon, a Mong khan's yurt in Tekkas, a brothel as far east as Chai Ka-Go. Tell me now, truly, what you know, and you will be spared that much."

She looked downward and said raggedly: "The foreign ship is loaded with the calde's gold. My father had long wanted to remove his personal treasure to a safer place than this, but dared not risk a wagon train across country. There are still many outlaws between here and Fortlez d' S' Ernán; so much loot would tempt the military escort itself to turn bandit. Captain Lohannaso agreed to carry the gold by sea to Port Wanawato, which is near Fortlez. He could be trusted because his government is anxious for trade with us, he came here officially. The treasure had already been loaded. Of course, when your raid came, the ship also took those women who had been at the palace. But can you not spare them? There is more loot in the foreign ship than your whole fleet can lift."

"By Oktai!" whispered Loklann.

He turned from her, paced up and down, finally stopped and stared out the window. He could almost hear the gears turn in his head. It made sense! The palace had been disappointing. . . oh, yes, a lot of damask and silverware and whatnot, but nothing like the cathedral. Either the calde was less rich than powerful, or he concealed his hoard. Loklann had planned to torture a few servants and find out which. Now he realized there was a third possibility.

Better interrogate some prisoners anyway, to make sure- No, there wasn't time. Given a favoring

wind, that ship could outrun any rover without working up a sweat. It might already be too late to overhaul. But if not- Hm. Assault would be no cinch. That lean, pitching hull was a small target for paratroops, and with so much rigging in the way. . . . No, wait, bold men could always find a road. How about grappling to the upper works? If the strain tore the rigging loose, so much the better: a weighted rope would then give a clear slideway to the deck. If the hooks held, though, a storming party could nevertheless go along the lines, into the topmasts. Doubtless the sailors were agile too, but had they ever reefed a rover sail in a Merikan thunderstorm, a mile above the earth?

He could improvise as the battle developed. At the very least, it would be fun to try! And at most, he might be reborn a world conqueror, for such an exploit in this life.

He laughed aloud, joyously. "We'll do it!"

Tresa rose. "You will spare the city?" she whispered hoarsely.

"I never promised any such thing," said Loklann blandly. "Of course, the ship's cargo will crowd out some of the stuff and people we might take otherwise. Unless, hm, unless we decide to sail the ship up to Californi, loaded, and meet it there with more royers. Yes, why not?"

"You oathbreaker," she said, with a heilful of scorn.

"I only promised not to sell you," said Loklann. His gaze went up and down her. "And I won't."

He took a stride forward and gathered her to him. She fought, cursing; once she managed to draw Ruori's knife from his belt, but his cuirass stopped the blade.

Finally he rose. She wept at his feet, her breast marked red by her father's chain. He said more quietly, "No, I will not sell you, Tresa. I will keep you."

VI

"Blimp ho-o-o-!"

The lookout's cry hung lonesome for a minute between wind and broad waters. Down under the mainmast, it seethed with crewmen running to their posts.

Ruori squinted eastward. The land was a streak under cumulus clouds mountainous and blue-shadowed. It took him a while to find the enemy, in all that sky. At last the sun struck them. He lifted his binoculars. Two painted killer whales lazed his way, slanting down from a mile altitude.

He sighed. "Only two," he said.

"That may be more than enough for us," said Atel Hamid. Sweat studded his forehead.

Ruori gave his mate a sharp look. "You're not afraid of them, are you? I daresay that's been one of their biggest assets, superstition."

"Oh, no, captain. I know the principle of buoyancy as well as you do. But those people up there are tough. And they're not trying to storm us from a dock this time; they're in their element."

"So are we." Ruori clapped the other man's back. "Take over. Tanaroa knows just what's going to happen, but use your own judgment if I'm spitted."

"I wish you'd let me go," protested Atel. "I don't like being safe down here. It's what can happen aloft

that worries me."

"You won't be too safe for your own liking." Ruori forced a grin. "And somebody has to steer this tub home to hand in all those lovely reports to the Geoethnic Research Endeavor."

He swung down the ladder to the main deck and hurried to the mainmast shrouds. His crew yelled around him, weapons gleamed. The two big box kites quivered taut canvas, lashed to a bollard and waiting. Ruori wished there had been time to make more.

Even as it was, though, he had delayed longer than seemed wise, first heading far out to sea and then tacking slowly back, to make the enemy search for him while he prepared. (Or planned, for that matter. When he dismissed Tresa, his own ideas had been little more than a conviction that he could fight.) Assuming they were lured after him at all, he had risked their losing patience and going back to the land. For an hour, now, he had dawdled under mainsail, genoa, and a couple of flying jibs, hoping the Sky People were lubbers enough not to find that suspiciously little canvas for such good weather.

But here they were, and there was an end to worry and remorse on a certain girl's behalf. Such emotions were rare in an Islander; and to find himself focusing them thus on a single person, out of all earth's millions, had been horrible. Ruori swarmed up the ratlines, as if he fled something.

The blimps were still high, passing overhead on an upper-level breeze. Down here was almost a straight south wind. The aircraft, unable to steer really close-hauled, would descend when they were sea-level upwind of him. Even so, estimated a cold part of Ruori's brain, the Dolphin could avoid their clumsy rush.

But the Dolphin wasn't going to.

The rigging was now dotted with armed sailors. Ruori pulled himself up on the mainmast crosstrees and sat down, casually swinging his legs. The ship heeled over in a flaw and he hung above greenish-blue, white-streaked immensity. He balanced, scarcely noticing, and asked Hiti: "Are you all set?"

"Aye." The big harpooner, his body one writhe of tattoos and muscles, nodded a shaven head. Lashed to the fid where he squatted was the ship's catapult, cocked and loaded with one of the huge irons that could kill a sperm whale at one blow. A couple more lay alongside in their rack. Hiti's two mates and four deckhands poised behind him, holding the smaller harpoons- mere six-foot shafts-that

were launched from a boat by hand. The lines of all trailed down the mast to the bows.

"Aye, let 'em come now." Hiti grinned all over his round face. "Nan eat the world, but this'll be something to make a dance about when we come home!"

"If we do," said Ruori. He touched the small boat ax thrust into his loincloth. Like a curtain, the blinding day seemed to veil a picture from home, where combers broke white under the moon, longfires flared on a beach and dancers were merry and palm trees cast shadows for couples who stole away. He wondered how a Meycan calde's daughter might like it. . . if her throat had not been cut.

"There's a sadness on you, captain," said Hiti.

"Men are going to die," said Ruori. -

"What of it?" Small kindly eyes studied him. "They'll die willing, if they must, for the sake of the song there'll be made. You've another trouble than mere death."

"Let me be!"

The harpooner looked hurt, but withdrew into silence. Wind streamed and the ocean glittered.

The aircraft steered close. There would be one on each side. Ruori unslung the megaphone at his shoulder. Atel Hamid held the Dolphin steady on a broad reach.

Now Ruori could see a grinning god at the prow of the starboard airship. It would pass just over the topmasts, a little to windward of the rail. . . . Arrows went impulsively toward it from the yardarms, without effect, but no one was excited enough to waste a rifle cartridge. Hiti swiveled his catapult. "Wait," said Ruori. "We'd better see what they do."

Helmeted heads appeared over the blimp's gallery rail. A man stepped up-another, another, at intervals-they whirled triple-clawed iron grapnels and let go. Ruori saw one strike the foremast, rebound,

hit a jib. . . the line to the blimp tautened and sang but did not break, it was of leather. . . the jib ripped, canvas thundered, struck a sailor in the belly and knocked him from his yard the man recovered enough to straighten out and hit the water in a clean dive, Lesu grant he lived . . . the grapnel bumped along, caught the gaff of the fore-and-aft mainsail, wood groaned . . the ship trembled as line after line snapped tight.

She leaned far over, dragged by leverage. Her sails banged. No danger of capsizing-yet-but a mast could be pulled loose. And now, up over the gallery rail and seizing a rope between hands and knees, the pirates came. Whooping like boys, they slid down to the grapnels and clutched after any rigging that came to hand.

One of them sprang monkey-like onto the mainmast gaff, below the cross trees. A harpooner's mate cursed, hurled his weapon, and skewered the invader. "Belay that!" roared Hiti. "We need those irons!"

Ruori scanned the situation. The leeward blimp was still maneuvering in around its mate, which was being blown to port. He put the megaphone to his mouth and a solar-battery amplifier cried for him: "Hear this! Hear this! Burn that second enemy now, before he grapples! Cut the lines to the first one and repel all boarders!"

"Shall I fire?" called Hiti. "I'll never have a better target."

"Aye."

The harpooner triggered his catapult. It unwound with a thunder noise. Barbed steel smote the engaged gondola low in a side, tore through, and ended on the other side of interior planking.

"Wind 'er up!" bawled Hiti. His own gorilla hands were already on a crank lever. Somehow two other men found space to help him.

Ruori slipped down the futtock shrouds and jumped to the gaff. Another pirate had landed there and a third was just arriving, with two more aslide behind him. The man on the spar balanced barefooted, as good as any sailor, and drew a sword. Ruori dropped as the blade whistled, caught a mainsail grommet one-handed, and hung there, striking with his boat ax at the grapnel line. The pirate crouched and stabbed at him. Ruori thught of Tresa, smashed his hatchet into the man's face, and flipped him off, down to the deck. He cut again. The leather was tough, but his blade was keen. The line parted and whipped

away. The gaff swung free, almost yanking Ruori's fingers loose. The second Sky Man toppled, hit a cabin below and spattered. The men on the line slid to its end. One of them could not stop, the sea took him. The other was smashed against the masthead as he pendulumed.

Ruori pulled himself back astride the gaff and sat there a while, heaving air into lungs that burned. The fight ramped around him, on shrouds and spars and down on the decks. The other blimp edged closer.

Astern, raised by the speed of a ship moving into the wind, a box kite lifted. Atel sang a command and the helmsman put the rudder over. Even with the drag on her, the Dolphin responded well; a profound science of fluid mechanics had gone into her design. Being soaked in whale oil, it clung there for a time-long enough for "messengers" of burning paper to whirl up its string. The kite burst into flame.

The blimp sheered off, the kite fell away, its small gunpowder load blew up harmlessly. Atel cursed and gave further orders. The Dolphin tacked. The second kite, already aloft and afire, hit target. It detonated.

Hydrogen gushed out. There was no explosion, but sudden flames wreathed the blimp. They seemed pale in the sun-dazzle. Smoke began to rise, as the plastic between gas cells disintegrated. The aircraft descended like a slow meteorite to the water.

Its companion vessel had no reasonable choice but to cast loose all unsevered grapnels, abandoning the still outnumbered boarding party. The captain could not know that the Dolphin had only possessed two kites. A few vengeful catapult bolts spat from it. Then it was free, rapidly falling astern. The Maurai ship rocked toward an even keel.

The enemy might retreat or he might plan some fresh attack. Ruori did not intend that it should be either. He megaphoned:

"Put about! Face that scum-gut!" And led a rush down the shrouds to a deck where combat still went on.

For Hiti's gang had put three primary harpoons and half a dozen lesser ones into the gondola.

Their lines trailed in tightening catenaris from the blimp to the capstan in the bows. No fear now of undue strain. The Dolphin, like any Maurai craft, was meant to live off the sea as she traveled. She had

dragged more than one right whale alongside; a blimp was nothing in comparison. What counted was speed, before the pirates realized what was happening and found ways to cut loose.

"Tohiha, hioha, itoki, itoki!" The old canoe chant rang forth as men tramped about the capstan. Ruori hit the deck, saw a Canyon man fighting a sailor, sword against club, and brained the fellow from behind as he would any other vermin. (Then wondered, dimly shocked, what made him think thus about a human being.) The battle was rapidly concluded, the Sky Men faced hopeless odds. But half a dozen Federation people were badly hurt. Ruori had the few surviving pirates tossed into a lazaret, his own casualties taken below to anesthetics and antibiotics and cooing Doflitas. Then, quickly, he prepared his crew for the next phase.

The blimp had been drawn almost to the bowsprit. It was canted over so far that its catapults were useless. Pirates lined the gallery deck, howled and shook their weapons. They outnumbered the Dolphin crew by a factor of three or four. Ruori recognized one among them-the tall yellow-haired man who had fought him outside the palace-it was a somehow eerie feeling.

"Shall we burn them?" asked Atel.

Ruori grimaced. "I suppose we have to," he said. "Try not to ignite the vessel itself. You know we want it."

A walking beam moved up and down, driven by husky Islanders. Flame spurted from a ceramic nozzle. The smoke and stench and screams that followed, and the things to be seen when Ruori ordered cease fire, made even the hardest veteran of corsair patrol look a bit ill. The Maurai were an unsentimental folk, but they did not like to inflict pain.

"Hose," rasped Ruori. The streams of water that followed were like some kind of blessing. Wicker that had begun to burn hissed into charred quiescence.

The ship's own grapnels were flung. A couple of cabin boys darted past grown men to be first along the lines. They met no resistance on the gallery. The uninjured majority of pirates stood in a numb fashion, their armament at their feet, the fight kicked out of them. Jacob's ladders followed the boys; the Dolphin crew swarmed aboard the blimp and started rounding up prisoners.

A few Sky Men lurched from behind a door, weapons aloft. Ruori saw the tall fair man among them.

The man drew Ruori's dagger, left-handed, and ran toward him. His right arm seemed nearly useless. "A Canyon, a Canyon!" he called, the ghost of a war cry.

Ruori sidestepped the charge and put out a foot. The blond man tripped. As he fell, the hammer of Ruori's ax clopped down, catching him on the neck. He crashed, tried to rise, shuddered, and lay twitching.

"I want my knife back." Ruori squatted, undid the pirate's tooled leather belt, and began to hogtie him.

Dazed blue eyes looked up with a sort of pleading. "Are you not going to kill me?" mumbled the other in Spaflo.

"Haristi, no," said Ruori, surprised. "Why should I?"

He sprang up. The last resistance had ended, the blimp was his. He opened the forward door, thinking the equivalent of a ship's bridge must lie beyond it.

Then for a while he did not move at all, nor did he hear anything but the wind and his own blood.

It was Tresa who finally came to him. Her' hands were held out before her, like a blind person's, and her eyes looked through him. "You are here," she said, flat and empty.

"Doñita," stammered Ruori. He caught her hands. "Doflita, had I known you were aboard, I would never have . . . have risked-"

"Why did you not burn and sink us, like that other vessel?" she asked in a flayed voice. "Why must this one return to the city?"

She wrenched free of him and stumbled out on to the deck. It was steeply tilted, and it bucked beneath her. She fell, picked herself up, walked with barefoot care to the rail and stared out across the

ocean. Her hair and torn dress fluttered in the wind.

There was a great deal of technique to handling an airship. Ruori could feel that the thirty men he had put aboard this one were sailing it as awkwardly as possible. An experienced Sky Man would know what sort of thermals and downdrafts to expect, just from a glance at land or water below; he could estimate the level at which a desired breeze was blowing, and rise or fall smoothly; he could even beat to windward, though it would be a slow process much plagued by drift.

Nevertheless, an hour's study showed the basic principles. Ruori went back to the bridge and gave orders in the speaking tube. Presently the land came nearer. A glance below showed the Dolphin, with a cargo of war captives, following on shortened sail. He and his fellow aeronauts would have to take a lot of banter about their celestial snail's pace. Ruori did not smile at the thought or plan his replies, as he would have done even yesterday. Tresa sat so still behind him.

"Do you know the name of this craft, Doflita?" he asked, to break the silence.

"He called it Buffalo," she said, remote and uninterested.

"What's that?"

"A sort of wild dattle."

"I gather, then, that he talked to you while cruising in search of me. Did he say anything else of interest?"

"He spoke of his people. He boasted of all the things they have which we don't . . . engines, powers, alloys . . . as if that made them any less a pack of filthy savages."

At least she was showing some spirit. He had been afraid she had started willing her heart to stop; but he remembered he had seen no evidence of that common Maurai practice here in Meyco.

"Did he abuse you so badly, then?" he asked, not looking at her.

"You would not consider it abuse," she said violently. "Now leave me alone, for mercy's sake!" He heard her go from him, through the door to the after sections.

Well, he thought, after all, her father was killed. That would grieve anyone, anywhere in the world, but her perhaps more than him. For a Meycan child was raised solely by its parents; it did not spend half its time eating or sleeping or playing with any casual relative, like most Island young. So the immediate kin would have more psychological significance here. At least, it was the only explanation Ruori could think of for the sudden darkness within Tresa.

The city hove into view. He saw the remaining enemy vessels gleam above it. Three against one . . . yes, this would become a legend among the Sea People, if it succeeded. Ruori knew he should have felt the same reckless pleasure as a man did surfbathing, or shark fighting, or sailing in a typhoon, any breakneck sport where success meant glory and girls. He could hear his men chant outside, beat war-drum rhythms out with hands and stamping feet. But his own heart was Antarctic.

The nearest hostile craft approached. Ruori tried to meet it in a professional way. He had attired his prize crew in captured Sky outfits. A superficial glance would take them for legitimate Canyonites, depleted after a hard fight but with the captured Maurai ship at their heels.

As the northerners steered close in the leisurely airship fashion, Ruori picked up his speaking tube. "Steady as she goes. Fire when we pass abeam."

"Aye, aye," said Hiti.

A minute later the captain heard the harpoon catapult rumble. Through a port he saw the missile strike the other gondola amidships. "Pay out line," he said. "We want to hold her for the kite, but not get burned ourselves."

"Aye, I've played swordfish before now." Laughter bubbled in Hiti's tones.

The foe sheered, frantic. A few bolts leaped from its catapults; one struck home, but a single

punctured gas cell made small difference. "Put about!" cried Ruori. No sense in presenting his beam to a broadside. Both craft began to drift downwind, sails flapping. "Hard a-lee!" The Buffalo became a drogue, holding its victim to a crawl. And here came the kite prepared on the way back. This time it included fish hooks. It caught and held fairly on the Canyonite bag. "Cast off!" yelled Ruori. Fire whirled up the kite string. In minutes it had enveloped the enemy. A few parachutes were blown out to sea.

"Two to go," said Ruori, without any of his men's shouted triumph.

The invaders were no fools. Their other blimps turned back over the city, not wishing to expose themselves to more flame from the water. One descended, threw out hawsers, and was rapidly hauled to the plaza. Through his binoculars, Ruori saw armed men swarm aboard it. The other, doubtless with a mere patrol crew, maneuvered toward the approaching Buffalo.

"I think that fellow wants to engage us," warned Hiti. "Meanwhile Number Two down there will take on a couple of hundred soldiers, then lay alongside us and board."

"I know," said Ruori. "Let's oblige them."

He steered as if to close with the sparsely manned patroller. It did not avoid him, as he had feared it might; but then, there was a compulsive bravery in the Sky culture. Instead, it maneuvered to grapple as quickly as possible. That would give its companion a chance to load warriors and rise- It came very near.

Now to throw a scare in them, Ruori decided. "Fire arrows," he said. Out on deck, hardwood pistons were shoved into little cylinders, igniting tinder at the bottom; thus oil-soaked shafts were kindled. As the enemy came in range, red comets began to streak from the Buffalo archers.

Had his scheme not worked, Ruori would have turned off. He didn't want to sacrifice more men in hand-to-hand fighting; instead, he would have tried seriously to burif the other airship from afar, though his strategy needed it. But the morale effect of the previous disaster was very much present. As blazing arrows thunked into their gondola, a battle tactic so two-edged that no northern crew was even equipped for it, the Canyonites panicked and went over the side. Perhaps, as they parachuted down, a few noticed that no shafts had been aimed at their gas bag.

"Grab fast!" sang Ruori. "Douse any fires!"

Grapnels thumped home. The blimps rocked to a relative halt. Men leaped to the other gallery; bucketsful of water splashed.

"Stand by," said Ruori. "Half our boys on the prize. Break out the lifelines and make them fast."

He put down the tube. A door squeaked behind him. He turned, as Tresa re-entered the bridge. She was still pale, but she had somehow combed her hair, and her head was high.

"Another!" she said with a note near joy. "Only one of them left!"

"But it will be full of their men." Ruori scowled. "I wish now I had not accepted your refusal to go aboard the Dolphin. I wasn't thinking clearly. This is too hazardous."

"Do you think I care for that?" she said. "I am a Carabán."

"But I care," he said.

The haughtiness dropped from her; she touched his hand, fleetingly, and color rose in her cheeks. "Forgive me. You have done so much for us. There is no way we can ever thank you."

"Yes, there is," said Ruori.

"Name it."

"Do not stop your heart just because it has been wounded."

She looked at him with a kind of sunrise in her eyes.

His boatswain appeared at the outer door. "All set, captain. We're holding steady at a thousand feet, with a man standing by every valve these two crates have got."

"Each has been assigned a particular escape line?"

"Aye," The boatswain departed.

"You'll need one too. Come." Ruori took Tresa by the hand and led her onto the gallery. They saw sky around them, a breeze touched their faces and the deck underfoot moved like a live thing. He indicated one of many light cords from the Dolphin's store, bowlined to the rail. "We aren't going to risk parachuting with untrained men," he said. "But you've no experience in skinning down one of these. I'll make you a harness which will hold you safely. Ease yourself down hand over hand. When you reach the ground, cut loose." His knife slashed some pieces of rope and he knotted them together with a seaman's skill. When he fitted the harness on her, she grew tense under his fingers.

"But I am your friend," he murmured.

She eased. She even smiled, shakenly. He gave her his knife and went back inboard.

And now the last pirate vessel stood up from the earth. It moved near; Ruori's two craft made no attempt to flee. He saw sunlight flash on edged metal. He knew they had witnessed the end of their companion craft and would not be daunted by the same technique; rather, they would close in, even with their ship burning about them-if nothing else, they could killed him in turn and then parachute to safety. He did not send arrows.

When only a few fathoms separated him from the enemy, he cried: "Let go the valves!"

Gas whoofed from both bags. The linked blimps dropped.

"Fire!" shouted Ruori. Hiti aimed his catapult up and sent a harpoon with anchor cable through the bottom of the attacker. "Burn and abandon!"

Men on deck touched off oil which other men splashed from jars. Flames sprang up.

With the weight of two nearly deflated vessels dragging it from below, the Canyon ship began to fall. At five hundred feet the tossed lifelines draped across flat rooftops and trailed in the streets. Ruori went over the side. He scorched his palms going down.

He was not much too quick. The harpooned blimp ordered compressed hydrogen released; the vessel rose to a thousand feet with its burden, seeking sky room. Presumably no one had yet seen that the burden was on fire. In no case would they find it easy to shake or cut loose from one of Hiti's irons.

Ruori stared upward. Fanned by the wind, the flames were smokeless, a small fierce sun. He had not counted on his fire taking the enemy by total surprise. He had assumed they would parachute to earth, where the Meycans could attack. Almost, he wanted to warn them.

Then flame reached the remaining hydrogen in the collapsed gas bags. There was a sort of giant gasp. The topmost vessel became a flying pyre. The wind bore it out over the city walls. A few antlike figures managed to spring free., The parachute of one was burning.

"Sant'sima Marl," whispered a voice, and Tresa crept into Ruori's arms and hid her face.

After dark, candles were lit throughout the palace. They could not blank the ugliness of stripped walls and smoke-blackened ceilings. The guardsmen who lined the throne room were tattered and weary. Nor did 5' AntOn itself rejoice, yet. There were too many dead.

Ruori sat throned on the calde's dais, Tresa at his right and Páwolo DOnoju on his left. Until a new set of officials could be chosen, these must take authority. The Don sat rigid, not allowing his bandaged head to droop, but now and then his lids grew too heavy to hold up. Tresa watched enormous-eyed from beneath the hood of a cloak wrapping her. Ruori sprawled at ease; he felt a little more happy now that the fighting was over.

It had been a grim business, even after the heartened city troops had sallied and driven the surviving enemy before them. Too many Sky Men fought till they were killed. The hundreds of prisoners, mostly from the first Maurai success, would prove a dangerous booty; no one was sure what to do with them.

"But at least their host is done for," said Dónoju.

Ruori shook his head. "No, S'flor. I am sorry, but there is no end in sight. Up north are thousands of such aircraft, and a strong hungry people. They will come again."

"We will meet them, captain. The next time we shall be prepared. A larger garrison, barrage balloons, fire kites, cannons that shoot upward, even a flying navy of our own. . . we can learn what to do."

Tresa stirred. There was life again in her words, but a life which hated: "In the end, we will carry the war to them. There will not be one left in all the Corado highlands."

"No," said Ruori. "That must not be."

Her head jerked about, she stared at him from the shadow of her hood. Finally she said, "True, we are bidden to love our enemies, but you cannot mean the Sky People. They are not human!"

Ruori spoke to a page: "Send for the chief prisoner."

"To hear our judgment on him?" asked DOnoju. "But that should be done formally, in public."

"Only to talk with us," said Ruori.

"I do not understand you," said Tresa. Her tones faltered, unable to carry the intended scorn, but the phrases came out:

"After all you have done, suddenly there is no manhood in you." He wondered why it should hurt for her to say that. He would not have cared if she had been anyone else.

Loklann entered between two guards. His hands were bound behind him and dried blood was on his face, but he walked like a conqueror under the pikes. When he reached the dais, he stood with feet braced apart and grinned up at Tresa.

"Well," he said, "so you find these others less satisfactory and want me back."

She jumped to her feet and screamed: "Kill him!"

"No!" cried Ruori.

The guardsmen hesitated, their machetes half drawn. Ruori stood up and caught the girl's wrists. She struggled, spitting like a cat. "Don't kill him, then," she agreed at last, so thickly it was hard to understand. "Not now. Make it slow. Strangle him, burn him alive, toss him on your spears--"

Ruori held fast till she stood quietly.

When he let go, she sat down and wept.

Páwolo DOnoju said in a voice like steel: "I believe I understand. A fit punishment must certainly be devised."

Loklann spat on the floor. "Of course," he said. "When you have a man tied up there are any number of dirty little games to play with him."

"Be still," said Ruori. "You are not helping your own cause. Or mine."

He sat down, crossed his legs and laced fingers around one knee and gazed before him, into the darkness at the hail's end. "I know you have all suffered from this man's work," he said, slowly and with care. "You can expect to suffer more from his kinfolk in the future. They are a young race, heedless as children, even as your ancestors and mine were once young. Do you think the Perio was established without hurt and harm? Or, if I remember your history rightly, that the Spaflo people were welcomed here by the Inios? That the Ingliss did not come to N'Zealann with slaughter, and that the Maurai were not once cannibals? In an age of heroes, the hero must have an opponent.

"Your real weapon against the Sky People is not an army, sent up to lose itself in unmapped mountains. . . . Your priests, merchants, artists, craftsmen, manners, fashions, learning-there is the means to bring them to you on their knees, if you will use it!"

Loklann started. "You devil," he whispered. "Do you actually think to convert us to. . . a woman's faith and a city's cage?" He shook back his tawny mane and roared so the walls rang. "No!"

"It will take a century or two," said Ruori.

Don Pawolo smiled in his young scanty beard. "A refined revenge, S'flor captain," he admitted.

"Too refined!" Tresa lifted her face from her hands, gulped after air, held up claw-crooked fingers and brought them down as if into Loklann's eyes. "Even if it could be done," she snarled, "even if they did have souls, what do we want with them, or their children or grandchildren. - . they who murdered our babies today? Before almighty Dlo-I am the last Carabán and I will have my following to speak for me in

Meyco's government-there will never be anything for them but extermination! We can do it, I swear. There would be Tekkans who would help, for plunder. I shall yet live to see your home burning, you swine, and your sons hunted with dogs!"

She turned frantically toward Ruori. "How else can our land be safe? We are ringed in with enemies. We have no choice but to destroy them, or they will destroy us. And we are the last Merikan civilization!"

She sat back and shuddered. Ruori reached over to take her hand. It felt cold. For a bare instant, unconsciously, she returned the pressure, then jerked away.

He sighed in his weariness.

"I must disagree," he said. "I am sorry. I understand how you feel."

"You do not," she said through clamped jaws. "You cannot."

"But after all," he said, forcing dryness, "I am not just a man with human desires. I represent my government. I must return to tell them what is here, and I can predict their response.

"They will help you stand off attack. That is not an aid you can refuse, is it? The men who will be responsible for all Meyco are not going to decline our offer of alliance merely to preserve a precarious independence of action, whatever a few extremists may argue for. And our terms will be most reasonable. We will want little more from you than a policy working toward conciliation and close relations with the Sky People, as soon as they have tired of battering themselves against our united defense."

"What?" said Loklann. Otherwise it was very still. Eyes gleamed white from the shadows of helmets, toward Ruori.

"We will begin with you," said the Maurai. "At the proper time, you and your fellows will be escorted home. Your ransom will be that your nation allow a diplomatic and trade mission to enter."

"No," said Tresa, as if it hurt her throat. "Not him. Send back all the others if you must, but not him-to boast of what he did today."

Loklann grinned again, looking straight at her. "I will," he said.

Anger flickered in Ruori, but he held his mouth shut.

"I do not understand," hesitated Don Páwolo. "Why do you favor these animals?"

"Because they are more civilized than you," said Ruori.

"What?" The noble sprang to his feet, snatching for his sword. Then, stiffly, he sat down again. His tone froze over. "Explain yourself, S'flor."

Ruori could not see Tresa's face, in the private night of her hood, but he felt her drawing farther from him than a star. "They have developed aircraft," he said, slumping back in his chair, worn out and with no sense of victory. O great creating Tanaroa, grant me sleep this night!

"But-"

"It has been done from the ground up," explained Ruori, "not as a mere copy of ancient techniques. Beginning as refugees, the Sky People created an agriculture which can send warriors by the thousands from what was once desert, yet plainly does not require peon hordes. On interrogation I have learned that they have sunpower and hydroelectric power, a synthetic chemistry of sorts, a well-developed navigation with all the mathematics which that implies, gunpowder, metallurgics, aerodynamics. . . . Oh, I daresay it's a lopsided culture, a thin layer of learning above a largely illiterate mass. But even the mass must respect technology, or it would never have been supported to get as far as it has.

"In short," he sighed, wondering if he could make her understand, "the Sky People are a scientific race-the only one besides ourselves which we Maurai have yet discovered. And that makes them too

precious to lose.

"You have better manners here, more humane laws, higher art, broader vision, all the traditional virtues. But you are not scientific. You use rote knowledge handed down from the ancients. Because there is no more fossil fuel, you depend on muscle power; inevitably, then, there is a peon class, and always will be. Because the iron and copper mines are exhausted, you tear down old ruins. In your land I have seen no research on wind power, sun power, the energy reserves of the living cell-not to mention the theoretical possibility of hydrogen fusion without a uranium primer. You irrigate the desert at a thousand times the effort it would take to farm the sea, yet have never even tried to improve your fishing techniques. You have not exploited the aluminum which is still abundant in ordinary clays, not sought to make it into strong alloys; no, your farmers use tools of wood and volcanic glass!

"Oh, you are neither ignorant nor superstitious. What you lack is merely the means of gaining new knowledge. You are a fine people, the world is the sweeter for you, I love you as much as I loathe this devil before us. But ultimately, my friends, if left to yourselves, you will slide gracefully back into the Stone Age."

A measure of strength returned. He raised his voice till it filled the hall: "The way of the Sky People is the rough way outward, to the stars. In that respect-and it overrides all others-they are more akin to us Maurai than you are. We cannot let our kin die."

He sat then, in silence, under Loklann's smirk and DOnoju's stare. A guardsman shifted on his feet, with a faint squeak of leather harness.

Tresa said at last, very low in the shadows: "That is your final word, S'flor?"

"Yes," said Ruori. He turned to her. As she leaned forward, the hood fell back a little, so that candlelight touched her. And the sight of green eyes and parted lips gave him back his victory.

He smiled. "I do not expect you will understand at once. May I discuss it with you again, often? When you have seen the Islands, as I hope you will-"

"You foreigner!" she screamed.

Her hand cracked on his cheek. She rose and ran down the dais steps and out of the hall.