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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE
DECEMBER 2ND

VOL. 4

DECEMBER, 1942

NO. 2

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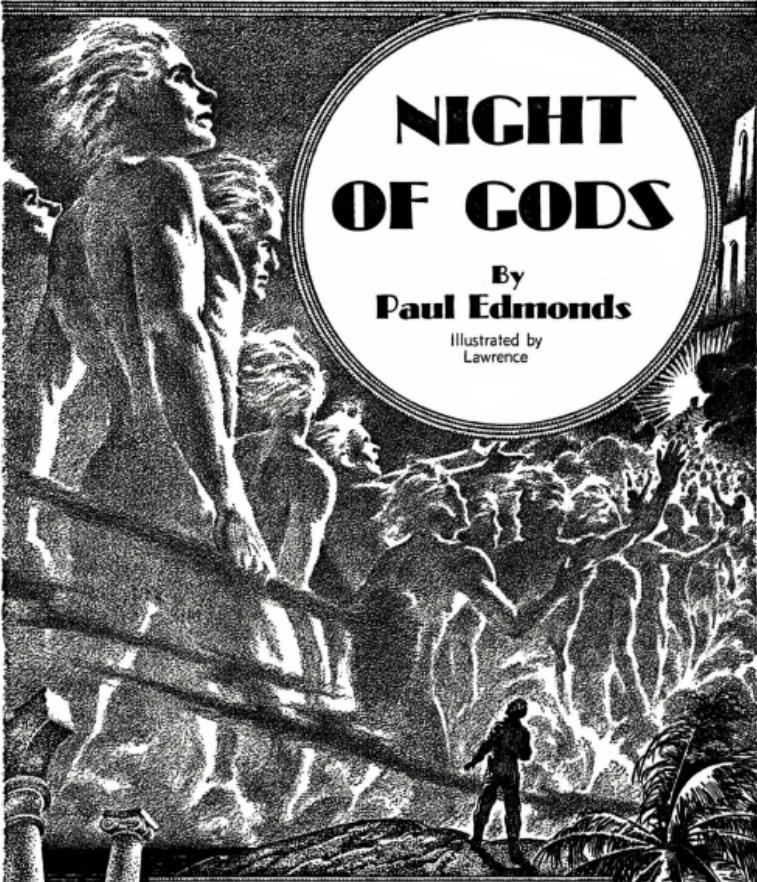
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NIGHT OF GODS

By
Paul Edmonds

Illustrated by
Lawrence

The Tuatha Dé—the Sleeping Giants of Eire, men called them, and made black legends of their memory. Until the fateful day when they returned—to unlock the gate of dreadful reckoning!

CHAPTER ONE

March of the Titans

GLENN looked at me sidewise, his haggard young face tense with exhaustion, his hands automatically reaching toward the plane's dual controls.

I didn't recognize my voice when I said, "Lay off. You can't fly this crate any farther than I can."

He lit a cigarette and stuck it in my mouth.

"You're crazy, Sean. You've got to sleep sometime."

I grinned, nodding to the bullet-marred shield where gray fog was torn to pieces by the props as we thundered eastward, somewhere over the Pacific. "Bird-walking weather. Maybe we land up in Tokyo. God knows. Anyhow, we can't try for a landing. What's down there?"

Glenn followed my gesture. He made a wry grimace.

"Water, and lots of it—I know. But you've got to have relief, man!"

Relief! There wasn't any. And I couldn't tell Glenn why I didn't dare let him take the controls—he'd think I'd blown my top. How could I say I was getting a message from—nowhere?

I was doped to the eyes. The Japs had been savagely strafing our island base for weeks, knocking down our planes one by one. We kept going up, of course, hoping for relief from Australia or the Pacific fleet. So few flyers! It got so I was dead on my feet, waiting for the signal to warm up and take off to meet the overwhelming air attacks. Thiamin helped, as well as other stimulants. I even tried a native drug, betel or something, to keep me going. My nerves were wire-edged. Physically exhausted, and mentally attuned to razor keenness.

That attack yesterday—

I cursed under my breath. Had the Japs taken the base? The radio had stopped, while we were up there in the fog, and then, suddenly, there was nothing in all the world except gray emptiness. The dogfight had carried us north. I tried to get back, but I missed the island, and we were alone, trying to pick signals out of the air, trying to find a landing place before the fuel was gone.

And the Japs jammed the air waves.

So we cruised around, feeling desperately hopeless, getting ready to die. There was a zero ceiling. I settled back into an alert sort of relaxation, my mind going blank for the first time in days. Physically I was tired. Mentally, stimulant drugs had, I think, done something to my mind.

I heard the—summons.

It came out of the fog and the darkness. It was wordless, inaudible, and alien to anything I had ever before experienced. There were no terms to describe the—the message.

Wordless, it called. As the magnetic pole draws a compass needle, with invisible lines of force, so my mind swung toward the south.

Like the fabulous lodestone mountain that draws iron ships to destruction on its rocky shores, so the call drew me southward.

Thrice before in my life I had heard it. But never so strong—never so compelling!

Once in the Florida Everglades, sick and racked with fever, nerves raw and jolting, I had heard it. And then once in the Andes, snowbound, my body filled with the tingling exhilaration of immense altitudes. It came from the east, or so I thought at the time.

A year ago the message had come while I was on a binge in a little port somewhere on the Burma coast. I was crazy drunk, on the way to delirium tremens. But the—summons—had been unmistakable.

Now, for the fourth time, that silent, incredible tocsin came ringing out of nowhere, finding a responsive chord deep in my brain, bringing forth a response that was almost intoxicating in its surge and pulse through my mind. It ebbed and mounted like a tide. My soul and body leaped up in answer to it.

It—called!

It called—me!

I thought of the lyre of Orpheus, that

drew even the dead back from their tombs to listen. But this was not music; I did not even hear it.

Deep within me, some unknown sense hearkened to that summons—and was drunken with delight as it hearkened. Madness or sanity, dream or reality, I scarcely cared. My body was dead with exhaustion. I handled the plane's controls automatically, by reflex action. Before me the instruments glowed in their panel. Gray tatters of fog flashed by the cowling. At my side Glenn Kirk smoked one cigarette after another, casting uneasy glances at the fuel gauge. There was enough and to spare; we still had the reserve tank to call on if necessary. But our destination was unknown.

Somewhere—out there in the fog—something called. What?

Something that had called me thrice before—and I had not answered. Now—“Sean.”

My tongue felt stiff. “Yeah?”

“Been trying the radio. Nothing. All wave-lengths jammed tight. I've lost my bearings completely.”

“Have a drink and forget it,” I said. “There's brandy in my jacket.”

FROM the corner of my eye I watched Glenn lift the flask to his lips. In the last few months I'd come to know the boy as well as two men, facing death together, could know one another. He'd saved my life more than once, and I'd reciprocated.

Flying together forges a certain bond. I'd come to know a good deal about Glenn, the little Illinois village where he had lived, the mansion where the Kirks had been reared for generations, the college where Glenn had studied medicine. He had more to lose than I, who had knocked around the world from early youth. I had no kin. But I could understand what that village and the people in it meant to Glenn—a future in a place he

knew and loved. He'd told me about it. Hunting trips in the autumn woods, fire-light in warm cabins, with snow piling against the windows, all that sort of thing—out of my line, I suppose. Just the same—

“After this is over, you're coming back with me,” Glenn had said. “You'll like the folks and they'll like you. Thanksgiving—you've never had turkey dressing the way Mom cooks it. And I want you to meet Paula, too.”

Thanksgiving. I'd celebrated it—yeah. In various ways. Fried monkey in the Amazon country, up the Orinoco. Steer steak on the pampas. Once, roasted dog in the Mexican mountains, where I was glad enough to get it. And lonely dinners in New York, London, Port Said . . . the hell with it. I could have landed on my feet; I'd inherited some money, and plenty of jobs were open. But a job wasn't what I wanted. Wanderlust is one name for it. A restless longing for something that couldn't be expressed, a blind, drunken searching for an unknown goal. . . .

My ancestors had wandered through the fens and mists of Ireland, in days long forgotten, before the kings of Tara rose to power—when men were fighters and minstrels both, their hands equally ready to reach for harp or sword. In me, Sean O'Mara, the old blood seemed to burn like fire. I could not rest. I—could not rest.

And now a soundless call beat out of the darkness—speaking to me, and to me alone.

Well—I grinned crookedly—I was answering that call. There was nothing else to do. Unless I cared to circle blindly in the fog, hoping it would lift. Sometimes these unexpected palls of cloud lasted for days. No, the O'Maras had always been gamblers, and, somehow, I trusted that summons.

But I could not tell Glenn. He was asleep now, looking impossibly young

with his tired face relaxed in slumber. Dreaming, maybe, about the village in Illinois. And Paula, who wore the ring he'd given her and waited anxiously for news from our Pacific base.

My lips tightened. By this time, that base might have been blown to hell! I had friends there—

The prop bit furiously into the air, hurling the plane forward like a bullet. The sun rose swiftly, suddenly, as it does near the equator.

The fog cleared. Some freak thermal made a funnel of clear air. Beneath us I saw an islet.

There were no signs of human habitation. A low peak stood up sharply, and there were palms and a sprawling hook of a barrier reef.

Now!

Here!

In my mind the cry beat wordlessly, imperative. I banked and slid down the slopes of air, heading for the broad beach. Here, at any rate, we would be safe. We could rest, conserving our fuel, till Japs had stopped jamming the ether and we could get our bearings.

Glenn awoke as I made a good landing. He blinked around, puzzled, and then turned to stare at me. His red-rimmed eyes were questioning.

"Don't ask me," I said. "We had a break, that's all. We hit the jackpot. Unless this is Crusoe's island."

"Natives? Mm-m." Glenn slid a fresh clip into his gun. He yawned mightily. "Lord, I'm tired. I'm going to find a nice, friendly palm tree, lie down under it, and sleep for a week."

I was already out of the plane, taking stock of the damage Jap bullets had done. Nothing serious, luckily. We were shot to hell, but I'd flown crates in far worse shape—and flown them into dogfights and out again. Yes, we could get back to a base, or some carrier, after we got our bearings.

Only—that message was still whispering inside my head.

Waves murmured quietly up the beach and receded in foam and blueness. Walls of fog banked us in, but diffused sunlight came down the shaft of clear air above the island—a thermal, caused by the release of heat the ground had absorbed during the day. The lagoon looked inviting. I thought of sharks and shrugged. We could take turns.

We did, one of us on guard with a gun while the other bathed in the cool water. Never in my life had I enjoyed the sensuous feel of water so much. My aching, exhausted muscles were soothed and rested. When I emerged on the sand, physical exhaustion hit me like a blow. I took a stinging gulp of brandy to clear my head.

"What now?" Glenn asked. "Never mind—I'm going to take a nap."

"Get dressed first," I told him, pulling on my trousers. "In case there should be natives here, we don't want to be caught without guns. We may have to take off in a hurry. Some of the black fellows in these islands are tough customers."

"Black fellows? Are we—"

"We may be closer to Australia than Suva," I said grimly. "In fact, only God knows where we are. Get some sleep. I'll stand guard."

"Toss you for it."

"Okay." I took a shilling out of my pocket and tossed. "Heads." That particular lucky piece had tails on both sides. I let Glenn see which way she'd fallen on my palm and waved him away. "Pleasant dreams. I'll wake you in a few hours and get some sleep myself."

"You're as dead tired as I am—more. You've been flying—"

"Oh, shut up," I said, and tripped him, so that he fell sprawling on the sand. "If you get up, I'll knock you down again. Get some sleep, dope."

"Well—okay." He was asleep in a moment.

I WENT back to the plane and tried the radio. No luck. I pulled Mary Lou out of the cabin and buckled her around my waist. She was a handy little weapon I'd picked up a while before—a blade about as long as a machete, but slimmer, with a razor edge and a set of brass knuckles set into the hilt. Very convenient. In close quarters, especially. If the slash missed, the brass knucks would follow through with a nice backhand motion. I'd ruined a Jap's face with that six weeks ago, when he'd come charging at me with his gun blazing and my automatic jammed. In hand-to-hand fighting, I'd back Mary Lou against the field.

I went back to where I'd left Glenn and put my back against a palm. I was more exhausted than I'd realized. But I still thought I could keep awake—

Which was the damnedest mistake I'd ever made. Because the O'Mara went out like a light in about two minutes flat. At

that, it wasn't entirely physical fatigue. Maybe hypnotism had something to do with it.

I was—dreaming.

That soundless call had come back. Relaxation of my mind left an opening. I still thought, with some distant part of me, that I was on the beach, sitting against the palm, but at the same time I saw things.

What I saw—

There was a great darkness. Through the cloudy murk vast figures strode, thunder-footed, towering to the skies. I sensed danger, the perilous danger of Abaddon itself.

The Titans marched on, converging on a—a—

There was no word. Something, a glowing, writhing, flaming spot of light glared far off against the dark curtain. I saw a temple, or its equivalent—a massive structure mighty as Valhalla Hall,

where the mighty Aesir feast eternally.
To it the giants marched!

I went, without volition, in their train.
Dimly, from far away, I heard a cry, my
own name, in a voice I knew. Glenn—

Who was Glenn? I did not remem-
ber. . . .

Faster thundered those racing feet!
Hordes of colossi, hurrying to follow a
call, a summons.

"Sean! Sean O'Mara!"

Is it Sean O'Mara who stumbles
through the jungle, up the lava slopes,
among the volcanic fissures where shad-
ows crouch in deeper darkness? O'Mara?
Not I!

I was one with the Titans!

They drew me on, carried me with
them. Past fallen blocks of masonry,
eroded and broken, past ruined, vine-
sheathed things that once were monoliths,
past the Road—

The Road?

Time had wrecked it; centuries had
smashed and crumbled what had once
been great. But I saw the shadows of the
past, the towers and plinths that had once
risen here. Shadowy but real as the titans
that strode onward along the Road!

"Sean!"

This was the door. Yet it, too, had been
eaten by Kronos, the time god who will
some day eat up the world and the uni-
verse as well. There was no door. There
was only a slit of blackness, half-hidden
by rubble, at the base of a cliff. . . .

I lifted a great boulder and put it aside.
The way was clear. The giants thun-
dered past me, along the road, through
the door—and I was one with them.

The tocsin sang within my brain. It
drew me. Drew me into the darkness—

Light filtered through the gap in the
wall, faint but strong enough to reveal
my surroundings. I was in a cave. The
walls and roof and floor shone bright
silver.

Before me in emptiness a globe hung,

dull and tarnished, larger than my arms
might span—and old—*old!*

From it the summons sang. And *had*
been singing for a thousand thousand
years, since the day when tall monoliths
had guarded this road. I felt the incred-
ible antiquity of the sphere, as though,
half-sentient, nearly alive, its intolerable
weariness had come surging out to meet
me.

A machine—yet half alive. It had been
waiting. Waiting for someone to walk
the Road once more?

Suddenly it flashed into blazing light.
I felt that tremendous pulse of power rush
through me. I felt a hand grip my shoul-
der, was swung around, off balance, to
stare into the amazed face of Glenn Kirk.
He had no time to speak.

Again the tide of power thundered si-
lently out from the sphere. And this time
it brought darkness in its wake. The ob-
livion of eternity itself!

CHAPTER TWO

Feast with the Gods

WHERE were the Titans?
It was a dream, nothing more.
My head throbbing, I sat up, star-
ing around. Those nightmare visions had
been phantoms, I knew. And yet—

Part of the dream had been real.

I was in a room with walls and roof
and floor of silver. A few feet away in
midair hung the sphere, dull now and
lifeless. There was a cleft in one wall,
and through it blue light came softly.

Beside me Glenn lay, breathing ster-
torously, the lines of fatigue almost gone
from his face. I realized that I was no
longer tired. How long had we slept? I
was ravenously hungry. But the fatigue
toxins were gone from my body, washed
away by healing sleep. How long—

Many hours, at least. I turned to ex-
amine the globe. It was quiescent, with-

out that strange air of half life. What unknown hands had built it? Or the city that lay in ruins outside? Perhaps those ruins, too, were like the giant figures, part of my dream.

Glenn stirred, muttering something. He flung out his hand questingly. I gripped his shoulder, shook him. He woke with a start.

"Sean! What the devil—" He was suddenly on his feet, staring around. "Holy sizzling cats, what happened?"

"I dunno. I was asleep," I said wryly. "Dreaming, too."

He looked at me. "I followed you. I yelled, but you didn't hear. You went straight as a homing pigeon through the jungle and up toward the mountain. When I saw those ruins, I nearly shot my cakes."

The ruins had been real, then. I asked, "Did you see any—figures?"

"No. Not a soul. Let's get out of here. I've got the jitters. That gadget gives me the creeps. What is it, anyway?"

I couldn't answer that. "A machine of some kind, I suppose."

"To make artificial lightning, eh? Let's get back to the plane. The fog should be gone by now. Wish I had my camera—I'd like to have a snapshot of that ball when we turn in our report."

The fog should be gone. But that bluish light filtering in didn't look like sunshine. I felt an uneasy qualm.

Glenn went to the cleft and squeezed out. I heard him gasp. I followed.

This was not . . . Earth.

We felt that from the first, I think. For there was no sky. There was an immense shining vault of lambent blue, cloudless and sunless. It was not the blue of Earth's sky. The air about us partook of that faint, soft azure, as though we walked beneath tropical water.

Cliffs colored like flame walled us in. We stood on a little knoll, staring. Those towering crags rose all around like a

prison. Only in one place, directly ahead, were the perpendicular surfaces broken by a narrow slit—the mouth of a gorge, perhaps a quarter of a mile distant. The canyon twisted sharply, so we could see for only a little way into it.

My hand crept to my belt. Mary Lou was still there. The sword's rough hilt felt good against my palm. I had my gun, too, and so did Glenn, I saw.

His mouth was open. He turned slowly, and I followed his example.

We had emerged from a dome-shaped building, about twenty feet high, built atop the knoll. It was featureless, of a uniform dark tint. It blocked our vision.

I said shortly, "Come on," and started to circle the structure. As I had hoped, the cliffs were not continuous on this side either. To left and to right they extended until they ended abruptly at the edge of a gorge, some distance away. A bridge spanned the gorge. Beyond, a low line of grayish hills stretched into the distance.

Glenn licked dry lips. "Am I crazy, too? This isn't—"

"We don't know what it is, or where." I pulled out my flask. "Have a shot. It's good for nightmares."

He took a stiff drink, and I did the same. The liquor strengthened us. We stood staring at that incredible vista, knowing that we were on the edge of the unknown.

"No welcoming committee," Glenn said at last.

"Yeah. That sphere—I wonder. A spaceship?"

"I'll lay my bets on teleportation. Etheric transmission of solids. It's just a theory—but we're certainly not in the South Pacific."

"We may be in another time," I said. "I've read yarns about such things. It's crazy. Sure. Only here we are. Well, no use standing here and starving to death. We didn't blaze a back trail, so let's go hunt up some grub."

Glenn managed a shaky grin. "Wonder what the folks back home would say about this?"

"Send 'em a wire," I suggested sardonically. "Come along." I started down the slope, walking carefully. The mossy surface underfoot looked treacherous. I felt better when we had reached level ground.

We couldn't see the gorge now, but the cliffs told us the right direction.

We kept walking. The silence was complete. There was no insect or bird life, only a distant murmuring I could not analyze. It sounded more like flame than water.

We neared the gorge. The bridge was narrow, no wider than a man's height, and was made of some dead black substance that felt rough underfoot. It seemed neither metal nor stone. What it was I did not know.

The abyss—

Glenn gave a choked cry and lurched back, flinging his arm before his face. He looked at me, and I saw that his cheeks and forehead were a blistered, angry crimson. "My God!" he whispered. "Don't get too close. That—that's the pit of hell, for my money!"

"Hurt, kid?"

"N-no. But it was close. Take it easy!" He gripped my wrist. I said, "Okay," and edged forward, till I could peer down into the gulf.

Far down I caught a glimpse of light that was supernally brilliant—more vivid than light could be. It moved in trickling currents, like water. A blast of searing energy sent me back, coughing and choking. Glenn said, "I told you to be careful, you damn fool."

"Yeah. I'm okay. It's some radiation—"

"Deadly. Plenty deadly. We're stymied."

I said, "No," and nodded toward the bridge. "I was out on that a few steps

and didn't get hurt. It's probably made of some substance that blocks the rays, or whatever they are."

"Radiant energy. Or something."

Before Glenn could stop me, I walked out on the bridge. I felt nothing unpleasant. But to left and to right the air shook with silent, terrible motion as the radiations from below rushed upward. The dim whispering grew louder. Curious, I thought, that the voice of death should be so soft.

Glenn followed me. "You crazy nut! How'd you know this bridge is safe?"

"I tried it. Besides, nobody'd build a bridge unless they intended to use it. Let's see what's at the other end."

It was a dizzying walk, for the span was at least three hundred feet long, but we made it finally. We sat down for a moment or two on the soft moss of the farther bank, a little weak with reaction. The unchanging, unearthly blueness hung over us like an immense canopy of filtered light.

"No," I said. "This isn't the South Pacific, Glenn. Unfortunately. If it was, we might dig up some breadfruit. And I'm thirsty."

"We can't drink *that*, anyhow." He shivered and looked back toward the gorge. "I've got the leaping creepies. Maybe we're dead, huh?"

"But not buried. I'm hungry—food and water is the first thing on the program."

SO WE went over the low ridge, and there, spread before us, was a rolling, forested countryside that vanished in hazy distances. A well-worn path lay ahead. I looked for signs of feet, but there were winds in this world, and I could find no prints in the grayish dust.

And we went on, though not for long. Presently the forest thinned, and we stood on the edge of a clearing. A castle was there, built of stone or metal—I could not make out which—and the style of archi-

ecture struck a half-familiar note. It was neither Grecian nor Roman nor Norman, but the principle of the arch was known to the builders, I saw. A castle, without the harsh crudity of Earthly fortresses, molded and refined till the basic grimness had been altered into something lovely and deceptively fragile.

"This is it, I guess," Glenn said. "Do we send in our cards?"

I patted my automatic. "Here's our reference. Maybe nobody's home; there's no sign of life."

We walked across the clearing to where gates yawned ajar in the castle's wall. We entered, finding ourselves in a courtyard, bare and deserted. Then a—a man came out of a door somewhere, and he was not—human.

We stopped dead. The creature was man-shaped, but his skin—he wore a loincloth, nothing more—was a dull grayish hue, and his head and body were totally hairless. He had two pairs of arms, and his legs ended in pads, like an elephant's. His face was—well, inhuman. The features were regular enough, but his eyes had no soul behind them.

He saw us, ignored us. I felt a chill crawl through me. The—being—walked past us and vanished into an archway.

Glenn said in a sick voice, "We'll need our references."

I didn't answer. I followed the creature, Glenn at my heels. We went through a short corridor, brushed aside a curtain, and came out in a hall. I had an impression of intricately patterned walls, of a bluish, ghostly dimness, and of two figures seated at a table in the distance.

Two figures—human! A man and a woman. They saw us and sprang up, staring.

Man and woman—no. God and goddess!

The man was a giant, taller than I, his hair a bright silver mane above a beautiful, strong, leonine face. He wore a form-



fitting garment of some bright fabric. His eyes were blue flames, blazing now with incredulous delight.

The woman—

I cannot, now, bring myself to describe Aedis. She was supernally lovely. She was dark. Her glance was the striking of a lance. She wore a garment molded of the night, and she was a goddess.

I felt the world stop around me, in that moment when I first saw Aedis of Dyan....

She gave the man a swift glance and looked again at us—ragged, grimy, stained with the dark red of dried blood from our scratches. In the background the inhuman, gray-skinned being moved, placing a covered dish on the table before the two.

The man said something in a low voice, and the creature slipped noiselessly away.

I heard Glenn's soft whisper, "I'll follow your lead. The dame—she looks like trouble."

"You're crazy," I said. I took a pace forward, hand lifted in the peace gesture. The man came around the table and

walked toward me. Swinging from his belt, I saw, was a great hammer, its head red as blood.

He, too, lifted his hand and paused, eyes searching mine. He asked a question in a tongue not entirely alien. I searched my memory. Then I had it. Erse—an-
cient Erse, though with a difference in accent and pronunciation that made the words unrecognizable.

Well, the O'Mara knew his forefathers' tongue! I spoke slowly, carefully, giving him greeting.

He swung back toward the woman, roaring a phrase I could not catch. There was triumph in his tone. Then back to me—

He flung me questions, staccato, so fast I could not understand. I shook my head and he spoke more slowly, piecing out the words with gestures. After a moment he gripped my arm and drew me to the table, forcing me down on a bench beside the woman. I beckoned to Glenn, and he came to join us.

There was food on the board—unfa-
miliar, but recognizable. I pointed to it, asked a question. The man seized a haunch of meat and forced it into my hands. "Eat!" he said—and I under-
stood. "Eat!"

WE ATE like wolves. The man kept talking, and gradually his tricks of dialect became clearer to me. He spoke Erse, or an Erse-root, and once I had mastered the difference in accent, it was much easier to follow him. Satiated at last, I leaned back, draining a cup of hot, spicy liquor.

I sought for words. "It is hard to speak. The old tongue is—changed."

"It is still spoken in Lleu-Atlan?"

He repeated it before I understood. "Lleu-Atlan?"

The woman said, "Let him tell his story. It has been long and long. Empires fall. Only in Dyan is there no change."

Most of the words I could make out. The others I guessed. But the old phrases came back to me with increasing ease. Glenn watched wonderingly. I nodded at him, said, "Take it easy. I'm finding out—"

"Tell me," the man said. "I am Lar, guardian. This woman is Aedis. She also guards. Now who are you, and how did you come to Dyan?"

I told him. He interrupted from time to time, questioning me carefully, giving me words when I could find none. When I had finished, he thrust a filled cup toward me.

"Drink! I drink with you! Aedis—"

She lifted her goblet. "So. But—he? This man called Glenn? He is not of the old blood."

Lar looked at me. "He does not speak our tongue? He did not hear the summons? Well—he came with you, and is safe. So drink."

And we drank together, for the first and the last time. Over the rim of the cup Aedis's eyes sought mine.

Aedis—Aedis of Dyan! Goddess indeed! I dare not think of you now. I dare not remember. But—I loved you from the first moment I saw you in that dim blue-lit hall, wearing the night like a gown, guarding a gateway that you thought would never open.

Lar rose, laughing down at me. "Tell him, Aedis. I have no time. In Lleu-Dyan the people prepare to march to the Cleft, and I must tell them that this time there will be no return. Yet—" He bent toward me, staring. "Take him to the Cleft when the storm bursts from the rock. His powers are still latent. Let him stand in that which gives life—"

"I do not understand," I said.

"Aedis will explain. Look you, now—" His giant figure flashed away so swiftly I could not follow him with my eyes. I heard Glenn gasp in amazed wonder. Before I could turn, Lar was back, gripping

a stone block between his great hands.

"Look you, now—"

He crumbled the stone between his fingers! Trickles of dust slipped to the floor; shards of rock flew. Glenn said, "Sean! The guy's doing that with his hands!" He knelt suddenly and picked up a fragment, tested it, and gulped. "It's no fake, either."

Lar laughed. "When you have stood in the Cleft's storm, you, too, will awake. As yet you stir in your sleep—but later, you will have such power as I have. And Aedis! And all those who dwell in Dy-an!"

Aedis said, "The other?" She nodded toward Glenn.

Lar sobered. "He is not of our blood. He may not visit the Cleft."

The giant turned to me again, his grip clamping like iron on my shoulder. "We shall meet again, brother."

A titan—he strode from the hall, silver head arrogantly lifted.

CHAPTER THREE

Cauldron of Hell

AFTER that there was nothing to do but wait. Within a certain period of time, Aedis said, Lar would return.

It was impossible for me to understand the time system of this strange world. There was no sun. The unchanging blue haze above, never darkened into night. There were, Aedis explained, certain temporal cycles or pulses which she could sense, but which I could not. There was so much that I did not understand!

One thing I came to know, and soon. There was antipathy between Aedis and Glenn. He feared and hated her, I think, and she felt for him a sort of scorn. Later I realized why.

"She isn't human," Glenn said, when we were alone. "Neither is the man. There's something wrong about them both, Sean."

"I don't see it."

He shivered. "Don't you? You remind me of them a bit yourself, rather—but you're a human being! They aren't."

"Well, they're treating us all right," I said practically, sitting down on a mound of cushions. "A private suite that looks swankier than the Astor. Got a cigarette? I'm out."

Glenn extended a crumpled pack. "Hope they have tobacco here. Where are we, anyway? Did they say?"

"No—at least, I don't remember enough Erse to get all Aedis said. We're in a place called Dyan, I gathered, and Lar went off to the main city—Lieu-Dyan."

"How come they speak Erse?"

"I don't know." Smoke trickled slowly between my lips. "We may be anywhere in time or space. I'll find out—give me a chance to talk to Aedis."

"You can have her," Glenn said, nervously tugging at his chin. "I don't like this place or the people in it. The sooner we get out, the better."

"If we *can* get out."

"Maybe Aedis will tell you how. God, I'm sleepy. That drink was doped."

It might have been, but I doubted it. We were still fagged out. It wasn't long before we were asleep. . . .

I was aroused by a light hand on my brow. I looked up to see Aedis kneeling beside me. She held a finger to her lips, nodded toward Glenn, and beckoned me to the door. I got up quietly, conscious of a queer, heightening excitement.

She led me up a stairway to the roof of a tower, where cushions were heaped. A gray-skinned being like a man stood

there waiting. Aedis spoke a word or two, and the creature hurried off.

"Your companion sleeps," she said, relaxing on the cushions. "That is well. He need not intrude. Sit beside me, and we will talk. Of my world and yours, and certain mysteries that should be made clear to you."

Beneath us the rolling, forested country stretched away into misty horizons. In one direction great cliffs towered; I could make out the gulf, and a thin band that was the bridge spanning it.

"First, Sean O'Mara, first we must drink together. Here is the Ghar with wine."

The gray-skinned being had returned, bearing an ewer and cups. He poured honey-colored liquor. I felt my spine crawl as I looked at him—it.

"The Ghar? What manner of creature is this—Ghar?"

Aedis sipped the wine, leaning back amid the cushions. Her unbound hair lay like clouds of midnight about her.

"A slave, a servant. They were made." "Made?"

"Aye. For a long time we have known how to mold living flesh to our needs. The—the basic stuff of flesh—"

"Protoplasm?" Aedis did not know the word. I tried to explain.

"Yes, that is it. We shape the flesh as it grows. We know the mysteries of life—and have known them since the days of Lleu-Atlan."

"Where was that? And When?"

She shrugged. "Oh, very long ago. It is written in the records. Our forefathers came from Lleu-Atlan, in your own world. It was an island continent in a sea—"

Atlantis, I thought. The Hesperides, the Isles of the Blessed, far westward from the Irish cliffs. Atlantis!

"It was long ago—that I know. But we ruled then. We were very great and very wise. You see—" She hesitated. "I do not know if I can explain this—but

there are two kinds of men. The Dojin—who are only a little better than the Ghar—and the people of my race, like Lar. Your companion is a Dojin."

Resentment stirred within me. "Glenn probably has a better mind than I have."

Aedis laughed at that, very sweetly. "He is Dojin. And so were all the men of Earth, once on a time. Then there were mutations. Yes. A new race sprang into being. Giants—but sleeping giants."

I remembered Irish legends of the Great Ones who slept in the hills . . . the Tuatha Dé.

AEDIS went on. "These men had in them certain powers. But these powers were latent, like a sword in its sheath. Now in Lleu-Atlan was a sacred cavern where a god dwelt, so the legend went. In truth there was no god. There was only a force of nature for which I have no name. Lar spoke of the storm in the Cleft. You will see that storm, stand in it, and it is the same power that once burst forth in Lleu-Atlan. Power that unlocked the gate and drew the sword of life from its sheath!"

What truth lay behind the tale of Excalibur, the sheathed sword that, drawn from the anvil, gave light to the world?

"These men, these sleeping giants, found the power. They stood in the storm. And they came forth gods indeed. Like Lar, like me, like all our race. Time passed. The Dojin, the weak ones, died out, to be replaced by us. In time all the world was peopled by us, and Lleu-Atlan was the greatest empire that had ever existed. Until—well, the dream ended. Something happened without precedent. A Dojin was born to one of our race.

"A Dojin. As though a woman should give birth to an ape. That was the beginning. Others were born. . . .

"Our wise men sought the reason, but it is forgotten now. There is a story that the Earth passed through a cloud in space,

a barrier that blocked certain necessary rays. And darkness and cold came to the world that Lieu-Atlan had once ruled."

The ice age? Cosmic rays? But—

"And so we fled. A gateway was opened to Dyan, and in Dyan our race could live in peace. Here exist those rays which allow us to remain as we are. Here in Dyan our children are as their sires and dams, not deformed Dojin. Yet even here it is necessary that we stand in the Cleft's storm as often as the storm breaks forth. It does that regularly, but not often—no! It is due soon now."

"Much of that I do not understand," I said. "But tell me this—where is Dylan?"

"We have never known," Aedis said quietly. "There is no way. The wise men, long ago, opened a gateway and searched for a land where we could be safe. They found Dylan. But they did not know whether Dylan is in a different space or a different time—or in an unknowable place."

"What lies beyond there?" I pointed to the horizon.

"The mists thicken eventually—we do not know. Far as we may travel, there is always land and mist beyond. But it does not matter. The wise men said this: On Earth our race would die out. The Dojin would rule again, until the planet had passed through the cloud in space. After that, evolution would begin once more. Not at once, no; the road is long and steep. But eventually the cycle would repeat itself, and one of our race would be born to a Dojin, as had happened in the past. That would be the beginning. Until at last, Earth would once more be peopled with men and women like us. . . .

"So, when we had passed through the gateway to Dyan, we left a sign. Our wise men made the gateway half alive. It sent out a message—a summons. A

message that no Dojin could hear. But if one of our race heard, he would come, and pass through the gateway to Dyan. That was necessary, for our people were scattered all over the Earth. We could not find them all. The gateway was made, and sent out its call, and soon our race came trickling in, two by two, family by family, tribe by tribe. It took long, but finally no more came. Earth held only the Dojin. And we—we were here, in Dyan!"

"The gateway—a globe? A dull metal globe that shone with lightnings?"

"Yes. It exists in two worlds, Earth and Dyan. Those who enter the temple are taken across space to the other world."

"Then we can get back?"

She nodded. "Yes. You will go back with us."

I stared at her.

"This is not our world," Aedis said. "We are Earth-born, and belong there. Always there have been two guardians placed here, ready to welcome those who might hear the summons and come to Dyan. We knew that, some day, our race would live again on Earth. So Lar and I dwell here, for that purpose and another."

"What?"

Her face darkened. "We had thought that perhaps, eventually, enemies might come through the gateway. Powerful enemies. Now we are strong indeed, but there are stronger beings—perhaps. If ever such an enemy should come to Dyan, the bridge would be destroyed."

"Couldn't it be built again?" I asked.

"No. From that gorge comes a breath that destroys. It blasts solid matter into nothingness. A rock, flung across the abyss, will melt in midair."

"What about the bridge?"

"It was here when we came. A civilized race already held Dyan. They had built the bridge—how, no one knows now."

I FELT my throat go dry. "What happened to that race, Aedis?"

She laughed at me mockingly. "Are we demons, then? Do you think we ate them alive? We are not cruel, Sean O'Mara. We dwelt here peacefully with that race—we allotted them reservations where they could do as they chose—and, after a while, they died."

"Their children?"

"There were none. We saw to that. We are not killers—but continuance of that race was unnecessary."

"And you—plan on invading Earth?"

"Invasion? We plan to *return*. We are not ruthless. You are the first mutation of the old blood to appear. Well, we will hasten that process. Those who bear in them the seeds of us, will survive. The others, who would give birth to nothing but Dojin—will not give birth. That is all."

"The Dojin have weapons," I said grimly.

"You do not yet know our power, Sean O'Mara. You will learn. You will be one of us."

"This storm in the Cleft—you need that periodically?"

"Yes. Else we lose our power."

"You won't find it on Earth," I said. "That cavern in Lieu-Atlan—it's been under the ocean for thousands of years. Lieu-Atlan is forgotten."

"We can find it again," she said serenely. "Or, if not, we can pass through the gateway to stand in the storm. You do not know what we are capable of doing. You saw Lar crush the stone?"

"Mere physical strength."

"More than that. We are strong, yes, and we move fast as racing water when we choose. But our minds—Sean O'Mara, if that Dojin companion of yours saw Lieu-Dyan, he would be struck blind! Our science is based on more than the five senses of the Dojin. We are—gods!"

And I believed her. Some hint of the

truth came to me then. I questioned Aedis.

I was right. Endocrinology was the root of the secret. I made a note to ask Glenn later. He was, I remembered, studying medicine.

"You must stand in the storm before your powers will be unleashed," Aedis said. "They are latent as yet. The sword rests in its sheath. But when you have become like us—you will be changed! Changed indeed!"

She looked at me thoughtfully. "I think I shall show you a little. Thus—" Aedis gestured. A Ghar—I could not tell them apart—came to stand before us on its stumpy feet, the four arms dangling, the blank eyes glazed.

"Will it to die," Aedis said.

"Eh? I'm no murderer, even if—"

"But these things are scarcely alive. They have no consciousness of self. We make them as we need them, to obey. But since you will not—"

Aedis lifted her hand. The Ghar seemed to shiver and shrink into itself. It grew smaller, losing all semblance of humanity. Within a few seconds, only a pulpy, shapeless lump of flesh lay there at our feet.

"It can be used again," Aedis told me. "Shaped into new forms. Now it must be cast into the reservoir. I will show you our crucible, beneath the castle."

As she turned, a strand of her dark hair blew against my cheek. I caught my breath, my throat suddenly tight and dry. Aedis stood motionless.

She swung back to face me, slowly. Her eyes met mine. They were aflame with little points of light, as if the power that had destroyed the Ghar still lingered within her.

"After you have faced the storm in the Cleft—" she said. "I have guarded the gateway for a long time, Sean O'Mara. Even Lar grows stale to me. In Dyan men have not the—"

"What?"

"I do not know. Something about you, Sean O'Mara, makes you unlike the men of Dyan. When you have become one of us, you will be very great. And I think you have searched for me, man of the old blood."

"I searched for you," I said hoarsely. "Without knowing it."

"Your heritage burned within you. Never among the Dojin could you find that which you sought. But now you are among your people. *I am of your blood.*"

Her lips were bitter-sweet and afame with madness. Her body, slim as a sword, yielded to my embrace. I had known women before—yes. But never a goddess!

Aedis! Aedis of Dyan! I would we had died together then, when our lips first met!

And—

"Sorry, Sean," Glenn's voice said quietly. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

HE WAS standing at the head of the staircase that led down into the tower, his face white, a curious look of abhorrence stamped on it.

Aedis tore herself from my arms, whirled toward Glenn. She cried, "Dojin! I shall slay you now—"

Glenn's glance didn't waver. "I don't know what she's saying, but she's bad medicine, Sean, in case you don't know it. She isn't at all human. I think she's a devil—but it's your own business."

"Right," I said. But I gripped Aedis's wrist and turned her away from Glenn.

"Let me go. Your power is still latent, remember. I can slay you if I choose."

"Can you?"

Her eyes dropped. "Well, I shall not try. But that Dojin—I cannot endure the creatures. They are less than human."

"Glenn is my friend."

"You say that now. After you have faced the storm. . . . I had promised to show you the crucible. Come."

She started down the staircase. I

gripped Glenn's elbow and urged him along. Aedis sent up an angry, flashing glance.

"Not the Dojin."

"He goes where I go," I said.



She did not answer that, but continued her descent. We followed. I gave Glenn a sidelong glance.

"Well?"

"None of my business," he mumbled. "Only—can't you see that she's—different? Like Lar? They both give me the shivers."

"I don't feel it."

"No. You're like them, somehow, but not—horrible."

What did Glenn see about Aedis and Lar that I could not? Did he feel toward them as an animal felt toward man? A Dojin—

Hell! Endocrines couldn't make all that difference. Glenn was jittery, that was all. Yet I sensed that Aedis looked on Glenn as she might have looked on a snake, and she resented my protecting him against her anger.

We went down and down, beneath the castle. Aedis showed us the crucible, as she had promised. Glenn could not bear it, and I felt sick qualms, though I managed to stick it out. The reservoir was the worst—a great basin filled with fleshy, palpitating, grayish stuff like protoplasm. Out of this the Ghar were molded—in any shape desired. Molded by the power of thought alone.

It was horrible.

I stood motionless, staring at that hideous reservoir. The gray stuff pulsed faintly beneath my gaze.

It was like clay. Living clay. To be molded—

From my mind a—something—reached out questingly. I felt Aedis's eyes on me. She had not spoken, but she was urging me to do—

To do what?

In the center of the reservoir a lump of protoplasm heaved itself up. It took shape—the shape of a man, crude, unformed but unmistakable. I stepped forward, my hand instinctively lifting in a gesture of command as the thing shaped itself in obedience to my thought.

"Yes! Yes!" Aedis whispered. "That is it! Force the flesh to bind itself to form!"

The grotesque caricature of a man heaved itself up, mouth open in a soundless shriek.

Like a damned soul in hell!

Hard hands gripped my shoulders, swung me around. Glenn's horrified face was before me. He recoiled.

To me he looked no more human than the thing in the reservoir. But his voice pierced through the mists that fogged my brain.

"Sean! For God's sake, what are you doing?"

And the cry of Aedis—triumphant as a trumpet blast.

"You have the power! You are one of us—you have the power!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Destiny to Shatter

NOW I must be brief. There were three of us in the castle, aside from the inhuman Ghar, and I judge that by Earthly standards about a fortnight passed before the affair reached its tragic climax. During those two weeks, unmarked by sun or calendar, much happened. But no superficial eye could have guessed that.

Two weeks with Aedis—

Aedis, goddess of Dyan. I tasted a rapture such as no man had ever known. Nor can I forget it until my body is dust, and even then, I think, the dust will remember.

I had come into my heritage—

Glenn hated her and feared her. Him she treated with casual contempt. He was an annoyance to her, but, because of me, she tolerated him—and that was all.

I told Glenn what I had learned. He was surprisingly credulous.

"Endocrinology's pretty mysterious, Sean. Medical science is just beginning to find out what makes the glands tick. The thyroid, the thalamus, the pineal—they're the gadgets that make us human. And when they go out of kilter our minds and bodies don't work right."

"Yeah? Then—"

"You know what a hypo of thiamin chloride will do—tone you up and get rid of toxins. And that's just B₁. Normally the ductless glands do the job of keeping the human organism functioning perfectly. It's entirely possible that they're capable of a lot more than we know. Aedis may be right—when the Earth entered that cloud in space, lack of radiation may have inhibited the secretions of certain vital glands. Those particular secretions may mean the difference between man and superman. Hell, nobody knows the function of the pineal. Apparently it hasn't got any, but maybe its function—" he hesitated—"means the difference between Aedis and me."

"I wish you'd try and get over these screwy feelings of yours," I said abruptly. "She's no monster. How would you like it if I felt that way about Paula?"

He turned away his head, his body suddenly tense. "She's human; I know where I'm at with Paula. Some day we'll get married and buy a house and raise kids. I'll be an M.D. She'll cook the things I like, and I'll get her the things she wants. We'll have fun together. Going to shows, hiking in the snow, swimming—normal, ordinary things. I wish to God I was back in—"

"Illinois?"

He grinned tightly. "Well, not yet. There's a little matter of a war to be finished first. Remember?"

"If Aedis's people come to Earth, they'll end the war."

"Sure. But how?"

"They're not killers."

"They kill the future," he said somberly. "Paula and I both want kids. That's part of marriage—our sort of marriage. Weeding out the—the Dojin and subjecting them to sterilization radiations—the devil with that!"

"The Earth was theirs once," I said.

"And they left it; took a powder. Our race has won the Earth now, Sean, and

fought damned hard to do it. If Aedis's people had stayed, stuck it out, they'd eventually have regained what they lost. Evolution means struggle. Sure, there are plenty of set-backs—but you can't simply step outside when there's trouble, and try to get back in stride after the trouble's passed. That's what these super-endocrines are trying to do. But the Earth is ours—for our race and our children."

I looked at him, feeling Aedis's kisses still hot on my lips. "Your race, Glenn." "Yours, too."

"No—I'm finding that out."

Glenn grimaced. "You'll change your mind."

"The Dojin," I said deliberately, "are done. Washed up. They've had their chance and made a mess of it. They'll be allowed to die out. They deserve to. The people of Dyan are not evil and they have grown intellectually and morally as well as physically. Crime, war, slums, hatred, misery—that's what the Dojin have accomplished. None of that exists among what you call the super-endocrines."

"Just the same, Aedis gives me the creeps," Glenn said. "And you're beginning to affect me the same way."

I turned angrily toward the door. A hand fell on my shoulder.

"Hold on," Glenn said contritely. "I didn't mean that, you dope. You're still Sean O'Mara, in spite of that she-tiger. But, look, don't change. Please don't. You're coming back to Illinois with me, remember? After the scrap's over? Remember that turkey dressing?"

I laughed, pushing my fist against Glenn's jaw. "Okay, kid. I'll go back to your hick town with you—and cut you out with Paula."

He looked happier than I'd seen him look for days. But as I went out, I caught sight of a Ghar shuffling along the corridor, and suddenly my heart was very heavy. It was like being caught in a net

—fighting the inevitable, and knowing that struggle only prolonged the ultimate, changeless end.

For there was Aedis—and there was the blood within me, the blood that had come down from Lleu-Atlan, stirring and quickening now into lusty life. Already I had changed. The Earth, the Dojin! Not of my breed! Here in Dyan was my heritage, here were my people.

And here—Aedis!

I FOUND her on the tower. A taut, breathless excitement was in her manner.

"I would have sought you soon, Sean, had you not come. Look there!" She pointed into the distant haze.

"What? I see nothing."

"You are blind, but soon your eyes will be opened. No, you cannot see as far as I, yet, but I tell you this: Lar returns! And the people of Lleu-Dyan are behind him. They bear weapons and other things. For they march to the gateway. To the Earth their ancestors left long ago!"

"Yes," I said heavily. "I wish they had not come. I wish we could have gone on like this forever."

"It will not end. It will not end, for us, Sean."

"I think it will end," I said, not knowing why I spoke thus. "I think it will end in flame and death and much sorrow. We have known happiness for a little while, but all ends now."

She was in my arms, her mouth stopping mine. "You cannot read the future. Do not say such things! Even we of Dyan cannot brush aside the veil that hides tomorrow. Sean, you will forget this foolishness when you have faced the storm—and it comes now! Now!"

"Yes?"

"Look! Beyond the abyss, beyond the temple of the gateway—that light. See? The storm in the Cleft, that gives life and

power to the gods, begins once more. That which comes from the rock sends out its beacon. Once you stand in the storm, Sean, you will be as an unsheathed sword! All you sense but faintly now, will be as flaming madness in your veins—as it is in mine. The bonds of the flesh still hold you. Come, before Lar reaches the castle. We shall go to the Cleft and bathe ourselves in the power that makes the gods!"

Her high excitement caught me in its mounting tide. Laughing, I lifted her, kissed her lips, moved to the staircase. Then down it, to the courtyard—

Glenn stood there waiting.

"What now?" he asked sardonically. Aedis flashed him a contemptuous glance.

"Sean is done with you," she said. "When you see him next, he will no longer bear the taint of the Dojin."

Glenn licked his lips. "Are you going to—"

"Yes," I said.

He hesitated. "All right. I'm coming along. Just in case."

"What does he say?" Aedis murmured. "He cannot come."

"Where I go, he goes," I told her, prompted, perhaps, by the sick, hurt look in Glenn's eyes. I felt somehow that I was betraying him. But that was folly—stupid folly!

Aedis shrugged. We moved toward the open gate, through it, and started along the path that led to the range of low hills. Glenn thrust something into my hand.

"Hadn't time to get the guns," he said. "I grabbed Mary Lou, though. Thought she might come in handy."

"You're crazy."

"Sean. Do me a favor—"

To please him, I buckled the wicked machetelike sword to my belt. Not that I'd need it. After I had faced the storm in the Cleft, I would have powers that

needed no weapon of iron or steel.

From the top of the ridge, looking back, I could make out a great horde of marching men—women too, no doubt—half hidden by the mist. They were still far away. It was impossible to distinguish Lar at this distance.

Aedis's excitement grew. She led the way, racing toward the bridge that spanned the abyss. We followed. I caught something of her exhilaration, sensing the incredible thing that lay hidden before us.

We crossed the black span. The air shook around us with deadly radiation.

We skirted the knoll where the gateway waited—the half-living spherical machine that had brought us to Dyan.

The flame-colored cliffs hemmed us in. We went toward their narrowest point, where a gorge split the walls—stone ramparts of flame.

"The Cleft," Aedis whispered. "Now—"

The narrow canyon twisted sharply. It widened. The walls were perhaps fifty feet apart for a space of a hundred yards. Beyond that, the gorge widened once more, and I caught a glimpse of forest—trees bearing golden fruit, and green foliage.

"Here," Aedis said, her voice shaking.

That hundred-yard stretch was bare of soil, uncarpeted by moss. Like the crags that walled it, it was of flame-colored rock.

"It comes. It comes. The storm that gives life. It comes!"

I heard a faint whispering, dim and far away. It grew louder. It mounted to a deep, powerful roaring—a wordless bellow that shouted like the drums of all the gods.

Higher it rose—and louder. Louder still! We were shaken with the clamor of its fury.

From the wall of rock burst—the storm! That which comes from the rock!

SHAKING the crags with its tumult, the torrent poured out, spanning the gorge, a wall of shaking, pallid flames that barred our path. It was like a river, I thought. It gushed from the rock face, drove across the Cleft, and was swallowed up by the further rampart.

But it was no river—I realized that. It was like a snowstorm. Now I could make out the myriad individual particles that made up the torrent. They were shaped like snowflakes, but in a hundred, a thousand variations. They sparkled with star-points of light.

They *were* light.

They *were*—*life*!

"Now!" Aedis's cry rose about the beating thunder. She drew me toward the swirling, flashing madness.

Instinctively I drew back. Aedis gave me a quick glance, turned, and gripped Glenn's hand. The intoxication of that incredible storm of energy beat like surging tides in our veins. I saw Glenn take a step forward—

"Aedis!"

"He, too!" she shrilled. Her free hand found mine. Together, the three of us went into the heart of that tremendous fury.

Momentarily I was blind. Then I saw again, heard the thunder trumpets bellowing like crashing worlds. Against my body the sparkling flakes were driven, as by gusting winds.

Yet I felt no wind.

Beside me, Aedis and Glenn. The star-points drove against them, melting into their flesh as they melted into the rock wall behind us. I felt cold fires eat into the center of my being.

Freeing! Unleashing!

Unsheathing the sword! Giving me back my lost heritage!

And—I was as a god. . . .

Through the driving, flaming veils I saw Aedis, laughing, her eyes brighter

than the stars' glints, her hair floating in the torrent. Beyond her, Glenn—

Glenn—his face strained with agony.

His eyes accusing, terror in their depths. His body shrinking and shriveling as I watched. Glenn—dying there. Dying!

I lurched toward him, shouting uselessly amid the roaring. As though at a signal, the storm died, the thunder faded to a faint murmuring. A few last flakes of light drifted toward the rock and were absorbed. The whispering died to utter silence.

Glenn lay at my feet, dying.

I stared at Aedis. She was still drunkened with the power that had surged through her. She looked like a goddess indeed.

Her voice rang loud in the stillness.

"He hated me, Sean. And he was a Dojin—"

I said, "You knew it would kill him."

She did not answer. I dropped to my knees beside Glenn. His face was ravaged and shrunken. But he looked up at me, trying to smile.

"You're a god now," he said, very faintly. "You won't be wanting that turkey dinner—I guess—"

I thought he had gone. But the fading life flared up once more.

"Don't let them scare Paula," he said. "She's just a kid in a—" he gasped for breath, and my middle went cold—"a hick town—not used to gods, so—"

That was all.

I stood up. Yes—I was a god. A super-endocrine. I possessed powers such as no man outside of Dyan had ever possessed for a million years.

Now we are come to our kingdom. . . .

"Sean," Aedis said.

I looked at her.

"Sorry, Aedis," I said slowly. "It's ended. The gateway's going to be smashed."

"You cannot. That is impossible. Sean! You—love me!"

"Yeah," I said. "I love you."

I turned around and went back toward the abyss. I moved fast. I moved faster than any normal human could have moved, because I was superhuman now. I was a god—*yeah!*

They had begun to cross the black bridge that spanned the gulf. Lar was in the lead.

In single file the others followed him—men like gods.

I raised my hand. "Lar, the gateway is closed. Go back."

He stopped, staring. "Sean O'Mara. You have been in the storm."

"Go back."

He said thoughtfully, "You are not mad—no. But you must realize that we will not retrace our steps—not now. We go to Earth, to regain our heritage."

"You lost your heritage a million years ago, when you came to Dyan. Earth belongs to another race now; a race that will some day be as great as you of Dyan."

He walked forward, making a gesture that held the others back. "Sean O'Mara, you cannot stop us."

I took out the sword at my belt. "All right."

Cat-footed, agile, graceful as a tiger, he approached. The scarlet hammer was in his hand. Huge as it was, he wielded it easily.

But he did not use it—not then. He tried that other power he had—the weapon of his eyes. An hour ago, that glance would have destroyed me. As it was, I matched him stare for stare—and he nodded at last.

Then he sprang.

He moved faster than I would have imagined possible. But I had faced the storm in the Cleft. I, too, was fast.

The hammer screamed past my head, my sword whined shrilly by Lar's breast.

And, after that, we fought—like gods. Or, perhaps, like devils. In the end, I killed him. . . .

APANG of sorrow touched me as he fell, his proud, leonine face ruined by my weapon, his blood spurting on the black bridge. He carried my sword with him, in his heart. But Lar's hammer clashed down, and I caught it quickly, ready to fight again.

From the crimson hammer, white lightning flew—driving the black substance of the bridge as chalk crumbles to a blow.

Something Aedis had said came back to me. "We are the guardians. If an enemy should come to Dyan, the bridge across the abyss would be destroyed."

Lar—guardian. Lar—who could break the span when the need came. Break it with the great hammer I held now!

I sprang back and brought the weapon crashing down on the bridge. A cry went up from the people of Dyan, across the gulf. Men came running toward me, weapons bared, perilously risking that narrow path. One fell and went plunging down. He made no outcry.

I wielded the hammer—lightning blazed from it. The booming thunder of my work went echoing up to the hazy blueness above. No man could have broken that span, even with the hammer of Lar. But I had faced the storm in the Cleft.

The bridge swayed. It broke away. Abruptly it wrenched itself free and, torn from its supports, swung down.

And from the people of Dyan, isolated forever beyond the gulf, rose a wailing, desolate cry, the mourning of the damned. It was not only the gateway to Earth that was closed to them now.

They were barred from the radiant torrent in the Cleft that kept them gods. Without it, they would lose their power—as the Aesir grew old and weak when the golden apples of Iduna were stolen from Asgard.

Gods no more!

I turned. At the base of the knoll where the temple stood, Aedis was visible, watching me. I walked toward her.

Past her. I went into the Cleft and came out carrying Glenn's body.

I climbed the slope. At the door of the temple, Aedis was waiting for me.

"Sean—" she said. "Sean!"

I did not answer.

"Sean, if you go back to Earth you will lose your power after a while. There is no Cleft in your world now. It is sunk with Lleu-Atlan."

I waited.

"You have destroyed your people, Sean. But—we are left. We can dwell here, in the forest beyond the Cleft. We—"

I looked at her, and, after a moment, she stepped aside.

I went into the temple. Glenn was heavy in my arms. The leaden sphere seemed to tremble as I waited.

Then the pulse of lightning beat out from it. I heard Aedis cry my name—and heard no more. . . .

When I awoke, I was no longer in Dyan. Outside the temple cavern lay the ruined city of an uncharted islet in the South Pacific. And, on the beach, the plane waited. The sun blazed in a cloudless blue sky. The radio was working.

I flew back to the base with Glenn's body. But I told no one the truth of what had happened. There were few questions, and those were easily answered.

It was dreamlike, after a while.

So—the fight goes on. And I, a dead man who was once a god, battle in the skies, refusing to remember a horror and a loveliness in a world whose name I never knew, hidden somewhere in a space and time where blue light filtered down eternally from a changeless sky, and mists hid the horizon. It is forgotten.

But—Aedis of Dyan! Do not forget me, goddess of a lost world. Some day you will draw me back to you, for, as long as I live, I shall remember the bitter-sweetness of your kisses—kisses that meant betrayal! If I live, Aedis—if I live—I will come back to you!