

A SCIENTIFCTION NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE!

STARTLING STORIES

MAY

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a red sleeveless top and red shorts, is kneeling on a metallic surface. She is holding a futuristic, blue and silver weapon that is firing a yellow beam of light. The background is a dark, swirling space scene with a planet and a ringed planet. The overall style is classic pulp magazine art.

**LANDS
OF THE
EARTHQUAKE**

*An Amazing
Complete Novel*
By **HENRY
KUTTNER**

THE DISC-MEN OF JUPITER
A Hall of Fame Novelet
By **MANLY WADE WELLMAN**

SCIENTIFCTION
STARTLING STORIES
MAY 1947

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Lands of the Earthquake

By HENRY KUTTNER

William Boyce, in whose veins flows the blood of crusaders, goes on the quest of a lost memory and a mysterious woman in an odd clime where cities move and time stands motionless!

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CHAPTER I

The Crystalline Window

William Boyce lost a year out of his life when he was thirty. One August morning he was walking south of the library on Fifth Avenue, past the stone lions that guard the broad steps, and then suddenly he was in a hospital bed in Bellevue, one year later. A patrolman had found him lying unconscious on one of Central Park's broad lawns. Boyce came out of Bellevue into Hell.

Amnesia was nothing new. Psychiatrists told Boyce that under treatment his memory would probably return. In the meantime, it would be best to slip back into his familiar grooves of life and pick up where he had so abruptly left off a year ago.

It sounded easy. Boyce tried it. But he had lost all interest in his classes at the university. He was haunted. He developed an obsession. He knew that he had to find out what had happened to the lost year or he could not go on.

Occasionally fleeting flashes of memory would come to him—a man's swarthy, moustached face, a quiet voice he seemed to know intimately, speaking sometimes in a language that was familiar and yet strange.

Once, in Classics, Boyce heard that tongue spoken—it was a reading from a medieval manuscript in old French, the French of six hundred years ago. But he understood it like his native tongue. That was very strange, he thought. . . .

Then there was a memory of dark figures, robed, moving with an eery liteness that made Boyce shake suddenly all over with sheer terror. That memory always snapped shut almost instantly, as if his mind would allow him only a glimpse. At such times he wondered whether the truth about his lost year might not drive him insane with sheer panic.

But something still drew him resistlessly to that lost time. He thought that it was linked somehow with the crystal he had found in his pocket upon his release from Bellevue. It was not a large crystal, but it was cut in a way he had never seen before. Some of its facets were concave, others were convex. It was perfectly transparent. And he felt—uncomfortable—when he did not have it in his pocket. He could not have said why.

Time passed—a year, full of restlessness and uncertainty. More and more of his days he spent wandering through the city, searching and searching, with no knowledge of what he sought. He was beginning to drink—too much, and more than too much.

The district near the East River, far south of mid-town, seemed to have the

deepest attraction for him. Sometimes, hazy with whiskey, he would roam the silent streets, his hand in his pocket clenched on the crystal that seemed cold against his palm with a chill of its own, never taking warmth from his touch. Louder and louder, more and more insistently, that silent voice from his lost year was calling him.

The man's dark face—that among many things floated before him more often than before. It was not the face itself that mattered, he began to realize. The face was more a key to some secret than anything of intrinsic value. And it was not even a living face, but a pictured one. . . .

One day he saw that face in reality. He followed the man at a distance, through streets that grew familiar. . . . At last he was left standing in front of an ancient, narrow brownstone house by the East River—indeed, its rear windows must have looked on the river. As he watched the man unlock the door and enter the house, he knew, without knowing why, that this was the place which had been drawing him for so long.

The muscles on his jaw tightened under the stubble of his beard. He crossed the street, mounted the low flight of steps, and stood waiting, not quite daring to ring the bell. Then, scowling, he thrust his finger forward.

After a moment the door opened. Blind wings of panic beat in Boyce's chest. He thrust forward, and the man facing him gave ground, his face darkening with suspicion.

Boyce's gaze went beyond him. He knew this dark long hall somehow, as he knew the stairway that went up into gloom, and the other one that led down.

"What do you want?" the man said sharply. "Who're you looking for?"

Boyce stared at that strangely familiar face.

"I—my name's Boyce," he said, hesitating. "You don't . . . remember me?"

"Boyce?" Sharp eyes searched his. Again the quick suspicion flared. "Heck, no! Listen, mister—just what do you want? I don't know you."

Boyce felt his throat dry.

"Two years ago—I've changed a lot, probably, but not so much that you can't remember me."

"I never saw you before in my life."

"How long have you lived here?"

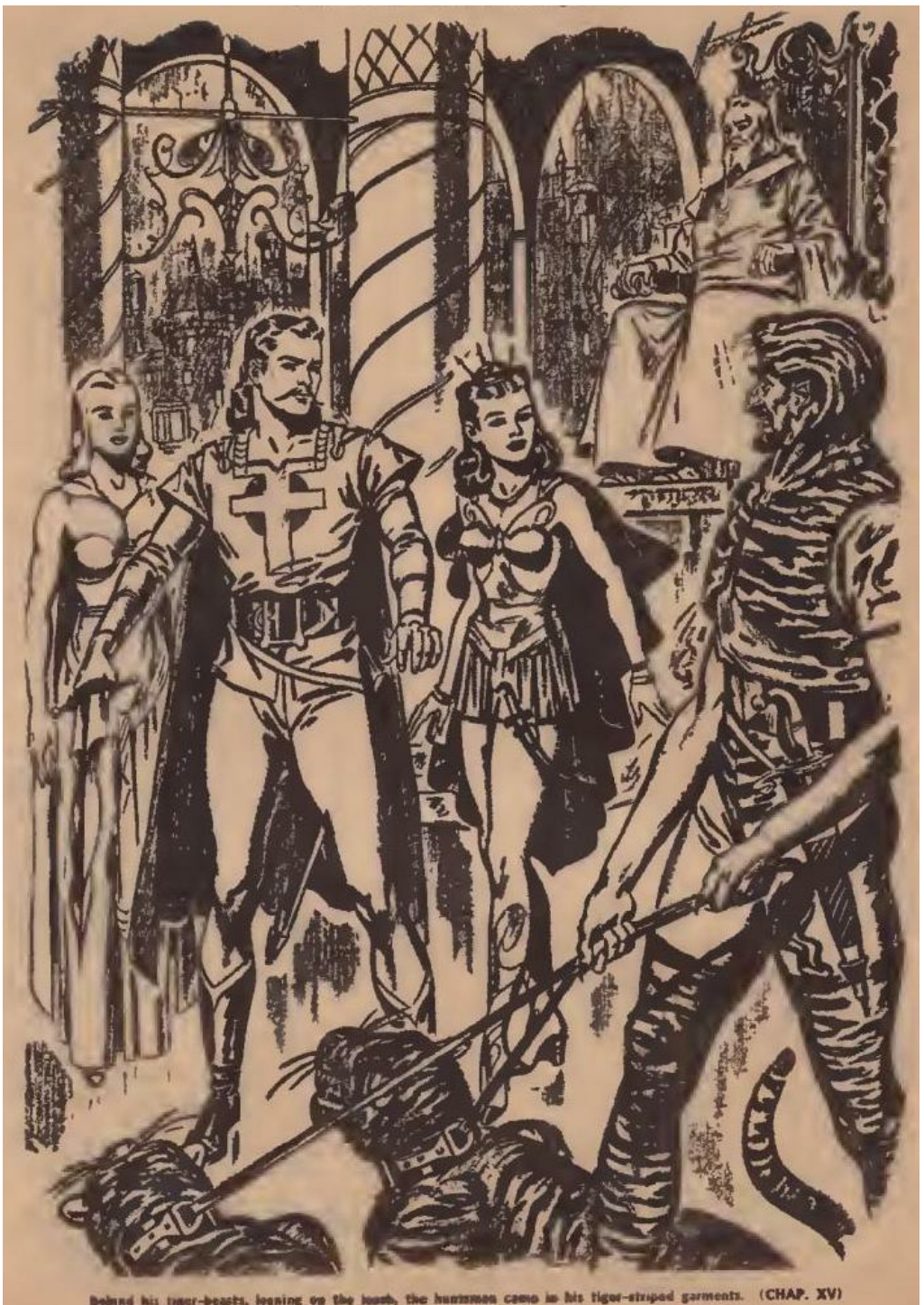
"Ten years," the man said. "Except—"

"I know this house!" Boyce said desperately. "Over there's the living-room, with the fireplace." He moved so quickly that the other was left behind. In a second Boyce was through a curtained archway and staring around a cluttered, gloomy room—a room he knew!

His eyes went to the fireplace and over it. There hung a framed tinted

photograph, nearly life-size, of the dark man.

It was the photograph he remembered— not the man! He whirled.



Behind his tiger-beasts, leaning on the leash, the huntsman came in his tiger-striped garments. (CHAP. XV)

Behind his tiger-beasts, leaning on the leash, the huntsman came in his tiger-

“I tell you, I know this house! I’m certain of it!” Again the inexplicable urgency tugged at him, drawing him . . . where?

The dark man said, “Look—I said I lived here for ten years, except when I leased the place once. But I leased it to somebody named Holcomb, not Boyce.”

“Holcomb? Who was he?”

“I never saw the guy. My lawyer handled the whole deal. I moved out and a year later I moved back in. Never saw Holcomb. But that was the name.”

Boyce stared, trying to find some light in this deeper mystery. Abruptly he headed for the door and out into the hall. Behind him the dark man said, “*Hey!*” but Boyce didn’t stop. He knew where he was going.

As he went down the stairs his unwilling host called after him.

“There’s nothing down there! It’s all empty, in the basement rooms. Mister, I’m gonna call the—”

But Boyce was gone. Heightened expectancy made his breath come faster. What he would find here he did not know, but he felt that he was on the right track at last. That inexplicable call was thrilling in his blood, urging him, commanding him to do something he should have done long ago.

He went through a door and the room beyond was small and dusty. The splintering board walls had no windows and the only light filtered dimly past Boyce as he stood staring. It was like any other square empty room—and yet somehow Boyce sighed, a deep sigh of curious satisfaction.

This was it. This was the room. It was here that . . . what?

He stepped out on the dust of the floor. It was so empty a room that the one thing in it struck his gaze forcibly once he was inside. On a shelf on the wall a cheap glass candlestick stood and in it a guttered candle. Only the wax of the candle looked a little strange. It was almost clear wax, a delicate blue-green like the sky at evening, so nearly transparent that you could see the shadow of the wick through its half-melted floor.

Footsteps sounded overhead. Boyce went over to the candle and touched it with a hesitant forefinger.

“I remember this,” he whispered. “I’ve seen this before. But the room. . . It is and it isn’t. It never was empty this way, and dirty. Somehow I don’t think it was. But it looks . . . *right*, even now.”

It was too gloomy to make out details. He snapped a match into flame and then lit the candle.

The room—it should have been a little different. Richness. Tapestries. Jewels. Silk stuff. But it should have looked exactly like this, too. How—

The wick kindled and bloomed up in a slow golden oval.

Boyce drew his breath in a long gasp.

“Something’s missing,” he said softly. “*This!*”

The crystal he had carried for two years was cold in his fingers as he lifted it in a gesture that was virtually a conditioned reflex. He held it before the candle and the flame struck sparks from the facets of the stone. The room for an instant was full of shooting fireflies as the lights danced wildly on floor and walls and ceiling. Boyce’s hand shook.

He remembered, now, out of that lost year, how he had held up this crystal before, while she—*she* . . .

There were suddenly shadows upon the walls. Shadows that moved and grew stronger as Boyce gazed. A strange, dim richness was gathering and growing all around him, a dance of shadow-tapestries blowing like ghosts in a ghostly wind whose draft he could not feel. Dim jewels flashed from the unreal folds.

The bare boards still rose around him, gray and splintered and dusty, but a clothing of tapestried hangings was taking shadow-form upon the walls, silently rustling in that silent, unreal breeze. Thicker and thicker the shadows grew. Now the boards were half-hidden behind their ghostly richness, like the bare bones of a skeleton that gathered ephemeral flesh about it out of a phantom-world.

With every flicker of the candle-flame the tapestries grew richer and more real. The jewels caught the light more clearly. There was a rug like thick, soft dust underfoot, opulently patterned. Overhead the ceiling billowed with dim silks like the webs of fabulous spiders, woven into flowery garlands. And yet behind all the richness he could still see the naked ribs of the room, grey boards, dust, desolation.

Boyce held the crystal to the light, his hand now steady. And the candle flame, falling through it in broken refractions, cast a web of light upon the one surface of the wall that was not shadow-hung. But no longer did the bare boards show there. Where the light fell a crystalline pattern formed upon the wall, intricately woven in designs as delicate and clear as the pattern of a snowflake.

It seemed to brighten as he watched. The ghostly tapestries blew about them, the silken garlands overhead billowed, but the pattern on the wall held steady and grew deeper and more brilliant, deeper and deeper. Light poured powerfully from the flame through the crystal, was strengthened as through a lens and sank like some tangible substance into the wall beyond. It permeated the wall, dissolved it, etched the pattern of the crystal as if with some strange, bright acid that set its mark forever upon the surface where the light-pattern lay.

The wind blew through the pattern. . . . Boyce was aware of it dimly. The tapestries blew both ways from that delicately etched design upon the wall, as if the light had dissolved an opening into the outer air and a breeze from another world blew through it.

It must be a breeze from another world, for he could not feel its breath.

Suddenly his hand began to shake. This was impossible. This could not be happening. It was hallucination, alcohol-born, and he would waken in a moment in some dingy booth in a bar with the noise of tin-pan music in his ears and crowds moving about him—not with these silent tapestries that looked so frighteningly familiar upon the walls.

His hand shook—yes. But the light upon the wall did not shake. Unbelievably, he lowered the crystal slowly. The light held steady. He closed his fingers about the crystal—it was colder than ever now, with a chill that sank into his hand—and dropped the smooth, shining thing back into his pocket, his eyes still unwaveringly fixed upon the wall.

The beautiful, shining pattern was a refraction no longer. It was real. It was a great glittering design of crystal, cold and perfect as a snowflake, and as fragile. He knew it was fragile. How he knew it he was not sure.

But it was the only real thing in the room. The bare bones of the walls, the dust and the splintered boards were not there at all. The tapestries were more real than he, blowing in a scented breeze from the crystalline wall. But neither tapestries nor the unfelt breeze had the compelling reality of the pattern.

There was something—he fought to grasp it.

She had gone before him. That was it! That was what had haunted him for so long, driving him along devious paths to this moment and this sorcerous room.

He could see her as she had stood here months ago—a moment ago—time lost all meaning as he remembered. But he could not see her face. She had stood with her back to him in this rich, gleaming room, a silhouette against the great shining pattern on the wall. A tall silhouette, lovely, dangerous. . . .

Light flashed in his mind. He saw as if a shutter had snapped open the way she turned for one brief instant and glanced across her shoulder into his eyes.

She had smiled. He saw the red lips curve, and the white flash of her teeth and the brilliance of her eyes, violet fire in the richly tinted face. Danger was in her smile, and bright, blinding color. An invitation and a threat. And then she had stepped forward and—and . . .

Yes, it had been invitation. It might have happened a year ago—it might have happened only the moment before this. Time meant nothing to *her*. She meant terror and something worse than terror. She meant the thing his mind had gone blank to shut away forever. But where she went, he must follow.

He had completely forgotten everything but that.

Blindly he stepped forward. The pattern upon the wall loomed above him, exquisitely etched in infinities of tiny crystalline panes. Beyond it he could see dim things moving. He did not care. He thought they meant danger, but he did not care. The bright, laughing, terrible face was in his eyes like a flash of light that blotted out all other vision. He saw nothing now, but her.

By instinct he put up both arms to protect his face—and plunged blindly through the glass.

He heard it splinter around him with a sound like thousands of tiny musical bells tinkling. He felt their sharp edges cutting through his sleeves. He felt a gust of keen, cold air, and then the world failed beneath his feet and he was falling.

After that he remembered nothing at all.

CHAPTER II

The Huntsman

Someone was laughing. It sounded far away. Boyce opened his eyes and looked up dazedly at a drift of blue-grey mist floating before his face. Beyond and above it he could see more mist, layer upon layer hanging in the dim cool air, and above them—mountains?—great walls of rock that vanished into the fog.

The laughter came again. It was not far away—it was close by, and there was a snarl in it. He sat up stiffly, wondering where he was.

There was clear glass, broken into glittering fragments, lying all around him. Boyce remembered.

But now he lay upon a shelf of stone, cold and a little damp, and behind him when he twisted to look was a grey rocky wall rising sheer into clouds. Window? There was none. Yet he must have emerged here, upon this ledge, for here lay the splintered glass of his passage through the pattern. Whatever door he had come through was closed behind him now.

The ledge was narrow. To right and left it led downward over a trail along the face of the cliff. Mist floated to hide what lay below. But before him, far away over the drifting mist, a great walled city lifted its towers. And it was a curiously shaped city. He blinked through the dim air that lay between.

Clouds formed and tore apart and reformed over the whole valley floor, but the city's roofs rose too high to be hidden. He could see that some of them were made of jagged rock, and some of clear glass. Many were of bright stuff like the roofs of tents, striped and patterned or of clear, glowing colors that billowed a little in the wind.

It was dim in the valley, and he could see lights burning among the roofs. Some of them came brilliantly through the crystal; some glowed like lanterns through the colored stuff of the tented towers. The city looked like a carnival alight with festive lamps. But there was something about it that he did not like. Was it memory, he wondered, or something more deeply rooted than memory—instinct itself warning him of what lay within those high walls?

Beyond them the mists rolled again over the far reaches of the valley, and beyond the mists were more mountains. They swept up and up, peak upon jagged peak, range upon rising range, until the low clouds hid them.

But upon one of the foremost peaks a gigantic castle lay. Boyce narrowed his eyes against the haze and the distance, and tried in vain to make out the shape of the building. The mists between thinned for a moment, like the

curtains of a stage drawing back.

He saw the great crenelated towers, with a scarlet banner like a tongue of flame blowing tremendously from the topmost height of the great donjon-keep. It was a castle such as he had seen often enough in old pictures, a mighty fortified heap of walls and towers, strangely familiar in this—this dream, this incredible land of mist and mountains.

Then the clouds rolled in again and the castle with its banner like a flame was blotted out as if memory itself had revealed it for a moment and then forgotten again, or as if the mists of the past had swallowed forever those anachronistic towers.

Boyce got slowly to his feet.

Not until then did the laughter come again, deep now, with amusement and a snarl that underlay the amusement.

Boyce turned. The sound seemed to come from above, and after a moment the mists drew back and he saw the one who laughed. Standing on a ledge a little way up the face of the rock, with mist swirling around him, a tall man watched him. Boyce stared incredulously.

At first glance he could not be sure the man was not actually furred like a tiger, for his long, muscular limbs and lithe body were tawny and striped with a fur of velvety sheen. But the man's grinning face was pale, and his black hair under the tiger-skin hood lay smooth.

He was leaning back against a leather strap he held with both hands, and Boyce could see dimly the surge of sleek bodies around his knees. The strap was a leash, but the creatures he held upon it were invisible in the fog.

The tiger-striped man's lip lifted in a smile like a snarl, and he took one hand from the leash to make a signal to Boyce—intricate, swift motions of the fingers that were blurred to the sight. About his knees the leashed animals surged instantly into activity, and the man laughed fiercely and seized the strap again, wrestling with his pack. But his eyes were questioning upon Boyce.

He waited, struggling with his beasts. The smile faded. He made the quick, cabalistic gesture again, again fought with his pack to quiet it as he waited. This time he scowled, and the scowl was scarcely fiercer than the smile had been.

Boyce lifted both hands, palm out, in the universal gesture of peace. It was all he could do. He had no answer for the mysterious sign, though dimly he felt he should know what the answer was.

Laughter leaped into the other man's face, instant murderous delight, as if this failure was what he had longed for. Boyce thought for the fraction of a second that he saw recognition in the pale, dangerous countenance above him. He thought the man knew him, had hoped for the chance at enmity

and laughed now in terrible delight because the chance had come.

The laughter swelled to a roar, triumphant, with a tiger snarl in the sound, and the man shouted out a deep halloo like a huntsman calling to his pack. One striped, tawny arm flung out in a gesture of warning. He was motioning Boyce to run. He was pointing down the narrow trail toward the valley, and the unseen beasts leaped about his knees, almost free of the loosened leash.

Boyce turned uncertainly, bewilderment fogging his mind. Everything had happened too suddenly, and he was not yet sure at all that he was not asleep and in a dream where a tiger-striped nightmare warned him to flee from snarling nightmares tugging at their leash. He did not like the thought of running. He did not—

With one last halloo the Huntsman slipped the strap. Over the lip of rock Boyce saw smooth bodies pouring down at him, five, six, seven sleekly furred beasts as large as mastiffs and as lithe as serpents. One lifted an almost human face to snarl at him.

It was a beautiful, demented face, half-tiger, half-cat—the strange semi-human countenance of animal faces in medieval tapestries. But the beast was neither cat nor dog. It was something he had never seen before. Circe's beasts might have had such faces.

He turned and ran.



“Look up, stranger,” Godfrey said. “This is Kerak of the Crusaders!” (CHAP. III)

The trail was steep. Mist blew around him as he plunged downward, never sure that the next step might not carry him over some unseen abyss. Behind him the Huntsman’s laughter rang wildly through the fog, the cliffs echoing it back until the whole valley seemed to laugh with him. From the beasts came a low, deep snarling, but no other sound. They might be far behind, they might be already at his heels. Boyce did not dare turn to look.

The steep trail curved around the face of the rock and leveled slowly toward the valley floor. Stumbling, panting, dizzy with incredulity, Boyce ran on.

When the ground was level underfoot and the drifting mist revealed to him that he had come at last to the base of the cliffs, he paused for a moment to get his bearings. There was silence behind him. Even the Huntsman’s laughter was quiet now and no snarling rolled through the fog.

He stood on a sandy plain among clumps of low-growing shrubs. Far off a glow of feint color staining the mist told him where the city lay, but he was not sure at all that he dared seek out that city. He needed time to think, to search his mysteriously closed memory for things he so desperately needed now to know.

Where was he—in what impossible land? What did he want here? For he had come through the crystal window in answer to a compelling urge toward—something. An urge to follow—*her*—to find her? That nameless, all but faceless woman who wore an iron crown and whose very memory was like a chain to draw him after her wherever she might go.

Where had he known her? What had she been to him? Why did the shiver of recollected danger ripple over him whenever he let her memory float back into his mind? He had no answers to these or any other questions. He only knew he was lost in the fog of an incredible land and he did not think he dared seek out that city which was its only familiar landmark.

The Sorcerers’ City. Its name came into his mind blindly. It was an evil city, full of strange enchantments and stranger men and women. He felt a sudden urge to look upon it, and struck out on impulse through the fog toward a rise of ground he saw a little distance away.

From the eminence the city was clearer, veiled and unveiled by the constant, silent drifting of blue-grey clouds. Enigmatically the great walls rose, enclosing their clusters of lighted towers, their crystal roofs, their tented canopies that glowed like lanterns from the lights within.

Through the mists a sound came faintly to him. He turned. Far away, winding through the cloudy plain, he saw a procession coming toward the city.

There was a curious darkness over the long, wavering column. Tiny lamps gleamed through it and the sound of bells rose and fell as the procession wound its way through the fog. He was near enough to make out a little of those who walked in the line. . . .

Boyce had no recollection of what happened next. He only knew he was sitting on the sandy ground, his face in his hands, while waves of sickness receded slowly as he sat there. He was shaking all over.

He remembered then that he had seen those—those beings—before. Somewhere in *her* company. As to what they looked like, what they were, his conscious mind had no recollection. He thought he would never know consciously. They were too terribly alien to all that is human. He only knew that they walked upright like men, yet were not men, and that such revulsion went through him at the very thought of them that his mind blanked wholly out. . . .

When he heard the laughter of the Huntsman in the fog, he was almost glad. He got up unsteadily. The dark procession with its lights and bells had vanished into the city and the mist was empty now. The Huntsman laughed again, nearer at hand, and on the heels of his laughter rang out the first cry Boyce had heard from the Huntsman's pack—a high, shivering scream that made his hair prickle at the roots.

He ran.

This time the hunt was after him in earnest. Twice he heard the pack snuffling almost at his very heels, and the thin, clear screaming of their voices was never long silent in the fog. He ran without direction or purpose for what seemed an endless time, with the sandy plain spinning by featurelessly underfoot. He only knew he must not go near the city and those who had entered it.

Gradually it began to dawn upon him that the Huntsman was deliberately herding him. For the pack gave him breathing-spaces. At intervals the Huntsman's halloo would ring through the mist and the screaming would die away, and Boyce would fling himself full-length upon the damp sand and go limp with exhaustion.

If they meant to pull him down, they could have done so a dozen times in the hours upon hours that the hunt lasted. They were herding him in some one general direction, for some unfathomable reason of the Huntsman's own.

Now the ground began to rise in jagged foothills, and Boyce knew he was coming again to mountains. The pack was close behind him. He panted up a steep slope, hearing the voice of the Huntsman and the shuddering screams of the beasts echoing hollowly through the fog.

Then suddenly the ground before him dropped away in a sheer cliff. He

paused and looked frantically about. If the Huntsman had driven him deliberately to this spot, then perhaps it was with no other purpose than to trap him more easily for the kill. For he could not go on or go back.

There was a new sound in the fog. A dull, rhythmic clapping that was oddly familiar. Boyce strained his eyes toward it, trying to quiet his painful gasping. But the fog hid the source of the noise and distorted its sound.

A clear, shivering scream from close behind him made Boyce swing around. Out of the greyness a low, lithe shape took form, lifting a snarling face to stare at him. Another and another behind it moved soundlessly forward, like creatures in a dream.

The clop-clapping was louder now. Abruptly the Huntsman's voice rang out in a high, summoning shout. The beautiful, snarling beasts hesitated. The Huntsman shouted again, and abruptly the pack was gone. Mist closed around them and they vanished like nightmares as they had come.

The Huntsman's laughter rang out once more, mocking, edged with that inhuman snarl. Then silence.

The rhythmic, half-metallic noise came on. Boyce turned.

Out of the fog that rolled back like a curtain from its shoulders, a huge black charger paced. Upon it rode a man—Boyce's eyes widened—a man who had ridden straight out of a lost century.

Chain-mail, glistening with moisture, hung in faintly ringing folds upon his great body. A conical helmet with metal-mesh hanging from it framed a harsh face in which eyes of pale blue stared unwinkingly at Boyce. A sword swung at the knight's waist.

Another enemy, Boyce thought. He glanced back into the fog, but there was no trace of the Huntsman or his pack.

CHAPTER III

Earthquake

The mounted man said something. Boyce was stunned to find he could understand the language. Not easily, but it was the old French, the tongue spoken by Frenchmen six hundred years ago. The words and inflection were archaic, garbled—but understandable.

“I am a friend,” Boyce said slowly, carefully. “I come in peace.” But his tense muscles did not relax. If the knight charged, perhaps he could dodge aside and somehow wrench the man from the saddle.

“If you ran from the Huntsman, you are no friend of the City dogs,” the knight said, his harsh mouth relaxing a trifle. “You may come in peace with me—at least. Where is your home?”

Boyce hesitated. What would modern place-names mean to this archaic figure?

“Another land,” he said at random. “Far from here, I think.”

The blue eyes widened.

“Beyond the mountains? Or—not a land of blue sky and a bright sun? Not a land named—Normandy?”

Still Boyce hesitated. The knight leaned forward in his saddle.

“By your garments you are no man of this haunted world. And you speak our tongue. By the Rood, stranger—answer! Do you know Paris and Rome? Byzantium? Answer! What world do you come from?”

“I know Paris and Rome, yes,” Boyce said, through his amazement. “But I do not understand—”

The knight clapped his gauntleted hand to his thigh.

“Oh, by all the gods! Now if you were helot to the Huntsman or servant of Satan himself, I’d take you to Kerak with me! Up—up, man! The pack may return, or other dangers may threaten. We ride a perilous patrol on these marches. Up, I say!”

A mailed hand gripped Boyce’s. The American was swung up, finding a seat behind the knight. The great charger, well trained, scarcely stirred until the armored man spoke a word. Then the horse cantered forward, picking its way delicately through the fog.

“I am Godfrey Morel—Godfrey Long-shanks they call me,” came the hard, firm voice. “Not in my memory has any man come here from the lands of the cross. We were the last. Dear heaven, how my soul has sickened and lusted for a breath of clean wind from Normandy!”

“Even the Turk sirocco, hell-hot as it was, would have been grateful, instead of the perfumed stink of this abode of Satan! Spy or traitor you may be—we can learn that later. But first you will tell me how the world moves—whether we still hold Antioch, and if the Red Lion still leads his Seljuk Turks against our armies.”

About to answer, Boyce paused as an elbow jolted into his ribs.

“Silence now, for a while,” Godfrey Morel said softly. “Kerak is under siege. It is always under siege, but the fight grows hotter of late. We must ride warily. And in silence.”

The war-horse paced on through the thickening mists. Boyce’s throat was dry. Byzantium? Antioch? More than six hundred years had rolled over old Earth since the banners of the Crusaders flaunted on the ramparts of Antioch!

Boyce breathed deeply. This was no stranger or more fantastic than the fantastic questions that seethed in his brain. This world was not Earth—he knew that without any question. The crystal gateway through which he smashed had led him into . . . what? *Her* world, yes.

But what and where? He knew it did not matter. Enough that it was here—the girl he could neither forget nor remember, whose image was a scar upon his memory. But for the rest, his questions must go unanswered a while longer.

Godfrey Morel’s armor creaked and rang. Beneath them the great war-horse’s ponderous gait rocked them both to the same rhythm. Himself, and a man who asked after Antioch and the fate of battles six hundred years lost and won. He must not think now of Godfrey Long-shanks’ enigma. His brain was dizzy already with unanswered questions.

The mists blew apart before them and Boyce saw, high on a crag, the towers and bastions of the great grey castle he had glimpsed across the valley. The crimson banner streamed from its keep-height. Briefly through his mind went the wonder that he had come so straight for it. Was that the Huntsman’s doing? And if it was, why?

Before him in the saddle he saw Godfrey’s mighty mailed back go rigid. He heard the Crusader’s caught breath. Then a deep-throated shout made the mist echo around them.

“Look—look at hell opening again!” roared Godfrey.

The horse beneath them staggered. No—not the horse, but the earth itself. Boyce saw a long swell of sandy ground swiftly rising as if the plain breathed. Between them and the castled heights of the mountain the land lay bare for a moment of mist, and all that space was heaving incredibly. It was more than earthquake—more purposeful, far more sinister.

Then the earth split. And the long jagged rent moved horribly, like a crawling serpent, toward the base of the crags that upheld the castle.

Godfrey Morel roared, “*Kerak!*” and waved a great arm toward the castle as if his shout could rouse the garrison to its danger. Then he bent in the saddle and drove his spurs deep. The war-horse gathered itself on the rocking earth and staggered, then leaped forward with a lengthening stride.

Boyce clutched the Crusader’s belt and coughed in the dust that billowed up from the pounding of the hoofs. The whole world seemed to be shaking now, with a shifting uneasy motion that tossed them like a ship on water.

And there was a crawling all over the plain, a converging of the serpentine rents as though the earth meant to swallow Kerak whole. Huge cracks tore themselves open, lengthening jaggedly. The plain was like a sheet of ice breaking in a spring thaw, shattering toward the crags upon which Kerak towered.

“*Sorcerers!*” Godfrey howled. He was upright in the stirrups now, yelling an ancient war-cry, blindly spurring the charger across the shuddering plain. Boyce hung on desperately, not daring to shift his grip.

Before them he saw the ground yawn suddenly. He could look down steep, crumbling lips of earth into darkness, and he felt the stallion shudder with the shudder of the plain. Then powerful muscles gathered beneath them, were ponderously released as the charger with its double burden hurdled the widening gap.

“*Dieu lo vult!*” Godfrey breathed suddenly, as they thundered on across the shaking ground. It was the Crusaders’ rallying cry, Boyce knew, but something in Godfrey’s voice told him this time it meant more—relief, prayerful thanks—“God wills it!”

He looked up. From the heights of Kerak a flicker of light was broadening like a halo around the topmost tower. It shivered and widened and pulsed outward as the rings widen in water from a dropped pebble. Circle after circle, broadening and slowly dropping, until the whole castle was ringed with falling wheels of fire. . . .

They did not stop at the base of the castle. They dropped farther, ringing the crags. They came down and down, slowly, silently, flowing and widening as they came, and ever the topmost tower pulsed them forth anew.

Where the first of the broadening hoops of fire touched the plain the earth ceased to shudder—and none too soon. For by then Kerak itself had begun to pitch a little, like a great castled galleon riding a stormy sea. The deep groan of rocks shaken one upon another sounded from the tortured crags. A little more of that, and Kerak would have begun to crack like the plain itself.

But the touch of the fiery rings was like the touch of oil on angry water. The earth quieted, the groaning of the cliffs fell silent. Kerak was firm again

upon its great grey crags. And as the showering wheels of fire fell slowly downward in circles that broadened toward the watchers, the cracks in the plain began to close.

Wherever the moving rings touched them, the earth healed itself. Without a sound the great rents were sealed like closing mouths. Boyce thought of the mouths of giants, silenced but not appeased by this quiet magic. There was a feel of sullenness to the yielding of the plain. The rings flowed steadily outward, healing and quieting as they came, but the earth was not appeased.

In silence it yielded, but it was not conquered. He could feel that, somehow, in the very silence of the place. The great gaping lips of earth closed, but they closed on threats to come. They bided their time.

Godfrey reined in his trembling charger. They waited while the first wave of light lapped gently around them and went on. Then the Crusader shook the caparisoned reins on the neck before him and they paced forward sedately, the stallion wading through wave upon wave of quiet fire.

Godfrey laughed, a deep, contented noise in his chest.

“The old mage has not lost his wisdom. Kerak is still safe in Tancred’s hands. But the day may come—” He flashed a glance across his shoulder.

“You may be a spy of the Huntsman—or worse,” he said. “Or you may be an honest man. It’s not my part to guess. There are few places now a man could come from—save the City. If spy you are, when you return tell the sorcerers that Tancred is still their match.”

“I’m no spy,” Boyce said hesitantly, fumbling for words in the strange, yet familiar tongue. “You saw the Huntsman follow me—”

“No man knows what drives the Huntsman,” Godfrey said. “Well, here are the bastions of Kerak. Look up, stranger. Feast your eyes, if you came to spy. This is Kerak of the Crusaders!”

High, high, tremendous with quarried blocks of granite, the mighty bastions towered. It made a man dizzy to stare up those vast, converging heights. And the banner that tore at its staff as if it fought for freedom with the wind made a sound of screaming cloth and a flame of burning crimson. It rolled over the tremendous battlements like a banner of fire, shrieking to the wind in a language of its own.

“Now you must face the Oracle,” Godfrey said. “And be judged, for life or death. But even if the judgment be death—by the Lance, stranger, you shall give me news from my old home before you die. That I have promised myself.”

The iron gates of Kerak screamed on their iron hinges and Godfrey’s stallion paced forward through the rings of falling fire. And it was thus Boyce first entered Kerak, where the last Crusaders dwelt.

CHAPTER IV

The Oracle

Mist hung in the open courts of Kerak. Attendants in archaic garments ran forward to help the riders dismount; they crossed a stone-flagged pavement, invisible in mist, and entered a half-seen door. The cold smell of stone and the fragrance of wood-fires closed about them as they went down a corridor and into a great stone hall high enough to have a drift of mist like miniature clouds hanging in layers under the vast ceiling.

This was a room out of another age. Boyce had seen pictures of such halls many times, but he had certainly never thought to stand in one, looking down the length of the room toward the dais at one end with a bright fire roaring in the chimney and men and women in the garments of six hundred years past lounging before the blaze.

He followed Godfrey over the rush-strewn floor toward the dais. There were women there, in bright velvets, belted with jewels. The breath came suddenly thick in his throat. He knew no more about *her* than the outline of her body against a crystal window and the flash of a brilliant face glancing once at him across her shoulder. But if she sat here on the dais, he would know her. And perhaps she did. Perhaps she did. . . .

A great voice rang out suddenly.

“Well, Godfrey! What skulker from the marshes d’you bring us now?”

Boyce started violently and paused among the rushes, staring toward the speaker. He knew the voice. He knew it as well as his own. He had heard it somewhere very lately—not with the arrogance that was in it now, but with the same inflections, the same pitch and pacing of phrase—the same voice.

Godfrey took his arm and they went up the steps of the dais and stood before the speaker, Boyce staring hard.

“A stranger from our own land, I think, Sir Guillaume,” Godfrey was saying. “A stranger from home—or a spy. I found him in the marshes fleeing from the Huntsman’s pack.”

The man in the high-backed seat of honor by the fire lolled at his ease, glaring up at Boyce under thick brows. He was a big man with immense strength in every line of him under the long velvet robe. His tanned face was seamed with the scars of old sword-strokes but his blue eyes were very bright and the mouth beneath a drooping yellow moustache had the arrogance born of a life-time of command.

And it was a face Boyce had seen before—seen very recently. A face of

haunting familiarity. This was nothing out of his dreams or his forgotten memories. He *knew* this face.

“Your name, stranger?” Sir Guillaume demanded peremptorily. Boyce was aware of a sudden flush. He did not like the man. It was more than any quick surface dislike. There was antagonism between the two. He saw it on the Crusader’s face and felt it on his own.

“I am called William Boyce,” he said shortly.

At Sir Guillaume’s shoulder a black-browed woman in green leaned forward. She was looking from the knight’s face to Boyce’s.

“A moment, Sir Guillaume,” she said softly. “I think—is it only my fancy, messires, or is there a likeness here?”

The others stirred in their chairs and bent to follow her gaze. But Boyce understood even as the woman spoke. He knew—and the knowledge was a flash that almost stunned him—what lay at the root of the familiarity in Sir Guillaume’s face and voice. This was impossible—it could happen only in such a dream as he walked in now.

Sir Guillaume was himself, given a few more years of age and a life-time of arrogance. The face and the voice were his own!

Guillaume was gaping at him. Now he rose and glared under bent brows into Boyce’s eyes, and they were exactly of a height. Blue eyes scowled at blue eyes. Identical mouths set angrily.

“Even to the names, Sir Guillaume!” the woman in green said. “He is called by your name in the English tongue. William du Boyce—”

“I am Guillaume du Bois, certainly,” the knight growled, still staring in the other man’s eyes. “But if there is likeness here I do not admit it!”

A young page, kneeling on the edge of the dais, had been polishing a great Norman shield. Godfrey bent and snatched it up.

“Look, Sir Guillaume,” he said.

Guillaume stared for a long moment into the mirrory steel. He glanced at Boyce and then back again, and his face began to suffuse with rage and something like terror.

Suddenly he flung down the shield. It struck the floor with a hollow clang and above the noise Guillaume roared with anger.

“Sorcery! By the Lance, this man’s a sorcerer! Seize him!”

Godfrey’s big hand closed on Boyce’s arm. Boyce himself, too bewildered to think clearly, shook it off with angry violence. The old French forsook him in his anger, and he could only shout in English,

“Let me go, you fool! I’m no sorcerer! I—”

His voice was swallowed up in the roars that swept over the dais as the men upon it scrambled to seize him. Two of the women screamed, and the

greyhounds lounging by the fire sprang up with yelps of excitement. A moment of pandemonium reigned upon the dais.

Then above it a great, deep voice rose commandingly.

“Let him go, messires! Let the man go, I say!”

Reluctantly the turmoil subsided. Boyce, looking up with the rest, saw a tall man in black robes standing in a doorway at the head of the dais. Without being told, he knew who it must be—Tancred the Mage.

There were cabalistic symbols on the dark robe the magician wore and his head was turbaned like that of an eastern prince, but the face beneath the turban was not what Boyce had expected. Tancred’s beard was white and long, but his brows were black and met above his nose in a perpetual, imperial scowl. He wore emeralds in his ears and his fingers were heavy with flashing stones. He looked like a man who could command men even without the power his magic gave him.

“Is there no peace at all in Kerak?” he demanded in a deep voice. “Even while the castle still rocks on its foundations from the assaults of sorcery, must we have brawling on our dais?”

“All sorcery is not without the walls, Tancred,” Sir Guillaume said loudly. “Look upon this man and me, and judge whether the City has not sent us another spy to—”

Tancred laughed and came down the dais slowly.

“Spy he may be, Guillaume. But there are other ways than sorcery to make two men alike. Are you so certain, Guillaume, that no kin of yours walk the earth?”

Guillaume was not to be appeased.

“I know magic when I see it. This stretches coincidence too far.”

Tancred paused before Boyce, pulling at his white beard thoughtfully. Black eyes burned into Boyce’s.

“Perhaps it does.” The magician nodded. “But brawling give us no answers. There are better ways of smelling out City spies.” He glanced around the dais and his eye moved past Boyce and paused. Boyce turned.

In a corner of the chimneypiece a young man sat huddled under a fur-lined cloak. It was not cold here, and Boyce saw that sweat stood on the youth’s pale forehead, but he shivered from time to time under the robe, and a shaking hand clutched at the collar to hold it close about him.

“Here is young Hugh,” Tancred said, his voice stern. “Most of you know the story of Hugh of Mandois. He went out scouting last week and the men of the City took him. He lived a week in the City.” There was loathing in the word. “And Hugh came back as all our men do—whoever return from the City. His wits half addled because of the things he saw.”

Tancred crossed the dais and bent above the huddled youth.

“Hugh, lad—Hugh.” The boy looked up. “Hugh, we have a question for you. Look at this man here, standing beside Sir Guillaume.”

Boyce met a pair of dazed blue eyes with shadows in them. For an instant he knew that look. He had seen it in the mirror in his own eyes many times, when he strove in vain to recapture some of the memories of his lost year. That same dazed blankness, with a hint of shadows beneath.

Had he himself ever walked the City, and looked upon the things that drove men mad?

“Tell us, lad,” Tancred’s voice went on. “Have you seen this man before? Do men in garments like his visit the people of the City? Is this man a spy, Hugh?”

Hugh of Mandois lifted his haggard stare again to Boyce, and for an instant Boyce was all but certain he would know him. He was all but certain that in his lost year he might indeed have walked those streets and met young Hugh upon them.

Too many strange things had happened to him already in the past few hours for him to feel sure of anything. His likeness in face and name to Guillaume was the final straw. Now he felt himself ready to believe or disbelieve anything Tancred might tell him of himself, so long as it offered a solution to the mysteries around him.

Hugh of Mandois let his shadowy, half-mad eyes rest a moment longer upon Boyce. Then he lowered them again, huddled the robe around his shoulders and shook his head dully.

“I do not know,” he said in a thin voice. “I do not know.” A shiver went over him and he turned back to the fire.

Tancred’s big shoulders lifted beneath the black robe in a shrug.

“For Hugh’s sake, I wish he could remember,” he said, half to himself. “For his own sake, I wish we could rouse him. Well—” He looked back at Boyce speculatively. “He must go to the Oracle, of course. He—”

“Wait a minute,” Boyce said abruptly.

Heads turned, murmurs rose. The people on the dais stared at him out of angry, suspicious faces, Guillaume’s nearest and glaring with that inner hatred which the two men who bore the same name and the same face had felt so instinctively for one another.

“I’m no spy,” Boyce said, stumbling over the archaic French. “The Huntsman should have proved that—he tried to kill me. But I didn’t come here by choice. And I won’t—”

Tancred laughed.

“Prove your point by the way the mist blows,” he said, “but not by anything the Huntsman does. His ways are more uncertain than the clouds.

Still, if he hunted you here and failed to kill you, be sure he had a reason of his own.”

“Who is the Huntsman?”

Tancred’s face darkened. The black brows wrinkled together above the black eyes.

“Perhaps you know better than we.”

“All right,” Boyce said in sudden anger. “Take me to your Oracle, then. Let’s have it over with whatever it may be, and then I’ll have some questions of my own that demand an answer.”

“Well spoken, stranger.” Tancred was smiling again. “Come.”

He swung aside with a sweep of the cabalistic black robes and waved a commanding arm.

Boyce moved after him half doubtfully. But Guillaume, grinning a wolfish grin beneath his drooping moustache, walked on one side of him, and Godfrey Long-shanks stepped up on the other.

“Now we shall know the truth about you, spy,” Guillaume said. “March!”

Beyond the door through which Tancred had first entered a narrow stairway rose, winding in the thickness of the wall. Glancing behind him, Boyce saw that everyone who had been lounging on the dais was following them. The women picked their way up the steps delicately, holding their long skirts in ringed hands. The men shouldered after, whispering among themselves. The walls echoed with their voices and the shuffle of feet on stone.

They went up a long way. Boyce began to suspect that they might be mounting to the top of the donjon-keep that towered highest of all over Kerak. Through slit-like windows he caught glimpses of the misty plain spread out far below, of the last rings of magical fire dying away around the foot of the crags like fading rainbows in the fog. And across the valley the City was a blur of colored lights veiled and revealed again as the blue-green clouds drifted over it.

The light had not changed here since his wakening. He wondered if they had day and night in this mysterious, incredible land, or if the same dim half-brightness dwelt always over the fog and the mountains.

An arched hallway opened up before the climbers. Boyce, between his two guards, cleared the last of the steps and followed Tancred’s broad back down the hall. A hush had fallen over the crowd now. Even their feet no longer shuffled. They walked almost on tiptoe, and he could hear Godfrey breathing fast beside him. Whatever the Oracle might be, the castle people seemed to hold it in something like dread.

There was a curtained doorway at the end of the hall. Purple velvet hangings embroidered all over in a pattern of silver webs hid what lay beyond. Tancred laid one big hand weighted with rings upon the heavy folds. He turned

then, his eyes searching the crowd. There was a rustling among them, and one quickly drawn breath seemed to sweep the throng.

“Stand forth, stranger,” Tancred said in his deepest voice. “Stand forth and face the Oracle!”

CHAPTER V

Spy From the City

The velvet curtains swept back. Boyce had one moment of wonder and involuntary dread, as he realized that Guillaume and Godfrey had released his arms and stepped quickly back so that he stood alone, facing Tancred and the door. Then he saw what the doorway framed and all other thought went out of his mind.

He did not know what he had expected. Certainly not this—this small stone room beyond the curtains, nor that which filled it. That delicate webbing of fire. . . .

It was the webbing that caught his eye first. The fiery strands were woven into a hollow framework of exquisite pattern that moved as he watched. A living framework—a living cage.

And in the cage of animate fire—a woman. No, a figure of marble. No—a woman, after all. Wax, or marble, or flesh—he could not be sure. She was not alive. That much the quickest glance assured him. The cage around her was living and fiery, but the woman within had neither life nor warmth.

She stood as a statue might stand, motionless, hands clasped before her, facing the crowd. Her long white robe was no whiter than her face and her hair fell in a cascade of pure marble pallor, straight and unbroken over her shoulders.

The face had a purity of line that seemed to rob it of all likeness to humanity. No mortal face ever turned such flawless planes to the beholder. The eyes were closed. The lips were closed too, on a lovely line that looked as if it could never have parted. Boyce thought he had never seen a figure so coldly remote, so utterly empty of life.

For a long moment there was no sound in the hall. Very faintly, standing this near, Boyce could hear a fine, thin humming from the cage, as if the fiery bars of it sang among themselves. But from the crowd came only the silence of caught breath, and from the woman—the statue—no sound could ever come.

“What do you ask of me?”

Boyce had to look again to be sure the voice had come from those marble lips. They scarcely moved. The eyelids did not move at all. But surely no other lips in the world could have spoken in such a voice of cold remoteness. Such infinite, distant calm. A chill went over him at the sound of that gelid tone.

Tancred’s voice was soft and strangely tender.

“We have reason to think a spy may stand here among us,” he said. “We

bring him before you that you may judge if he speaks the truth.”

No sound, no motion, as his voice fell silent. The marble girl faced them with closed eyes and clasped hands, not moving even to breathe. But the wait was a listening, searching wait. Even Boyce held his breath, half-believing against his own reason that this waxen thing could see and know and answer—if she would.

The wait lengthened. She stood there deathly in her coldness and her pallor—no, not even deathly, for nothing can die that has never known life, and it was impossible to believe that breath had ever stirred those marble nostrils or blood ever pulsed beneath that marble skin.

Then with barely perceptible motion, the waxen lips parted. The voice that chilled the listener like a breath of wind over ice was clearly.

“Yes, the man lies.”

Behind him Boyce could hear Guillaume’s deep rumble of triumph, instantly hushed. An involuntary ripple went over the crowd, and he heard feet shuffle with angry, impulsive motion and the whine of steel half-drawn from scabbards by quick hands.

“Wait,” the Oracle said coldly. “Wait.”

Instant hush. In the silence, the icy voice spoke on.

“One stands among you as envoy from the City. He came to kill. He waits now to kill.”

The anger among the crowd surged up again and its rumble of fury drowned out the thin, cold voice. Boyce braced his feet wide and wished ardently for a weapon.

“It’s not true!” he shouted desperately. “I’m no spy! I didn’t come to—”

The rising roar drowned out his voice too, and he knew one instant of that shattering self-doubt, that old wonder whether he himself knew what the truth might be. But there was no time for that now. Guillaume with both great arms lifted and a grin of triumphant hatred on his face was half a dozen paces away, and coming fast, and the crowd behind him was a swirl of shouting faces and angry eyes.

“*Wait!*” The clear voice, like an icy lash, cut through the noise in the hall. The marble girl’s face had not changed. The lips were parted no farther than before, the eyes were still closed. But the voice had the volume of a shout, yet was still a cold, thin murmur only.

Boyce saw the eyes of the crowd leave him and fasten on the white figure in the fiery cage. They paused, flushed and angry—but they paused.

“I did not name the man,” the chilly voice reminded them.

Bewildered murmurs answered that.

“He stands among you in a guise you know,” said the voice of ice. “He is no stranger. He is not this man before me.” She paused again. Then with an

emphasis so biting that Boyce could all but feel the sear of cold upon his flesh, she said, "*Must I name you, spy?*"

The thing that happened then stunned them all. Boyce saw it most clearly, for he was half-facing the crowd. The others had to turn and were jostled when the first wild sound rang upon them from the back of the hall.

The sound was laughter.

A huddled figure standing in the mouth of the stair-door shook with sudden, desperate mirth, flinging up a wild, pale face to stare at them. It was Hugh de Mandois, the half-mad refugee from the terror of the City.

In the first moment Boyce thought the lad was shaken with something like hysteria from the tenseness of the scene. Then he saw the bowed body under the heavy robe straighten—straighten and rise. His eyes refused to accept the height of the figure. They carried no message for a moment to his startled brain. He gaped blankly at that which stood in the stairway door.

For Hugh de Mandois was rising to a full stature that towered impossibly over the highest head in the crowd. The cloak fell back. The garments the young Hugh had worn were ripped and fell away, and it was no human figure that rose from the huddle which had been Hugh of Mandois.

What it was he could not be sure. Boyce saw it most clearly of them all, and not even he could give a name to it. None of them saw it for longer than an instant. In that brief interval the thing stood up before them, towering, terrible, a monstrous laughing figure mailed in something that might have been glittering scales or glittering armor, something so strange the eye could only translate it into familiar things like these.

Its laughter rang like a trumpet under the arched ceiling, filling the hall with sound. And then the creature leaped. . . .

Afterward some said it fought with a sword and some said it wielded a flame instead of a blade. Certainly wounds were later dressed that looked like the ripping of heavy claws. And the smell in the hall was of scorched flesh as well as of blood. For the fight was terrible before they subdued the—the spy the City had sent among them.

Boyce fought with the rest. It seemed incredible that one being, however large, could have engaged them all. Its speed was that of light itself, its strength beyond imagining. The strange thing was that they did, in the end, after a desperate struggle, manage to prevail.

Boyce remembered only the feel of cold, smooth limbs tossing him aside and falling after him, and crushing him with great, careless blows. How he fought he was not sure. Bare fists seemed little enough against that fabulous being, and yet he remembered the feel of his knuckles sinking into the scaled body, the sound of a groan as the blows sank, the reek of a scorching breath in

his face.

He remembered the numbing coldness of an edged something sinking into his flesh, the sound of ripping skin and the hot gush of his own blood flowing down over his chest. He remembered a heavy blow at the base of the skull, and after that he floated in a whirling of stars that closed over his head in fathomless darkness. . . .

“And your coming here was no accident, William Boyce.” Tancred leaned back in the window seat and looked at Boyce under meeting brows, his black eyes piercing.

Boyce looked away. His glance wandered about the small stone room, the canopy above the bed in which he lay, the tapestries on the walls, all of it very familiar to him now, after this long, long while of convalescence. He was tired still. He did not really want to delve any deeper into the mysteries that had brought him here.

The deep scar upon his shoulder had all but healed by now, but there was a deeper weariness in his mind. Perhaps it was the sight of the drifting mists beyond his window, changeless, grey clouds rolling eternally over a weary land.

He could see the mirages from here, too. Behind Tancred now the unreal towers of a mosque-like city were taking shape in the fog. At first he had thought it delirium when he saw these visions forming and fading again upon the mist. But others saw them too. And no one could tell him certainly whether or not the visions were wholly unreal.

“No one dares go far from Kerak,” Godfrey had warned him. “The land—changes. Perhaps it is sorcery that makes the pictures in the fog. Perhaps they are mirages like those we saw in the desert before Jerusalem. Or perhaps—*Dieu lo vult*—these are real things we see. Cities that drift like the mist. Gardens and orchards going by like ships in a sea of fog. There is no way to be sure—and return to tell of it.”

He would not think of the mirages now. Tancred was speaking, and he would have to listen.

“I say it was no accident that sent you among us with Guillaume’s face and name,” Tancred repeated, stroking his beard with a jeweled hand. “The story you tell is such a strange one I am inclined to believe it. I believe much, because of the things I know, which my companions would think rank heresy.”

He hesitated, turning a ring upon his finger, then shot a keen glance at Boyce lying among the bed-cushions.

“I could even guess,” he said, “what it is that lies hidden in that lost year you speak of. But I am not free to tell you what I suspect. This much I can say—I think you were a tool for someone stronger and less scrupulous than I. Perhaps this woman you tell me of. And if you were a tool, then tool you

remain!

“For you have not yet performed whatever function they meant you for. And I think you may have been chosen for that function because of your kinship with Guillaume.” The black eyes narrowed. “That means, you see, the City.

“Someone chose you from among all the men of your world, someone used you for a year there, in ways so terrible your mind has closed up against remembering. And in the end, someone made it possible for you to follow your forgotten memories into this land, where a timeless struggle still is waged between Kerak and the Sorcerers’ City.”

He was silent awhile, his face creased in lines of worried thought, his big ringed hand moving with a steady, unconscious motion over his white beard.

Something in Boyce’s mind did not want to follow that thought. It was like an alien thing, curled in the center of his brain, trying to shut his ears and his eyes to the things Tancred was saying. An alien thing? Some other mind reaching out from distances across the mist to quiet his questioning, keep him in ignorance of things the alien creature did not wish him to know?

“Tell me,” he said uncomfortably, not entirely sure the words came from his own mind, and not that half-sensed invader in his brain. “How did your people come here? I—Godfrey asks me so many questions about the countries he remembers, and I find it hard to answer him. You see—”

Tancred laughed.

“I know. I think I alone among us knows the truth. It has been a very long time since we Crusaders rode to Jerusalem, has it not? You were wise not to answer Godfrey too truthfully. How long in the years of our old world has it been, William Boyce?”

Boyce’s eyes met the old magician’s.

“Six hundred years.”

There was awe and weariness on the bearded face. Tancred nodded.

“So long, then? A very long time indeed. I had not realized quite how many centuries we must have spent in this accursed land where time stands still.” He was silent for a moment again, then he shrugged and said, “You must hear the story, William Boyce. You are the first from our old world to find your way through the fog to our gateway.

“There have been others—a few—from other times and lands. You must not believe yourself the only tool they of the City have tried to use against us! But you will learn enough of that later by yourself, I think.

“We of Kerak lived in Normandy when the Day of Judgment was only a little way behind us.” He laughed. “Perhaps you know that when the year one thousand dawned the world believed its end was near and the eternal Trumpet

ready to call us to account My father's father was a boy then. He told me the story many times.

"We were a credulous people in those days, ready to believe whatever men told us if they spoke with the voice of authority. Well, we lived past the Day of Judgment, but my friends and I fell into a strange sort of Judgment of our own and we linger in it yet, and perhaps will always linger.

"Sir Guillaume was our lord and leader. We took the cross when the Crusade was preached through Normandy, and rode away to free Jerusalem from the infidel. Perhaps you know the story of our ride. We went a long way, for a long, long time, through strange alien lands with every hand against us. We suffered much. There were those of us who died to see Jerusalem.

"We never saw it. We lost our way, like so many others, and in the Valley of Hebron we met a stranger fate, I think, than any band of men has ever met before.

"In the Valley a castle stood. And Guillaume, liking it, thought to make himself its lord. That was the way we went through the eastern lands in those days, taking what we could and holding it until a stronger man came by. So we attacked the castle. I remember it yet—black from foundation to battlement with a scarlet banner flying from its donjon-keep." He nodded.

"Yes, the banner we fly today from our own donjon. A terrible banner, my friend. We laid siege to the black castle. For many days we camped about its walls, thinking to starve the garrison out if we could not overwhelm the place by force. We did not guess who dwelt there, or what strange powers he had.

"One night a man came secretly to us from the castle, offering, for money, to lead us by a hidden way into the stronghold. We agreed. The next day we mounted and armed ourselves and in the earliest dimness of the day we followed the castle traitor up into the hills where he said the entrance of the secret way was hidden. He led us from a distance, carrying a crimson banner on a stall that we might see to follow.

"Many of our women rode with us. All you have seen here were in that doomed caravan. We rode and rode, through winding ways in the hills, following the red flag in the dawn. We rode a long, long way, for a long, long while, wondering why the sun rose no higher. We began to suspect magic after a time.

"I was a skilled magician even then, though I had much to learn. Presently I knew there was evil in the air, and I persuaded Guillaume to call a halt. We sent esquires ahead to ask of him who carried the flag where we were going and why it took so long.

"After a time the esquires came back, white-faced, carrying the crimson banner. There had been none, they said, beneath it. The flag itself had led us, flying like a great crimson bird through the dawn. We found no men but

ourselves in all those hills, in all that misty dimness.

“Well, there was nothing to be done, then. We tried to retrace our steps, but we were lost. We were not to see our own land again, nor the friends we had left behind. We were never to look upon Jerusalem nor upon our homes. We were not to see the blue skies, and in that misty dawn the sun never rose again.

“We built this castle here, as you see it. All the land around us I think—I believe—drifts slowly past the anchor of these hills. In those days there was a strange, swarthy people who came through the fog and traded with us, food for trinkets and labor for a horse or two. We could not speak their tongue nor they ours. Eventually they ceased to come. I think their land drifted too far away.

“By then I had learned more than the people of my own land had ever guessed at. For this is a place of strange power, William Boyce. For him who knows how to look, and when, and where, much wisdom lies open for the taking. I was able to feed and clothe us through powers I had never dreamed of at home. This is a world of magic.”

“Magic?” Boyce said, his voice tinged with disbelief.

“To us, yes,” Tancred nodded. “Because we know only a part of the laws that make such things possible. If we knew all those laws, it would be the science you speak of, not magic. I have learned many things here. . . I think that there are many worlds. And each has different physical laws. What is possible in some is impossible in others.

“It may be that this is a central world where others converge, so that the lores of many such worlds are mingled here, where there is no time, and where space itself may move. Because we know so little of these alien, strange sciences, we call them—sorcery.”

Boyce nodded. He could understand that. Even on Earth, different physical areas had different laws—if you didn’t know the answer. Water boils at different temperatures at sea level and far above it. Rubber is pliable under normal conditions, but at sub-zero temperatures it is brittle, and in Death Valley it melts. If you know the physical laws that caused these phenomena, you called it science.

And if you didn’t know—it was magic!

“You built this castle,” Boyce prompted. “Then?”

Tancred’s shrug was eloquent.

“After we had finished, we woke one morning to find the crimson banner flying at our donjon-height. There is magic in that banner, but no magic I know how to combat. In a way, perhaps it protects us. We have lost three men who tried to cut it down. Its redness may be the blood of those who have tried in ages past.

“We never knew whose power it was that sent us here. The magician of the

black castle is another mystery among all the unanswered mysteries of our lives. And for the most part, our people have ceased to question. There is no day or night here, though we count the hours and call them days, and we sleep and call it night.

“But time itself stands still. There is no way to explain that to you, or how it is we can count the hours and days, and still remain ignorant of the years. Something in the air wipes our minds clean of memory when we try to recognize time as once we knew it. This is an eternal present. We grow no older. We never die of age or sickness.”

Tancred sighed deeply and the stroking hand paused upon his beard. The black eyes were veiled.

“There must be ways in and out of this world,” Boyce said. “I came, for one. And you say I am not the first. And someone, somehow, must have come out of here into my own world and time.”

Tancred nodded.

“There are ways. After we had been here—I cannot say how long—and after enough wisdom had come to me, I discovered how to open the paths outside. If I had learned that sooner, we might have been saved. But it was too late then. Two of our men went through despite my warnings, and when they had passed the gateway they fell into dust.

“All their years came on them in the flicker of an eye and they were in that instant as they would have been had they dwelt in their own world all the time that had passed. So we knew then that there was no returning for us. You, perhaps, could go back, unless you wait too long. But I think it would avail you little. Your problem is here, William Boyce. And here I think you must fight it out.”

He slept. In his mind, something urged him to sleep and not to listen. He was still weary and sleep came easily. And how can a man fight the commands that rise from the center of his own brain?

Voices woke him.

“Hush—du Boyce sleeps. Speak softly.”

He recognized Sir Guillaume’s heavy whisper in reply and lay quiet, wondering if he should let the two men know he was awake.

Tancred, apparently still seated in the window, was speaking.

“Guillaume, you’re a reckless fool. You know you must not do it.”

“I do as I please,” Guillaume growled. “If the plan works, we may all be saved. If it fails, I’ll suffer for it alone.”

“Perhaps not alone. Have you thought you may return to us as Hugh de Mandois returned? How do you know what they may do to you if they catch you in the City?”

“I tell you, Tancred, I know what I’m doing. It will not be the first trip I’ve

made into the City. I have my own friends there now. Men who know me—or think they do—by another name. A turncoat from Kerak is a prize for the City spies. They'll buy all the information I give and beg for more. You knew my work there, Tancred. You never said no before. Why now? Since Hugh de Mandois, I feel more eager than ever to make this attempt."

"Because of Hugh, my friend. Because I know now how deep their powers go. Never before have they worked a spy into our midst in the very likeness of ourselves. How can we trust you, Guillaume, even if you do come back?"

"You have the Oracle," Guillaume said gruffly.

Tancred did not speak for a moment. When he did, his voice was soft and Boyce thought he heard sorrow in it.

"Yes," he said. "Yes—we have the Oracle."

"Very well, then. I see no cause for waiting. Two attacks from the City in so short a time must mean they plan to move upon us with all their forces. I say, learn what we can from them whatever the cost may be. If I risk my neck, who's to forbid me in Kerak? Not you nor anyone!"

"You risk more than your life, Guillaume," Tancred said.

There was no answer but a snort.

"Very well." Tancred's voice was level. "You are master here."

Heavy feet crossed the floor. The door opened and closed. Lying with closed eyes, Boyce heard Tancred sigh. He thought of one question that he meant to ask, but it did not seem to him that just now was the moment to ask it. He wanted to know more of the ice-pale girl whom the Crusaders called the Oracle, who and what she was, and why Tancred spoke to her with gentleness and heard her name with such sorrow in his voice.

CHAPTER VI

The Sleeping Spell

In Kerak Castle time stood still. But space around it flowed slowly by. Now that Boyce knew, he thought he could see the slow, slow ebbing past his window. The City itself, Tancred had told him, had drifted out of some distant foggy region into their valley. In time—no, in the passage of space, not time—it would float on and each citadel would forget the other.

But now, like enemy ships passing each other in neutral waters, they were engaged in battle and only the destruction of one—or both—or the widening of space between them could make an end to the conflict.

Guillaume had gone. Boyce knew it only because he missed the arrogant, deep-voiced presence on his convalescent journeys about the castle. No one would answer his questions when he inquired after his namesake. Godfrey had vanished too. Even Tancred had withdrawn and spent most of the waking hours locked in his towerheight, busy with secrets of his own. No man or woman in Kerak, except Tancred himself, knew what lay behind that tower door.

“He had a pool of water there,” one of the castle women whispered to Boyce when he spoke casually of the room. “No one knows how, but he uses it in his magic. And they say he has mirrors in his room that show a man his own thoughts.

“Voices come out of the room when we know only Tancred is within, and sometimes very sweet singing, like the voices of angels. And once a strange little beast, bright gold, with a blue halo around it, escaped under the door and ran down the stairs. The boy who caught it burnt his hands on the halo.”

Boyce had no way of guessing how much time went by before the morning of the Silence. It was very curious how impossible it was to measure time in this grey world. One could make a tally of the hours and still be helpless to reckon them up in intervals of longer than a week or two. Time was too slippery for the mind to grasp.

But one morning—though there was neither night nor morning in Kerak—Boyce woke to an awareness of profound silence. He sat up in his canopied bed and listened, bewildered, oddly sure that it was the silence itself that had awakened him. Silence and a—sense of pressure in the air.

He dressed rapidly and ran down the twisting stairs to the great hall of the castle, where at this hour the trestle tables should be set up and the castle folk gathered noisily at breakfast.

There were men and women in the hall, but they were not noisy. They lay silent in attitudes like those of puppets dropped in mid-stage when the hands of the puppet-master failed. Some had fallen over loads of wood brought to feed the great fire that should now be roaring up the chimney instead of smouldering in sullen ash beneath the stone hood of the fireplace.

Some lay with broken dishes and spilled food beside them. The dogs stretched silent in the rushes. Hawks in feathered hoods clasped their perches along the wall, rigid as hawks of stone.

Boyce stared in bewilderment over the silent room. Nothing moved—and yet it seemed to him that the air itself was in motion. It was as if people went by him unseen, brushing his shoulder in passing but weightless as the air they displaced. And there was a strange, sweet, pungent odor in the castle—very faint, nothing he had ever smelled before.

“Magic,” he whispered to himself, without any reason whatever. “The smell of magic!” He needed no reason for that thought. It came unbidden to his mind and he knew that he was not mistaken.

These people were not dead. They slept. He went among them anxiously, shaking the sleepers by the shoulder, calling their names. No one stirred. He dashed cold water in the face of a serving wench who slumbered beside her pitcher. She did not even sigh. It was a magical slumber and no power, he realized at last, but the power of him who had cast the spell could waken these people from the depths of enchantment in which they lay.

Alarm grew in him as he went through the silent castle, finding no waking man or woman or animal as he went. Only Boyce himself moved and was awake. And that in itself was frightening. There was a purpose so sure and grim behind all that had been happening to him since he broke the crystal window and heard the Huntsman laugh—no, since before that. Since the beginning of the year he had lost.

In all that while, he sensed now, he had been moving inexorably along some path predestined for him by an unseen planner. Nothing happened to him that did not move him nearer whatever relentless goal the planner meant him to reach.

Today, he thought, he had come to a milestone of that progress. Today, surely, he alone of all the castle was awake for a purpose not his own. The air whispered with the passage of invisible people as he went up floor by floor, searching the silent building.

Tancred, in the topmost tower, he did not seek until the last. He was not sure about Tancred. In that room of magic, there must surely have been a screen to protect the castle’s wisest man from the onslaught of the City.

Up and up Boyce went through the sleeping castle. “Sleeping Beauty,” he thought. “Sleeping Beauty in the enchanted castle—a spell like this. I wonder—it might have been just such a castle. And there may be more precedents than we know for the old tales. Sleeping Beauty—”

He paused on the stairs. Until that moment he had not thought of the real sleeper in this castle. Whether Kerak waked or slept or lay under an all-embracing enchantment, the Oracle would surely stand as she always stood, locked in her strange sleep.

Tancred had told him nothing of her. And the rest of the garrison folk were too much in awe of this marble girl to say even what little they knew. “I’ll try it, anyhow,” he thought. “I’ll go to her and ask—”

In the center of his brain that small, coiled, alien censor seemed to stir to life. Weariness that had not let him listen when Tancred spoke of certain things. *Something* was not willing for Boyce to speak with the Oracle.

But this time he fought it. This time he would not surrender. A deadly weariness weighted his limbs as he climbed, but he set his jaw and climbed grimly on.

“You,” he thought, “whoever you are—this time you’ve got to fight.”

Was it that nameless, formless being who had moved him like a pawn on the chessboard for the forgotten year in his own world and the uncountable days he had spent in this? Had that chess-player taken up a citadel in the center of Boyce’s own brain?

“If you have,” he promised doggedly, “from now on, you’re going to have trouble with me.”

Weariness was a weight like death itself on his shoulders. His eyelids drooped. Sleep was in the castle, brimming it from barbican to donjonheight. He was all but drowning in it. The stone stairs wavered before him like stairs seen under water.

But the weariness in itself spurred him on. For now he knew he had guessed correctly. They had left him awake for a purpose of their own when they deluged Kerak with sleep. But if he meant to fight, then he too must slumber while they accomplished whatever deadly thing they planned.

He would not sleep. The stairs were mountains under his stumbling feet. His brain swam with the fragments of dreams. But grimly, step by step, his feet carried his reeling body on. And at last, after a time more fluid even than normal even in this floating world, the stairs no longer rose under him.

Here was the hall of the Oracle. And there, far away, hung the purple curtains netted with silver threads. Far, far away, down an endless corridor that dissolved before him. . . .

He had no memory of walking that hall. He knew his relentless body must

have carried his spinning head forward, but he did not know at the time what went on. He only knew, at the last, that something soft touched his outstretched hand, waking him out of a troubled nightmare.

For this moment, at least, he was his own man again. Sharply and clearly the world came back into focus and he was awake once more. The castle still brimmed all around him with sleep and the smell of magic, and the air now and then swirled as if invisible beings went quickly by. But Boyce, at last, was vividly alive.

He put out a firm hand and pulled the curtain back.

There was the cage of fire, alive and softly humming with its own vitality—and within it, the marble girl. It had not occurred to him to wonder if he would find her here. To his mind she was as fixed as a statue in her niche, and he was not surprised to find that so far as the eye could tell she had not moved or breathed or spoken since that hour in this same hall when the hand of the enemy had last fallen upon Kerak.

Now, in the presence of the enemy again, with the hall swimming in alien magic, Boyce stood quiet, breathing hard, and waited.

It seemed a long while. She stood facing him, ice-pale hands clasped before her, her ice-white hair and ice-white robes falling in unbroken lines to her feet. He felt a moment's almost irresistible temptation to put out an exploring finger and touch the robe, the clasped hands, to learn if he could whether she and the robe were of the same marble, if this were a statue or an image of half-living wax or a woman incredibly empty of life.

He did not quite dare. He stood watching the closed eyes, the closed lips with their line of pure, flawless beauty as inhuman as the beauty of a stone image. And he saw, almost imperceptibly, the lips part.

“What do you ask of me?” the cold, clear, distant voice inquired.

And for a moment, hearing that voice he was struck as he had not been struck before by his utter loneliness here. It took this voice from the chill, inhuman lips to remind him most clearly that he was the only living, waking human in Kerak—unless Tancred had been spared.

All around him the air flowed with hostile magic. The castle was a great chalice brimmed with sleep, a tomb for the half-dead slumberers whose lives hung upon the caprice of the conquering City. Only he stood here alive and awake, and all his hopes were pinned on this marble being which was surely neither awake nor alive.

“Tell me what to do to save Kerak,” he said, his voice a little unsteady.

If she understood, she gave no sign. He was assuming, somehow, that she knew what was happening around her, that the closed eyes did not need mortal vision to tell that closed and marble brain of Kerak's danger. He

wondered if she cared at all.

In the silence, watching those closed lids, he thought the air had begun to shake a little, to a deliberate rhythm. It was the faintest possible pulsing through the hall, but his senses were strained to their highest pitch just now and he was almost sure of what he heard.

Then the Oracle spoke.

“Hear me,” she said in that clear, indifferent voice. “Hear me. There is one who comes to Kerak.”

Now he was sure. The strong rhythm beat out its measure and the air quivered in response. Someone was left alive then, after all. Someone who—who marched upon Kerak? For the rhythm was like the tramp of heavy feet, measured, relentless coming nearer with every succeeding beat.

“One man comes,” the Oracle told him. “The magic comes before him. He is a man who must die, or Kerak dies.” She paused. Then, with chilly indifference she said, “The man’s name is Guillaume du Bois.”

Tancred’s door was studded with iron stars. Boyce paused before it, hand lifted to knock, and listened to the heavy beat like thunder in the air that echoed the footfalls of the man who was coming to destroy Kerak. He could still not quite believe what the Oracle had told him.

His own queer, spontaneous hatred for Guillaume made him distrust his own reactions. The thought of killing Guillaume—if he could—was a dangerously exhilarating thing. But Guillaume had gone out to risk his own life for Kerak’s sake, and Guillaume was Kerak’s lord.

His knuckles on the star-studded door made hollow echoes that rolled down the hall behind him. There was no sound from beyond the door. He knocked again, and waited, while the coming footfalls of—Guillaume?—shook the air through all of sleeping Kerak.

Then Boyce lifted the latch of Tancred’s door and pushed it slowly open.

A curl of rosy smoke drifted past him as the door swung back. It smelled of flowers. Fanning it away from his face, Boyce looked into the room which no eyes but Tancred’s had ever seen since the builders left six hundred years before? An hour, a day, a century—time had no meaning in Kerak.

This was a room of magic, but its magic had not saved the man who lay here, fallen forward across a low table with his head resting on his arm and his white beard streaming across the carved edge of the table. With all of Kerak, Tancred slept. On the painted surface before him a heap of silvery ash in a black dish smouldered slowly, giving out the flowery smoke that floated in layers through the air. It shuddered rhythmically now to the increasing footfalls of him who walked toward Kerak.

“Tancred!” Boyce said hopelessly. “Tancred!”

To his amazement, the lolling head moved a little. Very slowly, with

infinite effort, the big shoulders drew themselves up and the magician rolled his head sidewise slightly and groaned.

Boyce found himself on his knees beside the low table, shaking Tancred's shoulder.

"Can you hear me?" he demanded. "Tancred, are you awake?"

He was not awake. But neither was he wholly asleep. Somehow, in the few moments between the coming of the magic and the conquering of Kerak, Tancred had managed to perform some averting spell which partly nullified the effects of slumber. Probably, Boyce thought, it was this smouldering ash that filled the room with rosy layers of cloud and the fragrance of flowers.

"Tancred!" he repeated. "Can you hear me?"

This time Tancred's eyes opened a little and his black eyes looked out through a film of sleep into Boyce's face. It was as if the mage looked at him through a curtain, standing alive and wakeful and impatient behind the veil which he could not lift.

"Shall I trust the Oracle, Tancred?" Boyce demanded urgently, shaking the black-robed shoulder. "There's a spell over Kerak—you know that? The Oracle tells me I must kill Guillaume. Does she speak the truth, Tancred?"

Light came briefly into the half-lidded eyes of the mage. The bearded lips stirred. Tancred made a mighty effort to break the bonds which magic had forged upon him. Boyce saw the veins stand out in his heavy neck, and the dark face which the suns of the Holy Land had tanned too deeply ever to fade grew livid with strain.

But he could not speak. The bonds of sleep were too heavy. He gave one last convulsive effort that lifted his head a little way off his bended arm, and Boyce saw him nod—once, twice. It was enough. He had his answer.

Then the magician's breath ran out in a sigh and he collapsed again in slumber upon the table top while the futile, flower-smelling smoke wreathed about him unnoticed.

"Kill Guillaume," Boyce heard himself saying softly in the quiet room.

The air shuddered around him. No—this time, not the air alone. The floor shook underfoot. There was the sound of heavy boots on stone, and each footfall made the whole of enchanted Kerak tremble to its foundation.

Suddenly Boyce felt his heart beginning to thud in quickening beats that matched the approaching steps; the breath was thick in his throat and exultation filled him as the enchanted sleep brimmed in Kerak Castle. His hatred for Guillaume was a tangible thing. He knew now, in a flash of understanding, that he had lived every hour in Kerak toward this one moment—toward the killing of Guillaume. For that purpose, it seemed to him now, he had been born, and lived to this one exultant hour.

There was no reason behind it. Dimly he knew that it must have been foreordained to happen so—or why was only he awake in Kerak when the destroyer came? But he would not think of it now. He would not try to reason why Kerak's lord had come back to Kerak as its destroyer. Reason was not in him. Hatred was all that remained, and the exhilaration of battle.

The footsteps, like the tread of a giant shaking the stairs they mounted, were very near him now. The air was thunderous with its echoes of that tread. Dimly Boyce thought there were moving shapes about him, brushing his garments as they went invisibly by. He had no time to wonder.

There was a sword lying across Tancred's table, close by his limp, outflung hand. Boyce snatched it up, stripped the sheath away, balanced the great blade in his fist. And as he did so, a sort of electrical shudder ran up his arm from the hilt, and Tancred, lying across the table behind him, stirred and sighed. The sword moved of itself in Boyce's grasp. It made an arch through the flower-scented air and brought itself up into position.

It was a magical sword, he knew then.

Laughter sounded in the hall, deep, wild laughter that was not wholly Guillaume's. More subtlety was in the sound than Guillaume had ever known. Then, for the first time since enchantment had fallen upon Kerak, Boyce remembered Hugh de Mandois, and how strangely changed he had come back to the Crusaders.

CHAPTER VII

False Crusader

The star-studded door flew open with a crash that echoed and re-echoed in Tancred's tower-room. The rosy smoke-layers swirled wildly. Guillaume's great bulk filled the doorway. He was laughing as he came, in deep, shaking gusts that Boyce thought must ring through all of the silence and the magic that brimmed Kerak.

Guillaume's huge sword, bare in his mighty scarred fist, flashed in the dim air of the chamber. His face was not mirthful. Though he laughed, it was his mouth alone that laughed. His eyes had the veiled look that Tancred's showed. A shadow was over his arrogant, stubborn face, and it was a terrifying shadow.

"*Tancred!*" Guillaume roared, in a voice that should have wakened every sleeper in the castle. "Tancred, this is the hour you die!"

He took one ponderous step forward—the whole room shook to that inhuman tread—and the great two-edged sword swung up over the mage's head.

In some remote corner of his brain Boyce knew suddenly and certainly that this was not the true Guillaume. The enmity between them was an enmity of the blood, a bond like kinship which neither could have broken by himself.

The Guillaume who had left Kerak would never have ignored Boyce standing here with a sword in his hand, to roar threats at a sleeping Tancred. No—this Guillaume was not the same man who left the castle.

Of its own will the blade in Boyce's grasp swept up in a glittering arc. And it rose not an instant too soon. Guillaume's sword was already falling, and in another moment the mage's head would have rolled from its shoulders across the painted table.

There was a clash in mid-air like the clash of meeting thunder-bolts. Fire sprang out as steel screamed against steel. Guillaume thundered a ponderous curse in a tongue Boyce had never heard before (the tongue they speak in the Enchanters' City? he wondered wildly) and the great blade rose again, shearing through the wreaths of colored smoke above Tancred's head.

It was a strange battle. They were iron men in the days of the Crusaders. The mighty swords they swung were so heavy a modern man could scarcely lift them in both hands. Magic alone made it possible for Boyce to meet the terrible, crashing blows Guillaume was raining upon his blade. Magic and the cunning of the sword which fought of its own enchanted will—and the fact that Guillaume never once really turned his blows against Boyce himself.

Guillaume—walking in magic, and with the shadow on his face that was not wholly the face of Guillaume—had come for one purpose only to Kerak. He had come to kill Tancred the Mage. All his sword-strokes were bent upon the sleeping Tancred. It was Boyce's part to keep the steel shield of the magical blade between Guillaume's and the magician. He did not have to fight to protect himself, but the fight to protect Tancred was a desperate battle indeed.

Lightning leaped through the chamber whenever the great blades screamed across one another. And Guillaume's footsteps thundered impossibly upon the flagstones, every tread shaking the whole castle. He was more than a man—he was a sorcerer's godling, walking in thunder and wielding the lightning. But he fought blindly, and he walked blindly, and it was not Guillaume behind that arrogant, shadowed face.

The end came suddenly. Boyce knew he had no part in it. He felt the blade he wielded shift itself in his grip, leap as if with abrupt triumph and dart at last in a flickering lateral stroke that snaked in under Guillaume's blow and struck the Crusader hard, edge-on, against the corded thickness of his neck.

It was a clean blow. It should have lifted Guillaume's head clear of his shoulders. But it did not. Sparks leaped out as if the blade had struck steel instead of muscle and flesh. There was a dazzling coruscation of jagged lights, and a ringing sound like a gong struck heavily, and Guillaume cried out in a strange, breathless voice, "*Dieu lo vult! Dieu—*" as if that blow were what he had prayed for.

Then everything shifted inexplicably, indescribably, before Boyce's eyes. The chamber that yet rang with lightning and thunder from the battle of enchanted blades fell suddenly silent. Guillaume was falling.

He fell slowly. The two-edged sword dropped from his slackened grip and clanged upon the flagstones. He sank to his knees and very deliberately seemed to float forward until he lay face-down upon the floor. Boyce heard the great sigh he gave as he collapsed.

It was as if deafness had suddenly been lifted from Boyce's ears, then—for Kerak Castle awoke.

And on the painted table, Tancred sighed and stirred. All through the castle beneath them were stirrings and startled voices as the slumberers awoke. The air no longer shuddered to every motion Guillaume made. He was a normal man again, with only a human's powers. And looking down at him, Boyce was surprised—but not entirely surprised—to see that from his neck a broken collar hung.

It was a collar of glass.

Tancred rose. Boyce, turning to face him, saw that the magician was breathing heavily as if he and not Boyce had fought that battle of the

enchanted swords. Sweat was bright upon his brown forehead above the meeting brows, and his great chest heaved.

“It *was* you,” Boyce said softly, holding out the sword.

Tancred nodded. He was still almost too breathless to speak. He took the weapon from Boyce’s hand and drew a finger down the length of the blade, and Boyce saw something—some brightness, some strange aliveness—fade and go out in the wake of the moving finger.

“Yes,” Tancred said. “But without you, I must have failed. My thanks to you, du Boyce.” He slid the sword back into its scabbard and dropped it on the table. “Now as for him,” he said, nodding toward the prostrate Guillaume, “—as for him—I wonder.”

He dropped to one knee beside the fallen man, reached out a cautious finger to the shattered glass collar which had stopped that deadly final blow. He touched it—and there was a clear, ringing sound like a wineglass shattering. The collar leaped of its own volition and flew into a glittering powder, and was gone.

Guillaume stirred and moaned.

Gently Tancred turned the Crusader over. Guillaume’s head fell back and his thick throat worked convulsively.

“I—it was not I, Tancred—they sent,” he whispered.

“I know, Guillaume. No matter now. You’re safe.”

Guillaume scowled and shook his head a little, with infinite effort. “No—not safe. Godfrey—I must go back—”

Tancred laid a ringed hand over the Crusader’s mouth.

“Hush, Guillaume. You were possessed. You have no strength left even to tell us what happened. Wait.”

He rose wearily. Boyce, watching, was aware now for the first time of the strangeness of this tower-room. Until this moment he had been too preoccupied with the urgency of what was happening to see any more than the essentials of the place. Now he saw—the magical things.

There was the pool the castle woman had whispered of. It lay in a little alcove on the far side of the room, round, framed in bright tiles, and a tiny tide of its own surged slowly outward in rings from the center of the circle. And magic hung over it. Boyce could not have said why, but he could sense it in the air above the pool.

Shelves lining the walls were thick with things Boyce had no name for. He saw books in many languages, some of them he was sure not earthly languages. A harp hung on one wall, its bright strings rippling a little now and then as if invisible hands stroked them, giving out the faintest possible humming music, almost below the level of hearing. And in one louvred box in

a corner he thought he caught a flicker of motion occasionally, as if some small being moved inside.

Tancred took a crystal goblet from a shelf. It was empty when he touched it, but by the time he had turned and bent to Guillaume, the goblet was half filled with something translucently red and pungent-smelling.

“Drink this,” Tancred said, kneeling and lifting Guillaume’s head. The Crusader obeyed. He seemed too exhausted to move of his own will or to question anything the mage might say. It was an unnatural exhaustion. There was about it something almost like the utter emptiness of the Oracle.

But after he had drunk, a little life came back into his face. He lifted himself weakly on one elbow and looked up urgently at Tancred. His voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

“Godfrey—” he said. “Prisoner—in the City. Help me, Tancred. I must go back to him.”

“Your strength is very little, Guillaume,” Tancred told him. “It will not last long. Tell us what happened while you can.”

Guillaume closed his eyes for a moment before he spoke.

“We went into the City as we had planned. I met my—my acquaintances there. They were eager to buy the secrets I offered them. We bargained. I—knew there was one close to the councils of the Sorcerer King. I waited for him—too long. I never saw his face, but his name is Jamai—he is a very evil man.”

Guillaume’s voice faded. He waited, gathering his strength, and then went on in a weaker voice.

“There are—factions in the City. The King—would not destroy us utterly. He hates us, Tancred, but for some—strange reason—he would destroy us one by one, not all together and Kerak with us. Jamai is his chief enchanter. He hates us too, and he has no scruples.

“Do you know, Tancred—there is a bond between Kerak and the City? Some bond that keeps the City from drifting on its way? The lands do move. The City has its course, like a ship. Jamai would be off on that course. He longs to cut the bond, whatever it may be, that holds them here.”

Tancred nodded.

“I think I can guess what it is.”

“He—will destroy Kerak,” Guillaume went on. “All this was—his doing. The King—did not guess. I was mistaken about Jamai. I tried to bargain—secretly. He took us both—Godfrey and me, I must go back for him.” Guillaume was silent for a moment, and his eyes clouded as he looked back into the past.

“He is hostage,” he said. “For my success here. I must release him, Tancred. He lies in—a strange prison. Strange—I cannot tell you how

strange.”

“How was this magic done?” Tancred asked. “Do you know that?”

Guillaume nodded weakly.

“The collar,” he said. “I would have sworn it could not be—that I should wear the collar of a master. But I wore it. And the spell—was simple. Sleep ran out before me—as I came. It was not I. . . I think Jamai—or his mind—rode mine as a man rides a horse. He saw through my eyes. Until the collar broke—it was not I.”

He struggled to sit up.

“Now I must go back,” he said. “Godfrey—”

Tancred put out a hand and pressed him back.

“One will go for Godfrey,” he said. “Not you, Guillaume. But Godfrey shall be saved if mortal man can save him. Rest assured of that.”

Guillaume was not to be assuaged so simply. He lay back in obedience to Tancred’s hand, but his eyes were fiercely questioning.

“Who?” The voice was only a breath.

Across the Crusader’s body Tancred’s eyes met Boyce’s.

“The answer to your problems, du Boyce, does not lie in Kerak,” he said.

“I have known that for many days. Will you seek it in the City?”

Startled, Boyce glanced at Guillaume, meeting the glare of his own eyes looking back out of that arrogant face so much like his.

“You can serve yourself and us,” Tancred went on. “If you take up the links of Guillaume’s plot I think you may find your way more easily than if you go alone. For only you can go—as Guillaume.”

Blue mist swirled about his knees as he walked slowly across the sandy plains between Kerak and the Sorcerers’ City. Boyce drew the blue cloak about him more warmly, for this air was damp and cold. Beneath the cloak he wore tunic and hose from the store-rooms of Kerak, and across his chest the red Cross of the Crusader blazed.

It was the cross men wore who had set their faces toward Jerusalem six centuries ago. None in Kerak carried the cross upon their backs to proclaim the pilgrimage completed, though all but Tancred still cherished the hope of doing so. For them, time still lingered where they had left it to step into this cloudy oblivion in which no sun rose or set.

Boyce touched his face experimentally for the hundredth time. He was not yet sure how Tancred’s skill had managed to engrave there the arrogance which marked Guillaume’s most sharply in contrast to his own. The drooping moustache of the Crusader was all that remained of the golden beard which had grown during the days—the weeks, the months, perhaps—of his convalescence. To the eye, he passed as Guillaume.

And he was going deliberately—like a fool, he thought—into the same trap which had sprung on Guillaume. He wondered a little why he was risking so much for the sake of these people who were nothing to him except exiles from the same world. True, they had taken him in. He owed them gratitude for that.

But he went into dangers now too deadly to have names. Remembering Hugh de Mandois, he shuddered. To be possessed by a scaled demon such as Hugh's—to be ripped apart like a garment, body and bone, when the demon chose to stand forth. . . .

No, he had no duty to the Crusaders that could force him to risk a fate like that. He risked it of his own will. He risked it because of—gratitude?—kinship? He knew it was not true. He would have gone if Kerak had never stood here on its crags, if Godfrey and Guillaume were dust in the world of their birth.

He must have gone, and he knew it—because of a woman whose face he did not know, a woman who had looked briefly over her shoulder at him in a fragment of memory and smiled beneath her iron crown.

She dwelt, he thought, in this city before him. Tancred had told him that much. And Tancred had told him of the bond which linked Kerak to the City.

“You have wondered about the Oracle, du Boyce,” Tancred had said an hour ago, sitting in a high-backed chair in his tower room and turning a cup of wine in his jeweled fingers. “Before you go, I think you must hear all I know of her story. She is—” He hesitated, looking down into the wine. “She is the child of my only child,” Tancred said finally.

Boyce straightened in his chair, muffling an involuntary sound of amazement.

“Then she *is* alive!” he said. “I thought—”

“Alive?” Tancred sighed. “I do not know. I have learned much about science and about magic since we came to this land, and I have seen much in my mirrors of secret things in the City. But about this one thing I know almost nothing. I know only that some terrible wrong has been done, and I think it is resolved, for good or evil, the bond will always hold between Kerak and the City. Unless one or the other is destroyed. . . .”

He sipped his wine.

“Drink,” he urged Boyce. “You will need strength for your journey. The lands between here and the City walls are cold and the mist is like floating rain. Drink your wine and listen.

“The City was much farther away from here when my daughter, who had come to us from Normandy on the Crusade rode out one day and lost herself in the mists. It was the last we saw of her for a long while.” His face grew grim, the black brows meeting above the black eyes.

“Those of the City took her,” he said after a pause. “The Sorcerer King

beheld her, and because she was beautiful, he kept her in his palace. He had many slaves. To do him full justice, I believe he held her in high honor. She was a very lovely woman. She bore one child to him—a daughter. Then she died.

“I have never known how. Perhaps poison. Perhaps the bowstring, or some more mysterious way. Or perhaps she sickened, and died of her illness. I never knew. I saw her but once before her death—briefly, outside the City walls.

“The child lived on in her father’s palace, and grew and became a woman. It is very strange, that—” He shook his head, the emeralds glittering in his ears beneath the turban. “Time goes so differently there and here. I think time moves and is counted in the City.

“I know my daughter’s daughter grew to womanhood while here in Kerak there was no time at all. Young pages among us now were young pages before my grandchild’s birth, and now she—she stands in her fiery bower, a woman grown.”

He poured more wine.

“What happened in the City I do not know. She was her father’s favorite, and I think some quarrel came up between them, and for punishment, perhaps, he made her as she is now.

“I only know she came to us like a ghost, like a marble woman, walking with closed eyes and clasped hands, white as snow, and as silent. Some instinct seemed to lead her to her kinsmen when she could no longer endure the City of her birth.

“We took her in and tried to tend her, but she asked only for a room in which she could dwell quietly. We gave her the room you have seen. And when we came in the morning, she stood as she stands now, in that cage of singing fire. She spoke to us from it, with the voice of an oracle.

“There is much power in her. With those closed eyes she can see into men’s souls. Wisdom is in her, but locked behind that silence.

“She is not always caged. There are times when the fire dies down and vanishes, and then she walks from the castle into the mist and is gone awhile. I think—I cannot be sure, but I think she meets someone down among the plains. But always she returns to her room and the bower of fire takes shape around her again.

“It is my belief that so long as she dwells here the bond between her and her father, the King of the Sorcerers’ City, will anchor them to us as a ship is anchored. And if what Guillaume tells us is true, the King will not have all of Kerak destroyed while his child remains here. He would gladly kill us all—but not his daughter.

“That is why I think there is hope for your mission to the City. If Jamai, who is the King’s minister, were king himself, my hopes would be small. I can

tell you no more than this. As far as I may, I will watch you. It may be I can help. But I think you came here for a purpose—led by what magic I cannot guess—and I am sure the answer to your coming lies in the City.”

He drained his cup again.

“Do what you can for us there, du Boyce. Remember you have a link with us in Kerak too. Your likeness to Guillaume is no accident.”

A faint drift of music through the mist roused Boyce from his thoughts. He looked up. Above him loomed the high walls which he had first seen from that gateway through the solid rock when he broke his way into this world. Lights gleamed from the heights of the wall. He could hear the tented roofs billow a little in the breeze from the plains and the fog was stained with bright colors where the glow fell upon it.

Boyce turned and went left along the base of the wall. There was a small gateway he must find, marked with a circle of blue lights. Guillaume had told him it was a pilgrims’ gate. Guillaume said the drifting City was for many in this unstable land a holy city, filled with altars to gods that bore strange names. Pilgrims from far away over the plains sometimes came here, by twos and threes, by caravans, sometimes alone.

Guillaume had told Boyce the word that would let him in.

“Say you come to worship *Nain*,” he said. “You need only that one name—*Nain*. Many of the pilgrims do not know the tongue the City speaks, so you will not need to know it. You can make yourself understood. The people of the streets speak a patois of which our own French tongue has become a part in the long time we have lived in Kerak.”

He hesitated, a look of bewilderment overspreading the exhaustion of his face, but he did not think that idea through. It was as well.

Kerak and the City must have lain anchored together on the drifting lands for a long time indeed, if the old French had incorporated itself into the street patois.

“You must ask the way to *Nain*’s temple,” Guillaume went on. “One will meet you there when you have done as I told you. After that—” He shrugged. “*Dieu lo vult*.”

A gateway in the wall loomed up at Boyce’s right. It was closed. Upon the panels a painted face with staring yellow eyes regarded the fog. Boyce went on by, trying to shake off the illusion that the eyes rolled to watch him pass.

The next gate was open, but the insignia painted on the back-flung leaves was a standing dragon, and something about the scaled picture reminded him forcibly of that monstrous thing which had cast aside the garment of Hugh de Mandois’ body in the hall at Kerak. He wondered what he might find

if he went in at this gateway—wondered if it was here that Hugh had entered—and passed quickly by.

The third gate was closed. A ring of blue lights glimmered on its panels. Boyce stood before it in the rolling fog, drew a deep breath.

This was the gate. Under this arch he must enter the enchanted City and find the answer to the questions which had driven him so long and so far.

He slipped his hand into his belt and touched the one thing he had brought with him from the outer world—that small, cold crystal which had cast its web of light upon a wall and opened a window for his entrance. It lay there against his side, hard, cold with a faint chill that struck through his clothing. It was his only link with *her*—nameless and faceless—and the lost year he had sought so long.

Perhaps he might find his answer soon.

He lifted his hand and knocked faintly upon the gate. There was a long silence. Then with a sighing of hinges the blue-lit door swung open.

Music drifted through it, and someone's light laughter from far away.

Boyce squared his shoulders and stepped forward.

He entered the City of Sorcerers.

CHAPTER VIII

The Called Bluff

Kerak's quarrel," Guillaume had said, "is with the Sorcerer King and the men about him. The common folk of the city know little about us and care less. You can go safely among them—or as safely as anyone may go who enters for a pilgrimage. That is not very safe, du Boyce. Go carefully."

The man who looked out of the opened gate bore out Guillaume's warning. He was a swarthy, small man with shifty eyes and a bandage around his head. He gave Boyce a look of indifferent dislike and said something in a tone of bored inquiry.

Boyce said, "*Nain.*"

The gatekeeper nodded and stood back. Boyce bent his head under the low archway and stepped into the street within.

It was a narrow street, walled by high, narrow houses. Colored lanterns hung here and there from upper windows, and the pavement was wet with fog, reflecting the lamplight. A curious city, Boyce thought, in which it must seem always just dusk, with the first lamps lighted in the streets.

This was a street of music and merrymaking, to judge by the sounds that came from the windows he passed. Most of them were set with tiny diamond-shaped panes that distorted the scenes within, but he caught glimpses of confused colors and shifting bodies and heard laughter and the smell of wine drifted from every open door. There was strange, wild music that sent its rhythm echoing involuntarily through his mind.

The people on the street were a mixed lot. Tall, fair men in striped robes that billowed around their long strides—short men, red-skinned, in turbans and tight-fitting coats—women with perfectly transparent veils across their faces, who smiled indiscriminately upon every passerby—women the color of polished ebony, who wore broadswords and swaggered as they walked in their scarlet tunics down the middle of the street.

Boyce, tall and fair-haired, in his blue cloak and scarlet-crossed tunic, had no reason to feel conspicuous in that crowd. No doubt there were symbols upon the garments of many others with meanings as esoteric as those on his, drawn, perhaps, from the worlds as unknown here as Earth.

He passed a little man in grey rags, who carried a striped paper lantern over his shoulder on a long stick, and touched the man's arm, saying, "*Nain?*"

The man smiled at him and nodded up the street, indicating a turn at the next corner. Boyce thanked him in English, grinned to himself to hear how

fantastic the familiar tongue sounded in this dim, wet street, and went on.

Twice more he asked his way, once of a grim-faced woman wearing a horned helmet and a green velvet robe that swept the ground, once of a man in armor whose plates glinted like mirrors in the light of the colored lanterns. On the third try, he found the temple he sought.

It was a big stone building, lightless, without windows, standing in the center of a square. The streets parted around it, flowing noisily with colorful crowds, but the temple of Nain maintained its austere silence even in the midst of that rioting crowd.

Boyce climbed the grey stone steps and paused under the archway at their top to look down a long room that twinkled around its walls with row upon mounting row of colored globes, thousands upon thousands of them, each burning in its paper lantern upon shelves that lined the walls. There were others here, a throng as motley as the street crowds, strolling and whispering through the big empty room. If there were ceremonies in honor of *Nain*, evidently they had not yet begun.

Boyce went straight down the room toward a translucent wall at the far end. Guillaume had said there was a magical tree growing there. He found it was a tree of glass, espaliered flat against the crystal wall. Clusters of luminous, richly colored fruit dangled within the worshiper's reach.

Calmly Boyce reached up and pulled a round blue fruit the size and shape of a pear. It vibrated in his hand for a moment, as alive and resilient as something of blown glass. Then there was a tiny exploding sound and the fruit vanished, leaving only a drop of blue moisture in his palm.

Someone touched his arm from behind. He whirled a little too quickly. It was a brown girl, barefooted, bare limbed, with gold bands on her wrists and ankles and a heavy gold collar locked around her throat.

She said, "Come," in the old French, spoken with an accent that might be the City patois, and led him back down the room toward a side door. They came out upon another street, lined with great crouching stone beasts that shone with the moisture of the fog.

The beasts had lanterns around their necks and the crowd went by under their stone jowls in the swinging light of the lamps. The brown girl beckoned to Boyce and then hurried down the steps on soundless bare feet and plunged into the throng.

There was something wrong with this crowd. He was not sure just what, but he saw how the people kept glancing over their shoulders uneasily. Their noise was a little hysterical now. Sometimes they looked up, into the misty sky, and presently Boyce heard a thin, shrill keening overhead that was louder than the noise of the crowd, and grew louder still as he paused to listen.

The effect upon the people was electrical. Faces turned up, suddenly pale

in the uncertain light of the lanterns. There was a little echoing moan that seemed to run like a breeze over the whole crowd, a sound coming in one breath from every throat there. And then, like magic, the crowd began to melt away.

Doors opened all along the street to receive them. Here and there someone beat impatiently at closed panels, calling in a low voice to those within. No one called loudly. It seemed to Boyce that within a moment after the first shrilling sounded from overhead, there was no one left upon the street.

The bright crowd had scurried by under the stone images and then, in a twinkling, the wet street was empty except for a straggler or two who glanced curiously at Boyce standing there alone and then vanished into the nearest shelter.

There was a patter of feet on stone. Boyce looked down. The brown girl was motioning impatiently to him.

“Come,” she said urgently. “Come—hurry! There’s no time!”

He went uncertainly toward her over the wet pavement. It was not fast enough to suit his guide. She swooped down on him, seized his arm and pulled him along at a run toward a door behind one of the stone beasts.

“What is it?” Boyce demanded. “I don’t understand—”

“*They* come,” the girl said. “Hurry! In here—quick, before *They* reach this street!”

The door creaked on its hinges. Within was darkness and Boyce remembered Guillaume’s warning to go carefully. He held back a little, not sure whether it would be more dangerous to enter or to stay outside.

Then from the street before him a little breath of cold air blew past, fluttering his cloak. It was a cold that seared like heat. And terror came with it—terror and such a revulsion as he had not known since the moment in the fog when he first came to this land and saw from a hilltop the dark procession winding down toward the City gates.

It was *They* indeed—those who walked among a twinkle of lights and a twinkle of tiny bells and a cloud of darkness that veiled them mercifully from sight. *They* who went upright like men, and were not men—*They* whom he knew he had seen once with the woman whose name and face he could not remember—or forget.

The old sickness came over him when he thought of Them. He turned swiftly and stumbled down three steps and fell against the door the brown girl held for him. He was shaking hard. He felt the cold burning down the street as the door shut behind him, heard the first thin tinkling of the bells. And the high shrilling from overhead was like a ringing in the ears, maddening, impossible to shake away.

The door shut out most of the noise. It was dark now, but a firm hand took his elbow and he hurried down an unseen hall beside the pattering steps of his guide.

What kind of a woman is it I'm hunting? he wondered, *when all I know about her is that she once went familiarly with Them?*

"The King summoned Them again," the girl in the dark beside him volunteered, speaking in her strangely accented patois. "There must be strange things happening among the tents tonight. A rumor is that the lords have attacked that castle in the mountains you can sometimes see from our walls."

So there was some connection, then, Boyce thought. Perhaps at last the pattern was beginning to click into place, and his own part in it might come clear.

A door opened before him upon light and smoke and voices. The brown girl pushed him through.

He saw first a lamp hanging from the center of the ceiling over a broad table. The table was tiled into intricate patterns, and some sort of game seemed to be in process upon it. A circle of men bent above the counters, their faces in shadow because of the hanging lamp.

One of them was laughing and sweeping counters in. They were carved and jeweled pieces a little like chessmen, and each one rang with a different note when the players touched it.

When the door opened there was a little hush and the men looked up.

"The man from *Nain's* temple," the brown girl said.

"You're late," one of the players declared. "Have you brought what you promised?"

"Waste no time on him," someone else urged in a belligerent voice. "He's made us wait too long already. His stories are probably lies from the beginning. I say—waste no time."

Boyce looked at them blankly. Guillaume had not told him about this. The Crusader had been lying on the last brink of exhaustion and there were obviously things he was unable to recall. This must be one of them.

Obviously Guillaume had been pretending to offer secrets for sale on the castle defense or Tancred's strength or something else that the lords of the City would buy. Boyce felt a surge of anger and dismay. The risks were great enough, certainly, in his coming here at all, without walking into a trap unarmed and unwarned.

There was only one course to take. He strode forward with Guillaume's arrogant, rolling step and struck the table a blow that made all the counters jump on their squares and ring faintly together.

"By all the gods!" he roared with Guillaume's great bellow. "You'll take what I give and wait my pleasure on it!"

There was an angry murmur around the table. Chairs scraped back across the tiled floor and one man rose and threw down the counter he had been holding. It rolled across the board, jingling as it went.

“You speak with a big voice, for a traitor,” the man said. He was young, by his tone, and slender in an ankle-length robe of chain steel, slit on both sides above the knee to show red leather boots and red breeches. He carried two long daggers in his belt, and his plumed hat’s brim dipped broadly down in front to shade his eyes.

“Later we’ll brawl if you still want it. Now you’ll give us your news if we have to tear it out of you.” He glanced around the table. “Many of us would rather take it that way. I would myself.” He laughed and laid both hands on his dagger-hilts.

One of the others, a short, broad man with flaming red hair, jumped to his feet and tossed back the purple cloak he wore to show the long barbed whip coiled like a belt about his thick waist.

“Why should we pay the dog anything for his secrets?” he demanded in an unexpectedly high voice. “I know a way to make him howl! We’ll—”

A white-haired man in a white fur cloak lifted his hand placatingly.

“Friends, friends, be silent! Let the man speak.”

“Let him lie, you mean,” the red-head said sullenly. “The last time we met him and his friend they promised us Kerak on a silver tray and that was the last we saw of them. They’ve had payment already for secrets they never told us. It was wonderful how fast they vanished once they got their hands on our silver.

“Now this one comes back alone and talking as lordly as Jamai himself. How do we know where the other one is? Offering the same secrets to someone else who’ll get to Jamai before us—that’s my word on it. I’m finished. Deal with him as you will. I say—let him die.”

Boyce laughed contemptuously.

“The least talk the loudest,” he said. “I’m back among you—isn’t that proof enough of good faith?”

He wondered if it was. Evidently Guillaume and Godfrey had dealt with these men just before their capture by Jamai. And the story of that capture must be secret or he would not now be in danger for having disappeared without reason. Desperately he wondered what secrets Guillaume had meant to invent for them. If he could only have found Godfrey first.

“Enough babble, enough!” the red-haired man broke in. “I want my own answer! Will you lead us by that secret way you spoke of, dog? That I’ve paid for and I demand your word on it. Are you ready to take us secretly to Kerak when our master gives the signal?”

Recklessly Boyce said, “Yes!”

There was a drawn breath all around the table. Then the white-haired man straightened in his chair and smiled. His face was in shadow, like all the rest, but Boyce could see the triumph on it.

“Very well,” said the man. “That is good. We are ready—now!”

The red-haired man laughed, seeing Boyce’s face.

“We tricked you there! You were not expecting that. But we must go quickly, as soon as the streets have cleared.” He glanced involuntarily toward the door, and a shadow of pure revulsion touched his ruddy face.

The white-robed man stood up.

“No delay,” he said. “Or Jamai’s spies may warn him what we plan. Now as for the course we take—”

Boyce was not listening. He knew he could not go through with it. Even if he were willing to play the traitor, he could not for he knew no secret ways into Kerak, if any such existed. Also, it was no part of his vague plan to leave the City now, just as he had entered it. There was Godfrey to be rescued, for one thing. And for another—he had not yet come any nearer to the girl in the iron crown.

“Wait,” he said harshly. The men around the table were all on their feet now, tightening their belts, talking eagerly among themselves.

They turned to him expectantly, suspicious eyes gleaming in the shadow.

“This is beyond my bargain,” Boyce said. “I was not paid for such a risk as this. I’ll need more money.”

“You were paid beyond your desserts the first time,” the red man began angrily. “You—”

“I’ll be a masterless man when Kerak falls,” Boyce told them brazenly. “I must look out for myself then. I’ll need more silver for that.”

Someone who had not yet spoken laughed in the shadows.

“He betrays his lord for money and demands more because he’s masterless,” the new voice said. “I like this man, friends!” Boyce thought there had been something familiar in the voice and in the strange tone of the laughter. Later—if there was to be any such time as later for him—he would try to remember. Just now he had no time to spare.

“More money or I go nowhere,” he said stubbornly.

The red-haired man growled a curse in some odd language that sounded as if it had been made for curses. He took a purse from his belt reluctantly and threw it jingling on the table.

“There, dog. Buy yourself a new master with that, then.”

“Not enough!” Boyce sneered beneath his new moustache. “For alms like that I’d get no better man than you!”

The red man laid a freckled paw upon his whip-belt. He snarled in his blasphemous language and Boyce thought for an instant the battle would begin

there and then. But the snarl died. The man set his teeth grimly, took out another purse and flung it beside the first.

“Dogs come high in this place,” he growled. “And now—”

It was no use. They needed him too badly. Boyce would have to provoke them still farther before he could escape.

“Money or no money,” he roared suddenly, “I’ll not lead *you* to Kerak, red-head! You stay behind or the bargain’s ended. I’ve taken a dislike to the color of your hair.”

CHAPTER IX

Escape by Water

In the amazed silence, the young man in the chain mail laughed softly. “Don’t you see?” he said. “The fellow is trying to force a quarrel. He doesn’t mean to go at all!”

For a moment, no one moved. Then the white-haired man with the gentle face tossed his cloak back over one shoulder.

“I think—” he said quietly, “I think he had better die.”

There was a quick, concerted motion in the room, and Boyce heard a sound he had never heard before—a curious metallic minor note all through the crowd. It was the whine of swords drawn simultaneously from their sheaths.

The shadows were suddenly alive with the flash of bare blades. Boyce’s hand flew to his own belt and the light sword the Crusaders had given him leaped into his fist. But this was no magical blade. It was good, sharp, beautifully balanced, but he must fight this battle alone, without Tancred’s magic gripping the hilt of the sword he wielded.

The red man bellowed once, a deep sound of pure fury, and his hand flashed toward his belt. There was a ripping sound as the barbed whip uncoiled and arched through the air like a serpent with fangs along its sides.

“Now, dog—howl for your master!” His voice was choked with rage. The whip sang through the air and Boyce had an instant’s vision of his own face laid open to the bone as the lash fell.

He leaped back, groping behind him for the door. His hand found it just as the whip fell. It fell so little short of his cheek that the wind of it fanned his mustache, and he could hear the vicious whine of the barbs along the edges of the lash singing in his ear.

The door was locked.

He heard the whip strike the floor at his feet with a metallic crash of jangled barbs. He heard the redhead’s sobbing breath of fury, saw him step back and brace his thick legs wide for a second try. He saw beyond the red man the flicker of nervous blades as the others crowded tensely forward, poised to close in if the whip should fail again.

He saw the young man in chain mail, a dagger in each hand as long as a short sword, come lightly around the table toward him, walking as if on air, his whole body poised as lithely as the whip itself.

Then again the lash sang. With the motion of a snake it arched backward and seemed to hang in midair for a tense and singing moment. The red man’s

wrist curved forward and so did the hanging whip.

This time he could not avoid it. Boyce's back was against the door and the youngster in chain-mail barred the only other exit. He could feel his flesh crawl already in anticipation of that terrible clawed lash, and he knew there was no hope for him now. The adventure that had begun with the first of that lost year would end in this room with the ripping of his flesh from his bones, and he would never know the answers he had sought.

In this last moment before the lash fell he had one vivid glimpse of a scene he had remembered only dimly before. He saw a crowned girl standing before a window as delicately crystalline as a snowflake's pattern. He saw her very clearly in memory as she turned and glanced at him once across her shoulder. He saw her eyes bright with violet fire, and the whiteness of her smile and the deep crimson of her lips. He saw all the brilliance and the danger of that nearly forgotten face.

And this time, in the stress of his danger, a name rose in his mind. He did not know if he whispered it aloud or not. It couldn't matter. Nothing mattered now—not even the fact that he could speak her name—at last.

"Irathe!" he said it to himself in a passion of fury and despair. "*Irathe.*"

And then the whip came down.

Laughter—familiar laughter—sounded again from the far side of the room. And beside him, just as he saw the lash's tip leaping straight for his eyes, feet suddenly made a soft, quick thudding on the floor.

Something dazzling shot past his face. Boyce braced himself for the impact of the whip. It took him a perceptible moment to realize that the barbed blow had not fallen. Dizzy with bewilderment and surprise, he fell back a pace to the right and stared, hearing a clang from the opposite wall.

Before him on the floor lay the severed whip. A long dagger, bright in the lamplight, clattered across the floor and lay still. A thrown dagger that had flashed past his eyes to cut the whip in two.

He turned his head and saw the young man in mail poised beside him, the second dagger lifted in his hand.

"Get me that knife," the youngster said peremptorily to Boyce. "Quick! I'll put this one through the first man that moves!"

Automatically Boyce stooped and took up the blade that had saved him. Eyes still on the crowd, the youth reached out blindly for the hilt. The dagger seemed to jump into his hand, so expertly did he take it. Now he jerked his plumed head toward the door beyond him.

"You first," he said. "Quick! Outside!"

Still too amazed to question anything, Boyce slid past him against the wall and reached the other door. The youth backed after him, both throwing blades poised menacingly. His lithe body was poised as menacingly as the knives.

Boyce thought he was laughing, though he could not see his face.

He stood in the doorway a moment, his quick glance searching the room. Bare swords quivered in the light as the furious crowd about the table leaned toward him, none quite daring to be first to move. Eyes glared redly under the swinging lamp.

The youngster laughed aloud. Then with a quick motion he raised one booted leg and kicked the table over at the angry faces before him.

Boyce, catching excitement from the sound of that exultant laughter, came suddenly to life and leaned out beside his mailed rescuer. Long arm and long sword reached over the armored shoulder and Boyce slashed the chain that held the lamp.

It crashed down over the falling table. There was a wild jingling of musical counters spilled from the game-board. The light flared sharply and went out. Darkness swallowed up the room and with it the angry faces of the men inside.

“Good work,” the young man laughed across his shoulder. There was the sound of a slamming door close beside them. Then, “Run! This way!” and a hand that still held a dagger nudged his arm.

Through pitch blackness, along an echoing passage, the two fled. Behind them through the closed door a confused uproar sounded. Then Boyce saw light ahead, and realized that they were coming out upon a broad underground pier with black water on both sides of it. At the same moment he heard the door behind them burst open and the shouts of the pursuers gain suddenly in volume, echoing hollowly along the corridor they had just cleared.

“Boat here,” Boyce’s companion gasped breathlessly. “End of the pier—hurry!”

The sound of their racing feet was like thunder on the hollow boards as they ran for the end of the dock. Someone yelled behind them, and a vicious whine sounded past Boyce’s ear. Ahead of them an arrow struck the pier and vibrated, singing.

The feet of the pursuers struck the dock now, and the dark underground place echoed and re-echoed to the noise of heavy boots on boards and the shouts of the angry men. A bowstring sang again and another arrow whined past. Boyce glanced back.

The redhead was foremost among the pursuers, purple cloak streaming from his shoulders. He brandished the stub of his mutilated whip, a formidable weapon still with its length of barbed lash. The rest made a jostling mob behind him, among which swords flickered in the light of the lamps strung along the edges of the pier.

Boyce heard again that annoying, familiar laugh among the shouts. He would place it when he had a moment to spare—he would think once more of

the crowned girl whose name he knew again, after such a long, long interval of forgetfulness. But later, later—not now.

His companion was kneeling at the end of the pier, leaning over to untie a boat. He glanced up as Boyce came panting to the water-edge. "Hurry!" he said. "We'll make it yet! I—" And then his gaze went beyond Boyce and he said more sharply. "Look out! Behind you!" and leaped to his feet.

Boyce spun. The redhead had paused a little distance away and was swinging his whip again. Shortened though it was, his range was too close to miss. Boyce dropped almost to one knee, ducking under the vicious inward curl of the lash, heard it whistle overhead and launched himself hard for the redhead's thick body.

His shoulder struck the man in the chest, and he heard the gasping grunt the man gave and felt the toppling body give way beneath his driving blow. It had all happened quickly. Boyce scrambled to his feet as the redhead rolled across the dock.

He snatched up the sword he had dropped in the moment of impact, seeing the red-booted feet of his companion flash by him as he rose. He looked up in time to see his rescuer make a joyous sort of leap toward the fallen man, kick him twice in the face, and give the squirming body a last thrust of the boot-toe that sent him splashing off into the black water.

Then Boyce was clambering down the short ladder toward the boat with the first of the others almost upon him. Over his shoulder there was a flash of red boots and silver mail, and the armored youngster hit the boat before him. Boyce slashed the rope that held it to the pier with one stroke of his sword.

Beneath him, as the rope parted, he felt an instant forward surge and the pier seemed to drop away as if by magic in their wake. The boat was very low, and not much larger than a rowboat. It was dead black in color, so nearly the shade of the black water that to the observers it must seem they moved unsupported over the surface of the waves.

Whatever power moved it was invisible. It might have had a motor, but if it did, there was no sound or vibration to prove it. Boyce thought it must be propelled by some force of this unknown world harnessed to a science such as Tancred had described, a science so wholly alien that magic was as good a word for it as any.

Several more arrows sang past as the boat shot smoothly away, but the shafts dropped into the water behind them. In a few moments even the shouts from the pier had died, as the lights died, and the boat moved through darkness and silence.

Limp with relief and more than a little confused by the sudden change of attitude which his companion had shown during the fight, Boyce sat back in the boat and sighed heavily.

“All right,” he said. “What now?”

Against the dim luminance of the water he could see in vague outline the younger man’s hat and head and bent shoulders. He seemed to be guiding the boat. He laughed softly in the dark. It was not a reassuring sound.

“Wait and see,” he said.

CHAPTER X

The Wrong She

Daylight glimmered ahead, the grey half-daylight which was all these drifting lands ever knew. The boat glided under an archway and Boyce caught his breath at sight of what rose before them. It was a great round tower that seemed to be all of filigree, story upon story of it, the interstices glazed with sparkling crystal. Its wall rose straight from the center of a moat-like lake.

Within Boyce could see dimly the shadows of moving figures here and there, no more than animate blurs upon the filigree walls. A tower of glass, he thought. And Guillaume had worn a collar of glass. Was there a connection there, or did all the City use glass-work in its building and its magic? He remembered now that he had broken through glass to enter this curious world.

The boat moved swiftly and smoothly over the grey water amid clouds of mist and a low door opened in the base of the tower as they neared it.

“Now we are home again,” the armored youngster said, and bent his head beneath the arch as the boat glided in. Boyce stooped too. They came into a water room walled with translucent glass, and a man in a brown tunic, a collar locked about his neck, came down broad steps to take the boat from its master.

“Come,” the young man said, scrambling out of the boat and hurrying up the stairs, his red boots flashing beneath the heavy mail.

Boyce followed him only as far as the platform around the pool. Then he took a firmer grip on his sword, glanced around the room for the nearest exit.

“Not yet,” he said grimly. “I don’t know enough about you. Let’s get all this a little clearer before I—”

“I think,” the young man interrupted, pausing in the doorway, “I heard you call upon Irathe.”

Boyce gave him a long, steady look. Under the hat-brim the man’s eyes were watchful. After a moment Boyce put the sword back into its sheath at his side.

“Go ahead,” he said. “I’ll follow.”

He heard the other laugh to himself. Then the man turned and led the way up a ramp of translucent crystal that wound around the tower just inside the filigree walls. They were transparent from within, and Boyce could look out over the whole city as they climbed, seeing the narrow streets open out beneath him, again filled with their colorful crowds.

Toward the center of the City a building of black stone rose square and

sheer above the rooftops. Above Boyce on the stairs the younger man waved a pointing arm.

“The King,” he said.

Boyce’s brows lifted. The brown girl who had guided him here said it was the King who summoned *Them*. They had wound in their dark procession through these very streets, then, toward that high, black building where someone awaited them who was not afraid—or was even the King afraid?—to look upon their faces. And it was City gossip that the summoning had something to do with the conquest of Kerak.

There was a painted room at the head of the ramp. Three walls of it were covered with patterns of birds and flowers seen against a bright sky. Boyce glanced carelessly at the colorful scenes, looked away—glanced back with amazement.

“Blue sky?” he demanded, scarcely knowing he spoke. “Birds, flowers, blue skies? Here in the City?”

His host had crossed to a far corner and was unbuckling his sword-belt. Boyce’s eyes swept the room. The fourth wall was of glass and framed a vast panorama of City streets and mist and mountains beyond them, and a distant glimpse of Kerak with a tiny flash of crimson above the towers which was Kerak’s enchanted flag. Heavy golden curtains covered the walls here and there, and there were broad divans and deep chairs cushioned with velvet. It was a luxurious place.

But he scarcely saw it. He was still enthralled by the presence of blue pictured skies, when so far as he knew the City had drifted forever on the sluggish land-tide of a world that knew no real day.

“What do you know about the sky?” he demanded, turning to the silent figure of his host.

He saw the figure stoop to lay down the broad plumed hat. His back was still to Boyce.

“As much as you know, William Boyce,” the other said amazingly.

Boyce’s breath stopped for a stunned moment.

“Who—who are you? How do you know my name?”

The young man did not yet turn. He lifted both arms to the latches on the shoulders of his mail robe, clicked them deliberately and let the linked steel drop away. Beneath it he wore breeches and a close-fitted tunic of scarlet, above the scarlet boots. He put his hands to his head and shook out a sudden wreath of dark curls that fell upon the crimson shoulders as he turned.

He laughed.

“Do you remember now?”

The room spun around Boyce. It was dark, a roaring darkness that was only the blood in his ears. He opened his mouth, but no words came. He stared and

stared, and could not move or speak.

She was not wearing the long robe he remembered, nor the iron crown. But the violent eyes were there, the color of hot small flames, and the same smile he remembered, white and scarlet and dazzling. And the same look of brilliance and danger and malice.

He said in a whisper, "*Irathe!*"

"There," she said softly. "I knew you'd remember, in the end."

She came toward him slowly, walking with a lovely swaying gait he surely could not have forgotten until now. When she was very near him she lifted her arms and her head fell back until the dark curls lay in wreaths upon her shoulders.

He knew before he touched her how the strong, soft body would feel in his arms. In the instant before they kissed he knew what the kiss would be like, the shape and the feel of her mouth beneath his. Even the spicy fragrance she wore was familiar. He did not yet remember fully, but he knew he had held her thus many, many times in the past, in his lost year.

"And so you remember, now?"

Boyce shifted his arm about her, the dark curls fanning on his shoulder in a fragrant mass. They sat together on a divan before the window, looking out over the tremendous panorama of the City and the hills beyond.

He paused a moment.

"No. A little—not much. I'll have to know, *Irathe*." He hesitated over the name. He was not sure yet, not sure at all how much had been solved by this meeting. He was still uncertain about her. He knew too little.

He was thinking of the way she had used her throwing-knives in the gaming-room brawl, of how her scarlet boots had kicked an enemy twice in the face before rolling him into the water to drown. Now she was all softness and fragrance in his arms. But it was not quite like this that he remembered her. He was not sure yet what it was he did remember—but he thought he knew what he did not remember. It was not like that.

"You loved me in your own world, my darling," she murmured against his cheek. "You loved me enough to—to follow me here, I think. Can you say you've forgotten our year together on Earth?"

She was mocking him. She knew he had forgotten. She knew because it had been her doing that he had. He closed his eyes and struggled with his own mind, determined to prove her wrong this time.

Slowly, painfully, in snatches and blanks and brief, vivid pictures, a piecemeal sort of memory began to return.

"There was a house," he said carefully. "On the river. You—it was your house. Big, quiet. No one around and a—servant? One, two people—" He

recalled suddenly the swarthy man who had come to take the boat in the pool-chamber below. "People from here!" he finished in surprise.

"Of course, why not? From my native City." She smiled at him derisively. "Go on. Your memory's better than I thought. Go on—if you dare!"

He paused at that. Yes, somewhere at the other end of this memory was something frightening—something she knew of and dared him to recall. He would not. But he would go on a little more. Not too far. . . .

"I met you—somewhere," he said, groping for a dim picture of the two of them together in some forgotten public place. "It was—I don't know. Somewhere, by accident—"

Her laughter stopped him. Malice and derision sounded together in it.

"Accident, you think? Oh no, that was not accident, my darling! I searched for you a long time—or for one like you. One of the blood of the Crusaders."

He turned to stare into her violent eyes. They mocked him.

"But that can't be true. I'm not." He hesitated. Guillaume du Bois—William Boyce. Face and name the same.

"Why?" he demanded. She moved her cheek catlike against his shoulder.

"I had a task to do. I still have a task." For a moment he thought he heard weariness and genuine feeling in her sigh. "I have gone many times into many worlds, seeking many men and women, trying to finish that task. Perhaps you'll finish it for me, my darling. Perhaps I've found the right man at last."

He did not answer. He was thinking clearly and rapidly, watching memories tumble through his mind like a kaleidoscope, pictures that shifted as he watched into new patterns, some of them significant, some sheer nonsense as he recalled them.

He had met the girl—somewhere. He knew that now. And he must have fallen instantly, irrationally in love. He could remember a part of that delirium now; he could feel a part of it still, at this moment, with this warm, sweet-smelling girl in his arms. But there was something wrong. It was not *quite* the same girl.

In that year there had been no question. He had followed her because he could not help himself. It was sheer infatuation, obsession—as if a spell had been laid on him to follow wherever she went. And she went to her big, quiet, secret house on the river in New York. And there, with him and with her servants, for a long, long while she had worked at—something.

What? He had not known, even then. There were wide gaps in his memory. There were blanks, induced deliberately he thought, to keep her purpose secret. But if she had chosen him because of his likeness to Guillaume, his remote kinship with Guillaume—then her purpose must have been connected with Kerak and the destruction of the Crusaders. Why? It seemed a trivial thing to stretch over so wide a range of time and space, to involve such infinite effort.

In the end—careful, careful, he reminded himself—in the end had come that thing which was too terrible to recall—the thing that had sealed off his memory of the whole year, like scar-tissue to protect a wound too deep to heal without it.

Something about *Them*. . . .

A dark procession coming up from the river, with tiny lights twinkling and tiny bells ringing, and a breath of cold as searing as heat blowing before them to warn all beholders away.

Watching them from an upper window—congealed with an incredulity and a revulsion that would not accept what he saw—something about a doorway he watched, and They parading through it toward him, walking like men, though they were not and never could be men themselves.

Her head had turned upon his shoulder. She was looking up at him and smiling a wise, malicious smile.

“I warned you,” she said. “Even then, I warned you. You shouldn’t have stayed that long. So I had to do whatever I could to make sure you’d forget.” She laughed, as lightly as she had laughed when she kicked the fallen red man on the pier. “You forgot!” she said gaily.

Suddenly Boyce knew there was something wrong here. He realized the wrongness so quickly that his body moved before he was aware that he had stirred. He found himself on his feet facing the divan, and he knew he had flung Irathe the from his shoulder and sprang away as if the touch of her were loathsome.

“*It wasn’t you,*” he said, his voice sounding thick and strange. “I know now—it was someone else, not you!”

He saw her lovely, brightly tinted face convulse as if a flame had shot up behind it, lighting a violet glare in her eyes and drawing her beautiful, bright features into a grotesque shape of evil.

“It was. *It was!*” she screamed. There were fury and passion in her voice, and a strange, wild grief he could not understand. But above all, there was evil, sheer, pure evil such as he had never dreamed to see so nakedly in a human face. No face could be wholly human and hold so much of it.

“No!” he shouted and saw her double suddenly, with a motion like a striking snake, and snatch at something hidden inside the loose top of her high scarlet boots.

He should have taken warning. He should have dodged. But she moved too fast for him. She straightened and her red arm flew back, and he saw something black and blurred flying straight at his face. He saw it come, and grow enormously and spread to shut out all the room behind it. But he did not see it strike, for he was no longer there to see or feel.

He floated in oblivion, rocking on mists like the clouds that move over the face of the drifting lands. . . .

Pain in bright, regular flashes roused him slowly. He groaned and stirred, not knowing it was himself who moved. It hurt to breathe. He opened his eyes and looked up blankly at a high window framing a fantastic panorama, twilight and a City lighted as always with colored lanterns swinging in the breeze above wet, narrow streets.

He tried to get up, and could not. Little by little, awareness came back. He was lying on the floor by the divan. His wrists and ankles were tied tightly—with vicious tightness—as if Irathe had drawn the bonds with all her strength. His head ached and he had been struck a number of times across the face, by the stiff, stinging feel of it. Also, he thought, she must have driven her booted toes into his ribs, to judge by the pain that accompanied each breath.

He wondered how long he had lain here. There was no way of telling time—if time existed at all inside the City. There were things he had to do. Godfrey still lay imprisoned, hoping for rescue from Kerak, and he knew there were other duties he might remember later, when his head stopped spinning.

What had happened? He had angered Irathe, of course—he was not quite sure how, but he had touched her in a very sore spot if the fury in her voice and her actions had been any criterion.

And yet—it had *not* been she. Lying there on the floor, he forgot for a moment his more urgent problems in the all-encompassing mystery of just who that crowned girl was whom he remembered so vividly. The name, the face—yes. But this fiery-eyed girl with evil like a lantern burning in her—no, it had not been she. . . .

He stirred again, and said softly, to himself, “*Irathe.*”

Instantly there was a sound in the room. Bare feet came across the floor almost in silence, cautiously, and a brown face bent above his, unfamiliar from this awkward angle on the rug.

“Master,” said a gentle voice with fear in it, “master—do you know me?”

She was brown and bare-limbed, and she wore heavy golden bands on wrists and ankles, and a golden collar about her throat. She was the little guide who had taken him from *Nain’s* temple to meet Irathe and her quarrelsome fellow-conspirators. He had not yet had time to wonder about that strange combination, or what Irathe had been doing there among them, in disguise.

“Master,” the girl whispered again, her eyes rolling above him so that the whites showed as she watched the corners of the room for—Irathe? Was she a servant of Irathe herself, or was this show of terror genuine? He could not trust anyone at all to the City now.

“Master, I followed all the way,” the brown girl whispered. “I must ask a question, master. Are you Jamai’s man?”

Boyce’s head ached. He did not know Jamai except as a name and a menace. He was tired of all this intrigue of which he knew so little and he had no strong feeling just now for any in the City but one.

“I’m no one’s man but my own,” he said angrily. “But if Jamai is against Irathe, I’d like to know him. Is that what you want?”

She smiled a white smile above him.

“Thank you, master.” The brown face disappeared briefly. Then he felt hands turning him gently, felt the coldness of a blade against his wrists, felt the intolerable tightness of his bonds fall away.

“That will be painful, master, in a moment,” she warned, working on his ankles. “When the pain passes, we will go.”

He rubbed his wrists.

“Where?”

“If the gods are with us and we leave this tower alive”—her eyes rolled again, fearfully—“we go to one who is Jamai’s deadliest foe.”

“And Irathe’s?”

She looked down evasively.

“We must go quickly,” she said. “It is better not to talk until we’re free of this house.”

Boyce shrugged. His limbs were beginning to prickle with returning circulation, but the pain in his side lessened as he waited, and he was eager to go. He could deal with Irathe later, and he would. That was a promise to himself.

The brown girl was holding one of the draperies aside and beckoning to him. There was a grille in the wall, and a steep stairway winding down into blackness. Limping, Boyce followed her into the dark.

CHAPTER XI

Again the Huntsman

Before a high oval door that glowed silver in the light of her tiny lantern, Boyce's guide paused at last, holding up her light to show him the latch. "Beyond this door I dare not go," she said frankly. "You must, if you seek Jamai's downfall."

"Who sent you?" Boyce demanded, keeping his voice as low as hers.

They had come a long way through winding underground corridors, surfacing only twice to walk a short distance along alleys or across lighted streets. The motley city life went on unheeding around them. If Irathe had missed him yet, her searchers were subtle. And the conspirators she had helped him evade might be looking for him too.

He could not guess about that. He followed the brown girl through devious paths because she, at least, promised him a chance of action. Alone he knew he could not accomplish anything in this inscrutable City. Allied with Jamai's enemy—whoever that might be he could at least gamble on success.

"Who sent me?" the girl echoed now, holding up her lantern to look at him in the dark passage. "My master will answer that, lord. You go to him now. But he is—capricious, lord. You must go the rest of the way alone, and I dare not pass this door."

She swung it open and stood back.

"My master awaits you at the end of the corridor, lord."

Boyce went in cautiously. The corridor, like the door, was silver, walls, floor and ceiling polished to mirror-brightness. From overhead small lamps hung, swinging a little in the breeze from the opened door. It was a city of lamps, Boyce thought—little lanterns and glass and wet streets with mist blowing through them in a changeless twilight.

The door closed. He went boldly down the hall toward the curtains at its far end. His own reflections went with him, distorted in perspective above and below. Looking up, he saw himself grotesquely foreshortened and floating upside down in space. Looking down, he was a fantastic dwarf in unfamiliar garments, cross-blazoned, mustached, his image repeated infinitely everywhere he glanced. He felt dizzy in his own distorted company.

He was not alone.

Someone walked behind him, at his very heels, someone's breath fanned his cheek when he turned. But the someone was transparent as the air. He saw in the mirrors only himself in those dizzy myriads. He went on.

Something padded before him on soft feet. There was a clink of metal like a blade in a scabbard, and a muffled laugh and something rushed by him down the hall with a thumping of feet and a gust of displaced air when it passed him.

Something whistled by his face, the wind of it cold upon his skin. It sounded like a sword.

He met his own startled glance, infinitely multiplied in the mirrors, when he looked around in alarm. Nothing more. But whatever the thing was, it had not touched him. He remembered what his guide had said—"My master is—capricious"—and smiled grimly to himself.

"He wanted me or he wouldn't have gone to such trouble to get me here," he reasoned. "If this is a test of nerve—well, let him play his games, whoever he is."

And he walked on as calmly as he could, ignoring the footsteps around him, the sound of breathing, the padding of soft feet like the feet of beasts. The curtains looked very faraway at the end of the corridor, but he would not let himself hurry to reach them. Confidence was growing in him. He thought he had at last begun to understand a little of what lay behind his coming.

The curtains parted before his touch. He passed into a low-ceiled room whose dark walls were hung with embroidered draperies, beneath ceiling tented with a striped canopy that billowed now and then as if from passing breezes. Here, as everywhere, lamps hung from above. There was a dais across the other end of the room, and a low couch on it. But the dais was empty. The room was empty.

Boyce looked around him, half in anger. Before he could move, laughter sounded from behind him, along the way he had come. He turned, knowing the laughter at last. Low, and with a snarl in it. He had heard it often before, most lately in that quarrelsome company of conspirators where Irathe took his part.

The curtains through which he had just come opened again. For a moment no one was there—the curtains framed an empty hall mirroring only its own length in geometric confusion of walls and floor.

Then the curtains fell and a man in tiger-striped garments came into the room, laughing to himself, leaning back on the leash from which two snarling cat-creatures led him across the floor.

"William du Boyce," the Huntsman said. "Welcome to my palace. We have postponed our meeting too long already, you and I."

Boyce scowled at him, saying nothing. The Huntsman wrestled his sleek, restless beasts past him and went leisurely toward the dais, dropped to the divan there and smiled at his guest.

"You'll forgive my little trick in the hall," he said. "You were in no danger, of course."

Boyce felt a touch of Guillaume's arrogance creep into his own attitude as

he faced the Huntsman.

“I knew that. I’ve begun to think I was in no real danger since I left Kerak, nor will be until you get whatever it is you want of me. I’ve walked through too many dangers already. It can’t all have been accident.”

The Huntsman smiled.

“Sound reasoning. Do you know why?”

“Why I’ve been safe, you mean? Why everything has worked out as you meant it to? I think I do know. It must be that you have had a hand in it.”

Under his tiger-striped hood the Huntsman’s pale face lost its smile for a moment. A haunted look came into it. Boyce thought he caught just a glimpse there of the same desperation he had seen upon Irathe’s face when she screamed her denial to him in the tower-room.

“What do they say of me in Kerak?” the Huntsman asked unexpectedly.

“They say you’re like the mist on the plains—blowing wherever the wind blows. But—” Boyce gave him a quick glance, “I think you know what they say in Kerak, Huntsman.”

The face beneath the tiger-hood grimaced.

“You do know, then.”

“I know I haven’t been—call it *alone*—since I first saw you on the cliff when I entered this world.”

The Huntsman flung back his head and laughed suddenly, his mercurial mood changing without warning.

“We won’t quibble about it. Yes, it was I. And I did protect you here in the City—most of the time. There is something I want of you, William Boyce. You can repay me for my care by helping me—” he paused delicately—“to destroy Kerak’s Oracle.”

Boyce met the expectant eyes coldly.

“I owe you nothing.”

“You owe me a great deal. You’ll do my bidding in this—or would you like to see the punishment of Godfrey Morel, my friend?” The Huntsman’s voice went thin in the last words, and the snarl sounded just beneath the surface.

“I came for that.”

“You speak too coolly, William Boyce. You think because you’ve walked safely so far through this City, you can afford to defy the Huntsman. Remember, it was my hand that kept you safe. You can’t afford my enmity, I warn you. Godfrey Morel you shall see—and join, if you choose.” He half-rose and the leashed beasts surged forward against their collars, their beautiful, mad faces wrinkled up in snarls. The Huntsman cuffed at them with his free hand and sank back again.

“No, wait. There’s too much you do not know. If I show you the truth, I think you may decide to help. You’ve been deceived too often to take anyone on faith just now. Irathe, for instance—she told you a little, I think.”

“A little.” Boyce was wary. He saw a flicker of emotion on the Huntsman’s face when he spoke Irathe’s name, and he began to think he had a clue to part of the Huntsman’s mystery. If Irathe brought that sick, longing, angry look to other faces than his own, then he and the Huntsman had one thing at least in common.

“You knew her in your world,” the Huntsman said. “You helped her in her work, which was—important. She left with you a certain talisman—a crystal, cold to the touch—that opens the gateway here. You used it, half by accident, I suspect, and came through the broken window on that cliff. I saw the flash the magic made from my tower here, and when I reached the cliff you were just awakening.” He paused, a curious look flickering across his face.

“I meant to kill you then,” he said. And Boyce suddenly recognized his look. Jealousy was in it. Yes, the Huntsman loved Irathe too, and hated her and himself because of it, and Boyce, because of—because of Boyce’s year with her on Earth.

“I would have killed you on sight,” he went on gently, his voice soft. “But I was not sure Irathe hadn’t summoned you. Until you did not return my signal, I could not be sure. And by then—well, my mind changes easily, William Boyce. I indulge my fancies.

“I let you go because a better thought had come to me. So I drove you toward Kerak. I knew an attack was starting on the castle then—Jamai’s efforts have redoubled of late because he grows weary of the struggle and longs to end it.

“I thought to myself, ‘He will die in Kerak if the attack succeeds. Let him die. But if it fails, let him live and be my eyes and brain to spy out what I can of Tancred’s secrets.’ Because, you see, you wore the talisman, and I have power over that crystal as well as Irathe. I made it for her, long ago, when she was—not as she is now.”

This time a shadow crossed the Huntsman’s face and Boyce saw the pale, strong features draw up in a grimace almost of pain.

“I think she left that amulet to summon you by when she was ready, and I think you came too soon. I saw you too soon. When she learned of your presence here it was too late, for I had entered your mind already by power of the talisman and there was no room for her.”

He laughed.

“She was wild when she learned that. She—but you do not know the secret of Irathe, do you, William Boyce? You do not know why you remember her as all that was lovely and delightful, or why she is not now—herself. Well, you

shall know. Better still—you shall see!”

He got up lazily, reining in the frantic beasts, and strolled to the wall at the head of the dais. He pulled a cord hanging among the dark draperies, and curtains swept back on both sides to uncover a wall of clear mirror glass, in which only blue-gray mists swam as if it were a window upon the plains.

“Tancred has a mirror like this,” the Huntsman said casually. “But smaller. Now watch.”

The mists rolled back on both sides. A room took shape in the glass, as vividly as if the mirror were a wall of the room, and that wall transparent. The room was gigantic, ringed with pillars that reflected themselves in the shining black floor.

The pillars marched up in a double line to a great throne at the far end, black, hung with scarlet. A man sat on the throne, light catching in the crown he wore. He was not young, and he was bending forward eagerly in his robe of yellow satin, stroking a dark beard and watching.

Boyce closed his eyes suddenly and whirled on his heel, his back to the mirror. He was shaking and the sweat felt cold on his forehead.

The Huntsman laughed softly.

“Yes, I know. *They* are not good to look at. But watch if you can, my friend. They wear robes, so you need not look Them in the face. And this they do is important to my story—and to you.”

CHAPTER XII

A Cure for Sorcery

Slowly, his body rigid, Boyce turned back to the mirror. He could not look directly at Them, but by watching the corners of the picture and keeping his jaw set hard and his fists clenched, he managed to control his shaking and to see what went on in the mirrored room.

They were only two, tall, robed figures hidden entirely from sight, but moving with an impossible litheness that somehow set the teeth on edge. They were walking—gliding—about a circle of glittering stones laid upon the black floor before the throne. Their robed limbs moved now and then in gestures of ritual.

“The Sorcerer King,” the Huntsman said, “is a man hungry for power. He loves power and knowledge for their own sakes. He guides this City along the drifting lands as ships are guided in other worlds, seeking new people and new places and new sources of power. Also, he picks up other treasures.

“When he was younger, he found one treasure he prized highly—a lovely fair-haired woman in outlandish garments, wearing a cross emblazoned on her bosom. She came from a castle built high on the cliffs of certain mountains the City was then drifting near. The King was pleased with her and took her into his household.

“You know that story. She bore him a daughter and then died. He loved the daughter, but he did her a terrible wrong. He had not guessed how what he did would affect himself or her, or many people he had not then heard of. The daughter was a lovely creature. Also she was wise and skilled in many arts. When the King came across a source of power and knowledge beside which all he had discovered before seemed tame, he shared the discovery with his daughter.

“There was one trouble only. That source—those who knew what he wished to share—were so alien that eyes like ours can not bear to look upon Them. *They* live in another city, traveling these drifting lands, but very far from here.

“A few of their travelers chanced into our City, and the King was enthralled by Them, but he had no way of communicating with Them. For one thing, not even he could bear to look Them in the face or listen to their voices. And yet he could not bear to give up commerce with Them altogether.

“They told him of one way only by which they might communicate. A very old way. Almost all peoples have it, and all old legends. It means the sacrifice

of a maiden.

“She would have to submit herself to their sorcery, and thereafter would serve as liaison between the two peoples. The human mind, They said, was too complex, too hybrid, to deal with minds like Theirs. Their sorcery would change the mind of their instrument, dividing it in a way to make communication possible. They did not tell us, then, what else the sorcery might do.

“The King chose his daughter for that sacrifice. This thing meant more to him even than she, and she was the one alone, he thought, whom he could trust in a position of such power. Too, I think their kinship was to help in the transmission of knowledge from Them to the King.

“It happened without my knowledge. I loved the King’s daughter very deeply. I should have interfered, had I guessed. But I came just as the ceremony was beginning, and until it was too late I did not know—”

He turned his back to the mirror and struggled with his beasts, bending over them as if he did not want to see that scene again.

“Look,” he said.

They moved with intricate, hideously lithe steps about the circle of fiery stones. There was a veiled figure in the center of the circle now, and the King was leaning forward, a look of pain and eagerness on his face.

Fire leaped from the shining circle on the floor. It blazed to a pyramid of white light, and when it sank again the veil had vanished from the girl in its midst. She looked out with blank, unseeing eyes, violet under an iron crown. Her dark hair lay in ringlets on her shoulders.

She had a lovely, soft mouth and even now, a look of vividness and a delicate, familiar beauty which made Boyce lean forward suddenly and catch his breath, forgetting even the figures parading around the fire with snake-like motions of their robed arms.

“*Irathe*—” he heard himself whisper.

The fire leaped again. Through it the slim, crowned figure was faintly visible. It shimmered before his eyes, curiously unfocused inside the screen of flame. It divided, drew apart.

The fire sank. There were two figures inside the burning ring. But only for a moment. Then *Irathe* swept up her skirts in one smooth motion and stepped over the low-burning flames. Her eyes were violet-bright, the color of the fire. Her face was dazzling with a beauty more burning than the old *Irathe* ever knew. But danger was in the face now, danger and a fierce, unstable joy.

Behind her a motionless girl stood in the enchanted ring. Not a girl—a marble figure, pale as stone, drained of all life, the marble hair lying upon the marble shoulders, the marble robes sweeping straight to the

floor. Hands clasped before her, eyes closed, serene and empty, the figure of Kerak's Oracle had taken shape in the ring and remained there while Irathe stepped lightly away from all that remained of her old self.

It was the same face—if it could be, when all that meant life had been drained from it. Boyce saw now that he might have known those marble features in Kerak—or could he have known them, in that inhuman repose, without the spark which meant Irathe glowing behind them? His memory had been too imperfect then. He had not known her face or her name, and nothing about the lifeless Oracle's features had reminded him of her other self.

The Huntsman, still bending to stroke the head of one snarling cat-creature, spoke as if to the beast, his voice soft.

"I had loved her before the—change. How could I stop loving her, afterward? And there was nothing left alive in the good half for a man to love, so it had to be Irathe as she is now—evil, terrible to the mind and the eye and most so for a man like me who can see beneath the surface. But to my heart, she is still Irathe, and my love."

Suddenly he slapped the snarling beast across the face. It twisted its head with cat-ike quickness and slashed at his wrist with bared fangs. The Huntsman laughed and cuffed it aside.

"They could not destroy the marble image which was all that remained when that half of Irathe's mind which was good and sinless split from the half which was evil, knowing too much of magical things. Irathe wanted to destroy it. The sight of it seemed to madden her. She was not Irathe now and the knowledge of her own incompleteness was more than she could bear with that marble thing as a reminder.

"*They* were indifferent. They had what They wanted; they would not help further. So Irathe, thinking to get the white marble being out of her sight and memory, drove it into the drifting lands and hoped she might forget it.

"The gods alone know what thoughts move in that still, stone mind. But some memory of her mother's people led her to Kerak, and they took her in. Then Irathe sent a cage of fire to keep her imprisoned, hoping the City would drift away and rid her forever of that shape which had been herself.

"But it was not so easy. The two halves of her were not wholly parted. A bond between them remained, a bond so strong that while it stretches between Kerak and the City, the two are anchored together and cannot drift apart. That means, of course, that Irathe must conquer Kerak's Oracle. She does not know the way. She has worked a long, long while on that secret.

"By now she is very wise—far wiser than I. I think she knows the answer which will mean the conquest of her other half. But the Oracle, too, is wise. And Tancred, Kerak's magician, is a rival in some ways even for Irathe. So she could not gain an entrance into Kerak—until she found you."

Boyce broke in abruptly, cutting off the slow, reminiscent voice that seemed to be watching the past unfold as it spoke on.

“You’re lying,” he declared, with all of Guillaume’s arrogance. “I knew her too.” He hesitated. He would not say, “I loved her too.” That was a matter between him and the real, complete Irathe, if ever they met again. But once they *had* met—he was sure of that—and she had been whole.

“I know you did.” The Huntsman gave him one glance under the tiger-striped hood, and hatred and envy was in the glance. But his voice was calm. “You knew her as I did, in one of her moments of completion. You see, there are certain times when the cage of flame does not prison Kerak’s Oracle. The time is now, Boyce.”

The dark eyes were sombre.

“You have listened to me, William Boyce, because I had information you needed. But why do you suppose I troubled to make these explanations?”

Boyce hesitated. But before he could speak he sensed a change in the Huntsman’s face, bright and triumphant as lightning flickering across a leaden autumn sky.

And suddenly Boyce knew his mistake. He had a flash of keen regret, the knowledge that he had, somehow, walked blindly into a trap—and then, for an intolerable instant of spinning vertigo, the walls before him tilted and slipped sidewise and dissolved into roaring chaos.

Tumbling mists shrouded him. Another mind, another power, was using him as a man’s hand wields a machine. His body, his eyes, his thoughts, were not his own now. Briefly he crouched in a timeless, lightless place, the deepest citadel of his self, where no Intruder could reach.

The monstrous claustrophobia slackened—was gone.

He stood again before the laughing Huntsman.

Thick, wordless sounds spewed from his lips as he tried to speak. The Huntsman’s eyes were ablaze with triumph.

“Is it hard to use your tongue, Boyce?” he mocked. “That will not last long. In a moment the feeling will pass. When a man has been out of his body it is not always easy to return.”

Boyce hunched his shoulders, feeling such anger as he had never known before against this sorcerer who could use him at will as a man dons a glove and doffs it.

He felt warmth beginning to return to his limbs, though he had not felt their coldness till now.

“You—”

“Speak! You have done me a great service, Boyce. I owe you an honest answer, at least.”

“What have you made me do?”

The Huntsman sobered. And now his eyes glittered with something very much like madness.

“You have done an errand for me. Not your body—but another part of you, your mind, your soul, perhaps. I sent that to Kerak a moment ago. Have you forgotten my words? This is one of the brief cycles during which the Oracle is free of her cage of flame.”

“*What did you do?*”

“I used you to summon the Oracle here. Free from her cage, she can go where she wills—but the spell of *emptiness* holds her, even now. She comes to the City now, because you called her, Boyce.”

Boyce spoke hoarsely.

“Why should she come to my call?”

“Should a woman not come when her lover calls? When her husband summons?” The Huntsman dwelt on the words, as he would have gripped the sharp blade of a dagger. What showed on his face was pure Jealousy.

Lover? Husband? But it was Irathe who had come to earth—

“I will give you death if you like,” the Huntsman said quietly. “It is best of all. Better than life. Perhaps in death you may join Kerak’s Oracle.”

That passion-drained calm, more than the Huntsman’s previous mockery, roused Boyce. He thought—with a breath this sorcerer can drive me as a wind drives a leaf. But—

“Curse your magic!” Boyce roared. The ice had gone from his limbs. The fire of rage melted the paralyzing chill.

For so long had the Huntsman dueled with the rapiers of magic that he had apparently forgotten more primitive methods of battle. Boyce’s fist smashed home on the man’s jaw, a solid, vicious blow that jolted his arm clear back to the shoulder.

He did it almost without reason, driven only by a sudden, instinctive revolt against the cobweb-soft, clinging bonds of enchantment that had wound about him since he had entered this alien world—and even before that.

To have the Huntsman use him, mind and body, with that contemptuous disregard for his own demands, was suddenly unendurable. And that molten, rising rage culminated in the blow that caught the Huntsman by surprise and sent him crashing back, stunned, against the wall.

“Magic!” Boyce said, his voice a snarl of hatred. “There’s the cure for that!”

But the Huntsman could not answer. He was a crumpled, silent figure, red blood trickling down his jaw.

A wordless, eerie cry made Boyce turn. He had forgotten the pack. The

tiger-cats were shifting uneasily, their bright, dappled bodies sliding soundlessly in an intricate pattern, backward and forward. The beautiful mad faces watched him.

He glanced quickly around the room. A breath of wind rippled down a tapestried hanging bright with black and gold. Boyce took a cautious step in that direction.

And another. Still the pack hesitated.

Boyce reached the tapestry and slipped beneath it. As he had guessed, there was an opening in the wall. A metal door was ajar, and a soft wind blew on his sweating face.

Mournfully, with inhuman sweetness, from the room he had left rose a wailing scream from a beast's throat. It was echoed and re-echoed.

Boyce put his shoulder to the door and slammed it shut. There was no bolt, only a latch that could be lifted from either side. If the Huntsman recovered—

Boyce's teeth showed in an unpleasant grin. His heavy shoulders squared.

He turned to stare down the dim, blue twilight of the tunnel.

CHAPTER XIII

The King Is Dead

Briefly he thought that the walls were hung with arabesque curtains. Then he saw them more clearly. Bas-relief carvings had been laid with a lavish hand on these walls. It was a design of roots, or branches—or, perhaps, serpents—intertwined in a jungle tangle that the eyes could not follow. The stone was varicolored, marked with brighter striations, glittering with mica and gem-chips. The passage seemed to be walled and roofed with a twining barrier of twisting roots.

A faint bluish light filtered through the tiny interstices between the carvings, as though they had been overlaid on a surface that held a light of its own.

Some instinct made Boyce move his hand to his hip, but the sword was gone, taken from him, no doubt, during his captivity to Irathe. But he did not want to think of her.

He could not go back. And the Huntsman might soon wake, unless the blood-scent had roused the pack to hunger.

Quietly Boyce moved along the passage. The twining coils on the wall and ceiling were motionless. Yet a feeling of tingling awareness, of the presence of some monstrous danger, never left him for a moment. As though he walked close beside a veil that might at any moment be ripped aside, that already rippled with a little wind that blew from an unknown and very terrible place.

Nerves—well, he had reason to feel nervous! His harsh grin broadened. To be plunged from his normal life into the maze of ancient, alien sorcery and intrigue—suitable enough for a Norman of Guillaume's era, who walked amid witches and warlocks and Saracen magicians and believed in them devoutly. But Boyce did not believe. What a superstition-reared Crusader might accept blindly, a modern man could not.

Perhaps, Boyce thought he had been accepting too much on faith. He should have questioned more from the beginning. Yet his mind had not been entirely his own. He had been, for the most part, a tool in Irathe's skilled hands, and the Huntsman's.

The stone carving of a beast's head was set amid the tangled root-carvings at his right. The stone eyes watched blindly. Into it—through it—the glittering coils seemed to grow.

Still the silence deepened.

He went on. There were more carvings to left and right. Some were animal,

others human.

In the end he paused for a moment before one of the stone masks. He studied it. A root grew through the jaw, deforming the face curiously, but it was carved from a different material than the other gray, granite masks Boyce had seen. And, under the coiling tendrils, he could trace the shadowy outline of a body.

The sculptor had even suggested the details of iris and pupil in the open eyes of the mask. It looked like. . . It was like. . .

The stone lips moved.

Painfully, half-articulately, with a dry, stone clicking that was infinitely horrible—the head spoke.

“Boyce,” it groaned—and the stone tongue clicked on the name against stone teeth. “*Boyce!*”

Now Boyce knew the face, and realized what end had come to Godfrey Morel. Though the end had not yet quite come.

He reached for the loathsomely clinging root-carvings, but that inhuman voice halted him.

“Stay! Do not touch the walls! Do *not!*”

Boyce knew that he was shivering. He licked his dry lips.

“Godfrey,” he said. “What—isn’t there—”

“Listen,” Godfrey Morel said with his stone tongue. “Very soon I shall be—silent. Before then. . . .” The clicking died.

“What can I do?” Boyce asked hoarsely. “Those things—”

“I am part of them already,” Godfrey said. “Part of *it*. It is a plant. Hell-spawned. A devil’s plant. Here are its roots, but through all the City, within the walls, beneath the floors, the tendrils have grown secretly. It is Jamai’s plant—his spy.”

“Jamai?”

“A devil-thing,” Godfrey said, his voice strengthening. “With its aid he knows all the City’s secrets. Within the walls its tendrils grow—listen—see—and when Jamai comes here, it answers his questions. I have seen that happen! It must be fed sometimes on the brains of living things, or it will relapse into an ordinary plant. He made it, long ago—with his sorceries.”

Sorcery? It was easy to accept that explanation, in this haunted blue twilight, but since Boyce had seen the Huntsman’s vulnerability, he was not so ready to believe. There were tropisms in plants—hypersensitivity—plants that could, in effect, see and hear and sense vibrations. Even in Burbank’s day the study of plant-mutations had been understood.

Under certain abnormal stimuli, such a monstrous thing as this was theoretically possible—a hypersensitive plant, amenable to directed control,

that absorbed brain-tissue and perhaps the energy of the mind itself. A specified plant that could be controlled like a machine!

Theoretically it was possible. But that did not lessen the horror of the monstrosity. Boyce felt faintly sick as he stared at the chalky, stiff face on the wall above him.

“I am nearly a part of—this thing,” Godfrey Morel said. “I have learned—something of what it knows. Only in a few parts of the City does counter-magic keep this hell-thing away. It cannot enter the King’s palace.

“The Oracle comes here. Jamai will try to kill her. Irathe—hates the Oracle. There is one power in the City that. . . .” The voice stopped. After a moment it began again, less clearly.

“Hard to—speak. Go to the King. I think—he can help—hates Irathe as she—hates him. Tell him—Jamai is bringing the Oracle here. . . .”

“Wait,” Boyce said. “It’s the Huntsman—”

“You have just come—from Jamai.”

“No. Godfrey, you’re wrong. I’ve come from the Huntsman.”

“The Huntsman—is Jamai. The same. . . .”

A cry burst thickly from the mask’s gaping mouth.

“Under the dragon mask—secret way! To the King—quick! *Quick!*”

The face was stone!

“Godfrey,” Boyce said—and then shouted the name. “*Godfrey!*”

Stone eyes stared at him.

Silence brimmed the blue tunnel.

Boyce went on. The sickness was still deep within him, but the fact that now he had some sort of goal gave him strength. He had learned little enough from Godfrey Morel, but he guessed that the King of this haunted city might be a friend. Or, at least, an enemy of his enemies.

Irathe and the Oracle were the same—or had been, once. The Sorcerer King might hate Irathe, but would he hate the Oracle?

And the Huntsman—Jamai? Boyce tried to understand that. It seemed meaningless. Why should the Huntsman masquerade as Jamai, or vice versa? Why. . . .

Huntsman or Jamai or both, if the man recovered from Boyce’s stunning blow, he would pursue. And with the pack. Boyce moved faster along the blue passage.

In the end he found the dragon mask. It was stone. No such creature had ever existed on Earth. It was the prototype of ancient woodcuts Boyce had seen, though how the artists had found their source he could not guess. The monstrous, snarling mask loomed above him, jutting out into the passage, blocking it so that he had to sidle past carefully to avoid touching the glittering walls with their festoons of roots.

Knowing what he did now, Boyce was more anxious than ever to avoid contact with the bright, unmoving tendrils that were the hungry roots of the plant-mutation Jamai had created.

The dragon mask was enormous, its lower jaw resting on the stone floor, its scaled snout three feet above Boyce's head. He could have walked into that incredible, gaping mouth. All around the mask grew the roots. If a secret way existed here, Boyce wondered how it could be opened without touching the walls. Perhaps here the twining coils were harmless—but he did not think so. When his shoulder brushed those bas-relief festoons, his flesh shrank.

All around the dragon-mask the tendrils coiled. But within that yawning mouth. . . .

He peered in. The blue glow did not penetrate far. Surely, if this were the opening to another passage, the Huntsman—Jamai—would have discovered it before this.

Shrinking a little, he stepped into the dragon's mouth. Before him now he could see a curtain of the stony roots—the wall. Disappointment flooded him.

As he turned to step out, the irregular surface beneath his feet betrayed him. He stumbled, caught blindly at the nearest object—

He caught himself, but too late. His hand had touched the wall.

It had *not!* There had been no feeling of substance against his palm. That meant—

Gingerly he reached out again. The wall was visible, but intangible. His hand and arm melted through those stony tendrils he could see only dimly.

He put out a tentative foot. There was a floor beyond the wall.

He stepped through the barrier into a soundless, lightless blackness.

That lasted only for an instant. Almost immediately he was conscious of swift motion. Wind blew against him strongly. Yet the movement was erratic, as though he stood in a car that was racing in a secret path through the heart of the City, bound for a destination he could only guess. Had the King built this—whatever it was—so he could spy on Jamai?

The swift motion halted. Light came, pale and colorless. Boyce stood in a tiny, featureless cubicle like a small elevator. Only for a moment did the white walls prison him. Then a gap widened before him.

Before him was the throne-room of a King—or a god!

It was the room the Huntsman had shown him in a vision. Double pillars marched the length of it to the great black and scarlet throne at the end, where a crowned figure sat motionless.

But now there was more to see than the Huntsman's glass had revealed. The room was enormous, and in place of roof and walls a gigantic hemisphere,

transparent as glass, covered it like a bubble. Below, Boyce could see the domes and smaller places of the Sorcerers' City. Mists shielded the distances, but there was a brief glimpse, gone before he could focus on it, of Kerak, gray and small in the distance, on its crag.

He had eyes only for the King, the same bearded figure, crowned and robed in yellow, that he remembered from the vision.

Warily he walked forward between the great columns. He could see his reflection in the shining black floor—not his own reflection, but that of Guillaume du Bois, scowling and scarred. Guillaume himself would have wanted a sword's hilt in his hand at this moment and, curiously, Boyce felt his own palm itch for the same comforting feeling. But he was unarmed.

The man on the throne made no move. His eyes watched Boyce. There was no sound but the heavy tread of Boyce's feet.

Closer he came, and closer. He stood before the throne.

"Go. Go at once," the king said. His voice held no shadow of emotion. It was utterly cold, completely depersonalized.

Boyce swallowed. He shook his head stubbornly. King or no king, sorcerer or scientist or man, he would not go until—

"Go at once. You will be summoned when I am ready. Go now."

Boyce set his jaw and took a step forward. The man on the throne lifted a hand in warning. And now Boyce was able to see, as the wide sleeve was raised, that across the King's knees lay a bared sword, shining with cold steely radiance. But the King did not touch the sword.

"If you come closer to me, you will die," the dispassionate voice said.

The yellow robe was stretched taut against the King's breast. A design was embroidered there, a pattern of hieroglyphics Boyce could not read. His attention was drawn briefly to that design—and he stared, not quite believing what he saw.

Then he took another step forward. The man on the throne did not move, even when Boyce laid his palm on the satin robe.

There was no heart-beat. Through the yellow, thick fabric, the chill of cold flesh was perceptible.

Even then, Boyce could not believe until he held the steel sword-blade to the King's lips. That mirror surface did not cloud.

"You are the first man in this world to learn the truth," Irathe's voice said. "No one else would have dared approach the throne." Her laughter sounded as Boyce turned, shifting his hand from the sword's blade to its hilt.

She stood near him, her red mouth smiling, her eyes faintly mocking. She wore a long robe now, and the iron crown was on her head. The black floor reflected her, and Boyce remembered the vision the Huntsman had shown him

—a woman sundered, broken into two women—Irathe and the Oracle—by an unknown science.

“Yes, the Oracle of Kerak,” she said. “I think I have won this game, even though Jamai threw the dice first. I’d never hoped for this much—that I could bring the Oracle *here*. Jamai has nearly earned my gratitude.”

Boyce looked at her coolly. He took out the crystalline gem and cradled it in his palm.

“I think this gives you power over me, Irathe,” he said. “Suppose I smash it?”

“If you like,” she said indifferently, shrugging. “You can’t return to your own world without it. And I have not as much power over you as you think.”

She nodded toward the King.

“I could destroy you now, if I wanted. But I may need you. You’ve fulfilled my purpose. You’ve also found out that the King, my father, is dead, and that must be kept secret, unless—”

“Dead?”

“He died long ago.”

“After you were made into two women?”

Irathe looked at him steadily.

“So you know that. The Huntsman, I suppose—Jamai. Yes, it was after that that my father died. He tried to use knowledge that only They can use. So he died.

“But I have certain skills of my own. The King died, but a body can be controlled, like a mind, by an outside source. For my purposes, the King had to remain alive.” She smiled again. “Call it hypnosis. Or believe that the body on the throne before you is a robot. I can control it, make it act and speak as I wish.”

“You were controlling it just now?” Boyce said.

“No. It automatically says and does certain things when anyone enters here. It spoke to you, eh? Had you been a man of the City, you would have obeyed and fled. Even Jamai has never dared approach the King.”

“I’ll keep the crystal, Irathe. I mean to go back—when I can. But stay out of my mind! You and the Huntsman.”

Irathe moved her slim shoulders in a gesture Boyce could not interpret.

“Jamai? What devils move him, I wonder, beside the devils of his own mind? I think he is mad. When the Oracle and I were one, he loved me. Then, afterward—he still loved *me*, but it was not enough. Do you know why?” She looked at Boyce through her lashes, half-smiling.

Yes, he knew. Old legends had given him the answer, stories of angel and demon battling for a man’s soul. The allegory of Jekyll and Hyde, and a hundred other such tales.

CHAPTER XIV

Ice and Fire

For Irathe was evil. Not immoral—on the contrary, she was completely free, unshackled by any bonds of conscience or remorse or empathy. She was as amoral as the inhuman creatures which had created her from a whole woman.

Good and evil, inextricably mingled in the human mind, each a check and balance upon the other—necessary to each other. And never to be separated, except by a science utterly behind the comprehension of man.

But that separation had taken place. The Oracle, no less than Irathe, was monstrous. Psychiatry had dealt with cases of schizophrenia, split personality, in which there were two inhabitants of a single mind. Sometimes one personality was pure as a saint, the other utterly vicious and evil.

But here the fission was complete. The negative and positive in the girl's mind and soul and body had been separated. No man, Boyce thought, could love Irathe without going mad. For he knew now that she was not human.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I know why the Huntsman couldn't—why it isn't enough. When I loved you, Irathe, you weren't like this."

"No. Once each cycle, the Oracle and I blend for a little while. We are one again. But I still maintain my power. I am dominant; I have control—with certain restrictions. And while we are in one body thus, I cannot harm her without harming myself. Afterwards, when we separate again, I am tranced for a while. By the time I recover, *she* is back in Kerak where I cannot reach her."

Boyce nodded.

"On Earth, then—"

"We were in one body. But I have been in many worlds. Only when we were in one body, because I needed her, I said I could not harm her here. The cage of fire, and other things, prevent me. I could not reach her in Kerak."

"Do you want to kill her?"

He thought Irathe paled a little.

"No. She is part of me, even though we are in separate bodies. Harm to her would be harm to me. But I—I am not safe. Suppose she and I were made one again forever?"

She held up her hand to stop Boyce.

"No! As I am now, I want to be always! Free to do as I want! Free to open the gateways of the universe, if I wish—to rule, to wield power, to feel no sorrow! If she and I are one again, and I not dominant—her foolish emotions,

her shallow conscience halting me from my will—no! I rule here!

“I know a way to prison the Oracle forever, where no one can reach her, and where she can never harm me. Till now I could not summon her from Kerak, except during the cycles when I dared not move because we were one.”

“With you in control. I see. It wasn’t you I knew on Earth, then—”

“You knew us both. In one body. I have searched through worlds and worlds, trying to find a key to Kerak, to the Oracle. For I had to gain entrance there and learn something of her secrets, something of how Tancred protected her and how strong he had become.

“As myself I could not go. Nor in the minds of any who would help me, for the Oracle can read men’s minds.” Her violet eyes looked at Boyce sidelong, slyly, with triumph in them.

“I found a way. I found a double way. At last the simple idea came to me that was easiest of all—to find someone she would love. She loved you, William Boyce. I knew that. She and I in a single body, forever divided in our minds, but sharing the same flesh—oh, I knew her thoughts! Something had touched her icy, frozen heart at last. I lingered in your world until I was sure. When her lover—her husband—called, I knew she would come.”

Irathe’s laughter was sweet and cold.

“I lingered until I knew I had wakened in you too the same fire. And until I was sure your mind held the knowledge of how to come here, and the passion to follow. But then—then, William Boyce, all your knowledge had to be erased from the surface of your memory. You see why.

“If you had gone into Kerak knowing what you do now, the Oracle would have recognized her danger and Tancred would have done with you as he has done with many of my envoys. So when my work was finished—I summoned Them to my aid. I knew Their presence was enough to drive all memory of me and of our year together deep, deep into the wells of the subconscious in your mind.

“If you are wise, you’ll leave them there! My purpose is served now. Though Jamai tricked me and used the crystal you carry to invade your mind before me, yet he has done my work. The Oracle comes blindly into my hands! Soon now, soon, the long wait will be ended!”

She smiled at him sweetly.

“I want your help,” she said. “I have told you that each cycle the Oracle and I become one again. In the past I have been dominant. But she grows stronger. Some day, I think, she may gain control—and find a way to conquer me. To make me subservient forever, in the same body with her. That must not happen. You will help me to prison *her*, if I need your help. And in return—”

She met his eyes squarely. Boyce leaned on the sword and waited, unsmiling.

“Instead of an image of ice—something better. The whole, complete Irathe you can never know again. And that ice image—you would die of cold,” she said, and suddenly laughed, a wild, reckless gleeful laughter that echoed shrilly from the pillars. “With me in your arms, William Boyce—you would not think of ice!”

She took another step toward him. He still leaned on the sword, conscious of the intense attraction he felt toward her, of the exotic appeal of her slim, vibrant body.

“Jamai tried that, didn’t he?” he said softly.

Her mouth twisted. Her beauty failed for an instant as the mockery of a devil showed in her eyes.

“Yes, he tried,” she said. “He had loved both of us, when we were in one body, before my father worked his magic with Them. It would have been better had I erased his memory, as I erased yours. For Jamai remembered me as I was, and yet he could not help but love me. And I am—what am I, William Boyce?”

The sword hilt was cold against his palms. He spoke hoarsely.

“I don’t know. But I know you’re something that never should have existed. A man—a woman—is supposed to be a mixture of good and evil, if that’s the way to put it. Maybe the Crusaders weren’t so superstitious when they wrote about lamias—demon-women. No man could love *you*, Irathe, without going mad. If the Oracle is ice, you are flame that destroys all it touches.”

“Then Jamai is mad,” she said. “Perhaps his mind split as my body and soul did. Perhaps he tried to create two selves, as They did to me. But only They have such power. When a mind splits thus, it is madness. Sometimes Jamai is Jamai and hates me and hates the Oracle and wishes to destroy us both.

“Sometimes he is the Huntsman, and does not care, and would not care if this world ended now. But he loved me before They worked their spell, and he is bound to me—to Irathe—by unbreakable bonds—and he must die. I cannot trust that windvane mind of his.”

She put out a hand and touched the sword Boyce held.

“You will help me. If you can have nothing else—am *I* not desirable? Look upon this frozen love of yours—and decide.”

Her arm swept out. Boyce’s gaze followed the gesture.

Down the long pillared avenue toward the throne, the Oracle of Kerak came slowly. Her hands were clasped before her, her eyes were still closed, the marble hair lay smoothly upon the marble shoulders. She walked serenely,

surely, toward him as if her mind had clearer vision than her unseeing eyes.

And now he could see that these two women were indeed the same. Fire and ice, good and evil—and more than that. Deeper than simple morality. It was positive and negative, each complete—and each unearthly!

But the good was less earthly than the evil.

She came straight to where Boyce stood. She paused. And then, for the first time, he saw the lashes flicker on her cheeks. The white lids rose. Her eyes were blue—ice blue, the color that lingers deep within frozen bergs. But more than ice was here now.

Far down, deeply buried, he thought he saw a stirring of—life? Awareness? There was a mind within this icy statue, prisoned inside it as the body had been prisoned in fire until he called her under Jamai's command. And the mind—remembered.

Boyce was shaken to his depths. He loved both women when they were one. Now they were two. In bewilderment he realized that each woman drew him, but in such different ways that for an instant he felt a shocking disorientation, as though the glass walls beyond him had drawn apart—more than that—as though he himself was being split into two parts.

Black garden of evil—scented with the poisonous perfume of flowers ablaze with sensuous color—promising untold desire fulfilled, a madness of ecstasy such as man had never known—

Goddess of shining crystal, pure and remote as the stars—a distant flame behind the cold blue eyes hinting at a love that was far and veiled by walls of ice—

Side by side they stood, those two who had been one.

And one promised more than any man had ever known.

You are my husband. You are my lover. You wedded me as well as that frozen goddess. We will walk through worlds of flame and color and sound, under seas of nameless planets, beyond the gates of space and time. Death or madness will not matter. We will plumb the last, uttermost limits of power and rule here like god and goddess.

But the distant ember behind the ice in the Oracle's eyes promised nothing. It asked nothing.

It said—*I love you.* And that was all.

I rathe saw Boyce's face change. She saw him step forward and face her, guarding the Oracle with his own body. Bitter mockery made the red mouth ugly.

"You could have helped me," she said softly. "There is danger now, but since you will not aid there is no other way. This means your death—you fool!"

Her gaze focused beyond Boyce. She made a quick, intricate movement with her hands, while her whole slim figure tensed into a rigid statue. Then, instantly, she had relaxed.

“*They* are coming,” she said. “I have summoned them before their time—before the cycle has been completed. There is danger in that.”

Boyce shifted the sword in his right hand. Irathe laughed.

“A sword against—*Them*?”

“No,” Boyce said. “Against you, Irathe.”

The blade lifted—hung poised to slash her throat.

She faced him unafraid.

“What of your love, then? Harm me—and she will be harmed. Kill me, and she dies.”

Boyce lowered the sword.

“Unless you’re lying.”

“Try it and see. Do you dare?”

“No,” he said. “But I can go back to my own world, I still have that crystal. I can take her with me.”

“Try it.”

He turned away. The Oracle followed willingly enough, though her face was void of expression. He glanced back at Irathe, and saw something in her eyes that made him halt.

“Wait!” she said. “The crystal—”

He took a long stride back toward her, the sword raised again.

“I’d forgotten! You were trying to control me through it, weren’t you? But —” He hesitated. “You couldn’t do it. Is that it? You’ve lost your power!”

“Not while you live!” Irathe blazed at him. “I am not that weak!”

“You tried to control my mind,” he said. “And it didn’t work. Why?”

“There was something fighting against me. . . I have felt that ever since you came to the throne-room. I—listen!”

The air shivered around them. A thin, high keening sound rang in Boyce’s ears, like that ringing in the head which cannot be shaken away. Now it grew louder, clearer. There was in it the tinkling of tiny bells. And a faint chill like no chill he had ever felt except when—

“*They* come!” Irathe cried. “Sooner than I thought. Oh, there’s danger here for you both—for everyone but me!” Her laughter was high and triumphant and Boyce had the fleeting thought that in its sound he heard something of tinkling sweetness like the bells *They* rang. Already she laughed with a voice like *Theirs*.

The floor shook.

Irathe glanced at the Oracle, standing serenely, hands clasped, icy eyes upon Boyce with a flicker of fire behind the ice, as if memory might be

flowing slowly, softly back into that frozen mind.

“The bond is weaker between Kerak and the City while she remains here,” Irathe said abstractedly. “You feel that? A pitching like the roll of waves under the City? These lands have been pent up a long while as the City rode at anchor with Kerak for a mooring.” She laughed again, recklessly. “What a storm underfoot we should have if the mooring snapped!”

Darkness was gathering in the air of the room. Boyce glanced up and saw through the great glass dome above them a scurry of motion in the City, men and women hurrying to shelter in any palace or temple or tavern that would receive them. The streets were clearing for *Them*.

“Now we shall finish!” Irathe cried. “They come who made me into two—and who will enchain this One of me so that she can never again hope to control my mind.” She leaned closer and her red lip curled up in a scornful smile as she gazed into her own face frozen to the color of ice and marble.

“You thought to rule me!” she said softly. “Oh, I knew your thoughts! Remember, we were one when this man loved us. I could feel your treachery moving beneath my own mind like snakes squirming underfoot. You thought to build up the power that could take control from me when we are next made one. Oh yes, I know why! It was love that woke your envy of my strength. Love for him. He’s mine now.

“Listen—you hear the bells? *They* come, who split us into two—and will deal at my command with you! Prepare yourself, my sister—my more than sister! These moments are your last. Are you ready for the enchantment that will make you forever the marble thing you now only seem to be?”

CHAPTER XV

The Way Back

She swung to Boyce, her black hair flying wide. Her face was a blaze of triumph and joyous evil. Her eyes upon his were a violet flame in the darkness and the chill of the room. They sought his eyes, fixed there—he felt an irresistible pull as if she were drawing out his very mind through the meeting of their gaze. Blackness darker than the gathering gloom around them swam through his brain. And then—

Laughter echoed through the great hall.

They turned, even the Oracle. Boyce was dizzy for an instant at the sudden release of the bond between Irathe's gaze and his. Then he saw, down the long aisle, a motion among the pillars. As the wild laughter rang out again he saw the tiger-beasts of the Huntsman sliding toward them with their beautiful pouring motion, golden eyes lambent in the dimness.

Behind them, leaning on the leash, the Huntsman came in his tiger-striped garments. Blood smeared his pale face, and he was laughing as he came—but not from mirth. Boyce remembered Irathe's words. Yes, it might be madness, that wild, mirthless sound that echoed among the pillars. But a cold madness, that knew its own power.

"It was *you*, then—in the crystal—fighting my will!" Irathe cried furiously. "You dared, Jamai—"

He came on, laughing deep in his throat.

"I? Was it Jamai? Or was it the Huntsman? I have two selves, Irathe, even as you. You should know that! William Boyce, I owe you thanks. Never before have I found the secret way to the throne. Till I looked into your mind through the crystal, I had not known that the King was dead. I had not even known that I was dead!"

"*Jamai!*" Irathe shrilled.

"Even you, Irathe, are vulnerable. You are afraid. All of us are afraid of something—death, or pain, or magic. Because you are sane—even you, Irathe—but I have lost my vulnerability. I had not known it before, but I know now.

"How can a man love good and evil—fire and ice—and stay sane? You were wise to make the choice you did. It meant death, but death is better than life. I made the other choice. I have followed Irathe through all the hells in all the universe!"

A shadow darkened above the crystal globe. The white mists gathered closer overhead, clustering about the hemisphere to hide the City's roofs

below. Kerak, far and small, was hidden by the pallid veils.

“*Jamai!*” Irathe cried again, and he smiled.

“No, Irathe,” he said, his voice dropping. “It is the end. I love you, and I love the Oracle. I will not see her enslaved to your evil will. I know what evil is in you.

“But I would not see her gain power over you again, because then she would look at me, and know the evil that has flowered within me since she saw me last. Both you and she must die, Irathe—and for all I care, all the worlds may die with you!”

Irathe’s mouth curved. “I have summoned Them. You are too late—much too late.”

The shadow was like thunderheads above the crystal roof, darkening the great room. *Jamai* roared with laughter.

“Let Them come!” he shouted. “Let Them slay! I know the answer now—and it is Death! Kill and be killed! I am wiser than you all, for I am mad—and I say the answer is Death!”

It was almost too dark now to see, but Boyce could make out the sudden upward sweep of a tiger-striped arm, and the whip of the loosened leash. And he could see the instantaneous forward sweep of the two long, low, powerful bodies at the Huntsman’s knee. His laughter seemed to madden them, and their screaming snarl of rage echoed the curious snarl in his own voice as they launched themselves forward toward the throne where the dead King sat.

Dimly Boyce saw the beautiful, screaming faces of the beasts, met the glow of their luminous eyes—and sprang forward before the Oracle, swinging his sword.

It was too dark to see the tiger-things, though they were almost upon him. It was too dark to see the two girls or the throne or the pillars, and the Huntsman’s mad laughter rang disembodied through the blackness. There was a singing in Boyce’s ears, a sound of tiny bells very near. . .

A hot-breathed snarl sounded in his face. He heard claws click on pavement as the beast launched itself at his throat. Of itself, the sword swung in his hands. It met hard, muscular resistance that held for a moment and then seemed to fall away, left and right over the razor-edge of the blade.

There was a sudden, hot reek of blood in the air, but he was scarcely aware of it. For now shadows moved through the dark, and it seemed to Boyce that his flesh moved with them, shudderingly, on his bones. Cold struck into his mind and his body, numbing, paralyzing. . . .

An icy wind rushed past him, swaying the darklike curtains before it. Briefly, dimly, the dark parted. He saw in one terrible glancing flash a robed figure moving as no human figure ever moved.

He saw Irathe facing it, her arms flung high, her black hair swirling wide on the blast, her face dazzling. He saw one more thing—a second snarling figure before him, crouching for a leap; lips wrinkled back over curved fangs as it glared at him out of wild, mad eyes.

Then the darkness closed in again, like dropping curtains. Through it he could hear Irathe's voice, high and shrill, speaking words whose very sound was a meaningless blasphemy to the ear. No human tongue was ever meant to shape such sounds.

The chant rose higher, thinner, like they were cramped like ice around the hilt of his ears and his brain except when the shriek of that icy wind drowned them out.

The cold was in his bones now. His hands were cramped like ice around the hilt of his sword. Hearing that feral snarl, he swung it up with infinite effort. A lithe, beast-smelling body thudded against him. Claws raked his thigh, and the snarl was in his very ear. Furiously, struggling against the cold, he flung it off, slashing downward—missed.

Now the chant of Irathe's strangely changed voice, resonant with that insistent hell-sound, filled all the darkness. And he sensed even through the cold and his confusion a motion among the robed, unseen figures—a motion he knew because his flesh told him by its shuddering shrink when They drew near.

With one last despairing effort he lifted the sword as he heard that snarl again. This time it struck home. The snarl was a howl. A body thudded to the floor and was silent. The figures were closing in around him, and he knew that when they reached him, he would die.

One last thing remained. He could not reach Irathe to silence her triumphant chant, but the Oracle stood at his back. He could reach her.

He could kill her.

She at least need never be captive again to the black evil of her twin self. And if the Oracle died—perhaps—Irathe too might die. It was a forlorn and desperate thing he meant to do, but he knew in his frozen horror and revulsion that it was best for them all.

She was very near, within reach of his arm. He touched her—for the first time. He had wondered often before now if she would be marble to the touch, cold, hard. She was not cold. For an instant it bewildered him, and then he knew. He was himself so paralyzingly cold in this unnatural icy dark that even marble might seem warm to him.

And as he drew her toward him, his arm closing about her shoulders, he felt her giving slowly, almost reluctantly, to his pull, her body bending as he brought her within reach of his sword.

He shortened his grip upon it. In the deadly dark he laid its sharp edge

against her throat.

She did not stir. But he could hear her quickened breathing.

Very gently he bent his head and kissed her for the first time and the last his conscious memory would ever know. And under his lips he felt warmth and life come slowly back into the Oracle of Kerak. Slowly, softly out of that distant place in which she had dwelt so long, the Oracle of Kerak returned to the world of the living.

Against his mouth her lips moved. Against his heart her heart stirred—beat more strongly. In his arms her body that had been marble relaxed into flexible, living flesh. The tie between them which Irathe herself had brought into being was a cord that drew her irresistibly through the gates of forgetfulness and enchantment. She stirred, sighed—

The spell broke!

She wrenched free and was gone into the darkness. And as she moved, it seemed to Boyce that Irathe's voice faltered. For an instant assurance went out of it and she stumbled in the midst of a phrase. Suddenly he thought he understood. They were the two halves of a single being.

Irathe in all her vivid aliveness had drained from that other self the very stuff of life itself. When living returned to the Oracle, it could come from no other source than Irathe. She must have felt her own power sink within her at the abrupt upward surge of strength in the Oracle.

Now suddenly in the icy darkness a new voice sounded—a clear, cool voice, very sure, chanting that blasphemous tongue which Irathe still spoke. Almost in chorus for a moment the two voices chanted, one cool and not strong, but gaining in strength, the other rich and high, brimming with passion—but fading a little as the new tones sounded through the dark.

But it was not a chorus. Strophe and antistrophe rang through the icy hall. And at the chant of that new, clear speech, Boyce thought the cold began to ebb a little. He could move again—not much, but a little. Blindly he stumbled forward.

Voice fought against voice. The two who had been one woman battled in the dark. And Boyce knew now the truth behind that battle. For Irathe was not, after all, the one human creature who could command Them. She was only half of that one being who alone spoke Their tongue with human lips. The Oracle too knew the chant, knew They must obey it. And in the dark the Oracle chanted on, her voice gaining little by little in volume as it strove with Irathe's.

Groping, Boyce touched something warm and breathing. Even in the darkness, he could not be mistaken who it was. He seized her waist, and Irathe struck out at him fiercely, pausing in her chant. The Oracle's voice soared

instantly in the pause, strength surging up in it.

Boyce's arms swept around Irathe. Her nails ripped his cheek. He dragged her close, imprisoning her arms, one palm clamping across her mouth. It was like holding one of the tiger-beasts. Her knee drove up viciously; she writhed in his arms and he tightened his grasp until it seemed as though her ribs must collapse under the pressure. But she could not speak.

The Oracle's voice poured forth that inhuman chant, clear and strong. It was a command—and an entreaty.

Darkness was paling around them. Over Irathe's twisting head, Boyce saw robed figures moving in an intricate ritual about the marble-white girl whose voice still echoed through the room. He saw, and looked away, setting his teeth against the shudders that racked him whenever his eyes even glancingly crossed those hidden shapes.

But something was happening.

In his arms Irathe suddenly froze. Something brushed past, a touch that exhaled cold, and Boyce was for a moment weak with horror at the touch. Then a single ringing sound like a struck gong vibrated through the lifting dimness.

And from Boyce's arms he felt Irathe—melt. . . .

When he could see again, the room was clear. He was not wholly aware of the great surging lift and fall of the floor beneath him, for one thing held his gaze like a spell of sorcery. And there was sorcery indeed in her violet eyes and the vividness of the smiling face beneath her iron crown.

"Do you know me now—my dear, oh, my dear—do you know me now?"

He was not sure of his own body any more. He took one forward step as the floor pitched beneath him, not daring to believe the strange evidence of his own stunned mind.

"We are one again now," the sweet, familiar voice was saying. And he did remember, from long ago and from another world. His heart was beating suffocatingly as he crossed the heaving floor toward her, holding out uncertain hands.

Her warm fingers clasped them. It was the face he knew tilting to his now—vivid and alive as Irathe, yes, potent for evil as Irathe—but not evil. All the strength was there, but under the control the Oracle had always known.

She thrust herself between his arms and laid the crowned head back to lift her lips to his, smiling as she had smiled so long ago, on Earth.

Yes, he remembered now. This was the real Irathe . . . !

The pitch of the floor beneath them interrupted the kiss. She drew back and looked anxiously about them.

"We must go," she said. "I wish—but unless you mean to stay here forever, we must go quickly."

He followed her glance. Through the crystal ceiling, clear now except for the drift of mist outside, he could see the City roofs and the mountains beyond them, with Kerak crowning the heights. And Kerak was slipping slowly backward. The mountains moved—no, not the mountains, but the City.

“The bond is broken,” the girl in his arms said. He could not quite think of her as Irathe, though he knew it was truly her name now. “I’m no longer an anchor to hold the City here and the tide is pulling us out and away. What do you think we should do, William Boyce?”

He dropped one arm from her to touch his belt where a faint chill from the crystal struck through his clothing. Yes, it was still there.

“Go back,” he said. “Back to Earth, if we can.”

She nodded.

“Yes, I hoped for that. This City is no place for me now. My place is with you—if you want that?”

He grinned and dropped his head to reassure her, but she smiled, pushing him gently away.

“Later, later, my darling. We—*look*.”

He turned his head. Then in an awed voice he said, “*Jamai!*”

And yet it was no startling thing he saw. Terrible, yes, and tragic, but somehow not strange in this strange and lawless place.

On the high throne of the Sorcerer King the Huntsman sat. The King’s yellow-robed body lay at his feet on the heaving floor. The Huntsman’s chin was on his chest and his face was turned toward them as they stood before the throne. But the Huntsman’s eyes did not see them. His eyes were fixed upon the bright face of madness and he saw no other sight.

They left him there, stumbling as they went over the pitching floor, his dead beasts lying about the throne and the dead King at his feet.

Through the mist they stumbled, over ground that swelled and sank beneath their feet like the tides of a solid sea. Great gaps opened and closed again with a screaming of rock far underground. The depths groaned beneath them.

“Hurry!” Boyce heard himself gasp as the ground shook itself and rose in a mountainous billow that sank as they began the climb up its slope. “It isn’t far now—only a little way. I remember that cliff. It’s the one I came through.”

“I think—it’s steadier now,” Irathe panted. “The ground—it’s rising into the foothills here. Only the valley—flows.”

Wreathed in mist, they climbed. And it was true that as the rocky hillside rose underfoot, the billowing subsided. Once they paused and looked back. Far away, gleaming with jeweled lights, glittering with enchantment, they saw the warlocks’ City drifting like a ship into the misty distances, pitching on the land

waves that surged in long quakes around it. And beyond the City, Kerak.

High on the crags, the great castle stood, its scarlet banner blowing above it like a flame. Other lands would drift through this valley at its feet. Other cities and people would know Tancred and Guillaume du Bois, who was Boyce's distant forebear and would never know it. Kerak, he thought, would sit through an uncounted forever on its crag while the drifting lands flowed slowly by, carrying unknown adventures past its gates.

They turned and climbed again.

"Here—no, farther. Here, I think." Boyce searched the ledges with anxious eyes. Incredible to think that just beyond one of them his own world lay. He caught a glint of something, and bent close to look.

"Yes, this is it. See, the glass I broke when I came through."

It lay on the ground in glittering fragments that crackled underfoot. Boyce fumbled in his belt, brought out the small, cold crystal whose chill struck into his palm as he held it.

"Wait," Irathe said. "The light—" She hesitated, then smiled suddenly at him. "I promised myself I would work no more sorcery. But for this one time, we have need of sorcery, my dear. See?"

She held up her hand, flexed the fingers once, twice. Then between thumb and forefinger she seemed to hold a tiny flame.

"Quick, while it burns!"

Boyce lifted the crystal. The fire struck through it, fell in shining patterns on the stone—sank into it. Slowly the window formed that was a gateway into other worlds.

Once more, for the last time, Boyce looked behind him. The City was a stain on the mist, far away, riding the quaking lands into new harbors, its lights glittering faintly through the fog. Grim, changeless, Kerak looked out across this strange world where space was fluid and time was not.

Unknown enchanted cities would always drive past through the troubled earthquake lands among the pale mists. He would never know these cities.

His mind lingered for one last, strangely reluctant moment upon Kerak, where men of his own blood dwelt.

Then Irathe said, "Come—*now!*" and took his hand.

The crystal loomed up before them on the rock, with shadows behind it.

They felt the delicate, tinkling shatter of the glass. . . .

Shadow-tapestries swayed and rippled on the walls. Dim jewels gleamed from the unreal folds. But through the rich hangings the bare, dusty boards began to show.

The tapestries were gone. The empty, silent room was around them. Behind them the wall showed no trace of the crystal pattern.

From the distance came the sound of auto horns, and a newsboy's voice

shouting.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed. This book contained extensive typographical errors: more than a hundred errors have been corrected.

[The end of *Lands of the Earthquake* by Henry Kuttner]