

# Strange

## STORIES

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**13**  
**COMPLETE**  
**STORIES**  
**IN THIS**  
**ISSUE!**

**THE**  
**CITADEL**  
**OF**  
**DARKNESS**  
By **HENRY**  
**KUTTNER**

FEATURING  
**SNAKE GODDESS**  
A Novelet of a  
Mystery Python  
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# The Citadel of Darkness

*A Complete Novelet of a Strange Zodiac*

By

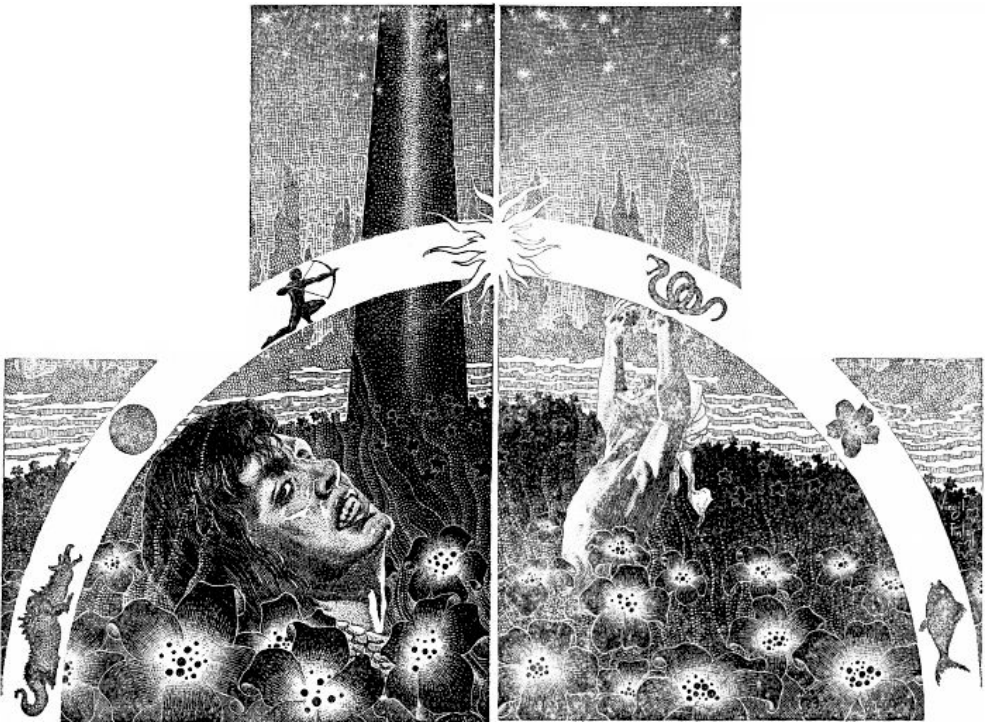
HENRY KUTTNER

*Author of "Cursed be the City," "The Frog," etc.*

First published *Strange Stories*, August 1939.

*Black Arts and Necromancy Flourish in Ancient Forests When a Prince Pits Himself  
Against Astrological Gods!*

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*The amulet bore six signs*

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Hearken, O King, while I tell of high dooms and valorous men in the dim mists of long-passed aeons—aye, long and long ago, ere Nineveh and Tyre were born and ruled and crumbled to the dust. In the lusty youth of the world Imperial Gobi, Cradle of Mankind, was a land of beauty and of wonder and of black evil beyond imagination. And of Imperial Gobi, mistress of the Asian Seas, nothing now remains but a broken shard, a shattered stone that once crowned an obelisk—

nothing is left but a thin high wailing in the wind, a crying that mourns for lost glories. Hearken again, O King, while I tell you of my vision and my dream. . . .

—*The Tale of Sakhmet the Damned.*

## CHAPTER I

### *The Sign of the Mirror*

For six hours the archer had lain dying in the great oak's shadow. The attackers had not troubled to strip him of his battered armor—poor stuff compared to their own forged mail, glittering with brilliant gems. They had ridden off with their loot, leaving the wounded archer among the corpses of his companions. He had lost much blood, and now, staring into the afternoon dimness of the forest, he knew death was coming swiftly.

Parched lips gaped as the man gasped for breath. Once more he tried to crawl to where a goatskin canteen lay upon the glossy, motionless flank of a fallen war-horse. And again he failed. Sighing, he relaxed, his fevered cheek against the cool earth.

Faintly a sound came to the archer's ears—the drumming of hoofs. Were the raiders returning? One hand gripped the bow that lay beside him; weakly he strove to fit an arrow to the string.

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Two horses cantered into view—a great gray charger and a dun mare. On the latter rode a tall, huge-muscled black man, his gargoylish face worried and anxious.

The gray's rider seemed small beside the Nubian, but his strong frame was unwearied by hours in the saddle. Under yellow, tousled hair was a hard young face, bronzed and eagle eyed. He saw the shambles beneath the oak, reined in his steed.

“By Shaitan!” he snapped. “What devil's work is this?”

The dying man's fingers let the bow fall.

“Prince Raynor—water!” he gasped.

Raynor leaped to the ground, snatched a goatskin, and held it to the archer's lips.

“What's happened?” he asked presently. “Where's Delphia?”

“They—they took her.”

“Who?”

“A band of warriors took us by surprise. We were ambushed. We fought, but—they were many. I saw them ride south with Delphia.”

The archer of a sudden looked oddly astonished. His hand reached out and gripped the bow that lay beside him.

“Death comes,” he whispered, and a shudder racked him. His jaw fell; he lay dead.

Raynor stood up, a hard, cold anger in his eyes. He glanced up at the Nubian, who had not dismounted.

“We also ride south,” he said shortly. “It was a pity we fell behind, Eblik.”

“I don't think so,” Eblik observed. “It was an act of providence that your horse should go lame yesterday. Had we been trapped with the others, we'd have died also.”

Raynor fingered his swordhilt. “Perhaps not. At any rate, we'll have our chance to cross blades with these marauding dogs.”

“So? I think—”

“Obey!” Raynor snapped, and vaulted to the saddle. He set spurs to the horse's flanks, galloped past the heap of bodies beneath the oak. “Here's a trail. And it leads south.”

Grunting his disapproval, the Nubian followed.

“You may have been Prince of Sardopolis,” he muttered, “but Sardopolis has fallen.”

That was true. They were many days' journey from the kingdom where Raynor had been born, and which was no longer a home for him. Three people had fled from doomed Sardopolis—Raynor, his servant Eblik, and the girl Delphia—and in their flight they had been joined by a few other refugees.

And now the last of the latter had been slain, here in unknown country near the Sea of Shadows that lay like a shining sapphire in Imperial Gobi. When Raynor's horse had gone lame the day before, he and Eblik had fallen behind for an hour that stretched into a far longer period—and now the archers were slain and Delphia herself a captive.

The two rode swiftly; yet when night fell they were still within the great forest that had loomed above them for days. Raynor paused in a little clearing.

"We'll wait here till moonrise," he said. "It's black as the pit now."

Dismounting, the prince stretched weary muscles. Eblik followed his example. There was a brook near by, and he found water for the horses. That done, he squatted on his haunches, a grim black figure in the darkness.

"The stars are out," he said at last, in a muffled tone.

Raynor, his back against a tree-trunk, glanced up. "So they are. But it's not moonrise yet."

The Nubian went on as though he had not heard. "These are strange stars. I've never seen them look thus before."

"Eh?" The young prince stared. Against the jet curtain of night the stars glittered frostily, infinitely far away. "They look the same as always, Eblik."

But—did they? A little chill crept down Raynor's spine. Something cold and indefinitely horrible seemed to reach down from the vast abyss of the sky—a breath of the unknown that brooded over this primeval wilderness.

The same stars—yes! But why, in this strange land, were the stars dreadful?

"You're a fool, Eblik," Raynor said shortly. "See to the horses."

The Nubian shivered and stood up.

"I wish we had never come into this black land," he murmured, in an oddly subdued voice. "It is cold here—too cold for midsummer."

A low whisper came out of the dark.

"Aye, it is cold. The gaze of the Basilisk chills you."

"Who's that?" Raynor snarled. He whirled, his sword bare in his hand. Eblik crouched, great hands flexing.

Quiet laughter sounded. A shadow stepped from behind an oak trunk. A giant figure moved forward, indistinct in the gloom.

"A friend. Or at least, no enemy. Put up your blade, man. I have no quarrel with you."

"No?" Raynor growled. "Then why slink like a wolf in the dark?"

"I heard the noise of battle. I heard strange footsteps in the forest of Mirak. These called me forth."

A glimmer of wan, silvery light crept through the trees. The moon was rising. Its glow touched a great billow of white hair; shaggy, tufted eyebrows, a beard that rippled down upon the newcomer's breast. Little of the man's face could be seen. An aquiline beak of a nose jutted out, and sombre dark eyes dwelt on Raynor. A coarse gray robe and sandals covered the frame of a giant.

"Who are you?"

"Ghiar, they call me."

"What talk is this of a—Basilisk?" Eblik asked softly.

“Few can read the stars,” Ghiar said. “Yet those who can know the Dwellers in the Zodiac. Last night the sign of the Archer was eclipsed by the Fish of Ea. And this night the Basilisk is in the ascendancy.” The deep voice grew deeper still; organ-powerful it rolled through the dark aisles of the forest. “Seven signs hath the Zodiac! The Sign of the Archer and the Sign of the Fish of Ea! The Sign of the Serpent and that of the Mirror! The Basilisk, and the Black Flower—and the Sign of Tammuz which may not be drawn. Seven signs—and the Basilisk rules tonight.”

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Meeting the brooding stare of those dark eyes, Raynor felt a nameless sense of unease.

“My business is not with the stars,” half-angrily he said. “I seek men, not mirrors and serpents.”

The tufted eyebrows lifted.

“Yet the stars may aid you, stranger, as they have aided me,” Ghiar rumbled. “As they have told me, for example, of a captive maid in Malric’s castle.”

Raynor tensed. “Eh?”

“Baron Malric rules these marshes. His men captured your wench, and she is his prisoner now.”

“How do you know this?” Raynor snapped.

“Does that matter? I have certain powers—powers which may aid you, if you wish.”

“This is sorcery, Prince,” Eblik muttered. “Best run your blade through his hairy gullet.”

Raynor hesitated, as though almost minded to obey. Ghiar shrugged.

“Malric’s castle is a strong one; his followers are many. You alone cannot save the girl. Let me aid you.”

Raynor’s laugh was hotly scornful. “You aid me, old man? How?”

“Old? Aye, I am older than you think. Yet these oaks, too, are ancient, and they are strong with age. Let me tell you a secret. Malric fears the stars. He was born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea, which serves the Sign of the Black Flower. I, too, was born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea, but to me has been given power to rule, not to serve. The baron knows my power, and in my name you may free the girl.”

Eblik broke in. “What would you gain by this?”

For a moment Ghiar was silent. The cold wind ruffled his white beard and tugged at his gray robe.

“What would I gain? Perhaps vengeance. Perhaps Baron Malric is my enemy. What does that matter to you? If I give you my aid, that should be enough.”

“True,” Raynor said. “Though this smacks of sorcery to me. However”—he shrugged—“Shaitan knows we need help, if Malric be as strong as you say.”

“Good!” Ghiar’s somber eyes gleamed with satisfaction. He fumbled in his robe, brought out a small glittering object. “This amulet will be your weapon.”

Raynor took the thing and scrutinized it with interest. The amulet was perhaps as large as his palm, a disc of silvery metal on which figures were graven clockwise.

Six signs the amulet bore.

An arrow and a fish; a serpent and a circle; a flower and a tiny dragon-like creature with a long tail and a row of spines on its back.

In the amulet’s center was a jewel—cloudy black, with a gleaming star-point in its tenebrous heart.

“The Sign of Tammuz,” whispered Ghiar. “Which may not be drawn! Yet by the star in the black opal ye may know him, Tammuz, Lord of the Zodiac!”

Raynor turned the object in his hand. On the amulet’s back was a mirror-disc.

Ghiar said warningly, “Do not look too long in the steel. Through the Sign of the Mirror the power of the Basilisk is made manifest, and you may need that power. Show Malric the talisman. Order him, in my name, to free the girl. If he obeys, well. If he refuses”—the deep voice sank to an ominous whisper—“if he refuses, turn the amulet. Let him gaze into the Sign of the Mirror!”

Ghiar’s hand lifted; he pointed south. “There is your road. The moon is up. Ride south!”

Raynor grunted, turned to his horse. Silently he vaulted to the saddle and turned the steed’s head into the trail. Eblik was not far behind.

Once Raynor turned to look over his shoulder. Ghiar was still standing in the clearing, his shaggy head lifted, motionless as an image.

The warlock stared up at the stars.



## CHAPTER II

### *The Sign of the Basilisk*

So Eblik and Prince Raynor came to the outlaw's castle, a great gray pile of stone towering above the gloomy forest. They came out of the woods and stood silent for a time, looking across a broad grassy meadow, beyond which the castle brooded like a crouching beast. Red flame of lamps and flambeaux glittered from the mullioned windows. In the gateway light glistened on armor.

"Follow!" Raynor snapped, and spurred forward.

Across the sward they fled, and before the nodding guardsman had sprung to alertness, two muscular figures were almost upon him. Bearded lips opened in a shout that died unuttered. Gleaming steel thrust through a bare throat, slipped free, stained crimson. Choking on his own blood, the guard clawed at the gate and fell slowly, face down, to lie motionless in the moonlight.

"One guard," Raynor murmured. "Baron Malric fears few enemies, it seems. Well, that will make our task the easier. Come."

They went through the flagged courtyard and entered the castle itself. A bare sentry-room of stone, with a great oak door in the far wall—a room stacked with weapons, sword and mace and iron war-hook. Raynor hesitated, and then slipped quietly to the door. It was not barred. He pushed it gently open and peered through the crack. Eblik saw his master's figure go tense.

Raynor looked upon the castle's great hall. High-ceilinged it stretched up to oak rafters, blackened with smoke, that crisscrossed like a spider's web far above. The room itself was vast. Rich furs and rugs covered the floor; a long T-shaped table stretched almost from wall to wall. Around it, laughing and shouting in vinous mirth as they fed, were the men of Malric, his outlaw band.

Bearded men, wolf-fierce, gnawing on mutton-bones and swilling from great mugs of heady spiced liquor. At the head of the board, on an ornate throne, sat the baron himself—and he was truly a strange man to lord it over these lawless savages.

For Malric was slim and dark and smiling, with a gayly youthful face, and long hair that fell loosely about his slim shoulders. He wore a simple brown tunic, with loose, baggy sleeves, and his hands were busy twirling a gilded, filigreed chalice. He looked up as two burly outlaws entered, half dragging the slim form of a girl.

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It was Delphia. She still wore her dinted armor, and her ebony hair, unbound, fell in ringlets about her pale face. There was beauty in that face, wild and lawless beauty, and fire and strength in the jet eyes. She straightened and glared at Malric.

"Well?" she snapped. "What new insult is this?"

"Insult?" the baron questioned, his voice calm and soft. "I intend none. Will you eat with us?" He motioned to a chair that stood vacant beside him.

"I'd sooner eat with wild dogs," Delphia declared.

And at her words a low, ominous growl rose from the outlaws. One man, a burly fellow with a cast in one eye and a white scar disfiguring his cheek, leaped up and hurried to the girl's side. There he turned to face Malric.

"Have I given you leave to rise, Gunther?" the baron asked gently.

For answer the other growled an oath. “By Shaitan!” he snarled. “You’ve kept me waiting long enough, Malric. This wench is my own. I captured her, and I’ll have her. If she eats with us, she sits beside me!”

“So?” Malric’s voice did not change. Ironic laughter gleamed in the dark eyes. “Perhaps you grow tired of my rule, Gunther. Perhaps you wish to sit in my throne, eh?”

The outlaws watched, waiting. A hush hung over the long table. Involuntarily Raynor’s hand crept to his swordhilt. He sensed death in the air.

Perhaps Gunther sensed it too. The white scar on his cheek grew livid. He roared an inarticulate oath and whipped out a great blade. Bellowing, he sprang at Malric. The sword screamed through the air.

The baron scarcely seemed to move, so swift was his rising. Yet suddenly he stood facing Gunther, and his slim hand dipped into his loose sleeve and came out with the light glittering on bright metal.

Swift as a snake’s striking was Malric’s cast. And a lean knife shot through the air and found its mark unerringly. Through eye and thin shell of bone and into soft, living brain it sped. Gunther screamed hoarsely once and his sword missed its target, digging instead into the wood of the table.

The outlaw’s body bent back like a drawn bow. Gunther clawed at his face, his nails ripping away skin and flesh in a death agony.

And he fell, his mail ringing and clashing, to lie silent at Malric’s feet.

The baron seated himself, sighing. Once more his fingers toyed with the gilded chalice. Seemingly he ignored the shout of approbation that thundered up from the outlaws.

But after a moment he glanced up at Delphia. He gestured, and the two guards dragged her forward.

Watching at the door, Raynor decided that it was time to act. Madness, perhaps, walking into a den of armed enemies. But the prince had changed his opinion. He had developed a queer, inexplicable confidence in Ghiar’s talisman. He found the disc in his belt, cupped it in his palm, and with a word to Eblik kicked open the door and stepped into the hall.

Ten steps he took before he was discovered. Ten steps, with the Nubian at his heels, great battle-ax ready.

Then the wolves saw him and sprang up, shouting.

Simultaneously Malric called an order. His voice penetrated knife-keen through the tumult, and silence fell. The baron sat motionless, a little frown between his eyes, watching the two interlopers.

“Well?” he demanded. “Who are you?” And he cast a swift glance at Delphia, whose slight start had been betraying.

“My name matters little,” Raynor said. “I bring you a message from a certain Ghiar.”

“Ghiar!”

A repressed whisper shuddered through the outlaws. There was fear in it, and bitter hatred.

“What is this message?” Malric demanded.

“That you free this girl.”

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The baron’s youthful face was bland.

“Is that all?” he asked.

Raynor was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. He had expected some other reaction—what, he did not know. But Malric’s calm passivity baffled him.

The baron waited. When no answer came, he made a quick gesture. And up from the board leaped armed men, shouting, blades bared. They poured down upon Raynor and on Eblik crouching behind him, gargoyle face twisted in battle lust.

So this was what came of warlocks' promises! Raynor grinned bitterly, whipped out his sword—and remembered the talisman. What had Ghiair said?

"If he refuses, turn the amulet. Let him gaze into the Sign of the Mirror!"

The foremost man was almost upon him as Raynor flung up his hand, the talisman cupped within it. From the mirror darted a ray of light—needle-thin, blindingly brilliant.

It struck full in the outlaw's face. It probed deep—deep!

Instantly a mask of stark, frightful horror replaced the look of savagery. The man halted, stood frozen and motionless as a statue, his eyes like those of a tortured animal.

Like a soundless whisper in Raynor's brain came the memory of Ghiair's words:

"The gaze of the Basilisk chills you. . . ."

And now from the mirror in the talisman pale bright rays were streaming, cold as white fires, unearthly as the arrows of the fabled Moon-goddess. And like arrows, too, they flamed swiftly through the air, seeking and finding their marks; and one by one Malric's men stiffened and stood frozen.

The last was the baron himself. And then the fires of the talisman died and were gone.

"Delphia!" Raynor cried. The girl was already running toward him, down the length of the hall.

"This is sorcery, Prince," Eblik said. "And it is evil!"

"It aids us, at least," Raynor flung at him, and then turned to meet the girl.

And halted—staring.

A sudden, icy chill had dropped down upon the great hall. The lamps dimmed swiftly and faded into utter darkness.

Through the midnight black Raynor heard Delphia scream. He sprang forward, cursing.

His foot struck a prostrate body. He bent, and searching fingers found a man's bearded chin.

"Delphia!" he shouted.

"Raynor!" she called and her voice seemed to fade and dwindle as though from infinite distances. "Raynor! Help me!"

The prince's sword screamed through the dark. He stumbled forward blindly, seeking to penetrate the jet blackness, and quite suddenly one hand gripped hard, leathery flesh.

He heard an angry voice.

"Thou meddling fool! You dare to lift steel against the Lord of the Zodiac?"

The voice of—Ghiair! Ghiair, the warlock, come now to Malric's castle by some evil sorcery.

"Lift steel?" Raynor questioned furiously. "I'll give you a taste of it, skulking wizard!"

He thrust strongly just as Ghiair pulled free. A pain-filled screech rang out.

But Raynor had lost the wizard in the darkness, and he pushed forward hurriedly, before the oldster could escape.

"Thou fool!" Ghiair's voice whispered, cold with bitter menace. "Blind, rash fool!"

Raynor, groping in the dark, paused suddenly. A strange, greenish glow was beginning to pervade the hall. But its eerie light gave no illumination. Rather, it served only to reveal the source from which it sprang.

A gross and hideous bulk, scaled and shining, loomed above the man. It was shaped like a dragon, and Raynor suddenly remembered the symbol that he had seen on the talisman.

The Sign of the Basilisk!

Only instinct saved the prince then.

He knew, with a dreadful certainty, that to meet the dreadful gaze of the horror would mean death. And before he had time to catch but a flashing glimpse of the Basilisk, Raynor whirled, both hands lifted to his eyes. Through them, darting into the secret fortress of his mind, an icy chill had leaped suddenly—a cold beyond cold, a horror beyond life.

Four strides he took, blinded, his head throbbing with agony. Something soft and heavy caught his foot, and Raynor stumbled and crashed down upon the stones. The world went out in a blanket of merciful oblivion.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Sign of the Black Flower*

Raynor awoke suddenly. Sunlight was slanting down through the high oaks, and a gruff voice was cursing steadily in several outlandish dialects of Gobi. The prince realized that he was being carried on someone's back, and recognized the deep voice as Eblik's.

He wriggled free, dropped to the ground, and the Nubian turned swiftly, his ugly face twisted with delight.

"Shaitan!" he growled. "The gods be praised! So you're alive, eh?"

"Just about," Raynor said wryly. "What's happened?"

"How should I know? When the lights went out back in Malric's castle, I blundered out of the hall in the dark, and when I got back Delphia was gone and you were lying on your face with a bump as large as World-Mountain on your head. So I picked you up and headed east."

"Why east?" Raynor asked. "You have my thanks, but it might have been better to have remained in the castle. Delphia—"

"She's to the east," Eblik grunted. "At least, our best chance is to go in that direction. I picked up one of Malric's men and brought him with us. He woke up an hour ago, and I choked some information from the dog. Ghiar has a citadel in Mirak Forest, in that direction." He nodded toward the rising sun. "You were cursing the warlock in your sleep, so I guessed a little of what had happened. What now?"

"We go to Ghiar's citadel," Raynor decided. "You did well, Eblik." Swiftly he explained what had happened. "Where are our horses?"

"Shaitan knows. They took fright and ran off. It isn't far, however."

"So? Well, I'm beginning to understand now, Eblik. Ghiar used me as a cat's-paw. Though just how I still cannot understand."

Raynor pondered. No doubt Ghiar had abducted the girl, but why had not the warlock stolen her by means of his magic, without seeking Raynor's aid? Could it be that the wizard had been unable to enter Malric's castle until someone had opened a gateway for him?

The prince had heard of such beings—creatures that could not enter a house unless they were lifted across the threshold, alien things that could never cross running water. Perhaps the amulet itself had given Ghiar power to materialize in the castle.

Reminded of the talisman, Raynor fumbled in his belt and found the disc there. He examined it with renewed curiosity. In the black jewel the star-point glowed with pale brilliance.

"Well, we go east, then," Raynor decided. "Come."

Without further words he set off at a steady, effortless lope that ate up the miles. The giant Nubian paced him easily, swinging his great ax as though in anticipation.

The oak forest stretched far and far, beyond their horizon. Overhead the sun grew hotter, pouring down its rays that would still be blasting upon Gobi when the empire would be not even a memory in the minds of men. But at last, hours later, the trees thinned and the two men found themselves at the top of a long slope that stretched down to the dark waters of a lake.

In the lake's center was an islet. And on the islet—Ghiar's citadel.

A citadel of darkness! Blacker than the nighted gulf of Abaddon was the great block of shining stone that towered up to the sky, a single, gigantic, polished oblong of jet, with neither

tower nor window to break its grim monotony. No bridge spanned the lake.

The waters were steel-gray; frigid as polar seas they seemed.

On the islet, about the citadel, the ground was carpeted with darkness. The nature of this shadowy stain was a riddle; it was not stone, for now and again a long ripple would shudder across it as the wind sighed past.

The citadel lay in the shelter of a valley, and over all seemed to hang a slumbrous, eerie quiet. No sound stirred, save for the wind's occasional murmuring. And even that was oddly hushed.

Thus might sleep the fabled Elysian Fields, where the dead who have tasted Lethe wander to and fro, with a half-incurious yearning for lost delights, amid the eternal hush of the shadowland.

With a little shiver Raynor shook off the spell. He strode forward, the Nubian at his side. Eblik said nothing, but his keen barbaric senses guessed that sorcery dwelt in this valley. The black's eyes were distended; his nostrils twitched as though seeking to scent something that dwelt beyond the threshold of his realization.

As the two went down the slope a dim, unreal perfume seemed to rise and drift about them, an odor sensed rather than actually scented. And a drowsy languor made Raynor's eyes heavy.

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Truly dark magic guarded Ghiar's citadel!

They reached the lake's shore. They circled swiftly, and discovered there was no means of crossing to the islet.

"Short of building a raft," Raynor observed, "which would take too long, I see nothing to it but a swim."

"Aye," Eblik assented, readily enough, but his somber eyes dwelt on the motionless gray waters. "Yet it would be well to have our blades ready, Prince."

A dagger hung at Raynor's side; he unsheathed this and gripped it between his teeth.

Without a word he dived into the lake, came up yards away, swimming strongly.

And the water was cold—cold! Frigid beyond anything Raynor had ever known.

The dreadful chill of it lanced deep into his bones, making them grind together with the sheer pain of the unearthly cold.

Looking down, he found that the water was opaque. A uniform dull grayness made it seem as though he was floating on clouds. What mystery might lurk in these hidden depths he could not guess; but at least nothing rose to halt his progress.

The lake was not wide; yet Raynor was curiously exhausted when at last he waded through shallows and on to dry land. Eblik was not far behind. Now, not far away, Ghiar's citadel rose blackly cryptic before them.

And at their feet were—the Black Flowers!

The ground could not be seen, so thickly they grew. A living carpet of velvety darkness they covered the islet, weirdly beautiful, with stems and leaves and soft petals all of the same glossy black.

Ever and anon a soft wind whispered past, and waves rippled across the jet sea.

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Save for the wind, it was utterly silent.

The two men moved forward. The flowers brushed against their ankles, and a soft cloud of disturbed pollen hung like smoke in their wake. And ever the insidious perfume crept into

their nostrils—stronger now, vaguely repellent, and redolent of unknown and forbidden things.

His gaze riveted on the citadel, Raynor did not at first realize that he was making little progress. Then he glanced down quickly, or tried to. But his muscles seemed to respond with unwillingness, and it was with a genuine effort that he succeeded in looking down. The black flowers seemed to be swaying toward him; around his feet the smoky darkness hung.

The dim haze fingered up, questing!

Raynor tried to spring forward. His feet kicked up a great cloud of pollen, and it shrouded him like a pall.

He was unconscious of the fact that he had halted and was swaying to and fro, slowly.

Over his vision a dim curtain dropped.

He seemed to fall very slowly.

The black flowers leaned toward him hungrily. A velvet blossom brushed his cheek; another seemed to cup his mouth as though in dreadful simulacrum of a kiss. Raynor breathed the dark perfume of the flower's heart. . . .

Of a sudden veils were lifted, and he saw unimaginable things. A blaze of sound and light and color swirled into being. Trumpets shrilled in his ears, and he heard the thunder of high walls crumbling to ruin. Confused visions of the past came to Raynor, and he lived again, dimly as in a dream, things he remembered and things he had forgotten.

And always the strange, deadly perfume was strong in his nostrils; but he felt no urge to move. The soporific spell of the Lethean flowers held him bound in fetters of dark magic.

It was pleasant to lie here, to rest, and to remember.

Then a rough hand gripped Raynor's arm; he was lifted, and immediately fell again heavily. From an immense distance came a harsh, despairing cry.

The voice of Eblik!

The sound pierced through the mists that shrouded Prince Raynor's brain. The Nubian was in danger, had cried to his master for help. Realization of this gave the prince strength as he battled down the terrible urge to remain motionless, to sleep, and at last Raynor won. The effort left him sweating and exhausted, but abruptly the visions faded and were gone.

He looked upon Ghiar's citadel, and the haunted islet in the lake.

With a sobbing curse he staggered upright. At his feet lay the unconscious Nubian, and Raynor lifted the black to his shoulders. Then, holding his breath, he plunged forward across the dark sea, even at that moment of mad turmoil feeling an odd sense of sadness at the thought of the jet, velvety beauty he crushed underfoot.

A wind rippled the blooms; they seemed to sigh as in farewell.

The Sign of the Black Flower was conquered!

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Sign of the Serpent*

Now Ghiar's citadel loomed above them. Grimly enigmatic it towered there featureless, with no gate or window breaking the dull monotony of its gloomy structure. Sick and dizzy, Raynor plunged on. And, quite suddenly, he realized that he had been wrong. A portal gaped in the high wall just before him.

Had it previously escaped his searching gaze? Perhaps; it was more probable that a hidden door had slid silently aside to admit the interlopers. It was not a comforting thought, for it meant that eyes were invisibly watching Raynor—eyes of the warlock Ghiar.

Nevertheless, the prince sprang over the threshold. Instantly the portal shut behind him. With little hope Raynor turned and attempted to reopen the door, but he failed.

Even if he had succeeded, what then? His path lay into the heart of the citadel. And a dimly lighted passageway stretched slanting down before him. Smiling grimly, Raynor moved on, carrying the unconscious Eblik, who now, however, began to stir and twitch feebly.

In a moment the giant Nubian had regained his senses. With one catlike movement he leaped free, the huge war-ax gripped in his hand. Then, seeing no enemy, he relaxed, grinning somewhat feebly at Raynor.

"We're in the citadel?" he asked. "Shaitan, there's magic in those damned flowers. Sorcery of the pit!"

"Keep your voice down," Raynor said. "Ghiar may have ways of hearing us, and watching us too. But we can't turn back now, and anyway I want to try my sword on Ghiar's ugly neck."

"I'm curious to see if necromancy will armor him against this," said Eblik, with a flash of white teeth, and the ax cleft the air in a deadly blow. The Nubian handled the heavy weapon as though it were light as a javelin.

Warily the two continued along the corridor. The dim light came from no discernible source; it seemed to gleam faintly from the air all about them. The walls and roof and floor were of the same dark stone.

The passage dipped, widened. The two men came out on a little ledge overhanging an abyss. At their feet was a gulf, dropping straight down to a milky, luminous shining far beneath. Nor was it water that lay at the pit's bottom, though it was certainly liquid. It glowed with a wan, eerie light that reflected palely upon the black room arching above.

Here the corridor broadened into a circular cavern. A bridge spanned the abyss. It arched from the ledge's lip, straight and unbroken as Bifrost Bridge that Norsemen say reaches to Valhalla's gate. It stretched to a black wall of rock and ended beneath an arched opening in the stone.

"Our path lies there," Raynor said grimly. "Pray to your Nubian gods, Eblik!"

The prince stepped forward upon the perilous bridge.

It was narrow, terribly so. Giddy vertigo clutched at the man's brain, impelling him to look down. He fought against the dangerous impulse, kept his eyes steadily upon his goal. He felt Eblik's hand grip his shoulder, heard the Nubian gasp:

"It draws me! Guide me, Prince—I dare not keep my eyes open."



“Hold fast,” Raynor said between clenched teeth. Yet he looked down. He could not help it.

Nausea clutched him. Far below, in the milky slime, dark bodies moved slowly, writhing and squirming in the dimness. What they were Raynor could not tell, but the creatures had a sickeningly human aspect, despite their ambiguous outlines. A blind deformed face stared up; a shocking muzzle gaped; but no sound came.

The things squirmed and flopped their way through the pale liquid, and Raynor knew that his hasty glance down had been an error. He felt stronger than ever the weird compulsion that seemed to tug at him, drawing him, overbalancing him so that he swayed perilously on the giddy bridge.

With a grinding effort he looked again at the bridge’s end. Through some secret reservoir of mind he drew strength and will. He stepped forward, slowly, carefully. But he could not banish the thought of the horrors that dwelt below.

Yet at last the two men reached their goal. Sweating and gasping, they stepped to solid footing. And before them the portal in the rock opened enigmatically.

“God!” Eblik groaned. “Must we cross that hell-bridge on our return? If we do return.”

But Raynor had crossed the threshold, and was standing silent before the Snake.

He was in a small cave, high-roofed, dimly lit, and containing nothing but a crude throne of rock directly facing him. On the throne sat a thing that bore a vague resemblance to a man. Staring at it, Raynor was reminded of the creatures he had just seen in the abyss.

Black and hideous and deformed it towered there, a pulpy shapeless thing of darkness, less human than a crudely chiseled idol. The head was worst of all. It was flattened, snakelike, with bulging dull eyes that stared blindly. The lower part of the face was elongated into a muzzle, and the creature was entirely covered with scales.

It sat there motionless, and bound about its brow like a dreadful crown was a snake. Its flattened head was lifted as in the uraeus crown of the Pharaohs, and its wise, ancient gaze dwelt coldly upon Raynor.

He had never seen anything as lovely and as horrible as this serpent.

The scintillant colors in its body flickered, changed, fading as smoke fades from red to violet, emerald green, shining topaz, sun-yellow, all in an intricate design that also shifted and moved strangely. The blinding beauty of the snake struck through Raynor like a sword.

Its eyes held him.

Very horrible were those eyes, alien beyond all imagining. Their gaze was at first tender, almost caressing, like that of a well loved maiden. Strange magic reached out to grip the man.

The eyes of the snake probed into his soul. He felt nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing but the flood of alien sorcery pouring into his mind from the incredibly ancient eyes of the serpent.

He was unconscious of the fact that Eblik had halted behind him, motionless, paralyzed.

And those passionless bright eyes were not evil—no! They were older than evil; beyond it, above it, as a god is above human motives and ideals.

They spoke of a wisdom beyond earthly understanding.

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They erased all else from Raynor’s consciousness.

The cords that bound him to this earth, the human ties, slipped away slowly. He had not lost his memories of warm hearths, of laughing, fire-lit faces, of sword-play and of the mad

high excitement of war. He remembered these things, with a distant, diamond-sharp clarity; but they had lost their significance.

They were unimportant.

They would pass, and be enveloped in the shadow of the ultimate night, and, in the end, they would not matter.

He remembered Eblik the Nubian, the pale proud face of Delphia rose up before him; but he felt no warmth of human kinship or understanding.

All these things were slipping away from him, in a clear, cold wisdom that came from beyond the stars. He envisioned man as a bit of animate clay moving for a little while upon a ball of mud and stone and water that drifted through the void, through the darkness that would finally engulf it.

So the Snake, that ancient one, gave to Raynor its vision. And the serpent uncoiled from the brow of the seated thing, and it slid down and glided across the stones to the prince, and it coiled about his body with a chill and merciless grip. The wise, flattened head lifted, till it was on a level with the man's face. The eyes of the serpent reached into Raynor's brain, into the secret fortress of his soul, and the prince stepped back one pace.

Then another. Slowly, like an automaton, he moved back toward the abyss that gaped behind him. He passed Eblik without seeing the black. For nothing existed but the dark, alien gaze of the serpent, brooding and old—old beyond earth-life!

The pit yawned behind him. Some stirring of human consciousness gave Raynor pause. He stopped, his sluggish thoughts feebly trying to rise free from the frigid ocean that held them motionless. Dimly he heard a cry from Eblik—muffled, faint, scarcely more than a despairing groan.

And that cry again saved him. Raynor could not have saved himself, but he knew that the Nubian called to his master for aid. And the thought of that was a faint, hot flame that rose and waxed brighter and slowly burned away the chill darkness that darkened his mind.

Slowly, slowly indeed, did the prince battle his way back to life. He swayed there upon the edge of the great gulf, while the serpent watched, and Eblik, after that one moan, was silent. And at last Raynor won.

Tide of life surged through his blood. He uttered a hoarse shout, gripped the cold, muscular body of the serpent, dragged it from his body. He flung the snake from him into the abyss.

A far sighing drifted up, unearthly, distant.

With that the spell lifted. Raynor came back to consciousness, no longer bound by the dark fetters of primeval magic; he swayed and leaped away from the edge of the pit.

He gave an inarticulate cry, somehow triumphant—exulting.

For the Sign of the Serpent was vanquished!

## CHAPTER V

### *The Sign of the Fish of Ea*

A movement caught Raynor's attention. The hideous image on the throne was moving slightly. Its misshapen black hand lifted; the muzzle gaped and shuddered. From the deformed mouth came a voice, deep as though it burst from the tongue of a corpse. Harsh, half-inarticulate, and muffled, it croaked:

"Mercy! In your mercy, slay me!"

The dull eyes looked upon Raynor. Shrinking a little in revulsion, the prince almost by instinct whipped out his sword. The monster slowly lifted its frightful head.

"Slay me! Slay me!"

"By all the gods," Raynor whispered through white lips, "what manner of being are you?"

"Once human, like you," the harsh voice groaned. "Once I ruled this citadel. Once I was a greater sorcerer than Ghiar."

A black paw beat the throne's side in agony. "Ghiar served me. I taught him the dark lore. And he turned to evil, and overthrew me, and prisoned me here. He set the Serpent to guard me. From my lips even now he learns wisdom. I serve him in ways I may not tell you. My soul roves between the stars to bring him knowledge."

Raynor forced himself to speak. "Know you ought of a girl, a captive of Ghiar's?"

"Aye! Aye! The warlock has need of a maiden once in a decade. Thus he renews his youth. Ghiar is old—death should have taken him centuries ago. But by the young blood of a maiden, and by her young soul, he drinks fresh vigor. He gains strength to work new evil. Follow this road, and you will find the girl."

Raynor made an impulsive gesture. But the horrible voice froze him in mid-stride.

"Hold! You have conquered the Snake. Yet I am still captive, still in agony you cannot imagine. Give me release, I pray you! Slay me!"

Raynor dared not look upon the hideous figure. "You seek death?"

"I should have died centuries ago. Free me now, and I shall aid you when you need aid most. Slay me!"

Raynor's lips tightened in resolution. He stepped forward, lifted his sword. As the blade swept down the monster croaked:

"Remember! The Sign of Tammuz is Lord of the Zodiac. It is the Master Sign."

Steel put a period to the words. The horror's head leaped from its shoulders; a foul-smelling ichor spurted a foot into the air. The creature toppled to lie motionless on the stones.

"Blood a' Shaitan!" Raynor muttered shakily. "I think we've walked into hell itself."

"Those be true words," said a low voice. "Once again you have saved us, master. But for what? Some worse doom, I think."

Eblik was rubbing his head, shivering. The prince gave a bark of laughter that held no mirth.

"Well, our road is open before us. And a brave man goes to meet his doom, instead of waiting for it to creep up on him. Hold fast to your ax, Eblik."

Raynor skirted the throne and entered a passage that gaped in the wall behind it. Once more the way led downward. It was a monotonous journey between dull walls of black stone.

What had the monster on the throne meant? “The Sign of Tammuz is Lord of the Zodiac.” The Master Sign that could not be drawn—the sign of which the jet jewel in Ghiar’s amulet was the symbol.

The passage turned and twisted, but always descended. They were far beneath ground level now, Raynor thought. His leg muscles were beginning to ache when at last the way was barred by a door of iron.

It was, however, unfastened, and moved aside at Raynor’s cautious push.

He looked into a great circular room. Wan green light illuminated it dimly. The floor was of mosaic, figured in a bizarre design that centered in the Signs of the Zodiac. A golden Archer and a blue Fish; a scarlet Serpent and a black Flower; the Basilisk, all in shining green; and the disc of the Mirror in dull steel-gray.

In the exact center of the room was an immense jewel of jet set into the mosaic. A blindingly bright star-point glittered deep in the gem’s heart.

It was frigidly cold. Looking up, Raynor realized why. The room was roofless. Its shaft probed up through the heart of the huge stone structure, a hollow tube that ended, far above, in a purple-black sky, shot with innumerable stars. The day had ended, and moonless night brooded over the warlock’s citadel.

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The stars looked down upon the Signs of the Zodiac.

The walls were hung with curtains of white samite. They parted now, and a slim figure entered. It was Delphia. She moved slowly, her gaze staring blindly before her, the coils of midnight hair clustering about the pale, keen face. Three paces she took, and halted.

“Delphia!” Raynor called, and stepped forward. The girl did not move.

She lifted her head, gazed up at the stars. There was a queer avidity in her face, a tenseness as though she waited eagerly for something. It was utterly silent—and cold, cold.

Raynor gripped Delphia’s arm, shook her roughly.

“Wake up!” he said urgently. “Are you under a spell?”

“She has enchantment on her,” Eblik grunted, peering into the girl’s eyes. “Let me carry her, Prince. Once we’re out of this evil place she may awaken.”

Raynor hesitated. Before he could speak a new voice came, softly mocking.

“Nay, let me carry the wench! I shall be gentle.”

With an oath Raynor whipped around, his sword bared. Eblik’s war-ax was suddenly in his hand, quivering like a falcon straining to be released. There, filling the passage by which they had entered, were a dozen men, fierce-eyed, grinning with hate and triumph—the outlaws of Mirak Forest.

At their head stood Baron Malric. His youthful face wore a gay, reckless smile, despite the fact that he was in the heart of the wizard’s stronghold.

“Hold!” he whispered. “Do not move! For if you do, I shall slay you.” And one slim hand slipped toward the loose velvet sleeve and the sharp knife Malric wore strapped to his forearm.

“How the devil did you get here?” Raynor snarled.

“I followed the path you opened for me. I swam the lake and crossed the field of the Black Flowers. I tracked you here through the citadel. It was not an easily won victory—no! Of all my men, these few are all that remain. Some sleep amid the Black Flowers. Others died elsewhere. But it does not matter. Ghiar was too reckless when he hired you to steal the girl from my castle. Warlock he may be, but I rule Mirak!”

“Hired me?” Raynor said slowly. “You mistake. Ghiar is my enemy, as he is yours.”

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Malric laughed softly. “Well, it does not matter whether you lie or tell truth. For you and this black shall both die here, and after I have found and slain Ghiar, I shall go back to my castle with the wench.”

“After you have slain Ghiar!”

The words whispered out; the samite curtains parted, and a man stepped through. It was the warlock. The dim green light touched the great billow of white beard, the shaggy eyebrows, of the giant. The dark, somber eyes held no emotion.

“You seek me, Malric? I am here. Slay me if you can.”

The baron, after a single start, stood motionless. His gaze locked in a silent, deadly duel with the cold stare of the wizard.

Abruptly, without warning, Malric moved. Too fast for eye to follow his hand dipped, came up flashing brought death. Steel flickered through the air. The keen knife drove at Ghiar’s throat—and fell blunted, ringing on the stones.

“Mortal fool,” the warlock whispered. “You seek to battle the stars in their courses. Malric, I am Lord of the Zodiac. I have power over the Signs that rule men’s lives.”

The baron moistened his lips. His smile was crooked.

“Is this so? I know something of the Zodiac, Ghiar, and I know you do not rule all the Signs. You yourself, once spoke to me of being born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea. As was I. How can you rule your ruler—or any other Sign? Nor are you Lord of the Stars. There is a certain Sign”—Malric glanced at the great black jewel in the mosaic’s center—“Aye, there is Tammuz. He is Lord of the Master Sign.”

“Who can call on Tammuz?” Ghiar said coldly. “Once in a thousand years is a man born under his Sign. And only such a man may work the ultimate magic. Aye, I said to you I was born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea, but who are you that I should tell you full truth—as I do now?” The warlock frowned at Raynor. “As for you and your servant, you shall die with the others. Had you been wise, you would not have sought me here. This girl is mine; I need her life to give me renewed youth.”

“D’you think I fear a wizard?” Raynor snapped, and sprang. His sword sheared down, screaming through cleft air.

And rebounded, clashing. The weapon dropped from Raynor’s nerveless hand, which was paralyzed as though by a strong electric shock. Snarling an oath, the prince tensed to leap, ready to close with the warlock with bare hands.

Ghiar’s preemptory gesture halted him.

“Rash fools!” the wizard whispered, a chill and dreadful menace in the sibilant words. “You shall die as no man has died for a thousand years.”

His arms lifted in a strange, archaic gesture. A gesture that reached up toward the stars far above, a gesture that summoned!

Bleak and ominous came the warlock’s voice.

“Your doom comes. For now I call on the Sign of the Fish of Ea!”

## CHAPTER VI

### *The Sign of Tammuz*

The green light thickened and grew fainter. An eerie, cloudy emerald glow dropped down upon the roofless room. The figure of Ghiar was a dark shadow towering in the dimness. And the deep voice thundered out:

“Ea! Lord of Eridu and E-apsu! Dweller in the house of the watery deep! *Shar-apsi!* By the power of thy Sign I call on the Lord of that which is below, watcher of Aralu, home of the restless dead. Ea, troubler of the great waters, consort of Damkina, Damgal-nunna, rise now from the eternal abyss!”

The green darkness thickened. Raynor, straining his eyes, could see nothing. He made an effort to move, but found he could not. A weird paralysis held him helpless.

He heard a sound, faint and far away. The sound of waters. The tinkling of brooks, the rushing of mighty cataracts, the thunder of tides crashing on basalt cliffs. The noises of the great deep heralded the coming of Ea, Lord of the waters under the earth.

Nothing existed but the glowing emerald fogs. A deeper light began to grow above. The mists poured up toward it.

Thicker they grew, and thicker. They swirled into an inverted whirlpool, rushing up toward the bright green shining in the air, flooding into it, vanishing. Vanishing as though plunging into an abyss that had no bottom!

A figure swam slowly into view, stiff and rigid. One of Baron Malric’s wolves. Raynor had a glimpse of a strained, agonized face, and then the man was caught up into the torrent and vanished into the emerald glow. A thin, high scream drifted faintly from afar.

There were others after that. One by one the outlaws were caught up by the tide of alien magic, drawn into the weird whirlpool, swirled into nothingness. All were gone at last save for Malric.

Now the baron came into view. His youthful face was expressionless, but in the wide eyes was a horror beyond life. The bright hair tossed as though the man floated through water.

No sound came from Malric. He drifted up—and vanished!

The tide gripped Raynor. He felt himself lifted weightless, felt himself circling, rising. The shining abyss loomed above him. Desperately he fought to escape from the necromantic spell.

Quite suddenly the green mists were blotted out. Raynor seemed to hang in a black, starless immensity. He was alone in the void of eternal night.

In the distance a white, chill light began to grow. It approached, meteor-like, and Raynor saw a round, oddly familiar object speeding toward him. Soon it hung in the void not far away, and the prince remembered the deformed monster that had sat on the throne above the abyss—the captive of the snake that he had slain. Here was the same misshapen, hideous head, with its glazed eyes and elongated muzzle, all covered with glittering scales.

The Thing spoke.

“My promise, Prince Raynor. You gave me release. And I promised aid when you should need it most. I bring that aid now.”

“The amulet,” said the monstrous disembodied head.

Abruptly Raynor remembered the talisman Ghiar had given him in Mirak forest, the disc that bore the Signs of the Zodiac on its surface. He did not seem to move, yet the amulet was

in his hand, and lifted high. It had changed. The Signs were erased, all but the black jewel in its center. Within the gem the star-point pulsed and waned with supernal brilliance.

“Tammuz is Lord of the Zodiac,” the hideous muzzle croaked. “His magic is above magic. He is master of truth. Through him you may cast away the fetters of glamour and sorcery. Once in a thousand years is a man born under this Sign, and only such a man may call on Tammuz. I am that man! I was born under the Master Sign! Ghiar lies—he boasts of that which he is not! And now, to keep my promise and to aid you, I summon the Lord of the Zodiac. I summon—*Tammuz!*”

Forthwith the black jewel blazed with an icy, incredible light, starkly pitiless and blindingly bright; and the fantastic vision snapped out and vanished. The talisman was snatched from Raynor’s hand. He felt firm stone beneath his feet; a cold wind blew on his sweating face.

Once more he was in Ghiar’s citadel. He stood in the roofless room of the Zodiac. But no longer was it filled with the green mists.

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Delphia and Eblik stood motionless; near them towered the warlock. Of Malric and his wolves there was no trace.

Ghiar’s beard fluttered in the frigid blast. His deep eyes were hate-filled. And, with a queer, strange certainty, Raynor knew that by the Sign and the power of the real Tammuz, all magic had been stripped from the wizard.

No longer master of dark sorcery, Ghiar was human, vulnerable!

Raynor’s shout was madly exultant as he sprang. The armor of invulnerability had been torn from Ghiar. But inhuman strength still surged in the giant frame. Huge muscles rolled under the coarse robe.

Ghiar swept out his arm in a bone-crushing blow. The shock of it made Raynor reel. Shaking his head blindly, he reeled in and closed with the warlock.

The two men crashed down on the stones. Ghiar fell uppermost; his fingers stabbed down at Raynor’s eyes. The prince rolled his head aside, and the warlock bellowed with pain as his hand smashed against rock. Abruptly Ghiar thrust himself away, and his mighty body dropped upon Raynor with an impact that drove the breath from the smaller man’s lungs.

Weakly the prince drove a blow at the wizard’s face. Blood spurted, staining the white beard. Roaring, Ghiar’s hands fastened on Raynor’s throat. They tightened remorselessly.

The prince rolled aside; he caught Ghiar’s body between his legs, locking his feet together. Breath spewed from the warlock’s lips in a foul gust. Ghiar bared his teeth in a murderous grin. And his fingers tightened—tightened.

A hot, throbbing agony was in Raynor’s skull. He could not breathe. Knifelike pain thrust into his spine. A little more pressure, and his backbone would crack.

Sheer blind madness swept down on the prince then. Like a flood of red waters it poured through him, sweeping away all else but an insane lust to kill—and swiftly.

Raynor’s thigh muscles bulged, holding Ghiar’s body in a vise between them. The grinding strain of that frightful effort made sweat burst out on the prince’s face; yet he knew that this was the crucial time. It was kill or be slain.

Bones cracked and gave sickeningly. There was a sudden softness in the wizard’s body. Ghiar gave a frightful, howling shriek that seemed to burst up from the depths of his lungs. Blood spewed from the gaping mouth, frothed over the white beard, fell on Raynor.

The mighty hands released their grip on the prince's throat. Ghiar sprang up in one last convulsive effort. Dying, he thrust up his arms to the cold stars and screamed like a beast.

And he fell, as a tree falls, smashing down on the stones. He lay inert. From him blood crept darkly across the mosaic, touching and then covering the Sign of the Fish of Ea, the Sign under which Ghiar had been born and had ruled.

The warlock was dead.

Consciousness left Raynor then. Merciful darkness blanketed him. Nor did he recover until he felt water poured between his lips, felt a cool, soft hand on his brow. He opened his eyes.

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Above him sunlight slanted between the branches of an oak. The green, warm daylight of Mirak Forest was all about him. And Delphia knelt at his side, her eyes no longer blinded with sorcery, her face clouded with anxiety.

"Raynor," she said gratefully. "You're alive, thank the gods!"

"Alive?" growled Eblik, coming from behind an oak. "I'd not have carried him here if he hadn't been. How do you feel, Prince?"

"Well enough," Raynor said. "My legs ache like fire, but I'm unharmed, I think. You carried me out of the citadel, Eblik?"

"That he did," Delphia nodded. "And swam the lake with you. The Black Flowers were dead, Raynor, blasted as though by lightning."

"If you can walk, we'd best be moving," Eblik said impatiently.

Raynor stood up, wincing slightly. "True. We'll find horses and leave this accursed forest behind us."

Together he and Delphia set out along the winding path that led through Mirak. Eblik hesitated a moment before he followed. He looked up at the blue, cloudless sky.

"May the gods grant we get out of this wilderness before nightfall," he grunted. "Out of this black forest, and in another land—a land where the stars are less evil."

Gripping his war-ax, he hurried after Delphia and Raynor. And, presently, the three of them were swallowed by the cool, dim aisles of the vast forest.

[The end of *The Citadel of Darkness* by Henry Kuttner]