

THE ELDER GODS

I

LORD NAZUN, chief of the Elder Gods, looked down at the city of Tordu, and sighed softly. Beside him, Taltm snorted angrily, a pleasant dilute odor of drying kelp and salt sea eddying about him in the soft breeze. Lady Tammar chuckled and spoke softly. "It oppresses you more than usual tonight, Talun?"

"It's sure we'll gain nothing in this way. Nazun, tell me, what was in the minds of men when we appeared first?"

Nazun stirred uneasily, a vague, lean bulk against the midnight blue of the sky. "I know, my friend—but there was a certain fear, too, that we would not change with the changing times. Perhaps that is our flaw."

"And the greater flaw," the sea lord growled, "is standing by in idleness and watching the destruction of our people. The Invisible Ones are death—death not of the body, but of the spirit and mind. Where are my sea rovers gone? Dead and decayed. Fisherman—good, stout workmen though they be—lack the spark that makes the sea rover."

"We cannot attack the Invisible Ones by attacking, by taking over the minds of our people; that is the First Law," Nazun pointed out.

"No—and ye need a solid right arm to attack the Invisible Ones, which none of us possesses. But, on the same, we possess neither a solid thing that keeps us subject to material weapons such as a solid right arm may wield!"

"You'll turn no man of Tordu against the Invisible Ones. The pattern and movement of every Azuni is so set and known to the Invisible Ones, as to us, that he would be dead at the hands of the priests of the Invisible Ones before he moved half across Tordu," Lord Martal pointed out. "There are chances in the lives of men—but not when the Invisible Ones have time to plot out those chances first!"

"No stranger has reached these islands in five centuries," Nazu sighed. "Your sea rovers, Talun, rove as close by the shore as a chick by the old hen's feet. While they rove the shorelines of the continents, they'll never find Azun . . . and without wider knowledge of the pointing needle, no seaman ventures far. It will be a century yet before men wander the oceans freely once more."

Talun's sea-squinted eyes narrowed farther. "They wander," he said explosively, "where the will of the winds drive them, my friend. Now if ye want a stranger here on these islands, we'll see what the winds and my seas can do!"

Nazun stood silent, squinting thoughtfully at the sea beyond, and the town below. "One stranger, Talun—only one. One stranger, without background known to us or the Invisible Ones, is beyond calculation and the prophecy of the gods; half a dozen strangers, and there would be more factors on which to base foreknowledge—and defeat!"

"One then," growled Talun. "One good sea rover, with a spark and flame within him that these damned Invisible Ones can't read or quench!"

Lord Nazun looked down at the wilted form on the pebbled beach with a wry, dry smile on his lips, and a twinkle of amusement in his narrowed gray eyes. "A sorry specimen you've fished up for us, Talun. And did you need to cause so violent a storm as the recent one to capture this bit of drift?"

Talun's dark face knotted in a grimace of anger, then smoothed in resignation. His roaring voice cut through the dying whine of winds and the broom of surf on the beach below. "I never know, Nazun, whether you mean your words. The scholars that fathered you forgot me, and forgot to give me wisdom—a sad lack in this day. That washed-up thing may be a bit bedewed, a bit softened by immersion in good brine, but he'll dry out again. And he's a man, a real man! There's more than mush in his back, and more than jelly in his heart. These Azuni men that sail by the bark of a dog and the twitter of a bird will be the vanishment of me!

"By the sea, I'd say such a storm as that last was needed to net that man! There was courage in him to build his ship on the edge of the brine, and sail straight out from land! A man who uses land as a guide only to show him how to get farthest from it quickest has my liking, and my protection."

Talun's heavy brows pulled down belligerently as he looked Nazun in the eye defiantly. Then his gaze shifted back to the man uneasily. Nazun's deep-set, narrow gray eyes were friendly, twinkling with pleasant good humor, but there was in them a depth beyond depths that left Talun, for all his own powers, ill at ease and unsettled.

Lady Tammar laughed softly. "And while you argue, he dries out. Now, good Nazun, you have netted your fish, or Talun has netted him for you and brought him to this beach. What plans have you for him next?"

"He's been well stripped," Lord Martal grunted. He

waved a muscle-knotted, stout-fingered hand at the man who was beginning to stir again on the lumpy mattress of hard quartz. "He has neither gold, nor sword to carve it out with, nor any other thing. I'd say he was fitted to take advice for his next move. He could have used a sword for defense, Talun. You might have left him that. By the cut of his figure, I'd say he would sooner fight than ask for help, weapon or no."

Talun scratched his bearded chin uneasily and snorted. The dying wind permitted the faint aroma of fish to cling about the bulky figure once again in a not unpleasant intensity. More a signature or card of identity than an offense. "Your favorite irons don't float," he said, half annoyed. "The man showed sense when he parted with that when his cockleshell went down. Now leave my works alone, and let me worry about my sea. I've done my task—a man, such as you asked, at your feet, stripped as you asked, but sound. You can find him swords and breastplates enough in the junk shops of Tordus, where your ex-friends have left them, Martal. My fishermen are still with me."

Lord Martal laughed. "Good enough, friend, and right enough. We'll equip him once again. There's a house, a small temple where men worship chance and probabilities, where I may find a way to help our new-found friend. Ah, he's getting up."

Weakly, Daron pushed his elbows under him, sneezed vigorously, and gasped. He looked about him at the empty beach. The pebbles that had left a faithful

imprint on every aching muscle of his back and shoulders gave way to broken rock a hundred feet away, and that in turn became a rocky cliff. Daron turned his head wearily, heaved himself erect, and dragged himself over to the nearest good-sized boulder. He held his head firmly in place till the dizziness left, then looked about.

The wind was dying away but the surf still made hungry, disappointed noises on the beach as it tried to reach him.

He looked at it resentfully. "You took my ship, and you took my crew, which seems enough. Also you took from me all sense of where I am, which was more than enough to rob me of. May the gods give that there are men somewhere near—though it seems unlikely. No men of sense would inhabit so unpleasant a coast."

He looked up the beach, which curved away somewhere beyond the rain mists into a gray, formless blank. Down the beach, the high rocky cliff dwindled away just before it, too, was swallowed by the gray, wind-driven mists. Overhead, the dull gray was darkened to night, and the dull gray of his spirits darkened with it.

He followed the line of the cliff speculatively, and looked at the smug, uplifted brow of it near him. There was no sense struggling up here if it fell away to an easy slope half a mile down the beach. He heaved himself up from the boulder and started, annoyed that he had not the faintest idea whether he was moving south, east, north or west. To his sea rover's mind it was a feeling of nakedness equal to the undressed feeling the lack of his sword gave him.

Half a mile and the cliff did give way to a cragged set of natural steps. Above, he found his dizziness returned by the effort of climbing, and the beginnings of a mist-obscured meadow of some wiry grass that thrived on salt-spray. He set off across it doggedly as the gray of the skies gave way to almost total blackness. The wiry grass clutched at his toes, and he felt too weary to lift his feet above it.

Resignedly, he lay down to wait for daylight. Half an hour later, the chilling, dying wind induced him to change "his mind. He stood up again and started on. The wind had swept away the last of the rain mist, and

presently he made out a gleam of light that came and went erratically. He stood still, squinting his eyes, and watched.

"It may be like the pools I saw in the Dryland, a dream of something I want, but again, it may merely be that trees are blowing in front of the light. In any case, it's something other than gray mist to walk toward."

He stopped a hundred yards from the little building and watched more carefully. Strangers were not welcome in most of the world he'd known, but a rough gauge of the way an unknown people received a stranger lay in their buildings. Sticks and wattles—the stranger was apt to be the dinner. Good timber and thatch—the stranger was welcomed to dinner, usually roast sheep or lamb. Crude stone—the stranger was allowed to enter, if he could pay for his dinner. Finished stone—the stranger was shown the way to the public house.

^It augured ill. The house was built of fieldstone, well mortared. But still—they'd be less likely to make dinner of him, even though they might not make

dinner for him.

He knocked, noting, for all his weariness, that the door was singularly ill-kept. It opened, and Daron paused in measurement of the man who faced him. Six feet and more, Daron stood, but the man before him was four inches more, built long and supple, with an ease and grace of movement that spoke of well-ordered muscles.

But the face eased the sea rover's mind. It was high and narrow but broad above the eyes—strange eyes—gray and deep, almost black as they looked out from the warm firelight of the room beyond. The rugged strongly hewn features were keen with intelligence; the eyes and the tiny wrinkles around them deep with a queerly eternal wisdom.

"Your coast, yonder," said Daron, his mouth twisted in a grim smile, "offers poor bedding for a man whose

ship is gone, and the grass of your meadows seem wiry for human gullets. I've naught but my gratitude left to buy me a meal and a night away from the wind, but if that be good value in your land—"

The face of the native wrinkled in good-humored acquiescence as he opened the door more fully. "It is a depreciated currency, much debased with counterfeit, a strange trouble of our land. But come in, we'll try the worth of yours."

Daron stepped in, and passed his host. Rather quickly he sought a chair made of X members supporting leather bands. It creaked under his weight as he looked up at his host. "My knees have yet to learn their manners, friend, and they seemed unwilling to wait your invitation."

"Sit then. How long have you been without food?"

"Some twenty hours—since the storm came up. It's not the lack of food, I think, but the too-free drinking of the last five of those hours. Wine has made my knees as unsteady, but I liked the process better."

"I have little here to offer you—a shepherd's fare. Tordu is some two days' journey away, beyond the Chinur Mountains."

"Hm-m-m . . . then this is some expansive land I've reached. Friend . . . but stay, if I may eat, the questions and the answers both will boil more freely. If you have the bread and cheese of the shepherds I know, they'll serve most excellently to sop this water I've imbibed."

"Sit here and rest, or warm yourself nearer the fire. The wind is dying, but turning colder, too." The tall man moved away,—through a doorway at the far side of the stonewalled room, and Daron's eyes roved over the furnishings.

There were simple things, chairs—stools of leather straps and wooden X's, some simple, wooden slabs—a

table of darkened, well-worn oak. Some sense of unease haunted Daron's mind, a feeling of decay about the smoke-grimed stone of the walls not matched by the simple furnishings.

Then his host was back with a stone jug, an oval loaf of bread, and a crumbling mass of well-ripened cheese on an earthenware plate. He set them on

the table, as Daron moved over, for the first time observing closely the dress of his host. His clothes were of some blue-green stuff, loosely draped to fall nearly to his leather-sandaled feet, bunched behind his head in a hooded cowl thrown back between the shoulders now.

Daron's quick eyes studied the fingers that set out the food, even as he reached toward it. They were long, slim, supple fingers, and the forearm that stretched from the loose sleeve of the blue-green cloak was muscled magnificently with the ropey, slim, deceptive cords of the swift-actioned man's strength.

Daron's eyes rose to the face of his host. The level, gray eyes looked down into his for a long moment, and Daron shrugged easily and turned back to his food. The eyes had regarded him with honesty of good intent—and the green-robed man was his host. If he chose to call himself a shepherd within his own house, to a stranger he befriended, that, then was his business.

"I am called Nazun," his host said presently. His voice was deep and resonant, friendly, yet holding within it an air of certainty and power that the sea rover had heard in few men before. One had been his friend, and had carved out an empire. None of them had been shepherds—for long.

"I am Daron, of Kyprost—which I think you may not know. I am afflicted with a strange curse—like quicksilver, I cannot long remain in any place, yet in all my wanderings I've never heard of land that lay halfway

from Western world to Eastern. And—unless I swam back in five hours over the course my vessel spent twelve days laying—this is a land I never knew existed."

"This is the island Ator, of the Azun islands. Some few of our people have sailed eastward to the borders of the great continent from which you came, but not in many generations have the Azuni been the sea rovers they once were. They wandered here from the lands you know, long ago, but now they see no joy in roving. Azun is very pleasant; they forget the old ways and the old gods, and worship new ideas and new gods."

Daron grinned. "Pleasant, is it? It was a hard, gray place I found. But for your light, it seemed I might find no more of it, for that the wind was cooling, I found for myself before I found your door."

Daron looked up again into Nazun's eyes, his blue eyes drawn to the gray. For an instant the firelight fell strong and clear on the sun-tanned face of the giant before him. The deep-sunk gray eyes looked into his levelly, from a face set for an instant in thought, a face of undeterminable age, as such strongly hewn faces of men may be. There was kindness about it, but in that instant kindness was hidden by overwhelming power. Daron's careless smile dropped away so that his own strongly chiseled face was serious and intent.

The gray eyes, he suddenly saw, were old. They were very, very old, and something of the chill of the dying wind outside leaked into Daron from those eyes.

The sea rover dropped his eyes to his food, broke a bit of bread and some cheese, ate it, and washed it down with the full-bodied wine from the stone jug.

The room was quiet, strangely quiet, with only the rustle of the fire to move the drapes of silence. Daron did not look up as he spoke, slowly, thoughtfully. His easy, laughing voice was deeper, more serious. "I am a

stranger to this section of the world—friend. I ... I think I would do better if you would give me some advice as to how I might repay you for this meal, which, at this time, is life."

Nazun's voice was soft against the silence, and Daron listened without looking up. "Yes, it is a strange corner of the world, Daron. Many generations ago the Azuni came, sea rovers such as you, and settled here. They found rich land, good temperatures, a good life. For a long time they roved the sea, but Azun was home. They built a peaceful country—there were no other sea rovers then to menace them—and prospered here.

"It was a peaceful home—they stayed by it more and more. Why wander in harsher lands? The Azuni have not wandered now in many generations. There is no need. And with peace, comes wisdom. They grew too wise to worship the old gods, and found new gods—you'll learn of them, the Invisible Ones, in Tordu, the capital of Azun—in new ways.

"But you will learn of this. Primarily, for safety and for pleasure here, remember this: the Azuni know more of minds and the works of the power of mind than any people of the Earth. This power may make things uncertain for you . . . but only some of the Azuni have the full knowledge now.

"For good reasons, friend, I cannot have you here the night. Go from the door straight out. There is a broken wall of stone some two hundred paces out, which you will see by the light of the moon—the clouds are broken to a scudding wrack, now—and beyond it is a cart road. Turn right on this, and follow it along. You'll find a public house along the road within the hour. And—if someone offers you a game, accept and you may have luck. Take this—it's a small coin, but planted well, it may grow a large crop."

Daron rose from the table. Turning as he rose so that his eyes sought the glowing fire. He slipped the small silver coin into his palm, tapped his hand, and the coin spun neatly in the air to slip, edge on, between his fingers and be caught. "Aye, friend. To the right. And— I will learn later, I think, how I may return this favor. Tordu would seem to be the goal of a sound man on this island of yours."

"To the right," Nazun nodded.

Daron stepped to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the night. The moon shone through rents in the shattered cloud veil. He went on steadily to the broken wall, crossed over, and turned right. He flipped the silver coin in his fingers and noticed to himself that the bright fire in the stone house no longer shone through the windows. For that matter, the moonlight shone through the ruined roof to make a patch of light in the room beyond the shattered, unhinged door.

Daron shrugged uneasily, and remembered the friendly creases about the deep-set gray eyes and tossed the coin into a pocket with an expert flip. He swung easily down the rutted cart road.

"Nazun," he said, and cocked an eye at the scudding cloud wrack. "Now the local people might know that name—and there are other ways than asking

questions to learn an answer."

II

THE WIRY GRASS gave way to scrub, and the stunted brush to patches of trees. The stone inn house nestled in a group of the trees, half hidden by them, but a signpost hung out over the road to rectify that flaw; the traveler "would not miss it. Daron fingered his single

coin and squinted at the signboard as the moonlight flickered across it like the glow of a draft-stirred candle.

"That," said Daron softly, "means 'The Dolphin,' which would be a right goodly name for such a place, so near the sea; but that lettering is like to none I've seen before!" He let it go at that, and went on toward the door, with a clearer idea in mind as to the meaning' of the name of Nazun. He had, seemingly, acquired a new fund of wisdom, a new language!

The voices of men and the laughter of a girl came through the heavy oaken panels of the door as he raised the knocker; and he heard the heavy, rolling tread of the host as he dropped it down again. The man who faced the sea rover now was no giant, but a short, round-bellied little man with a face all creases, sprouting seedling whiskers of a red beard as the only clue to what his vanished hair might once have been.

"Aye, and come in, for though the night is bettering, it's foul enough yet, my friend."

Daron smiled .in answer to the infectious good humor of the innkeeper. "And who knows better than I? Pray your drinks are better than brine, for I've had my fill of that, and your beds are better than the quartz the waves laid me out on. I've lost a ship, a crew, a sword, and all but one silver coin." Daron looped it upward so it glinted in the light of a hanging lamp and the glow of the fire.

The innkeeper's smile-creased mouth pursed worriedly. "Your luck seems bad, and . . . and your coin small," he said doubtfully.

"Ah, but you think too quickly, friend," laughed Daron. "Look, out of a crew of a dozen stout lads, I lived. You say my luck is bad? Out of all that I possessed, this bit of silver stayed with me like a true friend and you think it will leave me now?

"Now let us test this thing. Look; I want a bit of meat, a bit of bread, and perhaps some wine. You want my coin. Fair enough, but you say my luck is bad, which is a curse on any seaman. Let's see, then; we'll try this coin. If it falls against me, it is yours, and I seek another place for food. If it is the friend I say--"

The innkeeper shrugged. "I am no worshipper of Lord Martal, and I've no faith in the luck he rules. Go back through yonder door, and you'll find his truest worshipers in all Ator, I swear. They gamble away two fortunes in an evening, and gambit it back between 'em. But they gamble away my wine, and pay for that, wherefore they're welcome. Perhaps I should thank Lord Martal at that."

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Daron chuckled. "By all means, man! He smiles on you, and the old gods are

good protectors, I feel." The seaman swung across the little entrance room toward the curtained entrance to the main dining hall beyond. The smoke-stained oaken beams hung low enough to make him stoop his head as he pushed the curtain aside and looked beyond. A dozen men, some in well-worn, stout clothing bearing the faintly sour, wholly pleasant odor of the sea, some with the heavier smells of earth and horses, clustered about a table where five men in finer clothes were seated. Three girls, in tight-bodiced, wide-skirted costumes watched and moved about to fill the orders of the men.

None saw him at first, as they watched the play of the dice that leaped and danced on the dark wood of the table top. Daron moved over, and some of the outer fringe looked up at him, their boisterous voices quieting for an instant, then resuming at his easy grin and nod. The ring of farming people and the fishermen made way a bit, uncertain by his dress, for, sea-stained and flavored, it showed fine-woven cloth of good linen, worked in an

unfamiliar pattern with bits of gold and silver wire.

The seated men looked up at him, and back at the dice, and rolled again. Daron leaned forward, putting his widespread hands on the table. "My friends," he said seriously, "I have an unpleasant mission here. My ship is lost, my crew is gone, and all possessions left me save this coin." The single silver bit clinked down. "Our good host has said my luck is foul; I feel that it is good. Wherein does this concern you? It is this; if I would sleep softer than the stones outside, and eat fare tenderer than twigs, I must plant this seedling coin and reap a harvest. I fear it is from your pockets, then, the harvest must come."

The nearest of the player's laughed, spun Daron's coin, and nodded. "One stake, friend, and we'll finish the work the seas began! A man with such a thing is hard put—it would buy a bit of food, or a bed, but not both, and the decision would be hard. We shall relieve you!"

"Now, by Nazun, you won't, I feel!" Daron laughed— and watched their eyes.

The player shook his head and laughed. "Now by the Invisible Ones, I know we shall. If you still put your faith in outworn gods, it is small surprise they stripped you thus."

Daron relaxed, and nodded to himself. "We shall see."

"And," said the holder of the dice, passing them to Daron, "this is no field for Nazun, for there's no wisdom in these bits of bone. If the old gods appeal to you, why then Martal, I'd say, would be the one you'd swear by here."

"No wisdom in the dice—no, that may be. But wisdom may reside in fingers, thus?" Daron spun out the three polished cubes, and saw them turn a five, a five and a six. "What would you have me throw?"

"I'll take your stake," said the hawk-nosed player to Daron's right. "Better this." His fingers caressed the dice,

spun them, and shot them forth. They settled for a total of twelve.

"With two dice, I'd match it, with three—" Daron's roll produced fourteen. "But even so," as he picked up two silver coins, "we need some further crops. A bed and board I have, but Tordu is farther than a seaman walks. A horse, I

think—Will some one match me more?"

A sword filled the scabbard at his thigh, and a good dirk was thrust in his belt, a horse was his, and money for a day or two when he sought his bed that night. He whistled a bit of a tune as he laid aside his things, dropped the thick oak bar across the door, and settled for sleep. "I'll say this for this land," he muttered, "very practical gods they have. Unique in my experience. They do a man very material good turns. Wisdom, it is, eh? I thought as much—"

The sun was bright, the air warm, but not uncomfortable, and the horse better even than the lamp's weak light had suggested in the night, when Daron started off. The cart road had broadened to a highway, and this to one well-traveled within a pair of hours. The scrub bush and sheep-dotted meadows gave way to farmlands bordered with fences growing neatly from the ground, well-barbed fences of some cactus bush for which the sheep, showed sound respect.

There was little timber here, but under the clear sun, the meadowlands and farms stretched off into pleasantly blue-hazed distance, where the banking of the haze seemed to indicate a mountain range stretching off from east to west. The road led south, but like most farmland roads, seemed unconcerned with haste and directness. It visited from door to door and rolled aside when some small swale of land suggested climbing hills. The horse was sound and strong, seeming to have a nature as blithe

as Daron's own, with little mind to bother a fair day about a change in masters.

Toward noon, the rising ground began to show some signs of timber, and the stone-walled farm cottages began to trail attendants in wooden walls, and sheep appeared again more frequently. The haze rolled up by the rising sun still banked to the south, but the shining gleam above it indicated that the haze had retreated to solid mountain fastnesses, with a snow-crowned peak above.

The sun was warmer now, and where a small stream trickled through a woodpatch, Daron dismounted, tethered his mount to a bush near the stream, and spread his food. He ate, and leaned back in easy contemplation and thought. The wandering breeze brought some faint hint to him of a visitor, and his swift thoughts placed his line of action before the odor was more than identifiable to him. He looked up with a smile as the footsteps of the newcomer crunched on the twigs nearby.

He saw a wind-blown, sun-tanned man, rather stocky and heavily muscled, with eyes squinting permanently from the glare of the sun on water. A sailor's cap perched solidly on his round, dark-haired head. A black stubble of beard showed on his heavy jowls and on his thick, muscular arms, and an impudent tuft thrust out from each ear.

"My friend," said Daron, "you're a way from the sea, which, by your gait, would be more homelike to you."

The stocky one seated himself with a grunt. "Aye, and the same to you. Those linens were never stained in a brook, and, unless you ride yon horse lying on your back, it's not the sweat of your beast.

"Bound for Tordu?"

"One I met last night named such a city. I am not familiar with this country—a remarkable land I find it— and it seemed the part of wisdom to seek the center of the

place. And, by the bye, men call me Daron."

"Talun," grunted the stocky one, seemingly annoyed. "Tordu's a foul place for an honest seaman, though seamen of that ilk seem fewer with every season. The whole race of Azuni have grown soft and stupid, and the stupidest have gathered in Tordu to admire their overweening stupidity. They have no sense or judgment, and they shun the sea like the plague. Time was when the Bay of Tor was a harbor." Tahun snorted disgustedly. "They've got it cluttered so with fancy barges now no merchant ship can enter, and they've set a temple to those precious Invisible Ones of theirs across the mouth of the bay—they call it Temple Isle now; it used to be the finest shipyard in Azun—and their slinking Invisible Ones hang over the bay mouth till the good clean sea stays out in disgust."

"Invisible Ones? Hm-m-m. I'm somewhat unacquainted here, though I've heard a dozen times of these Invisible Ones—not including several references to them, both prayerful and annoyed last night, from certain gentlemen of the countryside I gamed with—but little explanation of them. Gods, are they?"

"Gods?" Talun snorted angrily. "They pray to them as to gods, and say they are not gods. The people of Tordu are fools and crazed ones at that. 'No gods,' they say. They scorn the old gods of their fathers, for say they, the old gods are foolishness—made in the image of men, and hence no more than projected men and the power of men's minds. The true god-being, these wise thinkers say, is certainly no man, a thing of force in form mere mortal mind cannot conceive. So they build themselves these Invisible Ones, and give them power, and curse the old gods.

"They're fools, and have no wisdom, and admire each other's mighty thoughts."

"The wise thinkers, eh?" mused Daron. "We have such

thinkers in my land, and we have certain other thinkers who have one certain trait that sets them off—a remarkable thing. They think long, study much, and confess to those who ask that they learn steadily that they know little. Some think that a crabwise way to knowledge—but I am prejudiced; I learned from such a man."

Talun stirred uneasily, and his squinted eyes turned upward to the clear blue bowl of the sky. The blistering sun was burning down from it to his face, but as he stared upward a fleecy cloud formed, rolled, expanded and hid the sun. Talun settled back comfortably.

"Learning never appealed much to me. One of my friends—but not to me. The wisdom of the fools appeals not so strongly to the countrymen, nor to the sailors, and on that alone these Invisible Ones would gain no strength, for these thinkers are few, if noisy with their thoughts.

"But another thing has influenced them," continued Talun. "The gods, these deep thinkers say, should know the future—else what's the use of consulting gods? Now the old gods did not know—or did not explain, at least."

Daron sat more upright, looked harder at this stocky, hairy figure, the very

image of a sailor or fisherman, from whom the shifting breezes brought a gentle tang of salt and fish and drying kelp. "Your gods, in this land, are most unique to me," said Daron softly. "Perhaps men have a certain reservation in their thoughts of gods in other lands—a thought that a god is some vague thing, whose statue man may carve, and to whom offerings may be made, but a remote being who does strangely little manifest for his worshipers . . . Now the gods of this country, I find, are most substantial beings—and most helpful. The Lord of Chance, of Contests, let us say: he wished me well last night, I think." Daron nodded toward the browsing horse. "Now if a people blessed by gods

who have such usefulness complain, it would seem they set hard standards indeed."

Talun grumbled and rolled over. Daron cast an eye upward; alone in the blue vault of the sky the single white fleece of cloud remained motionless between them and the sun, casting a pleasant tempering shade. "Men want more than they have—and that, my friends tell me, is good, and the reason seems enough," answered Talun. "If a man be satisfied with what he has, why surely, he will get no more. If a man catch a dozen fish, which is enough to feed his wife and a child, and fish no more, I'd think little of his courage, or his sense.

"But now this knowing the future. It is not always good. These wise thinkers of Tordu, they put it that the gods should know, and the gods should tell men—and their Invisible Ones do. But the priests of the Lord of Wisdom, the wisest of the old gods, say gods should know—but should not explain all things."

"Why not?" asked Daron.

"If a god should tell you that this night you would wager your horse against a slave girl, and lose both girl and horse on a toss of the dice what would you do?"

"Why, sure I'd be a fool indeed to wager then!"

"Whereby, if you do not, you make a liar of the god," said Talun with a snort. "The god's prophecy of the future was not accurate, for you did not. Now such a prophecy the old gods made. If might the priest report, 'you cast your nets at Seven-Fathom Bank, you'll snare a swordfish and spend three days mending nets.' Now the fishermen would not, but would lose a good day's fishing, and rumble that the prophecies were vague.

"But these Invisible Ones; they have no vagueness. They tell a man, 'As you walk home this night a horse shall kick and break your skull. Farewell, worshiper!' And, that night the man is dead. He swears no horse shall

come near him—they did at first—but the prophecy is right, of course. If the Invisible Ones read future right, then that must be his fate. If he has wit to escape that end, why then he's made a liar of the gods." Talun dropped one heavy lid, and his dark-blue eye speared Daron sharply. "And, young friend, old gods or new, no mortal man makes a liar of the gods!"

"That calls for thought," sighed Daron. "I see no joy in knowing my end if I have no hope of changing it."

Talun grunted and stretched himself up. "Nor did the country folk or fishermen at first. But try a human with that thought for long, and not even the gods

will make him stand firm. Live a year beside a temple of these Invisible Ones, knowing every day that there you can find sure and absolute the day and manner of your death—No. Men are mortal, and they fear old Barak, the dread god of their mortality, but the sharp, itching bite of curiosity will drive them on. You've seen the countryman twist the ox's tail to drive it in the pen in which the ox can smell death? So curiosity sends men into that temple which they know means loss of hope."

Talun shrugged. "Once there—what man has courage and will to walk away? They sink like wine sots, drunk with future knowledge, giving up all strength and drive of spirit, for the Invisible Ones tell them what is coming—and they know it will come, try how they may, so you may be sure they do not try.

"Go your way, friend. I have business at times in Tordu, too, so I may see you again." Talun wandered off through the woodpatch and vanished behind a tree.

Daron lay back to stare at the cloud. It hung still precisely between the sun and the spot where Talun had sat. But it was evaporating rapidly now, and presently the blue vault of sky was clear. Daron chuckled as he un-

tethered his horse and swung onto his back. Convenient, that trick.

His horse trotted on easily across the plain, passing a farm wagon here, neighing to a browsing horse along the way, and Daron sat straight and thought. A notion formed at the back of his mind that Talun had not altogether been a friend. That storm that took his ship and crew—Well, it was evident he had a mission here, and surely no higher adventure had he sought than this! With gods like those this land boasted—they did not seem a stingy lot!

The day passed, and he stopped that night in another inn, the Sheath and Scythe, it was, and the men who drank the lank, cadaverous host's wine had no smell of sea or fish about them. The heavy, earthy smell that permeated the inn was thick to Daron's sea-trained nostrils. Experimentally, he tossed the dice again this night. He lost three throws, won two, and knew his answer. What he needed, seemingly was his—but these gods did not take the spice of gambling from him by constant winning. He settled down then, and what Martal's help did not bring him a certain deftness of fingering did. The night grew fatter then, when he found that, somehow, this land had never learned the mighty magic of the three snail shells and the pebble.

Content, and more than warmed by good wine—his shells had betrayed him with clumsiness, else he'd have stayed longer—he went to sleep.

HI

WITH A SAILOR'S INSTINCT, for all his hoofed carrier, Daron found his way to the docks of Tordu straightway—and snorted as he saw them. No smell of good fish and

bad, no circling, wide-winged argosies of gulls. The broad, V-shaped Bay of Tor spread out, its mouth plugged by the Temple Isle, its waves showering familiar gold and diamond back to the blue skies and the sun. But the clean, salt-and-fish smell of any coastal sea was gone, buried, drowned away in a scent that reeked in the sea rover's nostrils. Incense! The bay was dotted with hoggish, bloat-belly barges, with white canvas mocked in pretty silks, good yellow cordage tinsel with golden threads.

The final insult to the sea was the crews. Girls! Golden-tanned pink skins, and dainty figures playing seamen! Slave girls with beribboned chains of gold pulling at the oars that drifted the silly barges out.

Daron groaned. The sailor's eye roved around the harbor, and his sea rover's soul writhed in anguish. High, granite-glinting cliffs, impregnable to any storm, formed a solid wall broken in two deep, sharp clefts, the twin mouths of the bay. Set like a grim, squat fort across it was the island, a grim, stanch island of black, pinnacled basalt bedecked with carved and spidery-lined temples, be-flowered with beds of plants in artificial soil.

Here was a harbor the gods had made impregnable! They'd set across its mouth such harsh defenses as no sea could smash, nor any force of men invade, for but a few score of good catapults could make those deep-cloven channels-wide enough for peaceful shipping—invulnerable to all assault.

Yet the great walls of granite fell away in rapid slopes so that the city of Tordu, at the head of the bay, straddling the Tor River, was on a level beach-front.

And barges—pretty barges mocking galleys with their silly, slim slave girls—monopolized this port!

Daron clunked his heels disgustedly against the stout ribs of his horse, and turned his back on the place. The

horse plop-plopped away in an easy trot, while Daron's ire mounted within him. The horse, not Daron, avoided the rumbling carriages of gaily decked men and women, skirted the shoreside area of marble-fronted shops selling things for temple decorations and offerings.

Even the sound of this section of the city was unlike any Daron had known before. It rang with the voices of men and women, as any good town must, and the creak and plop of harness and horses' hoofs. But the ringing jingle of godd steel swords, the strong, hard ring of vital, active voices was gone. The calls were vague, unimportant, even to themselves; the faces of the men were interested, but more from seeking interest than because they found interest in each small thing of life.

Daron drove westward across the city, away from the bay. The level of the ground swelled upward gently, and the street was bordered by high, plastered walls, tinted white and pale blues and greens and pinks, as pale as the life force of this silly city.

Then the ground dropped down again; and as it fell, the view of the bay was lost behind, and the large estates that hid behind those plastered walls shrank quickly. The broad street split, and narrowed—and Daron began to look about more keenly. The pale color.of the walls gave way, the pale, soft voices changed, the timbre of the city's sounds changed, and the smoky, spicy scent of incense gave way with it. From the east a breeze was sweeping the smell of a true city, the odor of foods and men and the green of growing things.

A good two miles back from the bay he found the sector he sought. The men were taller, heavier; two women leaned from nearby windows listening with hand-cupped ears to the angry voices floating from a neighboring house. The sweetly sour smell of wine floated out of a white-

washed inn, and the smell of hay turned the horse's nose to the stable yard as easily as the other turned his master's course.

Daron dropped the reins into the hand of the boy that roused himself from whistling lethargy to split his freckled face in a friendly grin. "You've seen a man become a fool with the aid of wine?" said Daron gruffly.

The boy's eyes rounded. "My . . . my father runs the inn—"

"A horse may do the same with food and water. Feed the beast, but mind he's no more sense than you, so feed him light, and water him gently." Daron grinned, and a coin flashed suddenly in the air and winked into nothingness as the boy's hand moved.

Daron swung from the courtyard to the street, and filled his lungs with a grunt of satisfaction. The air had not the tang of clean sea sweeps but the insult of the incense was out of his nostrils. He blinked his eyes and entered the inn.

A half dozen townsmen, in loose armless cotton shirts that slipped on over their heads, and woolen breeches falling loose to their knees, contracting sharply to mold the shins, looked at his different garb. The shirts were blue or green or yellow, but all the breeches were brown.

Daron grinned. "You've a good eye for color, lads, but tell me this; is it good brown earth or dye that makes your breeches match?"

One of the townsmen looked casually round the room and chewed on something slowly before replying. "And where would you be from, stranger? It's clear you never heard of the Elder Vows."

"That might be, and that might be an answer. What is this Elder Vow? And is it the custom here, too, that the host so hides himself a guest goes thirsty?"

"No guest goes thirsty, but the host wears no more

badge than does the guest." The man rose slowly, unfolding from behind his table like an endless python pouring from his hole. Lank as a ship's mainmast, he towered over Daron, his long arms dangling downward like wet rags hung out to dry.

Daron stepped back and eyed him up and down. "By Talun, now, you'd serve as jury-rig in any tall-sparred ship! If your drinks be as long as you, then there's good value for the money here! Give me something cool and wet that has less of the vinegar than the wine I've had since I landed on this shore."

The innkeeper grinned, leaned slightly, and plucked a cobwebbed bottle from a little door that sprung open at his touch, put it on the table and gestured broadly. "You've learned the trouble of the wines here quick enough.

"Now as to the color of our breeches; it seems small account of yours, but a long morning makes for easy talk, so sit. The answer's short enough, but there's little joy in short answers."

Daron smacked his lips and sighed contentedly. "Hm-m-m . . . a drink at last that wouldn't eat its way through marble stones! Let's hear this answer then, be it long or short. I'll leave when my business presses."

"I'm a fool," said the innkeeper sadly. "My friends"— he waved his queerly flexible long arm— "are fools. My foolishness—our foolishness—lies in this; we like to think that what we strive for we get, and what we get we get by striving for."

"A sound-seeming thought. Wherein lies the foolishness?"

The lanky one waved his arm again. "The street is full of those who will tell you. The temples on the isle are full of Invisible Ones and priests who will prove it for you.

"We go to the Older Gods. We wear these breeches to save us headaches."

Daron cocked his head. "A curious custom. In the Dryland, where once I was, there was a race of men who wrapped a white cloth about their heads to keep it cool and save them headaches, but this trick of wrapping the nether end seems somewhat strange. Still, one cannot tell. It seemed insane enough—that wrapping up the head to keep it cool—until I tried it, after twice finding that the sun was no puny light for man's convenience there. So I suppose you have some logic in your acts."

The man on the innkeeper's left blinked his eyes slowly, combed a full, spade-shaped beard of curly hairs, and patted a pate as bald as an empty seascape. "We tried wrapping our ears. The worshipers of the Invisible Ones still argued. So we wore the brown breeches and simply knocked down those who argued with us. A year or so— and they stopped arguing."

"By Nazun, that's wisdom!" Daron laughed. "But still I seek the explanation of the foolishness of striving for your wants."

"I," said the innkeeper, "am Shorhun." He stopped and chewed thoughtfully, looking at his sandaled foot.

"Daron, I'm called."

"If I go to the Temple Isle, the Invisible Ones will tell me whether or not the landlord of this place—who believes that I am a fool because I do not go—is going to throw me forth into the street. Incidentally, I'd be a fool in truth to seek an answer from the Invisible Ones on that; I know he is. But they might also tell me where I next will go, and, whether I will prosper. Say that they say I will. The Invisible Ones prophesy always what will happen. Wherefore, if they say I will prosper, it will mean little to me what I do. It seems no prize of my good effort. If, through carelessness, I crack my pate on yon-

der doorframe, even that I prefer to think of as my own, my personally blundering act. If the Invisible Ones prophesy it—why, I have yet to crack my pate, and lack the satisfaction of cursing myself for a blind and imbecilic nitwit in the doing of it.

"Wherefore it is foolishness. I should go and learn my fate and then sit back to live it, like a twice-told tale, mumbling in my teeth as my pre-known date of death draws near.

"No, I prefer old Nazun. He deals in warning of things he well knows will not happen, I suppose—things I am warned against and, by avoiding, avoid trouble.

Things— so the Invisible Ones say—I was not fated to meet in any case." Shorhun shrugged, a mighty thing that started like a tidal wave running up a narrow bay to crash in final jerkings at his head.

"I had thought," said Daron slowly, "to see the temples of the Old Gods. I saw none near the bay front."

Shorhun barked, a laugh that seemed half cadaverous cough. "Talun's Temple moved first. It fell to pieces one night with a mighty roaring and cursing, a sound that satisfied my feelings in its depth and originality, if it did disturb me next day in seeing his retreat."

"Eh? Talun was driven from his temple?"

"Aye. The old sea lord brought down a storm that ripped up every tree and all the nearly planted gardens of the Temple Isle, but that stubborn basalt was a bit too much for him. The isle stood."

"But what drove him out?" Daron asked intently.

Shorhun barked—or coughed—again. "Incense," he said lugubriously. "Before Tan Lormus, High Priest of the Invisible Ones invented that, old Talun came near to driving out the pretty barges of the rich devotees of the Invisible Ones. Talun, like the true Old God he is, was using only natural things—though the number of fish that

died on the beach that year was natural only by a wide stretch of allowance."

Daron burst into a roar of laughter till the tears rolled down his leathery cheeks. "Praise be Talun! Now that was an idea well worthy of the sea rover's god, and may this Tan Lormus live again in a fish's body for his rupture of so fine a plan!"

"But Talun moved," sighed Shorhun. "And the others moved after him, one by one, till last of all sweet Lady Tammar moved. She lacked not for worshipers, even with the Invisible Ones, for, Invisible Ones or not, men and women yet must have love, and no fine thoughts or wise prophecy can satisfy in place of that."

"But—she moved? The bay, foul as it may be for a sailor's eye, might still, with a good round moon, be a goodly place in a lover's eye," said Daron.

"It was—it was. But Lady Tammar is strangest of the gods in many ways. Lady of Love, she is all loves, all things to all men. She is the strong adventurer's companion mate, as strong as he, and as faithful. She is the young man's first love, very young, and never wise. She is the mature man's wife—his ideal of her, understanding, wise, forever ready to aid him in his troubles. But—she is, too, the fop's simpering coquette, for she is the ideal of every man, however weak that ideal may be.

"So she moved back, back from the bay and its lack of common men in honest need. Lady Tammar had no joy in appearing thus to any man."

Daron sipped quietly at his wine. "I think," he said softly, "that I must see the new temple of Tammar."

Shorhun shook his great head slowly, and a little smile touched his face,

changing it from the harsh look of weather-split granite. "You can go—but Lady Tammar is wise. She does not appear to every man—for every man cannot find his perfect ideal, save in Tammar herself. And

she is for no man. Once each month I go to her temple; three times she has appeared to me, and I go always in hopes. My wife is dead, and Tammar—

"But you can go."

"Are all the temples of the Old Gods near together?" asked Daron.

"Near together, yes. But some six miles beyond Tordu, six miles up the slopes of Mt. Kalun, looking out across the city to the sea."

"I think that I shall go there, then. There are inns near-by."

Shorhun shook his head slowly. "None nearer than Tordu. The Old Ones ruled it thus. Only the priests and priestesses and the temple people live on Mt. Kalun."

"Then this shall be my home. And—you have a tailor who could produce such fine brown breeches for me, perhaps?"

IV

DAEON SNIFFED, and his head nodded approval to the easy motion of the horse. There was incense here, on this road up Mt. Kalun, to the temples of the Old Gods—but incense he liked. The smell of spicy pine tar, baked from the tall, straight trees in the hot sun. The high air here was clear and crisp as a sea breeze, cleared by the luminous green masses of the trees.

The horse stopped abruptly, blew through his nostrils vigorously, and looked back at his rider. Daron laughed and patted the arching, sweaty neck. "Enough, my friend? A bit of climb it is. Good, then, it's near high noon, for all we started early. Tammar's temple has stood these good few years, and will, I think, wait while we rest. And Tammar . . . well, Lady Tammar has lasted

longer still. We'll stop—and there's a nicely sheltered place." Daron slid off his mount, threw the reins over the animal's head, and led him off the trail. A hundred yards to the right, the pine-needle carpet of soft brown gave way to a little clearing, green with grass.

From the saddlebags, Daron lifted a flask of wine, wrapped in a dozen layers of crushed green leaves, wilted now and somewhat dried. But the wine within was pleasantly cooled. A loaf of bread, and a cut of meat was food enough, and Daron settled comfortably. The horse was browsing at the grass, and blowing annoyedly. He was a lowland horse, it seemed, and the effects of some seven thousand feet of altitude were puzzling to him.

Hidden beyond the stand of straight-trunked pines, the road that led up to the temples carried a sprinkling of other visitors—hardy countrymen and tough-muscled seamen, the common men who had the will and muscle, too, to climb that narrow track.

No carriage road—those who came this way did not so from indolence and lack of other occupation, but because their minds and spirits drove them on. Daron, himself unseen, watched the steady, strong-backed walk of a man browned with

the sun, hands dark with rich brown soil, bearing an offering of ripe, round melons slung in twin sacks across his shoulders.

"Now there," said Daron, his eyes closed down to slits of concentration, "goes a man who knows his mind. No fine-tongued orator would quickly move him to war—but, I would be loath to meet his kind as an enemy."

A, pair of sailors, the breeze bringing even here the good, round talisman of their calling and proof of the god they'd worship, went noisily up the trail, blowing, laughing, rolling slightly in their walk, spurring each the other with insults of his weakness. Blowing like a hard north

gale on this small slope? The wine had washed away his strength!

"Gods," said Daron to himself, "have little need of help in working miracles—but these gods of Azun be strange gods. Why might a god call on a man for help? Why, to lead and work with other men. A god is no doubt a mighty leader—but men and gods are different things. I'd fight for a god in whom I found just cause—but not behind such a one. There would seem to me a certain delicacy in the question. A man who leads against the enemy is credited not perhaps with skill, but in any case with more than jelly up his spine.

"But a god? An immortal god? Is courage needed for one who cannot die to face a deadly foe? And would such anomalous courage hearten those strong, if odorous, fishers? Why, the god might be courage itself—but still lack proof, where he cannot die or feel steel cutting!

"So—perhaps this is a certain question of leading men against those foppish ones that rule Tordu. Foppish—but from the nice-kept stable yards I saw, well mounted. And your mounted cavalry is a savage thing for simple farming men to face, no matter how ill-trained the mounted man may be."

Daron looked out and down. Two giant old pines, their trunks scaled like yellow-brown bodies of gigantic, up-rearing serpents, had throttled out lesser competition to the northeast. Between their mighty boles, Tordu was visible, a sprawl of white and green and pastel blues against the green-brown farming land. The sparkling blue of the bay, with the white-crowned Temple Isle across its mouth mocked up at him with tiny, bright-ribboned barges plying slowly back and forth on languid oars, like water beetles crawling across a puddle.

Daron fingered a single coin tucked well down in one pocket, and looked out across the town. "Tammar I'll see

—I think—for this bit of silver should be more than coin, keeping in mind its source. And gods do not favor mortals for naught, and if this Nazun, chief of Azuni's gods, sees fit to speak to me, why Tammar—"

He paused, his slit-narrow, night-blue eyes widening and easing away the straight furrows of concentration. Mixed visions swam before his mind—oval faces framed in spun-golden hair, with wide-opened eyes like sapphires staring out in seeming wonder, and black-haired heads, round and olive-skinned, with black-jet eyes. Tall bodies willowy slim, and lithe as temple dancers, figures strong and tall and fine, free-swinging, life-loving—

He shook his head and laughed. "No one—but part of all, perhaps. But Lady Tammar will know—and be, if Shorhun tells me right." He leaned back, eyes rising to the vaulted roof of interlacing, dark-green boughs.

A footstep near brought his eyes down, and his hand shifted half an inch to reach in one flashing drive, if need should be, the long, well-balanced weapon at his side. His hand fell away, his eyes narrowed, then widened slowly as a smile overspread his tanned face.

"You are too late, good friend. My wine is gone, my meat and bread consumed—and I cannot repay a meal of some few evenings gone. But my accommodations here are good in many ways. The seats are soft, the needles pad them well, and keep away the ground's damp chill. Would you be seated?"

Nazun's gray eyes smiled, and his head nodded easily. His lean, muscular body folded gracefully, till he was seated at the base of a mighty pine, facing Daron's curious eyes. Nazun's eyes flickered swiftly over horse, silver-mounted saddle, Daron's good and well-stitched clothing, and the jewel-hilted sword he carried. "A single coin has seeded well, since last we met."

Daron laughed easily. "One crop it raised—but the next

night I found a planted pebble—planted beneath the shelter of three small snail shells—grew better still in the good soil of Azun."

Nazun's eyes laughed, and he nodded gravely. "Strange plants flourish well where the ground has not been sowed before. Yet the thing is very old."

"Perhaps," said Daron, "you could tell me its age?" He looked at Nazun's grave, unchanging face through narrowed eyes.

Nazun shook his head. "I've seen this earth somewhat longer than you, Daron, but this is older still. What legends of antiquity do your people know, Daron?"

Daron's gaze swung up to watch the bowing, swaying, stately dance of dark green boughs against a clear blue sky. His long, powerfully muscled figure looked relaxed and easy, his dark-green jacket blending here, and his gray-blue woolen breeches loose and floppy about well-corded legs. His face looked blankly easy—save for the eyes, where fine networks of tiny creases gathered about the night-blue eyes peering upward at the moon-blue heavens.

"Legends? Legends—and this Nazun is no mortal man, but Lord of Wisdom. Now legends are for children's ears, it seemed to me, but—but I am not Lord of Wisdom." Daron's thoughts flashed swiftly over years and nations—and legends. A pattern formed abruptly in his mind, a pattern he'd never seen before, and with his understanding, he started so he moved and looked deep in Nazun's eyes.

"Now by the gods!" said Daron, soft-voiced. "I've seen a hundred nations, and heard a hundred tales, and spent long nights around the fires to the music of the ballads and the thrill of long-drawn legends. I've heard how Bummeur of the Tutz nations defeated Lacoore of the Parrys from the Tutz balladeers. And, two nights later,

heard how, in that self-same battle, Lacoore of the Parrys drew Bummeur of the Tutz to follow his retreat, and trapped him—from a balladeer in Par.

"But in the Tutz ballads, and in those of the Parrys, in those of every nation I have met, there is one common basis of ancient, ancient legend, stories

older than the histories of nations. Once men were gods—and flew in air. And men were gods, to ride on fire, beyond the air, and spoke with the voices of gods, heard across all Earth, from nation to nation, and they had thunderbolts of gods.

"But men were men—not gods. They flew on their wings, and loosed their thunderbolts at one another, till each had stripped all godhood from the other. And—men were men, and grubbed in ground again, and rode the air no more, but plodded earth on old Shank's mare.

"Now a man may lie, and having taken council afore-hand, a dozen men may lie, and lie alike. But when a hundred men, in a hundred nations, men who have never met, lie the same fine tale—there's more than lying there!"

Nazun's gray eyes twinkled, deep beneath their shadowing brows, and his head nodded lazily. "I've heard such legends among the peoples of Azuni—and one legend heard only here. That, when man stripped man of god-like powers, and the world rocked and heaved in torture to their thrusts, lands sank and new lands rose from the sea-beds. The island group that is Azun rose from the seas then, and some hundred peaceful men, who had certain wisdom of those things that made for god-hood, took council. Now tell me, friend, if the nations tore like mad dogs at each other's throats and every nation was embroiled, and new lands rose from the sea—"

"I," said Daron, "would found a new nation on that untainted land."

Nazun nodded slowly, settled back against the tree and

looked up to where a scarlet-breasted bird cocked wary eyes downward before he drew back his head to rap a resounding tattoo on the great trunk. "Now," said Nazun, looking upward, "let us think what wise men might do— in days whe» the world was mad with bloodlust and mighty powers. Say you were such a refugee that settled here on Ator, largest of this Azun group."

His eyes wandered down again to rest on a hopping bird fighting with a stubborn worm. "That bird there walks, but he can fly, thanks to a certain mechanism—a sort of machine that he was gifted with. Pity we have not that machine."

Daron cocked a squinted eye, and watched the triumphant bird gobble quickly, ruffle his feathers, crouch and leap into the air. "I've tried a thousand times to do the same," the sea rover sighed. "I've seen coasts no ship could reach, and no walking man could find. And the bird flew where I could not." He shrugged. "I could not make such mechanism."

"But once—men were, the legends say, near godlike—men might have had the wit for that, perhaps," suggested Nazun.

"Ah," said Daron softly, and watched the bowing, dancing, swirling limbs above his head. Thoughts flashed through his mind such as he'd never contemplated. Gods, or godlike, the legends said. But—if their godhood had rested in mechanisms, in cleverness of tool and trickery— that was a sort of godhood one could well strip away, as one force took the catapults of another, to leave them helpless, wandering in rout.

"They'd need," said Nazun's soft, almost dreaming

voice, "most wonderful tools for that, no doubt. Better, finer tools than we. Springs, perhaps, of a steel better than we know, and mighty forges to make the steel."

The picture roiled and cleared in Daron's mind. That

was the source of legend, then! They had been godlike, those men of old! But their godhood had rested in machines—and the tools to make the machines. Once smash those tools—and machines wore out, with no more tools to replace them—

"They," said Daron slowly, "had wit, perhaps, but, it seems, more trickery than godhood. Wit, knowledge—but no judgment, and wisdom is also judgment."

"Men's minds are strange, are they not, my friend? And little known. Had such ones, as these ancient legends speak of, known more of themselves, perhaps their godlike knowledge of the things they bent to toys might have made them gods indeed."

Daron looked closely at the pine-needle-strewn ground on which he sat, and thought. There was a story here—a further story. Gods did not speak to men to while away the time. There would be reward, perhaps, but also—when the affairs of gods were concerned, and mortal men were brought to enter—danger, adventure! "Had I escaped," said Daron softly, "from a world, and founded on an island, unmolested, a new city, a new nation, having some remnant of that godlike knowledge—I think I would forget it. I think, perhaps, more knowledge of myself would make life "worthier to myself. How does man think—and how go mad? Some say a demon enters the spirit of the mad, and some say only that his mind is sick, like the belly with a colic. And some are only queer, and growing somewhat queerer, we say are mad."

"I know the thousand riggings of a hundred nations' ships—and know not how that knowledge lodges in my skull. I think, were I to build a new nation on the wreckage of that old, I'd learn myself a bit, before I tried the rebuilding of such powers as once destroyed men."

"And wait, before you learned again those things, till every man in all the race had judgment enough to carry

burning brands through the granary of man without setting fire? Wait, as the ages passed, till there was not, and never would be again, a madman to loose the spark? Yes," said Nazun softly, "that would be—safe, at least."

Daron laughed, and nodded slowly. "Safe," he chuckled, "and stupid, as the turtle in his shell. We need—Oh!" said Daron suddenly, and looked at Nazun with a sudden, overwhelming understanding. "Man needs a., god, or godlike guide who acts, who interferes to direct man upward as he longs, and halt the downward settling of his urge!"

Nazun moved easily, his long, blue-green-clad body rippling blithely to whipcord muscles under tanned and healthy skin. "Man needs his ideals personified, made real and given power. Given power enough, indeed, to stop the individual man who errs, but judgment enough to spare the man who sees ahead. One who is not man— for man is jealous of man, and unyielding to man's suggestions."

Daron sat very still, and concentrated on the soft brown mass of needles at his feet. "A mighty plan," he sighed. "And if man, through centuries, learned once to rule the rest of the world with godlike powers, perhaps through other centuries he might learn to rule himself. But how, I wonder, might it be?"

"The compass needle points to north, drawn by a thread of force unseen, unfelt by men. The brain of man is made of many tiny parts, working one against the other, millions on millions of them, by threads of force like the force that moves the compass needle, perhaps. A somewhat different force, more akin to the sparks that come from combing hair on cold, dry nights, it might be. If these small parts—these cells—act thus against each other, and it is their interaction, not the cells themselves,

that is thought, then it is the force the cells generate, and not the cells themselves, which is thought."

"Yes," said Daron, his eyes narrowed and alert on those bottomless gray wells of Nazun's eyes. "And—the force that is the interaction is not material, as invisible as the fine thread of pull that turns the compass needle."

Nazun relaxed, and his eyes wandered from Daron's, as though the important story were told. "If these things were true, men might then learn to make those interactions that are thought self-existent, apart from the materials of the cells. A group of many men, wise and learned, might cause a concentration of such forces to take an independent existence, a self-thinking, immaterial thought. It would be—almost godlike."

"It would be the essence of man—his ideas, without his needs, his heights, without his weakness."

"And the minds of many men might mold and build it better, nearer to human kind, while yet it had the power to reject the wrong in men."

"With such—man might go onward safely, for such a guardian of man could guide and aid men."

"Why"—Daron halted, licked his lips with tip of tongue, and rephrased his thought. If Nazun wished indirection, there might be reason, must be reason here—"if such a thing should be attained, say—five centuries ago—"

"Perhaps seven and a half," suggested Nazun.

"—or so long as seven and a half centuries ago, then men so protected might advance that knowledge of material things once more in safety. It seems to me, they would."

"But if," said Nazun, "some twelve long centuries had passed since Azun first was settled, and twelve long centuries of valifying those studies had established strong tradition—And does the young man choose the stony hillside, though it have rich and virgin soil beneath the rocks,

when the proven, fertile soil of the valley is there?

"Daron, where would you start the search for facts that lead to knowledge that might make men fly again?"

"Why . . . with birds."

"There is a tradition, I have heard, handed down from the days of legends. It is very strong, and probably true. The way to flight is not the way of birds. The wings men fly upon must not move."

"I'd like," said Daron dryly, "to study this science of the mind."

"So many did. But that is gone—since the Invisible Ones came."

"These thought-force things might be invisible, might they not?"

"But, being thought," Nazun said, lazily turning to shade from the shifting sun, "might make themselves have form in man's mind."

"But any form!" said Daron softly, thinking suddenly of Lady Tammar, who was, so Shorhun said, every man's ideal, but not for any man.

"But why should they? These gods—men are men; they are limited as men, and cannot truly conceive of a god, can they? It is not logic. To imbue a god with human qualities is basic contradiction. They are more than human, and hence, by definition, not human. A human, then, could not conceive them. A god should see the future, and be possessed of absolute logic/'

"The logic is sound," Daron nodded, eyes narrowed, "but the logic of a wise man of Tharsun, in the Tutz nation, was sound, too. It was logic that a heavy rock should drop much faster than a light one. It doesn't, incidentally. I had him show me, by test, the soundness of his proof.

"A god such as you describe might be a god! I could not know. But he'd be a poor neighbor, with his absolutes. The laws of nature are absolute, and logical. But I've

seen a small child thrust its hand into the pretty glow of molten brass—and be punished with the absolutes of nature's laws."

Nazun shrugged. "I repeat the logic of the priests of the Invisible Ones. They have no root in human brain—though they draw their powers from the tiny generators of the force of thought that make up human brains. They live by the energies of the thoughts their worshipers give. But their root and existence lies within a ... crystal ball, a thing some three feet through."

Daron stiffened where he lay. "That is material?"

"It is material, and may be crushed by a blow."

Daron knew, that instant, what his task must be. "Where might this crystal be?"

"On the Temple Isle—^but no one knows. The Invisible Ones guard that knowledge—with certain reason. But it is not readily seen, nor wisely seen. The priests of the Invisible Ones, the Invisible Ones themselves—and the sphere itself. Three defenses makes it safe."

Daron nodded, and shivered slightly.

"I ... I saw a thing of similar nature. And thereby came near to being no more! A certain wizard of the Tahly folk showed me it, and, but for a friend,

I'd be standing paralyzed before him yet! He learned, though, and taught me certain things. Hypnotism, where the mind is slaved!"

Nazun nodded. "Its strong defense, a final barrier. It was not meant so originally, but meant only as the basis of the Invisible Ones, its weaving lights their patterned thoughts, and, being mechanism, they are uninfluenced by anything but logic."

Daron snorted softly. "Cold comfort in such gods as that!"

"No comfort—but knowledge."

"Useless knowledge, if what I hear be truth."

"Useless—but satisfying, at times. To know the result of tomorrow's deeds. The Invisible Ones are there, that knowledge can be had. No good it can do, for, being truth, it can't be changed. But—a young man's wife is suffering in labor—and he can know the true result, two lives—or none! Or a child is sick, and the father sleepless with prodding fear, which might—and the Invisible Ones know—be needless.

"A day, you'll stay away, not caring greatly for that ultimate knowledge what day and hour Lord Barak has closed your book—but a month, a year, a dozen years. The knowledge is there—"

Daron nodded. "No man has will to fight such steady pull forever. And once indulged—the man's mind and will is trapped. Aye—that is logic, but lacks ideals. But—I wonder if the Invisible Ones"—Daron looked at Nazun's rugged face through narrowed lids—"could tell me when I shall die? Or—when they shall die?"

"They cannot. The course of a man is straight through time, from past to future, basing actions of the present on the memories and knowledge gained in the past. But a god acts on his knowledge of the past and future! That is chaos—and cannot be predicted. And those of men who associate themselves with gods—cannot be predicted."

Daron's eyes looked upward again. The lowering sun was casting longer rays, and the zenith sky was dark, deep blue, with the clarity of high mountain air. The darkening branches wove across the spot of sky, and whispered soft accompaniment to eager, anxious birds. A three-foot crystal ball with moving, weaving, hypnotic lights. A material thing that a blow could smash—but which, because it was material, no immaterial thing could harm!

Daron's eyes swept down—and widened sharply. The tree across the way swayed gently to the breeze, but

Nazun was gone. There was a helmet where he had sat, a thing of woven wires of silver and gold, wires fine and soft as young lamb's wool, and five strange jewels. A blue-green, queerly luminous bit of stuff lodged at the front, a bit of stone that matched in color Nazun's garb. A bit of stone like agate, red-streaked and white, above the right ear, a bit of rose quartz above the left, and a sea-green crystal at the rear.

At the peak, a blob of utter night made solid was fixed in the fabric of the weave. "Barak, Lord of Fate and Death," said Daron softly. "And the others—Talun's sea-green, my Lady Tammar's rose, and Martal's streaked stone, Lord

Martal's Stone of Chance."

Abruptly, as he settled it upon his head, it occurred to him that immaterial forces such as thought did not ordinarily move weighty gold and silver.

Slowly he caught up the reins of his browsing horse and mounted. Lost in thought, he nodded gently to the motion of the animal, and wondered further how it might be that clouds should form, and a howling storm move up at the behest of a wholly immaterial Talun. And puzzled at how much of a full, round truth Nazun had seen fit to gift him with.

A good hour later he roused, and looked about—and cursed himself for a fool. The horse, in natural course, had found the going easier down the mountainside. The temples, and Lady Tammar, were far above, and for this day, he must wait.

V

THE SUN WAS SET, and the moon well up, a round, pale lantern of lies, pretending to light the city of Tordu, when Daron turned down the cobbled street toward

Shorhun's inn. The moon's light was a snare and a deception, as Daron well knew; it lied about the colors of the walls, saying that dirt-streaked muddy yard wall there was touched with silver paint, and that yonder wall was built of glinting gold. Daron well knew it was blue-tinged plaster, and the black tiled roof was bright green by day.

And the shadows, where only low voices and soft laughter originated, were people—though the moon would not reveal it. Deceptive. The glow of light on walls and streets, smelling with the faint and blended odors over which prevailed the queer, wet scent of water poured on hot stone cobbles and lawns at sunset. The little trees and sunken entrances casting shadows sharp and black, the narrow, canyon alleyways black gouges through the twisting buildings of the section.

Daron was deep in thought—but Daron had visited more nations than one, and in most, he'd found an eye that didn't sleep of more than slight aid for long and healthy life. The black shadow of an entrance arch, cut through a high plastered garden wall, spouted figures, two clumps of shadow that ran, topped with white blobs of faces, and lightening with moon-glimmer on steel.

The horse reared and screamed and twisted round in panic as Daron's sharp spurs raked his sides in a way he'd not known since this new master mounted him. He lurched and pawed forward—and the two shadows ducked aside from the sharp shod hoofs. Daron was off on the far side of the horse. The animal snorted once, and felt his rider gone. Startled, hurt, he clattered away. Daron was on his feet, balancing lightly in the shadow of the wall, while the two shadows turned to face him. Full moonlight struck at them now, while the wall's high shadow engulfed and blotted out clear sight of Daron's figure.

"Right!" said a low voice, and one of the pair leaped to

Daron's right, the other to his left. They wore cloaks of some dark stuff, and cowls that snugged about their heads. The cloaks hung close about them, no hindrance now as they came on mincing, dancing feet, and lunged, a trained chorus that attacked from two sides at once.

Daron blotted out in shadow, and was behind the one as he spun on his heel. His cloak swirled loose at the hem, and the moon-glimmer of his sword reached up— and fouled in it. Moonlight silvered on his face, a lean, bony face with hollow, blackened eyes and line-thin lips that" writhed in blazing anger. Daron's sword licked out, twisted neatly round the fouled weapon, and sent it flying, a glinting fragment of light, across the garden wall. Somewhere beyond, it landed with a ringing clang. "Hold!" said Daron sharply. "I have no enemies here." The second man danced forward, his face lifting in a smile of keenest pleasure as his blade darted under Daron's momentarily lifted sword. Daron's body shifted slightly at the final instant—and the blade bent double as it scraped on the thin steel plate beneath the sea rover's jacket at the breast.

The cowed man danced back as Daron's blade came down, a soft-voiced vicious snarl on his lips. The second man was circling, his cloak stripped off in an instant's time and wrapped about his left arm, the glint of a dirk in his right hand .

"So be it, then!" Daron snapped. "I had no enemies here!"

"And," the sword bearer whispered, "you will have none—for the dead have neither friend nor foe!"

Daron slipped aside, backed toward the wall as he caught the other's sword on his own, the swift wrist play making the steel thrum and sing, and the close, keen following of blade on blade making scarce a click of contact. Daron danced and moved and wove, and watched

the moon-whitened faces of his attackers. They twins, twin meal-white faces with twin sooted, shadowed eyes. But one stood forth in lighter clothing, loose trousers gathered at the calf to tight stocking breeches, loose jacket hanging below the waist. But each arm carried an armlet of jewel-glinted metal, and across the breast was woven a pattern of spheres and many jewels.

Daron danced back and back, feeling out the swordsman, and knowing in the spring and slash of the blade he faced that this was one who'd handled weapons before and handled them well. He moved and danced and backed away, and the dirkman, short of reach with his small blade, circled helplessly.

Daron moved forward in a deceptive glide that scarcely seemed motion, and twisted as he moved. The long, thin blade lunged out, flicked once, and laid open his opponent's arm from wrist to elbow. A soft, thick inhalation of pain, and whispered curse; the cloaked one held his blade in his left hand, and charged in for revenge. Daron backed, circled left to avoid the lunge of the dirk. His twisting, glimmering blade lunged out once more and buried in the swordsman's throat. An instant's scream was throttled in a rush of blood, and the sword dropped down to ring on cobbled pavement.

Simultaneously, as Daron freed his blade, the dirk rang on the street, and the second man had swept up the fallen sword. Daron leaped forward, and in the engagement wrapped his blade about the base of the other's, and sent it flying. His own straightened out, and hovered near the jewel-sprinkled breast.

"Now how is this, my jeweled dandy, that you seek strangers for your

murdering? Would not wisdom suggest you know your victim and his capabilities before you practice up on assassination? I have no knowledge of your laws here, but there is one of mine I think good.

Who attacks me is an enemy—or gives good account of why he sought me out. Speak, and speak truth'/'

The moon-whitened face was motionless, the thin, straight lips held shut. He faced the moon now, and the shadowed eyes were lighted, gleaming fish-belly white against the face. They shifted minutely—and Daron leaped aside and whirled.

The sword he had just thrown with his blade licked past his shoulder like metal lightning. The man whose throat Daron had spitted whirled, and leveled the blade for a second attack as the other swooped to retrieve the dirk, glowing like molten silver on the cobbles.

Daron cursed softly, and engaged the dead man's blade. It swept and swung and danced to meet every move. It glinted like a sweep of sunlit rain, a thousand lines of steel in place of one. Daron danced back, drew back his arm as the dead man lurched forward clumsily, blood bubbling through slow-formed words. "Stand still, fool; you die!"

Daron's arm swept downward, and his sword flew hilt-foremost toward the dead, white face. The dead man's sword swept up too slow, and the heavy hilt crashed true across his eyes, with all the strength of Daron's arm behind it.

The second attacker lunged in, grasped Daron's sword before it fell, and reached out for Daron's dancing form. The dead thing squalled, raked at blinded eyes, and twisted vainly. Barely, Daron retrieved the blind thing's sword and danced away with skin still whole.

"Men," said Daron tensely, "I'll fight fair—but when the fairly killed come back again—why, there's an end to fairness!"

"You'll die," the rustling, laughing whisper of the other assured him. His cloaked arm reached, and suddenly, as the two blades engaged, grasped Daron's sword. Daron

released the blade, dropped his hand to his dirk before the other, expecting a frantic pull, recovered balance. The dagger flashed, spun through the air, and buried in the bejeweled man's face. He screamed and stumbled forward, dropping the two blades he held to claw at the dagger.

Daron whipped up his own blade from the street, and slashed coldly at the fallen man's throat. The watchful sword rang against it, and sent it dancing down the street.

The thing stood up and stared at him with blank, dead eyes.

"You die," it said. "You must—for I cannot!" The words were whistling, nasal, but half formed. The slashed throat whistled and moaned as air sucked in and out.

"You cannot die," Daron agreed with cold, live things squirming in his belly, "but blind, you cannot see!" The sword he held danced out again, swept, parried, darted in—and in a second time. Daron stepped back, his blade

lowered, to watch the blinded thing—and almost died on the lunging blade!

Desperately, the sea rover met the blade that danced and lunged and parried at his own, a dead, blind thing seeking out his every move and driving him back—back—with tireless speed, while lead flowed down Daron's veins and settled in his wrist. "Nazun—Lord Nazun," Daron whispered softly, "I ask no help in things I know, I ask no help in doing—but give me knowledge to stop this thing!"

The swords sang and danced and winked, and soft leather sandals scraped on cobblestones—and Daron felt the blade come nearer. Air whistled in the dead throat, and in his own dry throat, and he glanced sharply at the corpse that lay outstretched beside the dirk—and wondered when it would again rise!

Daron's breath sucked in in sudden understanding. For an instant, the leaden load of tiring muscles lightened with glimpse of relief. His defense grew bolder, then an attack that wrapped the dead thing's blade gave him the chance he sought. His own blade lunged forward again as he twisted—and laid open the dead thing's arm from wrist to elbow. The severed tendons dropped the blade, and as the other arm swept down, a slashing cut at the left wrist left it with useless fingers.

"You may not die, you may not blind," Daron panted hoarsely, "but those hands will grip no more!"

The dead man dropped like an emptied sack, lay limp an instant in the street and, as Daron watched, the limbs stiffened in rigor.

Cold gnawed at the sea rover's brain as he walked silently down the street, rubbing the tired muscles of his forearm. This section of the city was quiet as those men had at last become, the silvering of the moon alone remaining. The low voices and the laughter had vanished. Only far away across the still rustle of trees in the night wind came sounds of a city's movement, the restless, rustling tone that rises and falls and never dies while a city lives. The smell of flower gardens and fresh salt air swept from the bay on the wings of the inshore breeze. But no sound nearby.

Then, a block away, he heard the hesitating clop-clop of a shod horse's hoofs, the irregular rhythm of an un-ridden horse, uncertain of its way, feeling the weight of loneliness, lacking human guidance. Daron started toward the sound, loping silently, his mind skipping agilely, yet numbed withal, and bewildered mightily. His enemy was clear—for none but a god could make those dead things dance to their strings. But his friends—

Or had he thought that solution for himself? Had his own mind seen clear the ripped arm of the abandoned

corpse, and the reason for its desertion? It was no more than he had done before—save that that dead, blind face opposing him with inhuman skill had frozen and numbed his thoughts beyond any experience he had ever known. He thrust the thing to the back of his mind, and turned down a narrow street. His gray stallion tossed its head uneasily, and faced him, whickering uncertainly. "So, boy, it's easy now. I raked you then to save you from being spitted. Come, now—it hurt, I know, but a foot man does not fight a mounted man, but first his horse. Come—ah!" Daron swung up, and soothed the uncertain animal to an easy walk, and guided him once more toward the inn. But the sea rover's eyes kept sharper watch than ever they had at a good ship's bow.

VI

THE HANGING LAMP was dark, with charred and smoking wick, and Shorhun's lanky figure draped uneasily in the fireside chair, asleep and snoring gently. His long, lean arms, like knotted ropes, hung loose beside the chair, his fingers half opened to the glow of the dying fire. Across the room, the boy was curled upon a bench, head pillowed on an elbow, and one long arm, a small duplicate of Shorhun's knotted cables, reached down to grip in lax fingers a dog's collar.

The dog looked up abruptly, with wide-opened eyes as Daron's horse clapped softly in the courtyard, and the creak and grunt of leather harness attested to the stabling of the animal. His quick eyes watched Daron enter the room. He snorted softly, and lowered his massive head upon his paws, eyes watchfully awake.

Daron rubbed his arm and smiled. Softly he stepped over to Shorhun and laid a friendly hand upon his arm.

The lanky innkeeper moved and raised his head.

"Daron?" he said, his voice mechanical and toneless with broken sleep.

"Aye, Daron—and with a throat as dry as Fraka's plains. And—But get me wine, my friend."

Shorhun heaved up, and ambled toward his supply, to return with a bottle and a glass on a small tray. He set the lot before Daron, and slumped into his chair, resting his head within his palms.

"Ho, I am I to drink alone? Come, Shorhun, another glass, and join me in it. And tell me, is it customary for this town that men should seek to murder strangers on sight?"

Shorhun raised himself, and fetched another glass. "No," he said tonelessly, pouring wine into the two.

Daron looked up into the lank, tired man's eyes. He was quiet for a moment as he watched the eyes, and watched Shorhun pick up the glass. Then his strong, brown fingers gripped Shorhun's wrist and stayed the hand. "Wait, friend. I think—I think your lamp needs oil, and I need light, I know. I would not drink until I see the color of my wine."

Shorhun moved wordlessly to the task, pulling down the counter-weighted lamp, filling the reservoir, trimming the wick and lighting it so that the room was warm with yellow light;

Daron's fingers were busy then with an aimless spinning of a bit of polished metal on a cord, a polished metal mirror that spun first one way, then the other. "Sit here," said Daron, as the innkeeper finished, "and listen, friend. I have a tale to tell."

Wearily, Shorhun sat down across the table and Daron began. His voice was low and soft, and he described his start that morning, following Shorhun's directions, and Shorhun's sleepy eyes were watching the dancing, spin-

ning mirror on the cord, and the swirling reflections of the lamp that danced with it.

"Once before," said Daron softly, in a sleepy voice, "I traveled such a hill-climbing road, to the dwelling of a wizard of the Ind people. I was tired as you are tired, and wanted sleep—as you want sleep—the rest and ease of sleep—sleep—sleep—"

Daron's voice was toneless, sleepy—but his eyes were bright and hard, and the mirror in the lamplight spun and spun, and hesitated to spin the other way at the end of its cord. "Sleep you need—sleep—" Shorhun's sleepy eyes sank lower, then abruptly tried to rise, his body seemed to struggle to rise, his head to turn from the mirror. "You hear only my voice, as you sleep—sleep— and forget all other things, but see the mirror that tires your eyes and makes you sleep. Shorhun, you hear only your friend, Daron, Daron who, like you, seeks only the Old Gods. You hear no voice but mine, and obey me in all things. You obey me, and only me, Shorhun!"

The tonelessness was gone, and there was the whip of sharp command in Daron's tone—and the mirror spun. "You will and must answer any question I ask. That is true!"

"Y-yes," said Shorhun.

"I am your friend, and friend to your friends."

"Yes," said Shorhun promptly.

Daron's eyes were tense and dark. Very softly to himself, he whistled a little tune, and thought. "Now this is clear; someone has been here and worked upon this man, and thanks be to old white-headed Barhamu for what he taught me in the hills of Ind! But what is the purpose? No god did this, for the look of his eyes in good close view was clumsy revelation. But a man—if Barhamu knew enough to match at all these god-making wizards of Azun —cannot make another do what that other would object

to—such as murdering his friends!"

Daron thought deeply, then; "Shorhun," he snapped, "is this wine good?"

"Y-yes," said Shorhun, and stirred uneasily, his forehead careworn and weather-browned, wrinkling in a frown of childish puzzlement.

"Shorhun, there was a stranger here who laid commands on you?"

Shorhun's face worked, his mouth moved and knotted and fell still. Daron nodded grimly. "But that stranger, while no god, knew this mind art well. Now how to break that spell—"

A thought came to him, and he rose. "Shorhun," he snapped, "sit there, and do not move until I return." Then, thinking of certain things that lay upon a cobbled street—"Or," he added—"until the sun rises and the day is

here."

Daron strode out the door, and sought down the road. It was half an hour before he returned, swearing softly, with a mewling cat in his arms. His

clothes were torn somewhat, and stained with varicolored plaster dust from climbing many walls.

He set the cat upon the table stroking it. "Shorhun," he said softly, "I know. You can tell me, because I know these things already. The stranger came and talked with you, and laid command on you to forget. But you were to give me this wine, and do whatever was needed that I might drink it."

"Yes," said Shorhun, uneasily. "It is good wine. The flavor is better than my own."

"Watch," commanded Daron. He spilled a bit of wine, and forced some down the cat's unwilling throat. The cat mewed and spit and scratched, and, relaxed, sat down and cleaned its fur. Daron waited patiently. Abruptly the cat jumped, doubled up, screeched in agony—then

straightened down with ruffled fur to lick itself clean. Two minutes later it doubled up again, screeched louder, and writhed unhappily. The spasm stopped, to resume again within a minute more.

Within five minutes the cat was dead, in one last spasm wherein its cries were choked in a muscle-knotted throat, and its muscles convulsed so violently the broad abdominal muscles ripped themselves across in frightful spasm, and every muscle tore, so that the carcass was a loose bag of death wrapped up in skin.

Softly Daron spoke. "That is the wine you would have fed your friend, Shorhun. That is the wine you would have drunk with me! That is murder in its foulest form!"

Shorhun shuddered, his face worked in knotted muscles, and his staring eyes twitched and danced. Abruptly he shook himself, and stumbled erect, "Eh? Daron! You here? Eh-it's night!"

Daron nodded, smiling. "Aye, it's night, my friend, and you may thank a man you never knew, one Barhamu, that you and I live now, and are not—that!"

Shorhun looked at the body of the cat, then picked it up and dropped it sharply in disgust, rubbing his hands as though they were contaminated by the contact. "What . . . what is this? And where is that dandied priest of the Invisible Ones that visited me here?"

"Ah, now the tale appears! I thought it might. Now listen to me, friend, and in the future look not so keenly at spinning mirrors, glittering jewels, or other tricks of wizards. I'll tell you something of a tale to straighten up that knotted hair of yours, but first bring me some wine—some wine of your own, and no more of this hell's brew. In the meantime, I sense a bit of trickery in your son's sleep."

An hour later, Daron was dreaming. Now even one with the easygoing conscience and the tough stomach that Daron had, dreams now and then, but no such dream as this. He dreamed, and, moreover, knew he was dreaming.

For that last hour before he went to bed, the helmet of woven gold-and-silver wire beside him, he had been thinking as he talked with lanky, grimly boiling Shorhun. With half his mind he'd told his tale, and explained many things to Shorhun that he had learned in a high, dry old building far up the slopes of the shattered mountains of the Ind. And with the other, deeper half of his

mind, he had been thinking, stewing about one problem; the problem of the sphere.

The menace of iron and flesh and blood that was the priests of the Invisible Ones, he set aside. That sort of menace he had known before, and would know again— with luck! But the Invisible Ones themselves? That, it seemed, was in the immaterial, potent province of the Lord Nazun. But the sphere—

A single strong blow could smash it—but to see it was to be paralyzed. His keen, smoothly working mind was baffled, brought solid and firm against a thing that, he knew, was the one thing in all the world against which it could not fight effectively: itself. Too long and well had old Barhamu taught him for self-deception here. The trick of the Spinning Mirror and the Trick of the Winking Light were, alike, tricks that no mind could well resist— for they were tricks that turned that mind upon itself. And then the dream had come, as he sought sleep. He stood before an altar of blue-green beryl, a mighty, perfect gem four feet high, by three feet square, his head bowed down in prayer. Behind the altar stood Nazun, his gray eyes deep as night, with unplumbed depths so vast that the lack of bottom made them black. The eyes drew

up his bowed head, till his own blue eyes looked into them, and through them, swallowed by them—and saw with the eyes of Nazun!

His sight hurled out across the night, driving through walls of blue-green stone, through the dark, whispering forests of the mountain, across the city, where Tordu lay dark beneath the setting moon, with only here and there some late light gleaming. The world was a painted map, luminous with moon-glow and the Bay of Tordu was a lake of quicksilver, marred by the black gash of the Temple Isle. For half an instant the world held in suspense; then, as though his point of sight had plunged like a falling meteor, the Temple Isle exploded upward, turned black and silver as buildings appeared, exploded outward, and his sight penetrated through. For an instant of time he was deep, deep within the heart of one, deep in a room whose black walls, carved from the living basalt of the isle's foundations, were lighted with a glow that seemed pure white.

A circle of warrior guards stood round the sphere, the three-foot sphere of crystal, like a fragile bubble floating in a three-clawed rest of gold. Uncounted myriads of pin-point lights circled in darting, swooping, patterned orbits, a mathematically precise involvement of inextricable cycles and epicycles, progressions and ordered, intricate orbits. The row of warrior guards stood firm about the sphere—but every back was toward it, and every guard stood with hand on sword and metal shield.

In a fraction of a second—then the vision was gone, chopped off with a hollow sensation of frightful fall that gripped and wrenched at Daron's mind and soul.

His mind retched and quivered in terror—then quieted as some vast thing of calm touched it, soothing, stilling. And Daron stood again before, the blue-green altar gem, of beryl. Lord Nazun stood behind it, and his gray eyes

were tensed and tired; his strong-muscled hands leaned on the altar top, gripping it, it seemed, for support. The tanned, rough-hewn face of the Lord of Wisdom was white with strain and very tired.

Lord Nazun's voice was vastly weary as it whispered in the dream. "The Invisible Ones are wary; they cut off the vision soon. No further sight of that can I afford, for the cost is more than human mind could understand. But you have seen. Now—sleep again, and think!"

VII

DAHON SIPPED fragrant feya, and with drowsy eyes watched the sun shadows play in the courtyard. The sounds of Tordu City were waking round him; the cries of women, the shrill voice of a small boy carrying on conversation with some friend two blocks away, the heavy creak of a laden ox-cart plodding toward the market, bearing round, green melons and green-wrapped ears of corn.

Behind the drowsing eyes, the vision of the sphere danced and spun and moved, the myriad lights flashed in their orbit there, and, despite the strong protection of Nazun's mighty will, half hypnotized him still. Slowly to Daron's inward gaze, one fact was forming from the vision. Those myriad points of light moved not aimlessly, but with an order more precise than the swing, ticking pendulum of the clock upon the wall. They looped and moved and danced—in ordered, plotted curves.

And abruptly Daron started. The drowsing eyes became alive, and the immobile face moved in a sudden, grim smile. He laughed softly, and swung to his feet. Shorhun, sitting silent at his table looked up, and opened sleepy eyes.

"Ten minutes more, my friend," the lanky innkeeper sighed, "and for all your concentration I'd have broken in. I have a question of some small moment I would ask."

Daron laughed, and swung his sword belt round to a position of greater comfort. "Then ask away, Shorhun, for one cactus-spined and triply damned question that's festered in my mind is solved. Perhaps I can solve yours."

The innkeeper unfolded upward and shrugged. "'It was merely this. I live today, because your eyes do more than see, and your brain holds more than most. But—I know not your plans, of course, but if they do not include your death within some three hours, I'd advise you seek some other seat."

"Hm-m-m. My plans did not include quite that," Daron nodded. He cocked a half-closed eye at Shorhun's ugly, solemn face. "But why should this seat—a very comfortable one seeming—be so sadly dangerous?"

"The priests of the Invisible Ones know it's here. If half your tale of last evening be true, then you murdered one priest. If it be wholly true, then you did murder enough to bring down the wrath of all the Invisible Ones on a dozen men."

Daron grunted softly. "They are slow to anger, then. I'd act without thinking over the problem a whole night through."

Shorhun nodded. "They would. But King Elmanus wouldn't. And it's King Elmanus' word that's needed. He wakes at eight, has breakfast at eight and a half, and holds no audience before nine and a half. It's nine and a quarter now."

Daron looked up at Shorhun with interest. "Now if this King Elmanus has these haughty priests of the Invisible Ones trained so well to leave his sleep alone, he holds my strong respect. He is unique among the monarchs of the

world I've seen; he can make a high priest wait as high

priests should, until he's had his breakfast. What potent secret does he hold for this?"

Shorhun sighed. "Old Elmanus is near eighty years old now, and he's reigned for fifty-five. For fifty-five long years, the Old God's priests have howled in his left ear, and for fifty-five long years the priests of the Invisible Ones have shrieked into his right.

"It's reached a sorry state, where now he can hear very little in either ear, and not at all when he is sleeping. But he has curiously sensitive hearing to the wail of countrymen and seamen both. His nobles he hears continuously, wherefore he need not listen hard to them."

"I'd think," said Daron shrewdly, "the priests would have found another king."

Shorhun chuckled. "Old Elmanus has not the slightest fear of death. He's lived too long, and during that life the two sets of gods have grown apart and hatred grown between. Now each fears a new king more than they loathe the old."

"Has neither worked on the will of Elmanus' successor?"

"Elmanus has no son, and his daughter is a priestess of Lady Tammar—but no woman may hold the throne. His successor must be elected."

"He'd be a noble, and the nobles—so you say—are all ' besotted with the future knowledge of the Invisible Ones."

"He'd be no noble/' said Shorhun sourly, "The nobles all know well that several hundred exceedingly tough seamen loathe their blood and bones and several thousand countrymen obey old Elmanus blindly because he's just."

"Hm-m-m. ... it would make a throne as hot as the Sun's own fires! But—perhaps I'd best be on my way. ' Where would you suggest?"

"It depends upon your plans," said Shorhun, shrugging

like a beaching wave. "If you intend permanent escape from Elmanus' guard I'd say your own land would be a sound place to seek. If for a day—start west, and I'll say north. They'll find you, though."

Daron rose, stretched mightily, and started through the door. "Call up that imp you name your son, and have him fix my horse. I saw a watchmaker's place two blocks away, and I have business there."

"I'll call my son, but my memory is short. He may remember long enough to bring the horse to Granter's place." Shorhun vanished through the kitchen door.

The sun was warm and the breeze that slid joyously down the mountainside was fresh with pine-laden scent, and the smell of many breakfasts pleasant to the nostrils. The cobbles, round beneath the feet, were easy walking, and Daron's eyes alert as he swung down the street. Two blocks away he came upon the little doorway that he sought, signed without by a huge wooden cog bearing the symbols "WATCHMAKING."

The place was dark, and still cool with last night's air, and the watchmaker who looked up at him a half-seen figure in the gloom. His head was bald and polished as the faces of his products, but fringed around with a halo of white hair so fine it floated in the air. His face was a wizened, dried up apple, split by a smiling mouth, and sharp blue eyes as old as the skies, and laughing with them.

"And what is time and a timepiece to one as young as ye?" he snapped as Daron entered.

"Father, I am touched by a strange malady. The malady is never fatal, I am told, but long enduring," Daron said solemnly. "The malady some call inventor's itch."

The bright-blue eyes speared up at him. "Huy-hu, now. Unless this thing you have invented is the size and crude-

ness of an ox cart, those fingers of yours will never make it."

"Alas, father, they won't," Daron sighed. "Yours will, though, I suspect."

"I've work enough with things I know, and things that work, without befuddling my old head with foolishness. What have you in mind?"

"A thing about the size of a pocket watch, but of special and strange making. Now look you here, for all my handling of ships cordage, still my fingers have certain skill at drawing things, and this is what I'd need. I'll pay you for it with twice its weight in gold, and add another weight if it is done by the third hour of the afternoon."

Rapidly Daron sketched, and the old watchmaker's keen eyes followed him. A dozen sketches, and many special strictures and explanations were demanded, but at last the old man snorted understanding.

"That malady you call inventor's itch, we call more often madness. The thing is mad, and has no use, but I shall make it as you say. You'll have it by the second hour after noon." \

"Good," said Daron. "Now here is proof of my madness, for I'll give you now the gold." Four round, hard coins he laid on the old man's desk and stepped outside, where Shorhun's freckled son lounged by his horse.

"My father says," the boy whispered softly, giving him the reins, "that guards are popping out of ash receivers, and springing up among the flowers. I'm going to the house of my grandmother for a week or so. Good-bye."

Daron stood an instant in thought, then stepped around the corner of the building where the lad had vanished to take him on his way. Two legs scrambling over a roof top disappeared as Daron turned the corner, and the lad was lost.

Shrugging, Daron set off across the town, his mind

busy with his plans. Deeper and deeper into the city he went, stopping once at an inn where he was not known. Two hours later—the loungers there had learned a certain respect for three snail shells and a pebble that made longer stay

imprudent—Daron sought out a small tailor's shop, and took off his hands some misfit clothes that reeked in Daron's nostrils of earthy sweat. But, at least, they did not betray the seaman's origin.

For three long hours more he visited in armorer's shops, obscure secondhand places, seeking a shield. It was well afternoon before he found the place he sought, a tiny cubbyhole left when two haughty buildings had not quite met, a mere alleyway between them roofed over by some sad-faced individual with the salesmanship of Jeremiah.

"A shield," he sighed, and sat firm on the broken chair before his door, "I don't think I have many. What kind?"

Daron looked at him sourly. His beard was of the sort that prolonged and persistent laziness, not art, produces, and his hands stained not with the grime of toil but, it seemed to the sea rover, the dust that settles on anything long motionless. "A round shield," said Daron carefully. "A round, flat shield of good steel or of silver-plated bronze."

"Silver-plated bronze? I had one such—I think it's gone—but they are not practical, I'm told," he added hastily. "A shield of hard-tanned hide will turn an arrow, or stop a blade, and is far lighter. Tharmun's shop, two blocks from here, specializes in them."

"Aye, so?" said Daron patiently. "That's what I learned some five minutes past. Now look you, friend, your aura is that of a wild goat, increased in strength by your advanced age and greater size. The spiders have spun their webs between your feet, and how one so immobile has escaped a load of flowing fat surprises me. Or can it be

that your colossal lethargy forbids you rising to seek food?

"Be that as it may, I'll see your shields, my friends if I must prick your dusted hide to make you seek them in defense. Now move!" Daron's sword left its scabbard of its own volition, seemingly, and pricked the cadaverous, sad-faced one.

With a howl of anguish he bounced within his shop, with Daron at his heels.

The sea rover halted. The place was dark as the maw of some deep cave, and rank with lack of cleaning. Very slowly Daron's eyes made out its contents, while the whine of the proprietor sought to convince him he wanted none of the merchandise.

"Be quiet, or by Martal, I'll let that noise out through your throat," snapped Daron. "Now bring me that bronze shield you have. Is it not clear to you that I am mad, and not to be reasoned with?"

The shield was brought. It was bronze, a well-made shield that some craftsman had labored over, and in seeing it, Daron knew that chance had favored him. Unlike any shield he'd seen before, its face was absolutely flat and plain, without decoration save a very chaste and simple geometric pattern that inscribed a circle round the edge. The face was bronze, very thin, for lightness, but by its ring a hard, true melt. The back was crossed with a patterned grid of bars that made it strong enough to turn a broadax swing.

"Now by Martal, chance is behind me this day indeed," said Daron with

satisfaction. "What price do you want, Goaty One?"

"Ten thords I paid for it and less than twenty I cannot take and stay in business," the merchant whined.

"Ten thords it is then," said Daron, dropping two golden coins, "and good day."

"No, no! Twenty, I said!"

Daron swung on his horse, and started down the street. Behind him he heard a long, sad sigh, and the heavy creak of the broken chair. The shield, he saw, was bronze, plated well with silver, and the price was fair. The silver was black as night with lack of care, and a dark, old bronze patina had coated over the gridwork at the back.

Daron rode directly to the watchmaker's shop, and entered. The old man looked up from his work and nodded. "Ten minutes more, son, and your madness will spin as gaily as you like. You are early."

"No," said Daron wearily. "I'm late. I needs must polish my shield."

The old man's sharp eyes turned on the metal shield and narrowed down. "Now, by Nazun, I know your wits have left you, or you've more strength than even those none-too-puny arms suggest. That thing may make a fine display—old Elmanus' guards once carried those, I think—but as protection, they're as light and dainty as a good stone wall."

Daron laughed. "I'm vain as the peacock of Ind, and must make a flashing display, father. Give me polish, then, and a bit of cloth, that I may dazzle those who look at

me.

The old man bent, and drew out soft rags, and a cake of black-streaked rouge, and some white, moist paste. "Damp the rag at the pump yonder, rub on the rouge and mix the white paste with it. If there's any silver left, that thing should shine."

For half an hour more, Daron rubbed till his back and shoulders ached, and his new-old garments were stained with a dozen shades of red and black and green from the bronze. But when he finished, the old shield's face shone like the sun, with scarce a dozen bad scratches.

"So it's old Elmanus I've to thank for finding this

shield," eh? I knew it was made to hope to find so useless a thing, but this thing was what I needed, none the less." "King Elmanus it was. He had a special guard of twenty men, who used those things. Elmanus found that a good spot of sunlight cast back by twenty mirror shields would stop men quicker, and with less stain of blood, than twenty swords. With those twenty shields, the guard could blind a man for half a week.

"Wherefore all Elmanus' enemies came at him after dusk, and found, of course, his twenty guards as well protected by those heavy shields as though they each were weighted down with chains. Elmanus lost three full complements of guards before he gave up those shields. "You being only one, I'd think you had poor

chance to learn wisdom—but that, my son, is your own task. It is your skin that shield is supposed to defend."

"Ah, yes, and so it is. Now tell me, is that thing finished?" Daron asked.

"Done. And here it is. I owe you also a coin, for, having an affection for those who are mad, I made it very light. Undoubtedly, it shows I am a kindred spirit, and mad as you."

"Mm-m-m," said Daron, holding the tiny thing, "it seems good enough indeed. I know good workmanship, and that is here. Keep the extra coin. Good day, father."

"Good day, and if you now seek Nazun's temple, he will cure your madness."

"I have no time. I have another appointment. Elmanus' guards are seeking me for certain questions involving the death of two priests, and I must find them."

Whistling, Daron went out, and the old man looked after him with shrewd, hard eyes. With sudden decision, brought on by overpowering itch of curiosity, the old man swung heavy shutters across his tiny window, barred them, barred the door, and hobbled off across the town.

On his weak legs, it would take him some time to reach Elmanus' court.

VIII

ON THE HIGHEST CREST of the rolling land that fronted on the bay, the palace of Elmanus set, overlooking 'the estates of the nobles. The avenue here was broad, and paved with bricks of well-baked, hard, red clay. Daron's horse trotted along easily and turned into the broad way that led up to the gate. A half dozen uniformed guards, in bright blue-and-white foppish cut, barred his way with neat precision. Daron stopped at their hail and demand of identity, and looked them up and down.

"Now, lads, for all that foppish rig, you've bone and muscle underneath, I do swear! Now let me—Officer, I should say by your stance, and the broadness of your palm, you've walked behind a plow and seen a furrow turn. And a good half of you knows the smell of drying kelp."

"Enough of that!" snapped the officer. "I ask no guesses as to whence we come, but whence you come. In the name of the king, answer, or you'll find time to answer in the keep."

"Now that, my friend, is no threat at all, for there be few places safer in this land. Further, your good king would favor seeing me. I understand certain of your brother guards have marched hot streets the whole day through seeking me. Men call me Daron, and my origin is something even I am not too certain of."

"Daron! Ho, forward, round!" The guardsmen moved with perfect military precision, and with a smoothness Daron admired. He was instantly the center of

a small circle hedged with good steel lance points.

"Daron, dismount, in the name of Kirig Elmanus."

"Now softly, friend. What other purpose, think you, brings me here? Take down that hedge, and ease your nervousness. Good. Now, you of the infant mustache, take the horse, and feed him well. I'll want him back. Take sound advice, too. When your friends tell you that is not a mustache, but merely evidence of laziness, believe them. Either shave it off, or dye it dark. On your tanned face, the blond hair seems somewhat weakened, and like drought-burned grain."

The mustached guardsman's face turned red, and his eyes dropped, but he took the horse's reins, his young face sullen. The officer's eyes were lighting with a suppressed amusement and liking.

"Enough, Daron; I give the orders here. But take his horse, Kahlmur—and, by Nazun, his advice! Now forward. Elmanus has ordered your arrest."

"Your statement, officer—very incourteous officer, too, it seems. I know not your name, though you know mine—is exact. He has ordered my arrest; he does not want to see me."

"Pordan Holum, Daron. Holum, Pordan of the Outer Guards. Maybe his majesty does not desire to see you, but you may rest assured the priests of the Invisible Ones do."

The Inner Guards they passed, and to the doors of King Elmanus' Hall of Justice they were passed. Abruptly, there was an eruption of activity about Daron, and shouting officers. Priests began to appear from a dozen ways, priests in the flaming orange-scarlet of the Invisible Ones, and in the blue-green of Nazun, the deep, sea-green of Talun's temple, and the red-streaked white of Martal's retinue.

A tall, gray-eyed priest of Nazun first approached Daron, where he waited easily among the group of Hol-

um's men. The priest was as tall as Daron, lean and thoughtful of mein, but there seemed some lack of fire in his eyes and face, a worried, tired and strained appearance round his mouth, and a crease between his brows.

"In the name of my lord, Nazun, I appear for you, Daron. The adepts of the Invisible Ones accuse you of murdering two of their neophytes within the streets of Tordu." There was a hasty, uneasy pressure to his words, and a curiously worried, uncertain tone in his voice. And, withal, a look of deep respect with which he regarded Daron. Very softly, so that only Daron himself could hear, he added: "Lord Nazun himself has ordered this appearance—but I fear their case is strong!"

Daron laughed. "I have no knowledge of the laws and rulings of this land, wherein your kindly aid is much to be desired, but none save Nazun himself and, perhaps, the Invisible Ones, knows more of this case than I think we may manage, and—if Nazun has given you some charge regarding me, perhaps he gave a charge to follow somewhat as I lead in my argument."

"Aye," said the priest uneasily. "He—Lord Nazun—takes interest in few men."

A priest in scarlet-orange, bedecked with gold and flaming jewels hurried up,

a fat, round man waddling busily, with sweat-bedewed pate glistening in the light. "Pordan," he howled, "this man is armed. What manner of arrest is this! Take that shield, that sword and dirk from him. The man is a murderer; would you have an armed killer brought before our king!"

Daron turned to him, and bent a steady, hard-eyed gaze upon his fat, sweaty face. "Now by Nazun, my fat friend, you'll need no murdering. Have not your Formless Ones told you you'll die of bursted veins? And would you make a liar out of them by dying before your time?"

The fat-faced priest paled, and panted heavily. "You have no knowledge of that!" he gasped.

"So, I have not. I know nothing of what they say? But yet I do, it seems. Now, be that as it may, remember this. This is the house of King Elmanus, and your orders here are wanted no more than mine; in fact, I think, some several degrees less. I came to this place seeking justice, and of my own free will. Wherefore, my friend, Pordan Holum shows more courtesy than you.

"Now, Pordan Holum," said Daron, turning to the officer, "I give my sword and dirk and shield into your keeping, as an officer of the sea to an officer of the king's guard, to hold and protect with honor, till I may call for them."

"I take them as an officer, to hold and protect," replied Pordan Holum formally—with a gleam of satisfaction directed at the fat priest.

The great oaken doors, bound with mighty hinges of black wrought iron, before which they stood, swung slowly open, and a herald spoke. "In the name of King Elmanus, in the name of Ator, and the people of Azun, the Hall of Justice opens. Bring in those who seek justice before the king."

The crowd surged forward, and it was a growing crowd. A half score of priests in scarlet-orange, and a score in the assorted colors of the Old Gods flanked the little group of Holum's guards that marched with Daron toward the throne.

The room was vast and cool after the heat of outside, the light softened and dimmed. Great slabs of translucent milky quartz made the roof, pouring in the sun's light diluted and cooled. The walls were made of cool, green stone, and the floor was black basalt, soft and soothing to the eye. Great pillars of sea-green stone reached up, carved in intricate and graceful geometric designs.

At the far end of the long, high room sat King Elmanus, on a throne that narrowed Daron's eyes. There was a dais of red granite, and a backdrop of night-blue velvet behind. A ring of guards in that same night-blue velvet faded into it almost unseen, save for the flicker of their unsheathed swords, and their faces. Those faces were tanned and strong, and the men were big, broad-shouldered men with tapering build of speed and stamina. These were no city breed, but strong countrymen and seamen, every one.

But the throne itself! It was a chair of good blue leather, and deeply padded, without hint of gold or jewel, or any frippery. It was a broad, deep seat, with broad, comfortable arms, and the man that sat in it was broad and comfortable.

Daron's narrowed eyes slanted in a smile. Now here was a king who knew his dignity was beyond reproach, and sought the comfort aging bones enjoyed! Two

slim, and pretty girls stood beside and slightly behind the throne, and Daron's respect increased. They were dressed in simple, easy-falling robes of some light linen stuff, and in the very simplicity of their garments Daron saw more the character of their master.

With neat precision the guards drew up and halted before Elmanus' throne, and behind them stood the fat priest of the Invisible Ones, and the lean and worried priest of Nazun. Directly before Elmanus, Daron halted.

Elmanus was old, his head crowned with a wealth of white hair that gleamed and shone against the backing of the night-blue velvet drape. He wore a simple jacket of white silk, on which was embroidered in golden threads and scarlet, a crest and coat of arms. And, beneath it, in the oldest language known to man, a brief motto. His breeches were night-blue linen, with gold thread tracery, and in his hand he carried a staff of pure gold, chased

with a deep-cut formal design. At the peak of the staff there gleamed a single, monster sapphire, as deep as skies, and large as a man's two fists.

Elmanus' face was tired, the dark eyes sunken in old and leathery skin, his mouth creased about with the graven lines of many years of struggle, but over all lay lines of easy humor, and his eyes twinkled with good humor as they looked back into Daron's steady gaze.

"And this is the man you bring me, Tor Lamon, as double murderer? I say with satisfaction, you are a liar or mistaken." Elmanus snorted gently, and nodded to himself. "What is your case?"

The fat priest quivered angrily. "The Invisible Ones, your majesty, have stated that this is the man."

"Well, what say you for yourself ... er ... Daron, isn't it?"

Daron shrugged, and smiled. "It is a matter of temperament. These two annoyed me. I was forced to remove them."

Elmanus' jetting brows of white, stiff hairs drew down. "Annoyed you, eh? Are you given to these mad tempers, then?"

"Aye, in case of such annoyance. One sought to spit me on his blade, and the other tried hard with dirk and cloak."

Elmanus snorted and leaned back. "Annoyance enough. What said the Invisible Ones of that, priest?"

"If this man's words be true, then why is it that, not content with killing them, he coldly mutilated their corpses so? One, Rehsal, a neophyte of two years' practice, was run through the throat, and blinded too. Now if the man be blinded, what need to run him through, and if he be run through, why blind a corpse, save out of coldly murderous temperament?"

"And the other was yet more fiendishly mutilated!"

Shulthas was with us on the Temple Isle seven years, and was a man of good and even temper, yet his body we found run through the throat, blinded, and with the hands cut off.

"This Daron, I say, is a madman, a fiendish maniac. Give him to us, before this voyager from other, barbaric lands destroys more. He must be done away with."

Elmanus looked at Daron with lowered brows. "Your temper seems extreme, for even such provocation. What brought this thing about?"

"The power of the Invisible Ones, your majesty. These things I did; I ran the one attacker through the throat and he died as any good man should. I turned to face his companion—and the dead man rose and attacked me with a dirk. I blinded him—and he fought me with a skill he had not shown alive. Now such things I do not like, and it seemed the best thing was to make those hands incapable of grasping blade, and only then did that dead thing lie down as a dead man should!"

"Eh?" Elmanus gasped. "The dead fought!"

"The man lies to save his skin! The dead cannot move!" Tor Lamon roared.

Daron turned to the priest, and regarded him through narrowed eyes. "Now tell me this, priest, your gods can predict the future, can they not?"

"As every Azuni knows."

"And you can tell me the exact and final end to each and every power these gods of yours possess?"

"No, for they are gods, and no true god can be envisaged by a man," the priest replied haughtily, looking pointedly at the lean and worried priest of Nazun. "Their powers are unknown, and unknowable."

"Then," said Daron with finality, "they can raise their dead neophytes to fight again. That may be unknown and unknowable to you; I saw them, you did not."

Elmanus leaned back, his old eyes brightening.

Tor Lamon sputtered. "The dead cannot rise!" he snapped. "It is preposterous, insane! No—"

"Man," said Daron firmly, "can envisage the powers of a god. So. I saw your Invisible Ones bring the dead to Me. Go back to your temples now, and learn more about your gods."

"I think," said Elmanus, with a chuckle in his voice, "his point is very sound. Now on his testimony alone, I would not ordinarily have ruled that he was attacked, but since his arguments are so sound and his logic good enough to meet that of Tor Lamon, who seems sane enough, he must be sane. And if he is sane, he would not make an insane defense. The defense he has presented is insane, or true. If not insane, then it is true. We have shown him sane—sane at least as Tor Lamon—and therefore we must accept his statement and defense as true."

Elmanus leaned back with satisfaction in his sparkling old eyes, and watched the empurpling countenance of Tor Lamon. "I dismiss the charge. Daron is free."

"Your majesty," said Tor Lamon with difficulty, "there is a further vital point. I must accept your ruling that this outlander can murder—"

Elmanus' heavy brows shot down, and his finger shot out to stab at the fat priest violently. "I said the charge was dismissed!" he roared, in a voice that blasted at the great room's roof, and set Tor Lamon back in shock. "You deny my ruling by that statement."

"I—I retract my words. I ... I spoke without due thought. But, your majesty, there is a further trouble this outlander brings."

"Speak then," snapped the old king, his deep eyes sparkling.

"The predictions of the future that our whole country depends upon today—"

"And more fools they," said Daron softly. Elmanus' lips twitched.

"—are upset by this outlander. These predictions are based on a knowledge of all things that enter into life upon this empire you rule. Now this outlander has appeared, and injected a new and disturbing element, an element not in the orbits of the peoples of Azun, and upsets the prediction of the longer range."

"Your gods are strong," said Daron softly. "They are mighty, beyond the understanding of man. One man upsets their powers, which is, indeed, beyond the understanding of man, as far beyond his understanding as that a heavy ox cart be upset by a single grain of dust. Strange are the ways of the Invisible Ones."

Tor Lamon purpled with rage. "As much," he ground out, "as the power to predict the future is beyond your comprehension."

"The man's point," said Elmanus mildly, "is well made. It does seem strange." Elmanus relaxed back into his chair with a deep satisfaction. This was, beyond doubt, one of the most excellent examples of priest-baiting he had seen in fifty-five years of weary tending to dry and wordy cases: This Daron was a man to have around!

Tor Lamon's cheeks paled from their fat-bleached dusky red to a cold, white rage. "If a man have two children, and each of these children have but two, and these in turn have no more than two, there will be sixteen then, in the course of one man's lifetime. Now if the man—and his children like him—be an active man, given to killing neighbors who annoy him, at the rate of two in four days, such a family may have profound effect. In fact, it would appear, but some four generations of such men and we would have no more Azuni left in our empire!"

"That sounds somewhat improbable, but still seems a point possible of argument," said Elmanus weightily.

"Surely you have asked the Invisible Ones when this man shall die?"

Tor Lamon writhed, and Daron, who had studied more than one useful art, spoke softly. "The Invisible Ones could not give him that answer, for their powers are strangely limited, but they could, and did, tell him this; Tor Lamon dies here, this day!"

The paleness of Tor Lamon's face became ghastly, his lips and eyelids became

blued and purpled slowly as he stood, and stark fear shone in his eyes, all rage dying out. "You . . . you cannot know!" he gasped—and screamed as he said it, doubling up and clutching at his heart. He rolled, and fell at Elmanus' feet, dead.

A dozen lesser priests sprang forward, and knelt by the fallen Tor Lamon's side. Slowly they straightened. "Tor Lamon knew that he would die here," they acknowledged.

"How," asked Elmanus uneasily, "did you know this? Are you some newer god still, another god to plague my people here with death?"

Daron shook his head slowly. "There is a vein in the neck, even so fat a neck, and a swelling at the base of his neck, even beyond his fat, and many other small signs that the skilled may learn. I learned those signs. If the man's brain be exposed, there may be found a small but fatal leakage of blood. It may be, though, that the bursting of the great vein of the heart did this. The man was doomed, and being given to anger, doomed him doubly."

"Your majesty," a scarlet-orange robed priest said, "we ask one -thing. This man should die; his very presence has, now, three times taken Azuni lives."

"Through defense against attack, twice, and only by the over-weening anger of Tor Lamon, the third time. The man lives," said Elmanus decisively.

"Then, in the name of the Invisible Ones, let this man

be taken for study to the Temple Isle, that he may be fitted into the pattern, that the knowledge of the future may not be disrupted."

"With that proviso," said Daron distastefully, "and the returned to me, healthy, whole, and sane as he is now, that seems a fair request." Elmanus looked at Daron.

"With that proviso," said Daron distastefully. " and the additional one that I be given time to see the sun and breathe the air, I suppose I must agree."

"So be it then," Elmanus nodded. "Take him and all his possessions with him, save his horse, to be returned to him when, one month hence, he returns here before me."

Daron looked slowly at the silent priest of Nazun. The man looked worried, tired, and wearied by his worry. He looked baffled, too, as he looked into Daron's eyes and saw therein a deep total satisfaction!

IX

DARON STOOD MOTIONLESS, weaponless, helmetless, before the scarlet-orange robed high priest of the Invisible Ones. This temple room was small, its walls pure white marble, their decorations, a bas-relief of symbolic scenes in the creation of the Invisible Ones. Behind the high priest stood a block of basalt as black as the pit, streaked and grained with flaming scarlet-orange veins in lighting darts of brillh'ant color.

There was no other thing in the room, and light that entered came through plates of pure white marble shaved thin as heavy paper, diffused and softened, shadowless. But above that altar there remained a feel of vast and angry

tension, a straining, malignant drive that sought to reach and tear at the mind of the sea rover standing be-

tween four heavy-thewed and brawny priest guards.

Priests those four might be, but by the ripple of their scarlet-orange cloaks across their broad and heavy shoulders, their training had come in larger degree from the hilt of a sword and the grip of a shield than from the pages of a book. They gripped their silvery needle swords now with an easy sureness that spoke conclusively of confidence in handling them.

But confidence was gone now from the face of the high priest; his brows were contracted in a frown of futile anger, his eyes blazing with rage, and his lips strangely tense with fear and lack of surety.

"Who are you, outlander? Was that aged fool, Elmamis, right in naming you some new and potent god, a god both material and of force, too? The Invisible Ones shy off from you, cannot reach and touch your brain. Speak, what are you—man or god?"

A slow, easy smile of complete and easy satisfaction touched Daron's lips. "Now that, friend priest, it seems to me, is the purpose of my being here; you seek to find that answer. Sure it seems, Elmanus gave you thirty days to learn, and me no orders to inform you.

"This I will say; you'll know before the thirty days are gone—but not from my lips." Daron's smile changed to a solemn frown of thought. "But hold. You and your priests have maintained that no true god can appear as a man. A god, you say, by very definition is non-human, beyond conception of a human mind. Now that is a point I would not agree upon, but your own definition shows you, it would seem, that I must be a man, and no god."

"Why do you dispute that definition?" snapped the priest. "It is clear that a man-thing is no god, for, by very definition, a god is superhuman."

Daron laughed. "True enough, and sound logic that may be. But you have lost, here, it seems, the principles

of logic. Have you heard, perhaps, of the 'undistributed middle'? Look you, a fish swims in the sea."

"Aye."

"I swim in the sea. Therefore I am a fish."

"And of what importance is your false and silly sophistry?"

"A god is more than man," said Daron pointedly.

"By definition, that is so."

"And more than man's conception can hold. Wherefore you limit his powers stringently in one thing; whatever he may be, it must be unfamiliar, he cannot appear a man. So—and, swimming in the sea, I am a fish."

The high priest cursed softly to himself, and glared at Daron's mocking eyes, and cursed again at old—but potent!—King Elmanus.

"Your mind is a maze of silly, tricking traps and nonsense thoughts. The Invisible Ones appear in any form they choose; watch now the altar top, watch closely, see the darkening there—the slow darkening and condensation—see it grow, grow darker, more solid, a vague cloud at first—solidifying, strengthening—forming to no normal man but a winged being of luminosity—a glowing, slowly forming thing—"

Daron smiled and nodded to himself, and stole a sideward glance at the four priest guards who stood beside him. Awe and fear were growing on their faces; and in Daron's mind a dry old voice repeated an old refrain in the liquid, fluent syllables of the Ind: "No mind but yours can rule your thoughts, no mind but yours can control your inner self. But your mind will, if you permit it, follow after any other mind, and see and feel and be as that other mind desires—if you will let it I can make you see the flower or the tiger, smell the perfume or the acrid breath, but it is your mind, not mine, that does that thing."

And Daron looked at the empty altar and smiled at the futile mouthings of the fat and sweating priest. His hands moved and waved in futile gropings, and Daron let his mind laugh at the futility and pay no heed at all to all the high priest's exhortations.

"Your men," said Daron softly, "see wondrous things. I see an empty altar. Cease your foolish mouthings, and get on with what you seek to do."

The high priest's eyes blazed in exasperation, and he collapsed from mighty dignity like a pricked bladder of air. "Wake!" he snapped fretfully. "You see no more."

Four priest guards started, their eyes blinked rapidly, and their mouths gaped foolishly at empty air. With the white calm of incandescent fury, the high priest spoke again. "Take this accursed outlander to the South Wing of cells, and keep him there. I'll search him later."

Angrily the high priest turned away, and vanished through a door that seemed a part of the marble wall. Daron turned to the awed guards, and looked at them through lowered lids a broad grin splitting his face. "Remarkable! These Invisible Ones are invisible indeed. You seemed to see something there?"

"Quiet!" snapped the leader of the four. "March, and step along."

Daron followed easily, his mind busy with his thoughts. For one thing old Barhamu had said was true; no mind but his could touch his inner self. And one thing he had said was not true of these Azuni—they could trick the minds of many men, a mass of worshipers!

Down from the upper levels of the temple they went, and through corridors hollowed out in black basalt that formed the foundations of the isle, then across half the width of the isle it seemed, to rise again into a building of gray, hard granite, and huge oaken, iron-bound doors. A guard in dull-blue cloak and well-worn leather turned

a huge iron lock and passed them through, accompanying them, to use his key again upon another door.

The passageway before them now—walked and floored and ceiled with hard gray

stone—was lined with heavy doors, iron bound and locked. It was a narrow passageway, so that but two men could walk abreast, and at the far end an open door opened into a guard room where four blue-caped and well-weaponed guards lounged at their ease, to straighten into interest as the men came up the hill.

"In the name of the high priest, Shor Lang, we bring this prisoner. By King Elmanus' given order, one month he stays, to be guarded, fed and kept in health. And these are the orders of Shor Lang," said the scarlet-orange garbed leader of the priest guards formally.

One of the blue-caped prison guards, his head covered by a good steel helmet, worn at a jaunty, carefree angle, nodded, grunted, and tossed a heavy iron key to the priest guard. "Number three, down the way. If he's the howling menace to peace of mind that stinking fisherman we just threw out of there has been, you can have him back and welcome."

Daron's swift eyes took in the room. Two benches, two chairs, all hard and made of slabbed wood. One table, with a good and comfortable chair. A paneled case on one wall filled with bound volumes with a thousand titles—all religious. The table was littered with a dozen stacks of a dozen different forms, ink and pens, and odds and ends. As Daron turned away, the captain of the guards was filling in one of the forms.

"Where's his equipment, or does he walk the streets as naked of blade as he is now?" he asked.

"His materials will be brought to you for storing in the locker room. Elmanus ordered all returned to him one month hence. A shield—and it's one of those mirror things

old Elmanus finally got sense to dispense with—a sword, a dirk, and a helmet of gold and silver wire and phony jewels."

"Wire?" The captain of the guards looked up, and then looked toward Daron's retreating back. "A fool. If he had gold and silver, he could get good steel and leather. I'll hold this form till the things arrive. Here's receipt for your man. Hm-m-m, he rolls like a seaman but his garb stinks of earth."

Daron stepped through the oaken door to his cell. The walls were gray granite, too tough it seemed for even prisoners' patient scratching of names and decorations. One cot, one chair of hard oak slabs, and little other furnishing. The door closed behind him with a thunk of very sound and solid oak, and the lock turned with an oily grate of heavy steel.

Daron paced the room with eyes keen in observation. The door was no flimsy thing, but it was pierced by a spy-hole with a little sliding plate that let the guards look in whenever they might think of it, but left the prisoner blind as to passings in the corridor.

A window, high on the other side of the tiny cell, was barred with inch-thick wrought iron, blackened by weather, but resistant to rust. They were let into a granite block of size and strength that echoed clearly: "No—not this way, my friend."

Daron lay down to pass the time and think a bit. A month he had to plan his way—which should be time enough. An hour after he came, a guard came down on

feet so soft they made no noise through thick oak panels. Only the sudden clank of the sliding spy-hole plate, and the gleam of a weirdly unsupported eye appraised Daron of his coming. Daron grunted. With that sudden sort of inspection, there'd be no safe working out of tools within this room.

Restlessly, he went over to the spy-hole again. Six close-spaced bars of metal stopped it from the inner side. Bronze, though, and Daron eyed them speculatively. Daron carried a dirk-blade without handle beneath his clothes, a handy thing, he'd found.

The light died out of the high window, and the cell was dark. Daron slept.

With morning, the door was opened by two guardsmen, accompanying a single small and worried man in a greasy apron. The small and worried man edged nervously into Daron's room, and offered him a tray of wood, bearing two bowls of food.

The sea rover laughed. "My friend, I eat men only when most direly hungry. Keep me well fed, and your bones are safe enough."

The little, gray-haired man's lips pulled aside in a mechanical and nervous smile. "Yes. Yes, yes, oh yes. Food. Yes, sir. I--"

Daron looked at the grinning guards. "Has some one been frowning at him?"

"There's a fisherman with hair and strength enough to be old Talun himself down the way, and this goat-eared thing that calls itself a cook has been underfeeding him. Drathun, our fishing friend, swears he'll eat him yet," said one of the guards.

"Why, if I know seamen and their ways, there'd be peace and safety for him if he'd feed him," Daron commented.

"Eat up yourself, and get ready," said the guard as the little man danced nervously through the closing door. "Old Elmanus, so they tell me, ordered exercise and air. And Shor Lang says the gardens. So ... so you'll learn some gardening in an hour more."

An hour later, the ^little man was back to pick up the

empty bowls. The food was bad enough, but fairly plentiful, so Daron felt easy as he strolled out to the passageway. Six guards were there now, and the captain of them was going down the hall, opening the great cell doors one at a time, with a huge brass key. A dozen assorted prisoners came out, some seamen, browned and smelling of dried kelp and fish scales, some farming men, with brown-stained hands, and shambling, easy walk, and one man with the mold of lumbering.

Daron watched the process keenly. The corridor was lined up all one side with cells, and heavy doors that opened outward into the passage. Two cells opened from the other wall. At one end of the passage—the end but two doors from his own cell—there was a heavy oaken door that let out to the main building. At the opposite end was the guardroom's ever-watchful doors.

As Daron stepped out into the corridor the men from the cells nearest that outer door were already waiting. One, a massive, squat chunk of a man with bearlike arms and legs, and bearlike forward-slanting neck, looked up at him

from deep sunken eyes beneath enormous bushy eyebrows, black as charcoal marks. His body, through torn and salt-stained jacket and breeches, was as "hairy as an animal's.

But the little, far-sunk eyes were twinkling with good humor, and the mouth was wide and strong, the creases round its corners slanting upward.

"So," he said, in a gentle rumble, like a starting avalanche, "this be the outlander then? I'm Drathun, fisherman because no other of the scum of Nozos have the guts to sail beyond a dog's bark or a birdie's peep. What are these other lands? As big as Azun, then?"

"Nozos?" said Daron. "Hm-m-m, that's on the Isle of Eran, is it not? Ah yes. As to the outer world. There's more sea than land, man, but there's far more land than

ever you've seen. What brings you here?"

"Catching fishes in the isle's shadow!" he boomed in laughter. "They feared their pretty barges would smell of good, clean food."

"So they teach you now the beauty of the little pansy and the delicacy of the rose's sweet perfume? A new trade for you then?"

"Gardening!" Drathun snorted. "And two more months of that. Sohnun, my helper-aye, the lad with midget mustache on his lips-goes free in another week."

"Quiet," roared the guard captain. "Now, march!"

He led them to the door, worked at the lock with his great key, and the little troop was led outside, down an angling corridor to stop before another oaken door. Three guards remained with them, and three stepped through the doorway as the captain unlocked it with his key. Racked tools occupied one wall, and on the other, Daron's sharpening eyes saw a miscellany of possessions. Nets and clubs and hats and a silver-plated bronze shield, a long, strong sword, a jewel-hiked dirk, and a familiar helmet of gold and silver wires and curious jewels.

A heavy mattock in his hands, Daron followed quietly to the gardens outside. A tangled mass of weeds and tough-rooted creepers sprang from an uneven plot of newly imported soil that lay upon the barren basalt rock. Two lanky farming lads, Daron, and Drathun, the chunky fisherman, were set to work, watched by one crossbow-armed guard.

The sun was hot, the air was still, and the roots were tough. The position of work was one Daron was not accustomed to, and his muscles ached before the day was done. He slept that night with the heavy, solid sleep of exhaustion. And of contentment. He had a month.

X

DABON SAT DOWN with his back to a tree, and the heavy odor of new turned, sun-baked earth in his nostrils. Only faintly the salt, clear scent of the sea swept in, and he looked with sour eyes at the glint of sun on wind-ruffled waters.

"Drathun, my friend," he sighed at last, "that, and not this stubborn land, is

the place for men. Now a plant belongs in soil, rooted and fixed, unchanging itself in a never-changing stuff. But for a man to grow—and growth is change—he needs must live where change is constant on the sea."

"Aye—and a month, a week, and two more days before I get back to it." Drathun's deep-buried, twinkling eyes looked saddened.

"I think," said Daron softly, looking up through the tracery of an ornamental tree, "that we might leave these people here without their full consent. If you don't roar it out like a captain calling the bow-watch in a storm."

"Eh?" said Drathun sharply, in a much reduced bellow. His powerful, blocky body tensed.

"Do you," asked Daron, "like our aid and helper there, Tarmun, the farmer?"

"He's a solid ox, but good enough."

"Tarmun!" called Daron, turning toward the farmer lolling under a hedge, a floppy hat of straw across his face.

The gangling farmer raised his head, and the hat fell away. His face was long and sad and brown, and the man himself was long and sad and brown—and only Daron had the strength of arm to equal that of the slow-moving farmer.

"This shade is cooler here—and our brief hour of rest draws to a close. Come nearer, friend. I want to know that triply distilled essence of vegetable evil the next time I pull its root. That—what is its name?"

"Snake-bite root," the farmer roused himself gradually, stretched, and ambled over. "You can tell it," he sighed lugubriously, "by the purple veining of the root, and"—his voice fell as he sat near them, and farther from the guard still munching on his lunch in the shade of another tree—"you're a liar, my friend. You know it well after one bite, being above the wit of a hog, which learns likewise, in one good sting. What do you seamen want of me?"

"You like it here, perhaps, in the Temple of the Invisible Ones, my friend?"

"I loathe their rotten ways as heartily as you men of Talun do, as you well know."

"Then, my strong-armed friend," said Daron easily, staring up through the tree to the free blue sky, "do me the favor of tying this lumpy one in a goodly running bowline as the guard puts us in the cells this night. You know perhaps an insult or two to sting a seaman's hide?"

"Oh, the seaman's good enough in his place, but the place has too much smell. That stinking merchandise that Drathun would have us think is food, makes right good nourishment for plants, when well rotted at their roots."

Drathun's deep-sunk eyes grew somewhat brighter, and his wide, friendly mouth grew harder. "My oxlike friend, you learn your wit and knowledge from the horses you nurse about your farm. I'll knot those hawser-things that you call arms with greatest joy tonight."

"Aye, so?" said Tarmun sadly. "But then, Daron perhaps knows better why and when and where this thing should find its working out."

"In the passage before our cells, when all but we have

been locked away. Drathun, your cell is nearest-to the door, on that same side on which my cell is placed. Tarmun, your cell is across from my own. The cell on your side nearest to the outer way is unoccupied. We three will be last to be put away. If you would fight--"

"Aye," said Drathun. "We will, but, friend-" His brows drew down in puzzled wonder, and his tiny, deep-set eyes looked up at Daron from under paint-brush brows.

A guard stood up, stretched leisurely, and roared a call to work. The three beneath the tree moved apart reluctantly, Daron's voice rising slowly in "-- know the accursed rope next time I spot it, and I'll fry it slow and happily."

Tarmun yawned. "Do that, seaman, and you'll learn that plants have better protection than your brainless fish. Fry it, and the vapors will give you such an itch on all your body as you've never known, nor ever will forget. Drop that--it's mine. It's lighter."

"Yours, you mud-footed farmer, that tool is mine!" roared Drathun, grabbing at the mattock angrily, well knowing it was his, and Tarmun knew it, too.

"Let loose, fish-skin. You'll never swing a mattock like a man, and that will bring more aches than results, with your soft-muscle flesh."

"Why, you horse-faced flounder of the land! Let go that hold, before I try the mattock blade in that dried clay you call a head! I'll--"

"You," said a bored guard, "will drop that thing, seaman. If your friend, the ox, wants to play with it, let him. Sure it fits his hand better than yours, but I'll try a rope's end on your back if you prefer to argue."

Growling, Drathun picked up another mattock, and swung to his work, his brow-hidden eyes darting at the shambling, long-armed farmer.

From a dozen ornamental trees about the gardens, Daron collected bits of exuding gum, and chewed them placidly, to moisten his work-dried mouth. The guards sat comfortably in the shade, and joked at the laboring men, and kept the water bottles handy.

Twice through the long, hot afternoon the stubby, bearlike seaman and the horse-faced farmer came near blows, and twice the bored guard captain stopped their angry voices. With sunset, the dozen men were gathered together, and marched back to their cells, placed before their doors, and one by one locked in.

The captain locked away the fourth from last, and turned to Daron. In a slow, drawling voice the lanky farmer spoke. "Was it," he asked of Drathun gently, "your mother or your father that was the bear? For surely you cannot be full human with such a pelt as that. You should use a currycomb more frequently, and comb the stink of fish from it."

From the gray granite floor, Drathun swung a calloused fist toward the farmer's heavy jaw. With the slightest, slowest movement possible, Tarmun moved aside. His long arm reached out, grabbed Drathun's fist, and in an

instant the two were rolling, struggling on the floor.

The captain of the guard looked down with exasperated boredom.

Daron roared in laughter. "Ho guard, give me that key I They've been wanting to fight this out all day; we'll let 'em try it for a night."

Grinning, the captain released the key, and Daron, with a mighty heave of his foot, sent both the struggling pair into the vacant cell, and locked the door on them, to toss the key to the captain. He stared through the peephole slot, till the guard captain shoved him aside.

"Now my fine buckoes, you two can fight the whole

night through," said the captain sourly, "if such be your mind, or you can learn the part of men and stand up here. Your supper will be in your cell, but by the Invisible Ones, there'll be no scrap of food in that place you've got now."

Sullenly, the two men rose, eyeing each other angrily. Equally sullenly, they came out, to be locked in their separate cells, as Daron stepped into his. In Daron's closed palm, however, was an impression on the gums he'd gathered of that master key that turned all locks in this whole wing!

And in Daron's mind—lest the Invisible Ones be seeking to read his thoughts and plans—was a turmoil that defied their every effort. And that, too, was thanks to the old wizard of the Ind. Daron was trying to remember places, people, and happenings he had forgotten, and since most forgetting is caused by a subconscious barrier to remembrance, both conscious and subconscious minds were in a fine fog.

Under the tree, the next noon hour, Daron and Dra-thun sat, and at long and patient calling, Tarmun at last came over, mollified. He sank down beside Daron, well away from Drathun, the half-amused, half-bored guard captain watching Daron's laughing eyes as he smoothed their anger down.

"And now, since Drathun plays with closed fists, I have an eye two shades darker than the other," sighed Tarmun, "and no good reason for it. I like the man—and he's as slippery as one of his own eels. What was the reason for this?"

"An impression in a bit of gum. I've a design of that magic bit of metal called a key our guard captain conjures our doors open with. Within another pair of nights, I could carve out a key to do the same—but for that

thrice-accursed peephole in my door. But—T've a

to block it up." "The guard," said Tarmun sourly, "will approve of that."

"He will," laughed Daron, "when he sees my block! Now Drathun; you say your assistant was held less blameworthy, less punished for the crime of fishing in the bay?"

"Aye. The Invisible Ones are touchy on the score since old Talun sent droves

of dying fish to pollute the bay, and drive the noble pretties on their way."

"He goes in two days, I think?"

"Aye."

"Now if I were a fisherman released from this place, I'd go to Talun's good temple on Mt. Kalun, and give thanks to him. And, if I were released at such a time as this, I'd tell the priests of Talun that the fishing fleets might well be here—following a heavy run, perhaps—when next the moon is dark. Say five days hence."

"Aye, would you now? Daron, you seem to me a man of sense; I'll tell the boy your good advice." Drathun's deep eyes looked uneasily at Daron's immobile, placid face. "A run of fish, the whole fleet would follow willingly—if Talun would grant such things at any man's request."

"And were I released, a seaman, now, after seeing Talun's temple, I'd seek the fishing fleet, and tell them of my strong dislike for this prettied isle, and this misused harbor that has beribbon-decked girls for sailors. I'd even try to urge them to sail in here in force."

"Their reluctance would not be overwhelming—if they saw a reason there," remarked Drathun.

"Now," said Daron, "if such things had been suggested to you, as a fisherman, and it had been mentioned that, if Talun approved, a run of fish would come—would you

follow such a run, and enter the harbor?"

"And every man of Nozos, and every other fishing port as well!" Drathun answered.

"And," said Tarmun lazily, "you might mention that idea to a farmer here and there. Who be ye, Daron? Man or god?"

"None," agreed Drathun, stretching mightily, and standing up. He wandered off to settle heavily beside his young assistant, a hundred yards away.

Daron was wandering about picking up some bits of wood and twigs. Presently the guard called them to work again.

The captain of the guard walked down the row of cell doors on soft feet, mechanically slipping open the peepholes of the doors to glance at the men within. He came to No. 3, leaned toward the peephole and slipped the plate aside—and jumped back with a howl of dismay—Abruptly from within came a roar of echoing laughter, and the captain of the guard looked again, heard the running feet of the guardsmen down the corridor, and cursed luridly.

"By the Invisible Ones!" he roared, "that triply-damned slot nipped out a piece of my thumb as neatly as you please. Go on back, ye fools. I'll fix the thing."

Angrily he unlocked the door and swung it open as his men turned back. He stepped inside the door, and pulled it halfway shut behind him. On the cot, doubled up in the light of his lamp, Daron was laughing soundlessly now.

He wiped his eyes, and looked up at the furious face of the captain of the guard. "By the gods, captain, do me this small turn; leave up the thing, and let your men bite as hard as you! So it nipped your thumb, eh?"

The captain glared at him. "Nipped my thumb? Blazes, no, as you well know, fish-skinner! It stuck its leering face

out into mine when I slid that peephole cover aside, and I liked to jump out of my sandals with the startlement!"

Daron laughed silently, and through his laughter managed: "My respects, captain! Ye've a mind that works fast."

The captain snorted softly and turned toward the door and its peephole. "And have my men make me a laughing stock for crying 'Guard! Guard!' for fright at a silly jack-in-the-box—though, by the god's, a more obscene face my eyes have never laid on before! What is the cursed thing?"

One of the light bronze bars had been twisted from the peephole grate to make room for the contraption of paper, twigs and strings. A knotty root supplied an evil, tiny face with hideous, wormy beard, held on a springy twig that had been compressed behind the peephole plate to thrust the startling obscenity of the twisted root in the captain's face when the plate was moved. A bit of luridly red paper supplied a body of snakelike form, a wholly startling thing. ^"A. root!" the captain grated in disgust.

"A root!" said Daron, shaken with daughter. "Let not this art be sacrificed with but one showing, friend!"

In silent anger at his own stupidity, the captain closed the door, and slipped the peephole shutter back. He could hear the scratchings as Daron fitted up his contraption again.

He walked on his rounds, and so did not hear the further scratchings as Daron carved, from the removed bronze rod, a duplicate of the captain's key that had been hidden against his belly when the captain opened the door.

An hour later, there was another howl of terror, a moment's silence, and a lurid cursing of a nipping slide. Daron, in silent laughter, stared out the hole into the

red and foolish face of the guard. In determined silence the guard replaced the trap, and Daron returned to his carving. Slow work, for even good hard steel does not make fast progress on well-tempered bronze. But the key was shaping.

XI

MAYAN'S A FOOL—he never brought in more than a thousand pounds of fish at once in his life—but he's agreed to do it tonight. And Tarmun will be ready." Drathun whispered as he passed Daron. The guard snapped something at him, and he turned into the cell.

Thirty seconds later, Daron was locked in his cell, and within an hour, the last meal of the day was gone, and the little timid man had collected the bowls of their food.

Then: "Guard! Ho, guard!" Tarmun was roaring.

The guardsman walked down the corridor lazily. "Aye, what is it?"

"The Captain gave me permission to wash the earth from my jacket this evening. Let me down to the washroom."

"Captain, Tarmun, the farmer, wants to wash his jacket down the passage."

"Let him go," called the captain boredly, "but keep an eye on him."

Daron heard the click and scrape of the heavy key in Tarmun's lock then the heavy tread of the fanner, passing by his door.

"Hey, guard!"

"Aye, what now?"

"I be going mad of sitting here in one small room. In the name of the gods, will you let me get something to read, at least?"

"Captain! Mayan, the fisherman, wants something to read. Shall I send him down."

"Now by the Invisible Ones! I didn't think the fool had brains enough! Aye, send him down the hall, and if he must read, he'll read of the true gods."

Again the great bronze key scraped in a lock, and the heavy hinges creaked as the door was forced open. Mayan's rolling steps echoed down the stone-walled hall.

Mayan's cell was but one door beyond Daron's and on Daron's side of the corridor. Tarmun's cell was directly across the corridor. With the two men out of their cells, one walking by the guard down to the washroom, the other bound down the long hall to the guardroom—

With a single flowing motion, Daron was up and at his door. The five remaining bronze bars behind the peephole clinked in Daron's hand, and noiselessly, the peephole plate slid back. Through the hole, Daron saw what he had prayed for. With both men out of their cells, their great oak doors stood open—open into the narrow passageway from opposite sides, completely cutting off the view from the guardroom! And the guard was watching Tarmun wash his jacket.

Daron's long arm snaked out through the peephole, reached down, and thrust the key he'd carved into the lock of the door. It scraped, stuck a bit, turned—and the door opened. Instantly, Daron's arm was back, the five bronze bars were refixed in the peephole, and the contraption of roots and paper blocked the hole again.

Daron swung through the door, and as the door closed soundlessly behind him, he stiffened in horror.

"Ho!" came the roar of Tarmun's great voice down the passageway. Daron had the door half open again, and was darting through as the voice roared on.

"—on a fair spring day,

"When the snow's away,

"We'll plant the seed and pull the weed,

"And wait the harvest's sway-ay--"

Daron cursed weakly, and stepped out the door again. The lock clicked to behind him, and the key was in his hand again. Two steps, two motions, and Drathun's door swung open, and -the squat, powerful seaman moved soundlessly out. Two steps more, the door was shut and locked behind him, and the outer door swung open. Instantly Drathun was through, then Daron, and that door too, was locked tight behind.

"Left," whispered Daron, and the two were off on soundless, shoeless feet--each, at Daron's strict order, thinking furiously of things they could not remember! Left, and down, and across a deserted corridor, and the key slipped in another iron-bound oaken door. The un-oiled hinge creaked softly, and Daron cursed beneath his breath, then they were in.

From beneath his jacket, Drathun pulled a stub of candle, lit it, and the door was closed behind them. In the light of the candle's glow, the locker room was ghostly with hunched things, unnamable and unrecognizable. Two tense-nerved men danced lightly on their feet as each made his way to his own things.

Ten seconds later, Daron was out, and Drathun close behind. On Daron's head sat now the gold-and-silver wired cap of Nazun, and in his hand he carried his own good sword. Drathun, behind him, had a helmet of good round steel he'd looted from some temple guard, and bore a sword like a good ship's spar for length and mass. Daron's mind went blank for just an instant's time, as he sent a frantic prayer to Nazun for guidance--then something smashed into his mind, and exploded in his

brain. In the instant it came, it died--but left its trace on Daron's mind.

"Remember forgotten things," Daron whispered to Drathun, and the squat seaman nodded, his deep-set eyes blank with thought. Daron took his arm, and jerked him to motion down a side corridor.

In that instant's flash of understanding, a map of the entire Temple Isle had been engraved upon his mind-- and the room of the sphere he knew! On fleeing, soundless feet he set out, with Drathun's shorter legs rolling fast and noiseless behind. Down long gray corridors of granite he went, then down a stair that led to black basalt corridors.

The candle flickered in the lightless gloom, and shadows writhed behind them and before. There was an odor of musty dark, and the faintly sour smell of sea-washed rock about them. Through long, long runnels they fled, till they were far beneath the main temple of marble.

"There's something pricking at my mind," Drathun whispered.

As he spoke, Daron felt the first strange tingling of the cap he wore, and a soft, dim glow of blush lights like the lights of the winter sky in the far north, played round his head. Simultaneously, Daron was turning off and down, along a horizontal corridor of black basaltic rock, then down a stair. Another

corridor branched off, turned, and descended once more. But now the black basalt of the isle was not fine enough. This run was lined with white marble blocks.

The candle was out, and far ahead Daron heard the stir of men, and excited voices. A light sprang into being ahead, and the two dropped aside in a branching corridor to wait.

A pair of scarlet-orange cloaked priestly guards ran by, their voices tense and angry, bearing a crystal lamp.

Behind them another pair appeared. Then the lights were all upon the way the seamen had come. They started on, had made a hundred yards, when from a black tunnel mouth two guards sprang out with roaring cries that mouthed and mumbled down the bore, and lost all semblance of voices to become vague animal cries.

"Their hands!" snapped Daron, "Take off their hands— or these things will not die!"

Drathun snorted, and his broad mouth opened in a grin. The great sword he bore he twirled like a staff of wheat, his great thick wrists untiring in its lightning glimmer. It struck the priest guard's lighter weapon, twisted, flung the thing aside to clatter on the floor— and drank at the man's heart. The figure in scarlet-orange slumped, fell forward, and measured its length on the floor. Drathun turned to find Daron engaged with a left-handed opponent now— and gasped as the man he'd killed stabbed up at him from the floor, dead eyes white and ghastly in the light of the lamp the priests had carried.

"They can't die!" the fisherman gasped, his blade slowed by his very fear of this unholy thing.

"No, fool—their hands, take off the hands, and dead or alive, they can't grip blades!"

Two minutes lost, two handless corpses behind, they pressed down the corridor. The men they dodged were ranging back now, their shouts and cries an echoing confusion down the corridors. Daron ran on, eyes grim and determined, Drathun beside him sweating cold with horror. This thing was new, to him, and none too old to Daron.

"Two turns more, Drathun, and we reach the room. Look not within, or you fall paralyzed. Believe me there, as you did not believe what I said of those undead

guards. I'll go within; you guard my back, and look not in the room until I call. Hear?"

"Aye. I'll wait outside."

They turned a corner—turned another, and met a dozen guards, looking this way and that to locate the source of echoing calls that resounded endlessly in the halls. The two were in their midst and through them to the doorway before they well knew they'd come.

And at that doorway, a sheet of livid lightning struck, struck—and held! Blue curling flame, that writhed and danced and shrieked! A scarlet-orange guard backed away in leaping panic of the thing at his back, and Daron tripped him

with a flying foot. The man stumbled, twisted, shrieked as he touched the wall of flame.

Then he fell through, but was not consumed. Instead, he wavered slowly to his feet, as guards and attackers stopped alike in fascination. The man stood up, and his face was blank, his lips lax, his arms helpless, flabby things that swung at his sides. He laughed and chuckled, and the chilling sound rattled loosely in the corridor. He laughed, and the laughter grew in Gargantuan reboundings, thrusting fingers of madness in their brains.

Then the soldier-priest was dancing, dancing, skipping down the hall, and the men drew back and let him pass.

Daron stiffened, and his face went white and tense. "Nazun!" he called—and leaped toward that sheet of waving flame.

He touched it, and the helmet of his head grew warm while icy pricklings tore at his scalp. A shrieking hell of warring forces danced and sang and shattered in crystalline trumpeting about him, his body ran in crimson flame, blue laced, and wrapped in the blue lightnings of the Invisible Ones, a sheath of flickerings that blinded.

Warring things struggled there, with low mumblings of sound and silent fury that underran the root of their

blasting. Then slowly, from the very peak, where the dead, black stone of Barak, Lord of Fate reposed, a veil of black welled out, a heavy, clinging smoke of night that rippled, spread out, and overran, tumbling down about the figure that stood paralyzed, a helpless point on which two unseen forces concentrated.

The black lapped out, and drank the blue curtain of flame, drank and pulled and grew, and the howling hell of lightning died down, weakened, till only the mad, maddening mutterings remained, and even they grew weak. The icy pricklings left his scalp; the crimson cocoon of fire withdrew—

Abruptly he was through the doorway, and in the same instant that the cloaking cloud of blackness vanished, Daron pulled from a hidden pocket the little mechanism the watchmaker had made for him, and clamped it in his eye, a monocle of mechanism. He touched a button, and it whirred, softly, swiftly. Behind him he heard the roar of fear-struck guards coming again to life and action, and the clang of Drathun's mighty sword. Before him, in the same instant, he saw the circle of guards.

A dozen picked fighting men, men in cloaks of pure white wool, with harness of creamy leather, studded heavily with silver fittings, leaping toward him who faced at last the three-foot globe that was the root and being of the Invisible Ones!

There was fear and stark amazement on the faces of the guards, a fear and unknowingness that hampered their minds, and slowed their movement. This huge and bearded warrior who stood before them, with one blue eye closed and a monocle of whirring mechanism mounted in his other eye, this—man or god—who passed the veil of madness!

Daron's silver shield swept up, and every warrior of

them looked to it, as any trained and instant-reaction warrior must—

And every man of them slowed, stiffened—and became a rigid, useless thing, eyes fixed and glazed, staring at the image of the thing of mystery that they had never seen! In the polished perfect mirror of the shield, they stared into the mystery of the whirling, circling, patterned lights, the lights that boiled and raved and twisted now, as though some maddening thing was driving, hurrying, forcing them on.

Daron moved forward, two slow steps. His heavy blade came up—and fell.

A high, clear and piercing note sang out, a sweet, cloying sound of exquisite tone, as from a mighty, perfect bell. Again the heavy blade came up, and fell. Louder rang the note—but perfect still.

The silver shield moved, streaked forward, and clanged in brazen wrath—and the silver sphere exploded in a mightily blast of light, a shrieking, howling tornado of more-than-sound, a light that seared and darkened eyes.

The sphere was gone.

Daron snatched the whirring mechanism from his eye, opened his closed eye—and had by that one eye the advantage of every other. The twelve white-cloaked guards were down, down in limp and broken postures that told the warrior's eye a tale of ultimate defeat.

These men were corpses—and had been!

The power that animated them—the Invisible Ones—was gone!

Daron turned. Drathun was standing, half leaning against the doorway, holding a streaming wound in his left arm. "They fled when that bubble burst—and all shrieking furies of the world fled by me, too! By Talun and Martal, men, what deadly stuff is this we battered

"That was the death-howl of the Invisible Ones, my friend," said Daron grimly. "Now we've a rendezvous above, I think."

"The fishermen's ships!" Drathun gasped. "The Invisible Ones are gone!"

"Come up—they'll need guidance, they'll need to know!"

Along the winding passages they ran, passages that seemed like veins of some dead animal now, drawn of all life, dead things that had been living. The guards had fled; they saw no men, but far away they heard the howling, shouting clamor of men in terror and in pursuit.

They vomited from a sloping ramp, and stood in a garden torn and trampled now, a score of corpses, dead and useless things—with no mark to show their death! Fallen, Daron knew, in the instant that the crystal shell that was the root and basis of the Invisible Ones was shattered. ^

Daron charged across the gardens toward the main entrance to the vast, snowy temple of the Invisible Ones. A line of blue-cloaked guards was fighting, holding back a horde of howling, rough-clad seamen. And at their very head, roaring in a voice of thunder, stood a rough and hairy figure, a very squat giant of a man—

"Talun!" roared Daron, and charged forward. "By Talun and the Old Gods all, they're gone, ye seamen, they're gone! The Invisible Ones are fallen! Their power is broken for all time to come! Take back your harbor, seamen! Take back your island, too!"

"Ah, Daron!" the mighty, squat, old figure roared. "Come on, lad—fight, don't waste good breath in idle talk! Drive out these scum! We'll bring the good, clean sea back to Tordu, and drive that stink of incense out forever!"

XII

DARON LOOKED UP and ahead, where, in the early sunlight, the topmost parts of Nazun's blue-green temple loomed above the trees. He halted momentarily, and breathed deep of the clear, crisp mountain air.

Drathun, panting, looked up at him. "Ye be a determined man, Daron. This air is thin. Now while you rest and get a bit of breath, give me one more bit of fact. You drive me mad, friend! What was that whirring thing ye wore in your eye last night as you broke the sphere?"

Daron laughed, and pulled the little thing from his pocket. "Here, Drathun, look at it. Look through it, and press this button here."

The seaman did. A hole drilled through front and back, covered by smooth glass surfaces, was darkened suddenly as a plate of metal began to revolve, passing in front of it, then circling back. Swiftly it gained, till the moving metal was but a blur, a haze that slightly dimmed the clear sight through the pierced hole.

The seaman grunted and passed it back. "A hole, with a bit of metal revolving past so fast it is not seen. A blur—no more. Now what is the magic of this thing?"

"In the lowlands of Looz Yan, in the land of the West, I saw a similar thing. They have there great windmills, and this thing they call a strobe. Now the magic of the thing is this: if you peer through this at a whirling thing, that thing seems to stand still! When I looked through this at the ordered whirling of the lights of the sphere—the lights moved slow, and lost all order, and made no sense. The magic of their power was broken, just as my view of them was broken by that metal plate. Yet, because they did not whirl in ordered circles, I

could see them move in normal lines."

"Hm—m—m, there's more magic in simple things than I thought. Now, one more thing—"

"We climb the mountain now," laughed Daron. "And while you go to Talun's temple, I pay respects to good Nazun—and visit Lady Tammar. Up, my friend."

Drathun grunted. "Aye, up. My bones grow wearied, for I've had no sleep this night, and action enough for a dozen nights. I'm no young man such as you, or those who seem to be following us."

Daron looked back for the first time. Below them, a rushing crowd of men and women struggled up the path, panting, calling, beckoning. Daron smiled.

"I think the Old Gods have gained in popularity, with the death of the new."

"So the wine-sot turns to water his affliction is withdrawn," Drathun growled. "Half those who worshiped at the Temple Isle could not stay away, though they willed it. Well—we have given them sound cure for that! A hundred tons of fish were offered there to Talun this night, on the red-orange altar of the Invisible Ones!"

Daron walked on, steady and slow, as the mountain man must, who would gain his goal in health. The high hills of-the Ind had taught him that, as well as other things. "The fools will kill themselves in running up that mountain."

A voice, a shade more piercing than the rest, reached up to them. "Daron—Daron—wait there!"

"Eh?" Daron turned. "Someone called my name."

Drathun laughed, a deep roar of amusement. "Are you fool enough to think that name unknown after this night! All Tordu calls your name now!"

Daron shrugged. Again the call came up, clearer now, and the speaker, a long-legged youth, blowing like a

spent horse, shouted out again. "Wait there for us, Daron! We've need of you!"

Daron turned and looked up at the tops of the temples above, clustering in the long-slanting rays of the risen sun. He looked back at the crowd, and the youth, and said to Drathun: Til wait, or the young fool will run his heart out."

"Elmanus"—called the youth. He slowed now; gulping deep breaths of air, and stumbled nearer, to throw himself on the pathside grass. "Elmanus is dead!"

"Eh?" snapped Drathun. "Old Elmanus gone?"

"Aye—he died this night."

A half dozen other men were struggling up, blowing hard. Long-legged farm men, and a seaman with rolling gait. The seaman laughed and panted all at once, and stuttered out the tale.

"Aye, the good old king is gone—may the gods protect his name—and gone happy, at that."

"What struck him down?" Daron asked. The king had been old, but seemed strong and well for all that.

"Joy," panted a horse-faced farmer. "And foolishness."

"He had a wine bottle in one hand," the youth panted.'

"And a slave-maiden of his on the other," the seaman managed, between a laugh and a gasp for air.

"And the old fool danced a jig! At his age! He was howling in glee, and dancing round, and the girl had more sense than he!"

"She tried to stop him," the seaman nodded. "But he was howling praises on your name, and curses on the vanished Invisible Ones, and shrieking—"

"—that," the farmer interrupted gleefully, "he didn't give a damn what gods were gone, so one set or the other was destroyed."

"Ah," said Daron, a half-smile tugging at his lips. "Too much release from pressure—and he exploded."

"Aye, he tried to dance, and tripped and fell. His leg bent under him, and broke his hip. He was old and drunk with wine, and the shock killed him two hours gone."

"But," the seaman panted, "as he died, he was conscious again, and he said to his ministers, "Bring me that Daron! Bring him here! He's the only one in all this land with force enough to be a king!"

The crowd was growing, surging, panting all around them now, and shouting out to Daron. Suddenly they parted, and an officer in old Elmanus' livery came up, panting hard, his face red and sweating. "I near killed my horse, I fear, Daron, and these seamen and farmers beat me even so. King Elmanus is gone—gone from joy, and gone demanding that you take his place."

"I—" said Daron, and looked about the crowd. Every hot and sweating face looked up at him eagerly. Abruptly, he spotted one face that was cool, and slightly smiling, a round, rough-hewn face, with dark and heavy brows, and leathery, tanned skin.

Old Talun shut one eye slowly and nodded to him. Beyond, behind him, even, Daron saw a tall, lean man in blue-green robes.

"Now this land," said Daron with a sudden laugh, "is a broad, and right good land, and one thing I like about it. It has good gods, gods who act and do, and fight for what is theirs! And, better, these gods pay those who help them in their own way, and show no stinginess!"

"So be it then; not for King Elmanus alone, but if ye people—fishermen and farmers both—want me there—why there I'll go!"

There was a roar of cheers that washed up about him like a pounding surf, and a hundred hands laid hold of him. Before he well knew what had happened, he was riding down the mountainside on the shoulders of a howling, cheering crowd.

His roars and protests went unheard, and, at last, he grinned and accepted it. But, back across his shoulder, he looked toward Tammar's temple, glowing rose-quartz vanishing behind, gleaming in the sun.

He'd reach that temple yet!