

NO. 7
SUMMER Issue

Science

Fiction

QUARTERLY

25¢

K

TWO NEW NOVELS!

THE GREAT MIRROR

by **ARTHUR J. BURKS**

STARSTONE WORLD

by **HANNES BOK**



BUY
UNITED STATES
DEFENSE
BONDS
AND
STAMPS

FANTASY and SCIENCE FICTION

Science Fiction QUARTERLY

TWO NEW COMPLETE NOVELS

Science Fiction

THE GREAT MIRROR **Arthur J. Burks** 4

Out of the heart of Tibet came the summons to an American archaeologist, a call that was to plunge him into fantastic conflict with another world. For the people of the High Lama had stolen a thing valuable beyond price to Mars and the Martians were determined to punish Earth and its inhabitants!

Fantasy Fiction

STARSTONE WORLD **Hannes Bok** 88

The science of this far land was so strange as to border upon witchcraft, even though the man, trapped in an alien body, knew that all that happened was due to natural laws, weird as they may be in this world. And his quest to find a way back to the Earth he could not forget led through the grim fire-tunnels to—Sula, mistress of the starstone!

THREE OUTSTANDING NEW SHORT TALES

UP THERE **Martin Pearson** 85

Which is more fantastic: the theory that the stars are incredibly distant, or that they are very close to a stationary Earth?

BOOMERANG **Bowen Conway** 138

He thought he could influence the future by shooting this man in, to him, the far past. It worked—he did influence the future!

STROKE **John L. Chapman** 142

Something about that pitiful body on the beach looked familiar. . . .

SPECIAL DEPARTMENT

PRIME BASE **The Editor** 144

*Cover by John B. Mussachia from a scene in "Starstone World"
By Hannes Bok.*

SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY, No. 7, Summer, 1942, published by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC. Office of publication, 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 60 Hudson St., New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. Single copies, 25c. Yearly subscription \$1.00.



This time I tugged with all my strength.

STARSTONE WORLD

Strange was the science of this distant land and stranger still the struggle between the two who kidnapped the man from our world and Sula, mistress of the starstone! A colorful novelet by a new master of fantasy!

Illustrated by Damon Knight

THEY WERE two scientists—and not too well equipped, either—on an undreamed-of planet in who knows what unfathomed corner of space. How could they possibly have deliberately chosen me, out of all the billions of humans living on earth today, to be the subject of their experiment? Or they might not have been able to choose; it may have seemed to them like dipping a net into dark water and accepting whatever became enmeshed.

And I was the one who happened to be in the net's way.

I remember some children playing noisily in a street, especially a small boy so intent on catching a ball that he did not notice a car bearing down on him. As the machine's horn bellowed, I rushed off the sidewalk to push the child out of harm's way—and managed it all right. The car hit me instead, and the next thing I knew, the dreadful pain was fading away; stars were swarming past me—I was shooting through space like a comet.

But—an automobile had hit me! I ought to be lying on the street, with a curious crowd looking down on me, or perhaps in a hospital, a doctor examining me—and instead, I might

have been bodiless, only a head equipped with eyes. I felt neither heat nor cold.

I AM not a religious person. I don't believe in the after-life, and I'm sure that I do not possess an immortal soul. I think that our bodies are like radio receiving sets, tuned into a broadcast of—it is hard to find the right term—cosmic awareness; each machine modifying incoming vibrations according to its make. Shut off the station, break the machine, and the person is dead.

Suppose two different models were dialed in at exactly the same volume and pitch? It might explain telepathy. And it might also explain what happened to me. . . .

I recognized the moon: it was diminishing with distance below me. A flickering spark above me swelled into a gigantic opalescent orb; I passed it, and its size decreased until it was again a mere speck of light. A band of powdery stars lay ahead; it seemed that ages passed as I drifted toward them.

Very gradually their fiery flecks widened into monstrous moons which shimmered with rippling yellow flames. They held nothing but the seething fire; a tongue of it, licking

by **HANNES BOK**

(Author of "The Alien Vibration", "Web of Moons", etc.)

upward lazily, barely touched me, and I felt an intense anguish not so much of burning as dreadful psychic debility.

Something reached out of incalculable distance like a writhing thread. It snaked over me, winding about me as though I were a spool, and whirled me back in the direction from which it had come. Giddy, sick, I struggled weakly against it, accomplished nothing, and had to allow it to carry me on and on through utter darkness.

I thought that I heard a faint chanting of male voices; it was a strange minor monody, and I could not understand its words. It became louder, until it was almost deafening. Without warning, a sharp pain stabbed through me; I was sensible of cold, and aching muscles. My eyes flicked open. My body was here; I must have dreamed that flight through space—

Or had I? I lay on my back in an immense vaulted room which was feebly illumined by fires smouldering in intricately pierced braziers. Aromatic blue smoke hung so heavily around me that it almost obscured the gloomy walls, sculptured with rows of thousands of tiny marching figures. Unconsciously I thought of China's "Five Great Caves" whose every square inch of wall space is carved with representations of Buddha and his disciples—and such a horrible pang knifed my head that I groaned before I was aware of it.

I lay on something hard and cold, which I thought was the top of a large table, in the center of the room. Heavily robed, hooded men knelt around me, filling all the floor-space, their faces blank and white under the cowls. All of them were alike, rapt upon me; it was like seeing the same face endlessly reproduced in

mirrors, or looking through a fly's multiple eye. Their eyes dwelt on me without a flicker as they intoned their monotonous tune; I felt like the conductor of an a cappella choir. I imagine now that these men were drugged.

It certainly was not what you would expect in the way of a scientific laboratory, but that's what it was—disguised without doubt by a lot of superstitious hocus-pocus to impress the ignorant that it was a den of sorcerers versed in supernatural lore.

TWO MEN stood over me. The first was short and stocky, and wore a perpetual scowl. The second was as slender as an image in a cylindrical mirror, more interested in foppishly arranging the folds of his shimmering blue robe than watching me.

As I opened my eyes, the short man involuntarily stepped back, jerking his partner's sleeve. In sitting up, I noticed my legs; I was naked, and—those legs were not my own! Something had happened first of all to my skin—it was greenish-white. There was nothing especially wrong with the limbs I saw; they were sturdy and quite shapely, but a little short. I had the feeling of looking not at my own body but over the shoulder of someone else. I raised a hand, and saw that it was as unfamiliar as skin and legs; the fingers were shorter than I was accustomed to seeing them, and the palm much broader. Dazed, I touched my forehead, felt a quick pang, and jerked my hand away. I must have been badly cut or bruised in the accident. But where was I?

THE TALL man in blue spoke to the short man, who was scowling

at me. "Silence the singers, Aibur, and send them away."

With something of an exaggerated importance—I could see that he liked to impress the man in blue—the little fellow raised his palm to the crowd, which immediately ceased chanting. The singers arose and glided somnolently out of the room, a few of them staring after me over their shoulders. I watched them go, and automatically rubbed the goose-pimples on my arms.

The short man reached down to a heap of clothes on the floor; he selected a dull-hued mantle and tossed it at me; I caught it. The tall, languid man helped me to the floor—and I saw now that I had been lying on a carved altar. I tottered weakly; the tall man's grip steadied me. Effeminate though his mannerisms might be, there was nothing womanish in his grasp.

I wrapped the cloak around me and saw blood on my head. My body was unmarked; exploring the wound on my forehead, I found it V-shaped, running from the bridge of my nose to my temples. The tall men drew my prying fingers down to my sides.

"Careful," he warned. "It will take time for that to heal." He faced the smaller man he had called Aibur. "Shall we examine him now?"

Aibur nodded and gripped my right arm; the other man took hold on my left. They drew me to a door and into a smaller chamber which, too, was illuminated by fires in braziers. Colorful tiles covered the floor; fantastically wrought chairs surrounded a small table on which, in a turquoise bowl, were what I imagined to be fruits.

The man on my left pointed to a chair and ordered me to be seated; I obeyed gladly. Aibur took a chair beside me and thrust his face close

to mine, searching my eyes with his.

"Yes, Yephor—we've netted someone besides Khorith," he remarked with satisfaction.

The man in blue shrugged carelessly, dragged a chair to face mine, and sat down. He leaned forward, his hands lax in his lap.

"I am Yephor, and this is Aibur," he said to me. "We are wizards, and we have brought you from wherever you come into our temple—in our city. We rule here. You understand?"

I bent my head in assent; he continued, "Our slave Khorith was—useless. Awkward in performing his tasks. We temporarily disabled his body, expelling his mind from it, for we were interested in sending the combined wills of ourselves and our followers out into the void in quest of some alien roving thought which, capturing, we could cage in Khorith's body, and from which we might learn something of use to us."

I said, "Either I'm in terrible pain, and delirious—or asleep and dreaming. This just isn't possible!" I did not pinch myself, knowing that it was feasible to dream a pinch's pain.

The pair exchanged mocking glances.

"Let him alone without food for a few days, and he'll find out it's possible," Aibur chuckled unpleasantly.

"It makes no difference to us whether he thinks he's asleep or not," Yephor replied, his fingers delicately stroking his chin as he eyed me.

I asked, "How can I understand what you're saying? You are people of an unfamiliar place—it seems foreign enough—but you speak the same language—"

Aibur picked one of the fruits from the bowl on the table and bit into it, munching with bulging cheeks. Yephor gestured airily.

He said, "Some acts, such as walking and swimming, become automatic and instinctive, once they are learned. It is the same with speech. True, thought governs one's utterance to a considerable extent: one must make an apt choice of words to insure being understood by others; but it is also true that in times of sudden pain or stress, a person cries out unthinkingly or instinctively — and in many cases, intelligibly. It is—the awareness-of-being-alive which remembers, but when a thought or deed has become habitual, it leaves an actual mark on the pattern of the brain. Though we drew you here from an unknown world, you can communicate with us because you are equipped with the instincts of the man in whose body your consciousness now reposes."

I couldn't help laughing, however shortly. "Now I'm positive that this is a dream!" I said. Yephor shrugged and looked away as though bored; Aibur's gaze lingered on him with something of speculation in it.

Aibur said, "I will allow this slave a few days' rest before probing the mysteries behind his eyes, Yephor. I'd rather have that wound of his healed before making any attempt—"

Yephor turned to him and nodded lazily. "It might be just as well to wait."

Aibur seemed amused at something secret; he arose from his chair, grunting with the effort, and moved heavily to the door. At his signal, two uniformed men appeared. When I say uniformed I mean similarly dressed; they wore kilts, breastplates of metallic scarlet, and ankle-length cloaks. Peculiarly notched rods hung from their belts; I never saw these in use, so I cannot say whether they were weapons. There was something unearthly about these men, but

whenever I tried comparing them with people I had known, I was tortured by swift, violent headaches. As soon as I relinquished my memories, the hurt ceased. It was very odd. . . .

AIBUR pointed at me. "Put this slave in the hall with the others," he said. "See that he keeps strictly to himself." He muffled his flamboyant cloak more tightly around himself, and with a quick glance backward at Yephor and me, he passed through the doorway out of sight. I arose irresolutely.

The two liveried men approached me and took me by the arms. Worried, I turned to Yephor and found him daintily patting a yawn. The men dipped their knees slightly in homage to him, and having received a condescending nod for answer, hurried me from the room. We passed through the ornately sculptured vault in which I had awakened; its spicy smoke hung low, like descending fog.

We went through a series of corridors which became less architecturally gorgeous, until the walls were without a vestige of decoration. Quiescent cones of fire, in pierced metal globes on tripods spaced a hundred feet apart, lighted our way, making fantastically patterned mosaics of light and shadow on walls and floor. I noticed no windows.

A fragrance of mixed lavender and pine tainted the air, and we entered a long hall, approaching a doorway guarded by men in costumes like those worn by my guides. They carried whips, which they snapped suggestively as I was led past them into a room the size of an auditorium. Under a dim overhead light I thought that the walls were decorated with vast horizontal stripes, but another glance revealed that these were bal-

conies. Mattresses were arranged in rows on the floor, like beds in a hospital ward; beside each was a small and in many cases crudely embellished cabinet, and a tall urn. The heavily sweet perfume welled from all around me, as though everything in the room had been sprayed with it.

On many of the mattresses, men sprawled listlessly; here and there a few of them were huddled together, whispering; they raised their heads to stare at me. Some were clustered about a pallet where a guard bathed the bleeding, whip-marked back of a moaning naked man. There were only men present: they wore loose garments which were shirt and trousers in one.

I heard a baby's cry, and looked up to the balcony from which it had come. Women were peering timidly over the high railings, their faces dim in the murk. As some of them withdrew from my curious gaze, others took their places. The two men in charge of me let go of my arms, and one of them pointed at a mattress.

"No, that's taken," the other remarked.

The first man indicated the pallet beyond it. "Use that one, then," he told me.

I sat on the mat which he had assigned me; it was quite soft. The two uniformed men nodded satisfaction to each other, and withdrew from the room, lingering to converse with the men at the door. Several of the recumbent people sat up, turning inquisitive eyes to me, but when the doorway's guardians peered in, they looked away as if unaware of my existence.

I still thought that it was a dream, although an amazingly consistent one.

I WONDERED what was in the battered cabinet beside my bed, and opened its door. Inside were neatly folded bed-clothes, toilet articles, and a suit like those worn by the men around me. I looked into the urn. It held water. The guards at the door scanned me suspiciously and then withdrew.

I peered up at the balconies. The women were still regarding me, but as my attention lingered, they drew back out of vision. I watched the fellow in uniform bathing the moaning man. He nodded at me, but made a warning gesture as I arose and started toward him. Finishing his doctoring, he covered the sick man and walked out of the room.

Heavy shoes of extremely thick, black leather were folded in the suit in the cabinet: they were worn, and I wondered who had used them before me. I arrayed myself after the fashion of the others present. As I sat studying my surroundings, I heard the thunderous boom of a gong. Its echoes played tag through the room, and the light overhead flared dazzlingly bright. The drowsing slaves awoke. Some lay stretching and yawning; others arose at once, and, dipping into the ewers near them, sponged their faces and arms.

There was an instantaneous buzz of conversation. A man tilted back his head and called a name to one of the tiers above. Women's faces stared down, and several feminine voices answered tantalizingly in unison. A girl appeared at the railing and lifted a puppy-like child for the man to see; he waved, cooing at it. Many of the slaves whispered together, pointing at me.

The gong resounded again; the slaves hurriedly stood beside their beds, their backbones rigid and their

arms at their sides, as though at attention in response to a military command. I arose dubiously. The women disappeared above.

One of Aibur's men entered the room and approached the wall opposite the door. He pressed his hand against a badly soiled spot on it and a rectangular section of the plaster slid away, disclosing a lever. The guard lowered his whip and, fumbling at his belt, produced a key which he fitted into a slot in the lever. He returned the key to his girdle, pulled the switch, and suddenly the aisles between the beds gaped apart; massive tables laden with steaming food arose on a platform. The guard leaned back against the wall, toying with his whip. The gong reverberated a third time, and the slaves hurried to the tables, kneeling beside them to eat, chattering vivaciously as they assailed the repast. One of them scurried to the bed of the sick man and laid food within his reach, then scurried worriedly back to the table. The sick man did not touch his plate.

I felt no hunger, but the guard snapped his whip at me and jerked his thumb expressively toward the tables. As I knelt to eat, I doubted now that I was not awake.

The slaves watched every move that I made. One of them furtively exchanged his place with another to be nearer me. I was fingering a dish which looked like vegetable salad, and which tasted like stewed beef, when he whispered, "Have you—?" We heard the crack of a whip. The slave slipped back to the place which he had deserted.

The tables held plenty of food, but not much by way of variety. I sampled the little loaves: they were sour, and I laid mine down. The slaves dipped their cups into a central bowl

of red liquid; I filled mine and raised it to my lips. It smelled like bitter medicine, and I did not drink it. Disgusted, I watched the others obviously enjoying the meal. Except for their vigilant glances, they ignored me. At last I spoke to the one beside me; he pretended not to have heard. The one who had changed places with him leaned my way and whispered, "We aren't angry with you, or afraid of you. We're not allowed to speak to anyone with the Scar." His fingers traced a V on his forehead.

The man opposite us snapped, "Shut up, you!"

The first man ignored him. "People with the Scar are old bodies with new minds," he whispered, his eyes craftily narrowing.

The man across from him glared wrathfully. Turning, he lifted his hand high, summoning Aibur's sentinel, who swaggered to the table.

"He talked to the stranger," the man said, pointing.

The guard knitted his brows and waved his whip significantly. "You know the rules!" he warned the transgressor, who ducked his head quickly in assent and nervously tore a loaf apart, stuffing enormous fragments of it into his mouth.

The man with the whip looked at me. "So you're not hungry," he said. "Well—who can blame you! But you'd better leave these people to themselves. Go to your bed and lie down."

CHAPTER II

INTRIGUE

PRESENTLY the gong boomed. Lifting my lids, I saw the slaves leaving the tables, some of them surreptitiously

hiding bread under their clothing. They stood at attention beside their beds. At a second stroke of the gong, the guard returned to the lever and drew it back to its former position. The tables sank into the floor, which closed over them. At a third gong note the light on the ceiling waned to a feeble glimmer, and the slaves ceased all communication with each other.

One took a scrap of cloth and some sticks of pigment from his bedside cabinet and began laboriously to draw. Another pored squinting over a tattered fragment of a book, his nose almost rubbing the pages.

I closed my eyes again and tried to imagine my way out of this body that was not mine—out of the slaves' ward and into the sky. I thought that I looked down at the world I was leaving, that it looked like a prodigious lump of bloodstone.

Sudden pain—and something more—balked me; I seemed to strike an invisible wall. I could not break through it: flashes of intense green lightning flickered repeatedly across my sight, obscuring the stars. The wound on my forehead throbbed unbearably. The bloodstone world rushed up to me; I was falling. In another moment I was back at my starting place; defeated, I opened my eyes.

Aibur, clad in lustrous purple, and Yephor, still in his blue robe, loomed over my bed. The smaller man fluttered his hand derisively at me.

"Asleep? No, Yephor, he was trying to run away from us, already tired of our hospitality."

Yephor lifted his brows sanctimoniously.

"Well," Aibur was now speaking to me, "are you still so positive that you're dreaming?"

"I'll get away," I boasted.

Yephor bent forward. "Alas, you can't," he said. "When we made the incision which sent Khorith from our midst—and opened his shell to fresh and more interesting occupancy—we placed within it an amulet whose influence, like a leash, confines the body's inhabitant to a very limited zone. We cannot permit any of our occult-wise guests to steal from us like thieves and carry information about us to their native worlds. Unless we remove the charm, which we will not, you must remain in your present physical form until physical death, whose pain does strange things to your being, searing it, distorting it, making unrecognizable wounds of otherwise immortal memories. If you can remember who and what you were, after the death of your present shell, you may find your way home. But I am afraid that the forces released in the process of fleshly corruption will not allow it."

He smiled a shade too pleasantly, straightened, and glanced indifferently at the other slaves. "Come," he said to Aibur. "There are other things we must do."

Aibur plucked the blue wizard's arm and gestured toward the sick man, who had begun afresh to moan. "You remember him?" he queried. "The slave who will not take orders. A useless lump of flesh—as he is. But like Khorith's body, potentially a cage for a finer mind."

"We haven't any use for him at present," Yephor said. "Why, we haven't even started on this new man yet"—and he glanced my way. "Who knows what secrets he may show us?"

"We can always use another body to trap an errant thought," Aibur persisted.

Yephor shrugged, and when he answered, I sensed steel under the silk

of his voice. "Perhaps—but let's not concern ourselves about it now. We've other things to do."

The sorcerers ambled lingeringly down the aisle between the beds, discussing the slaves, who had become restless and nervous. At the door they were saluted by their attendants. After their departure, the men with whips stepped into the dormitory.

"Prepare for sleep!" one called. The gong roared twice.

At once there was a flurry of action, the slaves carefully but quickly putting aside the reading, carving, and whatever else had been occupying their attention. Stripping off their clothes and folding them neatly, they crawled under their coverlets and settled themselves for sleep. I imitated them. The guards glanced critically around the room, dipped their heads in satisfaction to each other, and stepped through the doorway. I heard the slam of portals and the rattle of bolts being drawn. There was a hiss of escaping steam. I had become accustomed to the perfume with which the ward reeked, but now I was abruptly aware of it again. It had become tremendously intensified and overpowering, like an anaesthetic.

My senses reeled vertiginously, and I slept.

AN UNREMITTANT crashing of the gong roused me; sleepily I half-raised myself. The slaves were awaking; they threw aside their coverings and arose, not putting on their clothes. The alarm ceased. The slaves gathered toilet articles from their bed-cabinets, flung their blankets over their arms, and stood exaggeratedly straight, as though awaiting a martinet's inspection. The doors rattled open.

A voice called, "First row!" and a line of slaves filed out. "Second row!" A second line marched away.

I was in the fifth row. We stomped down a long, windowless hall and emerged in a roofless walled yard into which the sun poured light like blinding acid. I blinked and faltered. A whip cracked; I flinched aside, stung as if by a bee. The whip smacked again. I faced the guard at the entrance; he raised a finger warningly toward my place in the line. Hastily I returned to it.

Before us were rows of lavatory troughs, in the background an open latrine. Sagging ropes hung across a bare space: at a signal from the guards, the men broke ranks to air their blankets on the cords. Over the high walls I glimpsed the tops of trees which were shaped like skeleton elms and which bore, rather than leaves, twinkling iridescent spikes.

There were no towels; when we had bathed in the icy water, the guards waved us aside. I followed the others, most of whom broke into an eager trot, through a gateway into a smaller sunny enclosure. Here the slaves began to wrestle, run races and toss lopsided balls back and forth. Some clustered together, slyly whispering amid coarse laughter; others whooped insanely and rolled about on the pavement, stretching greedy arms in the sun. Aibur's men were present, but for the most part they remained in the background. When I approached a knot of the conversing men, an overseer flicked his whip at me.

"Sorry, but you'll have to keep away from them for a while," he said, not unkindly. So I remained alone until perhaps an hour passed, when we were herded back to the dormitory and fed.

Then the slaves stood at attention

while the guards passed along the aisles, instructing each man as to his duties for the day. Upon receiving instructions, the slaves slipped from the room, until only the sick man and I remained.

"I'll take him there," I overheard one guard remark to another; the man's whip prodded me ahead of him through an increasingly pretentious tunnel into a suite of rooms whose walls were draped with opaline fabrics. Tall, rosy-paned windows were open: through them I glimpsed low white structures similar to pueblos; beyond them was compact woodland. Not more than a mile away, perpendicular cliffs reared into the grey mist of the sky.

Aibur sat on an embellished throne which occupied a platform against one of the walls. He wore a piebald mantle over a white robe, and held a stick of graphite and several long sheets of paper on his lap. The guard salaamed, the butt of his whip rapping the base of my spine. "Bow too, kyi!" he muttered at me. I didn't want to obey, but there wasn't anything reasonable that I could do about it. I bent reluctantly.

The priest motioned the man away and beckoned to me. As I approached, he took a cushion from his throne and dropped it at his feet. "Kneel on this," he said.

I knelt at his feet: his stubby fingers gripped my head. He thrust his face close to mine and peered through my eyes as though they were windows. I sensed something invisible entering me from him and probing the memories of my aboriginal world. An age crept past. Dust settled on my wide eyes; I blinked, and the frowning wizard cuffed me. "Don't do that!" he snapped.

He stared intently again; I did not know what he saw. His writing im-

plement scratched the crackling paper. My neck began to ache; my knees hurt; tears dripped out of my eyes. At last Aibur said, "Enough. You may rest." I blinked until my eyes reverted almost to normal. The priest was poring over what he had written; I glimpsed apparently meaningless hieroglyphics on the paper.

"But what is it that motivates them?" Aibur asked himself, running a finger over the writing. "Let me look again," he commanded me. I raised my eyes and he peered into them, muttering impatiently, sometimes lifting his hand as though importunately turning the leaves of a book. He sank back, pushing me away, and stared at his notes. "At least, I will have models constructed; perhaps they will tell," he murmured to himself. I waited in silence. Finally his foot poked me. "You may go now," he said.

The guard was waiting out in the hall. He accompanied me back to the dormitory, where, almost at once, Yephor sent for me. In his grotto-like room, its ceiling dripping sapphirine stalactites, the blue-clad warlock peered like Aibur into my eyes, and wrote comments on what he saw. He flourished the length of pigment most elegantly, but I was no longer deceived by his apparent foppishness; I knew him to be far more dangerous than Aibur.

"So Aibur's been ahead of me again," he remarked pensively. "Well—he hasn't learned anything that he can use against me." He waved disgustedly. "Go now!"

I was taken back to the dormitory.

MANY times after that I was the subject of Aibur's psychic research. I wonder now whether it was telepathy, or hypnotism—and why did the red-robed wizard sudden-

ly begin to point brilliant lights toward my face as experiments progressed? I recall answering innumerable questions, though what they were I could not remember afterward.

Much as I disliked these explorations of my fettered mind, I preferred them infinitely to the dullness of the slaves' sleeping quarters, where I could do nothing but eat, sleep, and wait patiently for the all-too-brief daily exercise period.

Once on entering the sorcerer's apartments I saw many models of machines which spoke to me of my unattainable—terrestrial self. There were dynamos, gasoline engines, printing presses, even a small telephone. As I studied them, homesick, the green flames in my brain almost blinded me, and I was forced to turn away from the little replicas and to dwell on more recent experiences. The painful flames promptly vanished.

Yephor occupied a throne beside Aibur's. He contemptuously indicated the models.

"What if you have duplicated them perfectly?" he cooed. "You can't find out how to set them into motion. You can obtain your research only from what this man has experienced—a partly written book. You cannot make the fuel which operates these mechanisms!"

Aibur nodded dourly. "But it has not been entirely wasted effort. Though I cannot make the fuel for these things, as you claim, I know from this man's memories what that fuel is like—if I were to stumble upon some here in our world I would recognize it at once. We will preserve these devices—perhaps we may some day capture a mind that will supply the information we need now. In the meantime, this man has sup-

plied us with all we can get from him. We've no further use for him."

"You plan on setting him free, so that he can gain his former physical shape?"

"No," Aibur replied. "You've seen how great his people's magic—in some instances—can be. The magicians of his world might use him to extract knowledge concerning us. We cannot risk that—at least not while Sula retains her share of the lost knowledges. Our magic must remain exclusively ours." He clenched his hands. "Sula! If only we could trick her into revealing what she knows—"

"What do you propose doing with this slave?"

"If we had time, we might amuse ourselves by torturing his body and watching the warping of his mentality through pain. Interesting yes—because we will have to face pain and death ourselves one day; we may as well know what to expect; perhaps a way may suggest itself to prevent our undergoing such an ordeal. But this slave—we will allow him to live until we have more leisure." Aibur motioned to the guard. "Return him to the others; he may now mingle freely with them. Set him to whatever tasks you like."

As Aibur's man grasped my arm, I broke away and stretched my hands to the two wizards. "Please!" I cried. "Let me go back to where I belong! I'll say nothing, nothing—!"

"You were happier there?" Tall Yephor flirted his scented handkerchief under his nose, and inhaled appreciatively.

I did not remember. However, I vaguely realized that at present I was being misused. While I puzzled over a reply, Aibur gestured peremptorily, and the man in uniform jerked me to the door.

YEPHOR came for me in person and conducted me to the vaulted auditorium on whose stone altar I had first awakened in the slave Khorith's body. He took special pains that no one would see us going there. As before, it was dimly illumined by smoky fires in braziers. The blue warlock laid his fingers lightly on my arm, and smiled patronizingly.

"You wonder why I have brought you here? Because your life is in danger. My confrere is determined to put you to death. Selfish motive! We've watched hundreds die, and learned nothing. There are uses to which a live slave can be put—to our advantage, and—yes, to the slave's, too, if he obey us implicitly—as I'm sure you would."

I looked eagerly at him, trying to show by my expression that I was very reliable and that he would never regret his words.

He stood brooding down on me, his fingers coddling his underlip. Presently he said, "Of course, I could attempt an operation which would remove our charm from your head; then your will could desert this body and return to its own. But I have no time for that: we are preparing for a ceremony tonight. One of your fellow slaves is dying, and we intend using his body to trap another mind from—Outside. Besides, such an operation as could free you is fairly sure to be a fatal one. . . . There is only one certain way for you to regain your old self. If someone who has died, yet kept his identity, could guide you through the Maze—"

"The Maze?" I asked.

"It stretches through the universe like a gigantic cobweb, but it is not made of the forces composing Matter. Rather it is a web of pure negation. The chaos which existed before substance was created. No positive

force may pervade it, but must pass around it—and in this avoiding of the web, the streaming energies are fused together, their patterns of flow altered. The resultant conflicts produce variations of intensity, ultimately shaping what the wizards of your world call atoms, which are the base of all Matter."

Yephor toyed with an irregular blob of gold hanging from his neck by a chain. "The Maze," he went on, "is no flat nor simple thing—its veins thread the universe like the blood-vessels of a body. It was first observed and charted by our predecessor Nurnir when he was concerned with spectrology and electrodynamics. No live man can traverse that path and remain sane, but a thought which has endured the reversed processes of life—physical decomposition, or death—has become of the same stuff as the Maze. It can grasp living thought and draw it into the web, cloak it with its protection and carry it to any part of cosmos." Yephor sighed wistfully. "But this is idle talk. No mind can survive the inverted stimulus of death and still remember what we call life. It would be insane." But I thought that he looked craftily at me, as though he knew more than he was telling. What was his purpose in telling me all this? Was he trying to rouse my hopes to a pitch where my enthusiasm might be of some assistance to him?

"Then that is what explains magic?" I asked. "If the mind does live through the decay of the body, are there not minds of those who were crazy before death which can communicate, though perhaps incompletely, with those who know how to summon them?"

"Yes," Yephor purred. "To those who know how to summon them."

He laughed shortly. "I almost told you more than I wished." The remark sounded innocent enough, but later—when Sula told me about Nurnir, its true import dawned on me.

Abruptly Yephor became brusque. "Come, now—we're wasting precious time. I don't want Aibur walking into the midst of this little tete-a-tete. I am interested in your welfare, and I intend to hide you from Aibur, for a time—here in the temple."

HE DREW me to a niche in which stood a carved figure, a little larger than life-size. I couldn't understand at first why he wanted me to look at it, the thing was so fearfully ugly. He touched its eyes, and I saw that they were holes opening to the back of the alcove.

"Hollow," Yephor nodded, as I glanced an inquiry. "Hide behind it. You'll be perfectly safe. No one would dream that a slave could commit such a sacrilege as hiding here."

"This is—really a temple?" I asked, wedging around to the back of the idol.

Yephor smirked. "Aibur and I call it that—we've got to keep the superstitious fools under us believing that we're omnipotent."

I was behind the idol, now. I could see through its slitted eyes. Yephor was turning as though to go. I wanted him to know my gratitude.

"I'll repay your kindness, some day," I promised.

His lips curled almost in mockery. "Yes—you certainly will!" he crooned, and glided out of the room.

I stared perplexedly after him, then examined the carvings on the walls. They were very like the sculptures in the Yun Kang caves near Peiping, in China. Their confused elaboration tired my eyes, which I

lowered to the braziers. The flames lighting the room burned within transparent ruby globes. Bluish, perfumed smoke appeared from nowhere about three inches above the globes, and filled the great chamber with slowly eddying clouds of fragrance which were not of the sleep-inducing kind that I had known in the slaves' quarters at night; they sharpened the senses rather than dulled them.

I heard pattering footfalls. Two overseers conducted six slaves into the room; the slaves carried buckets of water, brooms, mops, and other implements used in cleaning. They sponged and wiped the altar slab as carefully and fearfully as though they expected it to come to life and bite them. Poor fellows—none could be sure that he would not be that altar's next victim!

One of them carried a sealed metal cylinder; unscrewing its lid, he took tongs and lifted glowing rosy spheres out of the metal case: upon contact with air the orbs began at once to gleam and smoke. The slave dropped them into the braziers. The room brightened; its smoke grew denser. The slaves washed the floor, and when the cleaning was done, the guards marched them out of the chamber, leaving me alone again.

I was hungry, and wondered if I might be able to steal something to eat—or would Yephor take care of that?

ONCE several guards entered and stared around suspiciously.

"Think the slave's in here?" one asked.

A second shook his head. "He wouldn't dare. Besides, there are no footprints on the floor: you can see it's just been polished."

"That's right." The guards nodded and went out.

CHAPTER III

MISSION

A HORN blasted shrilly. My ear caught a babble of voices, loudening as it grew nearer, like the roar of an approaching flood. I cowered against the idol, waiting for the inevitable. They'd found me, of course.

Aibur and Yephor entered the room, and in twos behind them crowded their disciples, all gabbling garrulously, and all of them carrying stoppered black flasks. They swiftly ranged themselves around the room, and over all their faces, like a veil, dropped an instantaneous calm, an utter selflessness. Like dolls they stood, waiting, silent.

Yephor and Aibur stood at the head of the altar; at its foot two of their men were stationed; each held a jeweled metal box.

I heard footsteps again, and the groans of a man in intense anguish. One of Aibur's police entered, carrying the sick fellow whom I had seen in the slaves' quarters. Aibur motioned a command and the sick man was laid on the altar: the guard looked around himself nervously, evidently not much liking the ceremony; he hurried out.

The two wizards bent over the moaning man and examined him.

"He's fit enough," Aibur pronounced, glowing. "His spirit is suffering more than his flesh. Well, we'll soon cure that!" He glanced at Yephor, who nodded abstractedly; Aibur's habitual scowl deepened.

One of the bearers of the gemmed caskets opened the lid of his burden. Aibur dipped his fingers into it, withdrew a knife and a blue-threaded needle. Automatically Yephor turned

and took a flaming green gem from the other box.

Aibur's hands described fantastic shapes before the recumbent man's eyes. The slave ceased moaning and lay motionless, apparently not even breathing. The scowling wizard applied the knife to the man's forehead, cutting a crescent from the right temple to the left. Simultaneously the disciples unstopped the phials they held, and from each flask a white phosphorescence surged upward in slender streamers. It did not blend with the smoke, but wedged snakily through it, uniting into a seething mass on the ceiling. The sorcerers' followers began to chant softly the same monody which I had heard on awakening in Khorith's body.

Yephor proffered the green gem—it was a thin disc half an inch across—to Aibur, who placed it in the cut on the senseless man's forehead and began to sew shut the wound.

The shining mist on the ceiling lowered slender fingers into the heavy smoke; the fingers began wagging like pendulums, and the assembled singers mimicked them, swaying as they intoned. I am sure that I made no sound in my hiding place—at least no sound that could have been heard above the singing. But one of the votaries looked my way; his eyes widened; he clutched the man nearest him.

"A spy!" he bawled. "A spy!"

The chanting slurred to a halt. The crowd faced my hiding place, silent and immobile. The phosphorescence dripped downward as though weary, as though the vibrations of the crowd's voices had propped it.

Aibur rushed at me, pushing the rooted disciples out of his way. He dragged me from behind the idol, and as I stood cowering, he raised a hand

slowly to my face. I remembered when his eyes had searched through mine among my memories. Was he about to do it now?

At once Yephor was hurrying forward. "So that is where the *byrat* has been hiding! He deserves the full punishment for poisoning our ceremony! Let him be buried alive!"

I KNOW your trick, Yephor," the other warlock almost whispered. "You think that if you condemn him, I will try to thwart you by relieving him! Well, he shall be buried alive—and without delay! Our rite has been desecrated. Just look at that!" He pointed to the ceiling, where the luminous mist had begun to merge with the scented smoke. There was an outraged groan from the gathering as all eyes followed the wizard's gesture.

Aibur trotted to his colleague. "A man's life has been thrown away in vain tonight—a perfectly good body wasted because of some whim of yours to protect this fool! Yephor, I have tolerated much from you, because you are important to me—but one day you will go too far!"

The blue sorcerer seemed blank with dismay. "Why, Aibur, I never dreamed that it would happen like this! I thought to divert myself from the everlasting boredom of routine by torturing this *yodk* with the hope of freedom—"

Aibur pressed his face close to Yephor's, and the blue warlock flinched from him. "You did, you say! I'd like to have you chained somewhere so that I could read what goes on beyond those eyes of *yours*! I warn you—for the last time—I'm not going to endure your treachery forever!"

"Treachery, Aibur?" Yephor was the height of outraged virtue—but

his eyes shone like frosty steel. The disciples waited motionless, jaws agape.

"You heard what I said!" Aibur choked with wrath, coughed, and gulped. "Yephor—you deserve impeachment!" He swept an arm at the disciples. "Leave us! You, Guarance, send in four of my men and have a coffin brought in." The heirodules dispersed timorously, looking backward, stumbling against those in front of them. Guards hurried in. "Watch this *kyi*—and Yephor as well!" Aibur howled, and rushed from the room.

So Yephor had been toying with me! I glared hate at him. The watchmen regarded us alertly. The blue wizard contemplated me indifferently, strolled to the altar, and casually fingered the dead man.

Aibur returned, two votaries behind him. From one he took a glittering cup; he lifted its hinged lid and passed it to me. "Drink it," he said.

I peered at the cup's contents. Viscous foam floated on a cloudy green liquid.

"Drink it!" Aibur put out his hand as though to tilt the cup against my lips.

I raised the cup to my mouth. Yephor turned my way, looked straight into my eyes. He meant to help me after all! Before I could sip the liquid, my muscles stiffened out of control. The cup dropped from my hand, and I toppled to the floor.

Aibur bent over me and drew my eyelids over my eyes.

"Good," he grunted. "You'll suffer quite a time before you can sufficiently recover yourself and try digging your way up through the ground." Feet tramped. "Ah, the coffin!" he said. "Lay him in it!"

Hands lifted me and set me none

too gently in a splintery wooden box. There was a hollow thump as a lid was clapped down; the warmth of light beating on my eyelids ceased. I heard the crunch of screws grinding into the coffin's wood. Then the box was lifted and carried for a long while; it was dropped without warning, jarring the breath out of me.

"Wait until the worms and *kyis* get busy on him!" Aibur gloated. "If only he could live to see them!"

I could hear picks in the ground and the soft thuds of shoveled dirt. It was so black in the coffin that I seemed blind.

Aibur and Yephor were talking; they were beside my casket, and each one of them drummed his fingers on the wood as they conversed.

Aibur said, "By all rights, Yephor, you too should die! Be assured that if you were less helpful in matters of ritual you'd be fed to the *yodks* for this!"

"This slave has broken my friendship with you!" Yephor protested. "He has made you doubt me! Well, then, Aibur, let me tell you that rather than bury him alive, I'd like to send him to Celeise and let Sula bury him for us—in her garden!"

Aibur chuckled involuntarily. "Yes, that would be quite a thing! I can't imagine a worse punishment than that! We must do it to Sula herself, sometime—if we ever get her jewel away from her so that we can capture her. Sula's jewel!" His voice caressed the words. "If only we had it!"

"Why not make a bargain with this fool? What will interring him avail us? Suppose we send him into Celeise, promising to pardon his crime if he brings back Sula's jewel to us?"

"You aren't thinking of yourself alone, are you?"

"Aibur, have you no regard for my feelings?"

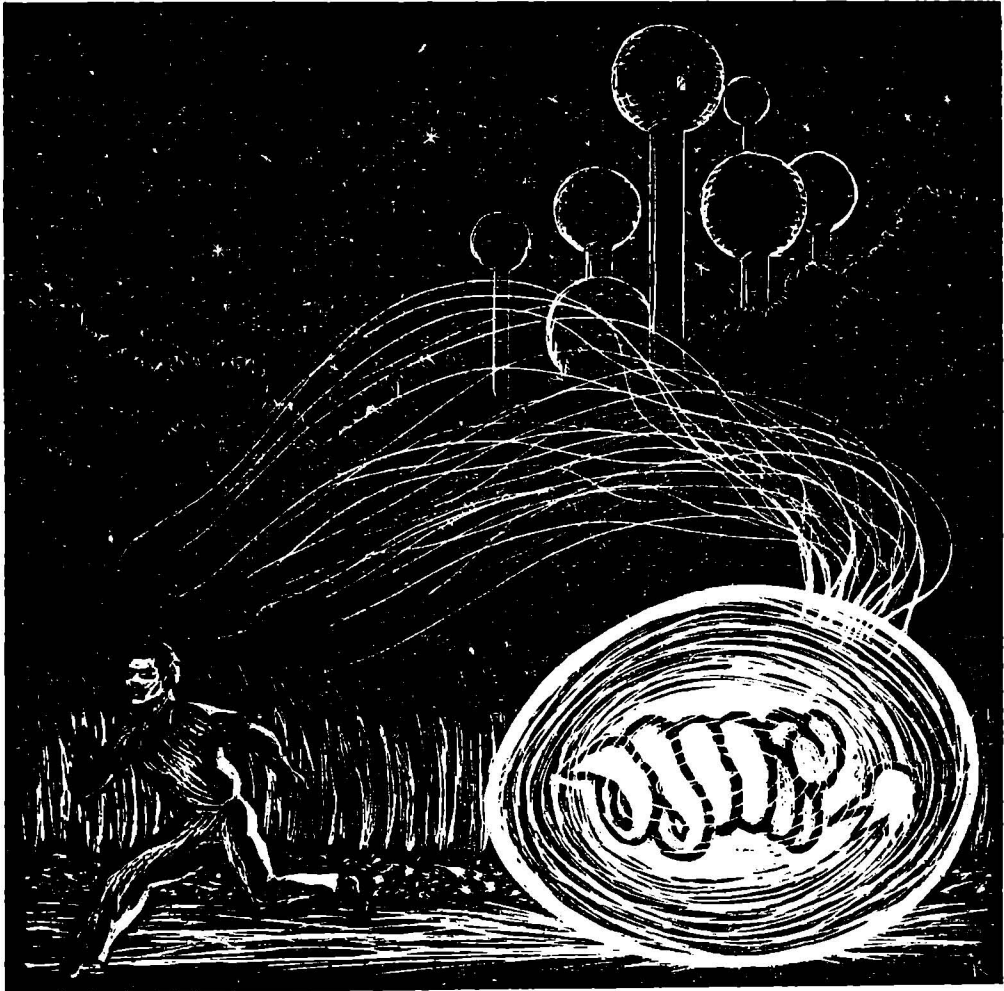
"Well, then, forgive me." But Aibur's tone was not contrite. "It is certain death for anyone to set foot in Celeise. Any man who can bring us Sula's crystal deserves pardon and gold—even this slave!" I did not like the way in which he laughed.

HE SHOUTED a command; the digging ceased. My coffin was lifted, carried, and placed down again. Its lid was wrenched off. Something cold touched my lips, and icy liquid ran over my cheeks and chin and down my neck. The power of voluntary movement returned to me; I opened my eyes. I was back in the sculptured shrine. The dead man had been removed from the altar. Yephor was bending over me, and Aibur stood scowling beyond him.

"Had enough?" Yephor took the vial from my lips. As I raised a hand to my face he whispered urgently, "Trust me still! Pretend to faint—now!"

I shot a quick glance at him. His eyes were imperative. I dropped back, banging my head on the casket's floor. Aibur hurried forward; I felt him prodding me.

"The recovery was too sudden; we must give the slave a chance to calm his nerves," said Yephor, his hands massaging my wrists. "Call a man and have this *byrat* taken upstairs to a cell." Aibur must have gone to the door, for Yephor murmured rapidly, his lips brushing my ear, "I had you captured intentionally; I wanted you sent to Celeise, where you may find freedom. If you can get Sula's jewel for me—" He turned alertly. "I will come to you tonight and tell you more," he husked, and arose. "Ah, Aibur. I'm glad you called a strong



... one of the misty path-making things, its tendrils flowing ahead of it . . .

man. I tried lifting this slave, but he's no feather!"

I was draped over a man's shoulder. Through lowered lashes I saw Aibur frowning at me and Yephor fastidiously rearranging the folds of his vesture. I was taken through a long hall and up a winding stair. At the head of the steps were rows of small cubicles, and Aibur's men threw me down on a pallet in the first of them. The door grated behind him before I dared to open my eyes. I heard a bolt slip into a socket, and arose. The sound of the guard's feet pattering down the steps grew faint and ceased; then silence.

The room was absolutely dark. A feeble line of light marked the lower edge of the door, but did not illuminate the room. I groped about and found the small table and ikon of a monkish retreat. Despairing, I sat on the pallet. Hours must have passed.

SOMEONE was approaching outside. The door opened; the hall's mellow light brightened the cell. But it was not Yephor who had come, as he had promised. Aibur, his face distorted by a wide sneer, beckoned to me, his scarlet robe's sleeves fluttering. As I advanced, his men sur-

rounded me, and marched me downstairs to an unfamiliar chamber. The damp air smelled mouldy; moisture had seeped through the masonry and stained the painted walls. As my escort halted, Yephor hurried in after us, no longer languid nor affected. To Aibur he said, "Why didn't you let me know you were sending him so soon?"

Aibur sneered, "You seem to have found out without my telling you."

Yephor approached me. "Open your mouth!" he said curtly. I obeyed, and he raised a hand as though he meant to thrust a finger into my mouth. Aibur rushed to us.

"None of that!" Aibur cried.

Yephor supplied an ingenious explanation. "After all, the theft of Sula's crystal is no unimportant task. You doubt my friendship—isn't that reason for me to question yours? Why shouldn't I want to know whether you've befriended this fellow, although seemingly hostile to him!"

"I might ask the same of you!" Aibur retorted.

"Ah, but your men can tell you that I did not visit the prisoner," Yephor said silkily.

Aibur replied, "They have mentioned that you tried to see this slave—and couldn't get past them."

Yephor appeared unperturbed. "It's too bad that I haven't men of my own to keep others from doing what I would like to do!"

Aibur lifted an eyebrow. "You think I've seen him secretly—is that it?"

Yephor nodded. "And so I should like to search him—to be sure that he has not been armed by you."

Aibur snorted disdain. "Armed—by me! Whose idea was it to send him to Sula? Go ahead and search!"

As Yephor's fingers probed my body, I thought that he tucked some-

thing into the pouch at my belt. As soon as he had stepped back, satisfied that Aibur had not given me anything, the other wizard advanced.

"What—?" Yephor raised a restraining hand.

"Merely to make sure that you didn't plant anything on him yourself," Aibur explained grimly. Yephor's hand was still on his arm; he shook it off. Suddenly, while the scowling man was exploring me, Yephor laughed.

"I see your wisdom, Aibur." The searcher stopped short, looking questions. "You planned it this way. You will leave something on him now, thinking that I will not search him again. You want the crystal for yourself, of course."

Aibur turned away from me. "You accuse me of bribing this *yodk*?"

"I'm going to search him as soon as you are through."

Aibur deserted me for Yephor. "Look, this can go on and on forever. You search, then I, then you, then I again. If this foolishness must persist, then I say let us bury this slave as we started to do, and forget all about Sula."

"Aibur, you're too wasteful with your slaves' lives. What good could come of burying him alive? What about Sula's jewel? We could use it!"

Aibur ruminated. "Yes—so we could."

"Then let's stop this silly searching and send him on his way."

Aibur cocked a shrewd eye at his partner. "You haven't possibly left anything on this man's person?"

Yephor raised reproachful eyes to heaven. He lowered them to the priest, and they had become indignant. "You searched him after I, didn't you?"

"Not all of him."

"Oh, well, if you choose to be unfriendly, go ahead and finish."

"You're offended?"

"Suppose I am? What can I say—except that your actions give me reason for suspicion—"

AIBUR whirled to his men: "Take the captive and put him back in the coffin!"

Smiling placatingly, Yephor countermanded the guards.

"Not yet, please," he said. "Listen, Aibur, aren't we behaving like children? As though we didn't trust each other? For all of me, you may search the man all you like. Only, I'd rather have the chance of getting Sula's jewel than mere momentary revenge."

The man in red sighed. "If you insist on my searching him, you can't have given him anything," he reasoned. "And whether you have or no, I am ever a match for your wits, Yephor."

"Is that a challenge?"

This might have gone on forever, but Aibur ignored the thrust. He signaled to his men, who dragged me to one of the chamber's walls.

Aibur took from inside his robe two pieces of metal, each about six inches long. Dangling one by a string, he struck it with the other. A peculiarly unpleasant chime vibrated through the crypt, echoing and re-echoing, fuzzing in my ears. I heard a subterranean rumble, and the wall before me trembled—a portion of it slipped down, disclosing a rude tunnel. Dazzling yellow radiance gushed into the room. I saw that a quivering web of aureate fire—like a flaming curtain—hung across the tunnel. The guards thrust me into the opening, but they did not follow. I looked from them back to the fire, and paused irresolute.

Something told me to glance at Yephor. His eyes stabbed mine a moment, then lowered to my pocket. I understood what he was trying to convey: he had left something in my pocket, despite his protests to Aibur. And if that something were of any use to me in the ordeal to come, he would expect me to give the stolen jewel to him in return.

Sula's jewel! They hadn't told me a word as to who Sula was, or what kind of jewel I was to take. I didn't know if I were being sent to rifle a gem-box in a cottage, or pluck a crystal eye from a stone idol. Yephor had appeared anxious to explain, and he had taken the trouble of supplying me with some sort of protection. Aibur didn't want me to know, evidently, confident that I would be killed as soon as I set foot in this mysterious Celeise—wherever that was.

THE EXTRAVAGANT fullness of Aibur's red robe proved to be functional in design. He hid his face under the trailing cape and let the long sleeves fall over his hands, then entered the passage, brushed beyond me and broke through the fire. Immediately he stepped out of it and withdrew from the tunnel back into the vault where Yephor stood. The fiery web had been parted by his body, and as I watched, I perceived that the hole was closing. Two of the guards rushed in, grasped me and thrust me through the hole; they stood waiting with upraised knives lest I should attempt to come out. The gap grew smaller, soon I could not have put my hand through it.

The yellow splendor hurt my eyes. I divined that I had better not attempt forcing my way through it, since Aibur had taken the precaution of covering himself with the red gar-

ment. Experimentally I touched the vibrating web with the toe of my shoe. The golden light clung like shining pitch to the leather, which smoked most unpleasantly. In a hurry, I kicked off the shoe. The yellow fire devoured it until there was only a heap of ash; then the flame crawled back to the web and merged with it. One shoe was of no use to me, so I pulled off the other.

The hole in the web had closed. I was sealed behind the fire in the tunnel. I did not have time to look around me before I heard Aibur's voice—strangely distorted in its passage through the flame.

"You are now in Sula's territory," he said. He seemed to be just on the other side of the shimmering curtain. I stooped and recovered the lone shoe. Aibur continued, "You can't help but see Sula's palace as soon as you leave the tunnel. Get there unseen, if you can; steal her jewel from her rooms, and bring it back to me. There will be men stationed here to hear you should you call. Don't think you can trick us: if you come without the jewel, I will still bury you alive!"

I threw the shoe, hoping that the tenacious fire would cling to it and burn Aibur when it struck him. Though the missile left a slowly closing breach in the veil across the tunnel, I could not see beyond it. I heard a snort of surprise from Aibur, and a shriek from one of the guards.

"Missed me," said Aibur. "Well, that is all."

Turning from his voice, I stared ahead, where the tunnel went straight into blackness. Thinking of Yephor, I put my hand in my belt-pouch, felt something hard, closed my fingers over it and drew out a carved brass amulet. A chain was attached to it; evidently it was a pendant. Not being superstitious, I did

not wear it; after a cursory examination of it, I replaced it in my pocket. Why on earth had Yephor given it to me?

I proceeded cautiously along the tunnel. Now it was absolutely black. I stumbled, groped, and found a flight of stairs. At its top was a gate, which swung open at my touch. I passed out of the tunnel into what must have been starlight, but which to my darkness-sensitized eyes was almost daylight.

CHAPTER IV

LASCIMA

BEFORE me was a wide stretch of prairie, beyond it a forest, and—tiny with distance above the far trees—a castle which shimmered dully, as though cut from black pearl. Fantastically domed as though rainbow bubbles had been impaled without breaking on thick iron rods, it was everywhere ornamented with gayly colored patterns: polka dots, checkers and belts of spidery designs.

I looked behind me. The tunnel ended in a little structure something like a sentry box. It was crumbling, and sadly in need of repair. Beyond it the prairie stretched interminably. There was such silence that I felt deaf.

The tunnel-house opened upon no path. It was as if the passage had not been used in years. But farther away there were several paths crossing the prairie, intersecting and apparently much-used, for they were deeply worn. I waded through the knee-deep grass over to one of them which headed for Sula's castle. It was a strange thoroughfare, its outer edges as worn as its center, in which there was no rut. There was some-

thing peculiarly unpleasant about that path; somehow it reminded me of the smooth strip which one sweep of a razor leaves on a whiskered cheek.

The path curved suddenly, away from Sula's dwelling, but I followed it, thinking that it would soon turn in its former direction. A pile of evil-smelling rubbish lay in my way, and I leaped over it.

Far ahead, something seemed to be blocking the path. As I approached it, I noted that it moved, but sluggishly. I neared it warily. It was immense, ovoid and misty, like a gigantic cotton egg. It glided forward slowly; before it was the unmarked grass of the plain, but as it moved it cut a path through—and probably ate, for all I know—the grass. It made no sound.

It did not seem aware of me. Boldly I advanced within a few yards of it—and still without effect. Now that I was nearer, I thought that the thing was translucent and that I could discern vague outlines within it: wormlike looped intestines, and a rhythmically swaying thing which might have been its heart. Perhaps I was mistaken, but I supposed that I saw a rounded thing like a human skull, surrounded by long splinters of bone. . . .

I felt a breath on my cheek, as though a passing breeze had brushed it, and as I instinctively raised a hand to my face, I encountered several strands of gossamer. Clutching them, I drew back in astonishment. They were connected to the misty thing, swirling up transparently white, like delicate chiffon, from an opening in the thing's back.

I tried to release the strands in my hand and could not. They began to coil around my fingers, jerking at me; I was almost dragged off my bal-

ance as they drew taut. At the second jerk I pulled away, fell free, and began to run. Yards and yards of the cobwebby tendrils billowed out of the thing in pursuit like steam flowing from a surrealistic teapot, but I kept ahead of them. When at last I dared to stop and peer behind me, the ghostly filaments were receding, like string being wound hand over hand into a ball.

Disregarding the remaining paths, I plodded through the grass toward Sula's abode. Observing a feeble glimmering a little off course on my right, I aimed for it. With proximity the glimmering became a series of waves of light, each rippling close behind its predecessor from a common point, filling the air with ever-rising bars of luminescence which dissipated a hundred feet above the ground. The waves surged up from a hillock of ragged glassy rocks which were like huge chips of crystal.

And now I heard a sound at last which was not of my own making. It was someone singing, but the voice was so characterless that I could not tell whether it was masculine or feminine. It was not a young voice, nor an old cracked one. Though the melody might have been based on an unfamiliar system of tones, like Oriental music, I fancied that the singer was occasionally off-key. The phenomenon of the rippling light had made me cautious, but if someone else was near it, and singing at that, I was not going to be afraid.

The song ceased; there was a hammering. I reached the rocks and sighted the caroler as I skirted them—she was an unkempt ragged woman, vigorous of motion, with strings of lank blonde hair falling over her pudgy face. She was hacking at the vitreous rock with a chisel. Approaching her from around the up-

thrust of stone was one of the misty path-making things, its tendrils flowing ahead of it and almost touching her.

I SHOUTED a warning; the woman dropped her work and stared at me. I ran to her. "You fool! Get away before it catches you!" The misty thing's coils were swirling around the woman, who was gaping at me in surprise. Reaching her, I snatched her hand and dragged her away from the advancing thing. Its filaments fell away. We were on the other side of the heaped rocks before I released the woman's fingers.

"Don't you know that those things are dangerous?" I demanded. "If I hadn't yelled, you might have—" and then I stopped. For she was staring at me in a way in which no woman had ever contemplated me before.

I had a better look at her now: she must have been thirty, and pretty in a big-boned, slatternly way. There was something strange and indefinable about her eyes, which were blue and not very large.

She raised a hand to her cheek. "You meant to rescue me!" she murmured.

Peering to see if the misty thing had followed us, I replied, "I wasn't trying to kidnap you because of love at first sight, or anything!"

Her eyes narrowed fleetingly. "Oh, you weren't! . . . Didn't you know me?"

"No, I didn't," I said cheerfully, "and still don't."

Her eyes dwelt on mine for a long moment; embarrassed, I avoided them.

"You are not of this place," she said at last.

"No," I admitted. "Are you?"

She nodded. "I am Lascima. There are no humans—here—except Sula

and me. You know Sula?" I wagged my head negatively. "She is the witch who turned this place into the hell that it is, and she is proud of it."

The woman's eyes lowered a moment, as though they were searching hands; I did not know it then, but she suspected that I carried Yephor's amulet. At last she said, "I have not thanked you for saving me. Sula would want that beast of hers to attack me." As I opened my mouth for interrogation, she continued, "Everything here, animate or not, belongs to the sorceress Sula. Even I—whom she abuses for sport. She hates me! But she cannot do away with me. Her imps are always around me; she knows of every move that I make. Even now she is very likely aware of your presence here. Look!" She pointed suddenly. Swiftly turning, I thought that I saw a shadowy thing duck into the tall grass. I glanced back to the woman.

"What was it?" I asked.

"One of her—familiar," she answered.

I walked to the spot where I had seen the dark shape, and all around me in the grass arose a frantic rustling. There was nobody hiding; the grass had not been flattened. I was about to turn back to the woman when I glimpsed a second shadow pop up from the grass a hundred yards ahead, then quickly drop out of sight. I would have trailed it, but Lascima called me back.

"You'd never catch it," she admonished. "Sula lets them lead strangers around like that for hours—usually into the grip of one of the pathmakers."

"The what?"

"The beast from which you so gallantly rescued me." She eyed me coyly. "You are the first adventurer

in Celeise who has treated me kindly," she said.

"I thought that you said there were only Sula and you here?" I asked.

"I did. Sula makes short work of trespassers." She sighed. "Sula will probably make short work of you, too." She peered at me to see how I was welcoming this bit of news: I wasn't. "Of course," she added, "you've been kind to me, and I ought to return the kindness. I could invite you to stay with me a while: I could tell you much about this place, so that you'd have a fairer chance of reaching Sula's castle without being harmed than you'd have if you went right away."

"What makes you think I'm going to see Sula?" I demanded.

"All the others were. Why are you here, if you're not?"

"I didn't come of my own choice," I answered sullenly.

ALL THIS time the waves of light had been rolling up from the rocks, sending flickering gleams like firelight over our faces. Now the woman started back toward the spot where I had first seen her.

"Where—?" I started after her. "Be careful!"

She smirked over her shoulder at me. "I'm just going to collect the specimens of crystal which I was getting when you snatched me out of the beast's clutches."

I followed. The grass whispered; a quick look askance told me that we were being spied upon by a pair of shadowy figures which Lascima had called Sula's familiars. When I turned my face full toward them, they dipped from sight.

Stooping, Lascima retrieved the crystal chips which she had dropped when I had called to her. Concentric

bands of light pulsed outward from them, like the ripples of a still pond into which a stone had been thrown. As I bent over them, the woman closed her fingers over them. Puzzled, thinking that she wished to prevent my seeing them, I looked up; she was smiling amiably. I lowered my gaze back to her hand, and perceived that the rippling light throbbled through her fingers from the hidden chips; but the light had altered, becoming curiously blue.

Lascima thumped me companionably but forcibly on a shoulder. "Come along," she invited. "We'll go to my house. There's food there; if you're tired, you can sleep."

We left the prairie and entered a wooded tract. The trees were of the same species which I had glimpsed in Yephor's land, but they seemed distorted, as though seen through a corrugated glass. Suddenly, as though at a gust of wind, they began to sway, their outermost twigs rattling together as if in palsied applause, their spiky leaves rubbing together and squeaking. But there was no wind. Lascima, cognizant of my uneasiness, said, "It is only the imps' work."

I heard a distant thundering, and above it a mournful, monotonous piping. The thundering neared. Furtive shadows slipped from the trunk of one tree to another, passing us, from the interior of the forest. Lascima appeared indifferent to their presence.

"Aren't you afraid of them?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I can handle them," she answered.

The piping drew nearer. Long lines of the shadows, hands linked, flowed from the woods' depths like erratic smoke. The thunderous booming was close at hand; it came from a

thirty-foot drum which a number of dark things were rolling on edge over the rough ground. After it came diminishing groups of the black people until—except for an occasional solitary figure's flitting—we were alone.

Sight of the pulsing light from the chips which Lascima carried drew my attention from Sula's imps.

"What makes the light?" I asked.

Lascima gestured her helplessness at explanation. "I don't know. It is their characteristic, making light. Sula uses them in her magic."

"And you're going to try to duplicate that magic?" I asked.

She scanned me with playful reproach. "Nobody could duplicate Sula's magic," she said.

"But you can try," I persisted.

"Yes," she said absently, "I can try."

Magic! I laughed inwardly. Magic has always been the appellation applied by the ignorant to human arts beyond the layman's grasp. What could this poor woman, obviously a peasant, know about the strange sciences with which I had become familiar?

WE HAD BEEN walking over pathless ground, at times forced to push through thickets of ferns and flowering bushes; now we emerged on a narrow path. Lascima took the lead. In a few moments we emerged from the bosage to behold a ruined structure on the order of an adobe hut.

"My home," said Lascima.

The door was ajar, and before entering, the woman uttered a shrill hoot. There was a faint scuffling from within, and several of Sula's imps fluttered frightenedly through the doorway toward the trees. Lascima took my arm, and we entered the crumbling dwelling, I fearful and

alert, she completely at ease. The place was very dark inside, but the luminous stones which the slattern carried cast a flickering glow like candlelight. We were in an almost bare room. There was the low table customary with Aibur and Yephora, a few cushions with hairy stuffing projecting from rents, and several badly warped wooden coffers. I stepped upon some of the floor's litter of gnawed bones, scraps of firewood and tattered rags, and almost fell; Lascima's strong hand, still on my arm, steadied me. With a pat of her hand to ascertain that I was all right, she stepped from me and set down the shining stones on one of the wooden chests. She kicked a number of the cushions into a heap, and with a really elegant wave of her hand suggested that I be seated. I lowered myself to the pillows, and feeling something sharp under me stooped and drew a fragment of broken crockery from the piled cushions. I threw it away and rested again.

Meanwhile the woman was rummaging in one of the boxes. I heard the clatter of glass, a metallic clink, and the whisper of cloth as she drew several objects from the coffer and set them upon the floor. Banging down the lid of the box, she gathered the articles from the floor. Placing some dishes and silver on the table, she tossed a heavy bundle of fabrics at me.

"Here're some blankets," she said, as she threw them. "Make yourself comfortable; I'm going to get us something to eat."

From another of the wooden boxes she took bread—which I found to be very stale—and shrivelled smoked meat. She took a bucket from a peg on the wall, and went toward the door. I arose to assist her, but she motioned for me to remain at ease.

In a moment she was back with water, plus a jug which gurgled in the crotch of her arm, and a handful of little clustered apples that looked much like grapes.

"We could do with more light," she said, and brought a number of thick candles from another room. She lit them with what she called fire-stones: a pair of pebbles set separately in the ends of tongs which when brought together burst into flame. She placed the food on the table, shoved some pillows beside me with her foot, and dropped down with a jarring thud.

I was embarrassed at her difficulty in breaking the bread; after several vain attempts to crumble the loaf in her hands, she whacked it on the tabletop, making the dishes clatter. I did not eat much bread, found the meat tough and very salty, but I liked the little apples.

Lascima poured a bitter wine from the jug. She ate with her mouth open, rhythmically smacking her lips. With a last draught of wine, she banged her flagon on the table, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and lay back on her cushions.

"Tell me about yourself," she said, "how a person like you came to this place." All through the meal I had felt her eyes steady upon me, covert and calculating; as I told her my story, she watched me with the shrewd gaze of an owl.

". . . Aibur and Yephor told me," I finished, "that if Sula didn't kill me, I should steal her jewel and bring it back to them; then they'd pardon me."

“AND you believe they'd let you go free! They'd kill you, of course, once they'd taken the jewel from you. But tell me which jewel

they specified: Sula has more than one, you know.”

"They didn't say. Merely *the* jewel."

"Oh," Lascima murmured introspectively. "I suppose that they meant her crystal." She studied me to see whether the definition had meant anything to me. "Sula's crystal is made from that kind of stone"—she pointed to the luminous pebbles on the wooden chest, and I noticed that their light was fading—"but with one difference. Like plucked flowers, the chips of the shining rock wither and die. There is in everyone of the huge rocks a spark which generates the rippling light. What it is, who knows? Neither I, nor Sula—nor the wicked pair who sent you here. It's one of the secrets left from olden times. And it is this vital spark, which never dies, that Sula's crystal contains."

I did not relax from my attitude of polite interest, and she went on, "Sula can send her sight out on those waves of light—and more. She can project material things—deadly poisons, mesmerising perfumes—" She yawned, not covering her mouth. "I'm sleepy, but if you like I'll tell you Sula's story."

I bent my head in assent. She said, "You know the geography of this land? No? It was all flat woodland—once. But now there is an artificial mountain barrier, separating Aibur and Yephor from Sula's dominions. There's a tunnel under the barrier, true—the two wizards made it so that they could send spies here, perhaps to conquer Sula! A door of fire seals this passage—"

"I came through that," I said. She did not heed me.

"In the old times, people occupied all of the land; they were peaceful

farmers, interested only in getting enough to eat. Who knows where Nurnir came from? He was a sorcerer who had gathered all his knowledge into a book. He loved Sula, and it was his intention to marry her—so that his book of formulae, in view of what later happened, might have been said to have been hers; or that she was entitled to first claim to it. She expected to come into possession of it on event of his death, for Nurnir had no living kin.

“Yephor and Aibur had become friendly with Nurnir; he taught them many things, until they were jealous of his power. One night they stole into his house and killed him, taking his book — and thenceforth they were able to rule all the people—and they did, cruelly. They reduced the entire population to slavery, all except Sula. They had forgotten her closeness to Nurnir. Not all of his magic was written in that book; prior to his death he had been experimenting in a totally different field, and only Sula knew these later secrets. Aibur and Yephor tried to capture her, to learn what she knew—she fled them, came here, and set up the barrier of mountains between the wizards and herself. By the time Aibur and Yephor had tunneled under the peaks to attack her, she had summoned her imps to her—from an alien universe invisibly linked to ours. Their sciences were strong: she had only Nurnir’s later magic to use against them — the battle ended in a truce.” Lascima laughed wryly. “A truce broken by those two whenever they see fit to send a fresh spy in here—more to be rid of him than in the hope of gain.

“Well—the imps built Sula’s castle for her; they attend to what menial tasks she requires done; in return

she gives them the peculiar rewards which they crave; being from a differently constructed universe than ours, their appetites are not the same.” Lascima yawned again, making a luxurious moan of it.

“And you?” I asked.

She replied, “Oh, I! I was shut up in Sula’s territory. She hates me; in her loneliness she amuses herself with spies in dreadful ways. She has found none worthy of her clemency—as yet. Me she hates most of all; she’d give all her power to finish me off, but so far I’ve managed to elude her.” Her glance at me was speculative; did she expect me to be her ultimate saviour by some deed of mine against the sorceress?

She stretched luxuriously, and I heard the sound of ripping. Lascima fingered her sleeve. “This thing’s about ready to throw away,” she observed, “or else I’m putting on weight. Well—it’s time we were asleep. Get up and I’ll fix your cushions for you.” She arranged the pillows into a pallet and threw the cloths over them. “There, that ought to do. Go on,” she tugged at me, “lie down.” She blew out the candles.

“Don’t you undress before going to bed?” I asked a bit testily, wondering if she would leave so that I might remove my clothing in privacy.

She opened her eyes wide. “Do you?” she asked.

“Of course!” I replied.

“But don’t you get cold!” she wondered. There seemed logic in that: the covers which she had given me were not very substantial. I lay down. “I’ll tuck the blankets around you,” Lascima offered, and kneeling did so. Her hand lingered briefly on my chest. Suddenly she bent and kissed me, then drew away and stood watching me. “Good night,” she said. At the door she looked

back, as if expecting something; then I heard her in the next room, making herself a bed, before I fell asleep.

CHAPTER V SHADOW OF SULA

IN the morning I was roused by Lascima's bustling about the room; she had made herself a broom of fresh green boughs, and was sweeping. The air was foggy with dust; I sneezed, attracting the slut's attention. She looked at me briefly, as though with distaste, and went on with her work. As I arose, however, gathering cushions and blankets to air in the sun, she spoke.

"Did you sleep well?"

"I had bed-partners in the middle of the night," I said, showing her the spots on my arm which were raw from scratching. Unconsciously she rubbed her hand on the back of her neck.

"Sula could get rid of those things in a jiffy," she said.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No; why?"

"You seem displeased about something this morning."

"Do I?" She relaxed. "I'm sorry. In a moment I'll be through, and we'll have something to eat." She turned back to her sweeping, and suddenly paused. "If you want to wash, there's a spring behind the house, on your left." I thanked her, noticing that she had cleaned her own face, which had been caked with what seemed the grime of years on the preceding night. When I returned from my ablutions, I found that she had just combed her hair and braided it, though rather ineptly. She was bending over the table, setting it, and at my entrance straightened and faced me.

"Why, Lascima, what've you done

to yourself?" I asked. "You're marvelous!"

Her face gleamed as though a rosy light had been directed on it, and her hand involuntarily fondled one of her braids. Her steady gaze embarrassed me, but I didn't like to turn away brusquely, belying my compliment. So I gave her a playful kiss. "If you don't watch out, I'll be falling in love with you!" I joked.

Her hand touched her cheek where I had put my lips, and she continued to stare. Then suddenly her arms shot out and she nearly dragged me off my feet in a powerful embrace. I tried to pry her arms free of me, but succeeded in only slightly loosening her hold. Her face was hidden on my breast; it dawned on me that she was crying.

She lifted her face: red and shining with tears, it was absurdly like a plump child's. "I've been alone here for ages," she bawled—at which I almost laughed, for her voice was anything but tragic except in a very comic way; sad folk should whisper, never bellow. "I've been here for ages, and no one has ever kissed me before!" Small wonder, I thought, if she had cried like that in front of them.

But looking at her wet eyes, her twisted mouth, and feeling the sobs which shook the body which she pressed against me, I felt compassion and kissed her pityingly. She dropped her cheek against my shoulder, and her sobs ceased. After a few moments I disengaged myself from her now lax embrace. She turned away, ran the back of her hand over her eyes, and pointed hastily to the table.

"Let's eat," she said.

There were bread, meat, and fruit on the table again. As I struggled to down them, Lascima remarked

thoughtfully, "When you see Sula you'll forget all about me."

I was gallant. "I'll never forget you," I said. Then, not quite so gallantly, "You've done so much for me; I owe you an enormous debt for your kindness—"

"I'll guide you to the castle," she offered abruptly. "I have nothing else to do, and I like being with you."

"Fine," I said. "And if I can do anything in return—"

"That'll come later," she replied, "after you've either stolen the crystal or decided against the attempt." She lowered her eyes. "Have you heard of her garden? No? Then I'll tell you about it—Sula's very proud of that garden. Whoever has trespassed in Celeise is in it. Perhaps you will be in it, too, but not if Sula finds you as unlike the others as I have found you. She might keep you as a novelty for a while, at least, before planting you."

"Planting me?"

"She changes people into plants by some kind of magic. By virtue of a certain light, their bodies change from flesh to vegetable, and after they have tasted the earth, they—alter."

I frowned: "I grow weary of this 'magic' . . . after all, there's nothing supernatural about it. Even I might learn these sciences. Where is this garden?"

"In the court of her castle."

Now this of course was mere exaggeration, intended to impress me. I was certain that whatever science constituted Sula's sorceries was in good part hypnotism.

THE meal over, we set out for Sula's castle. First we went through groves of the distorted trees, then over the whispering grass of a windy meadow. Lascima pointed out

a bright-hued little lizard which scuttled away from our approach. I wanted to track it down, but she warned me against it: the creature was a *byrat*, it seemed, corresponding to our terrestrial skunk. She also showed me a beautiful red flower of highly offensive odor which she called a *byrat-bulb*; it had been named after the evil-smelling lizard.

Irregular stretches of huge rounded rocks spread before us like gigantic cobblestones. Lascima indicated them. "At night they are alive," she murmured.

I glanced sharply at her, but she was serious.

"They split like pods," she said, "and lights come out which make strange music, and dance—"

"Sula's science?" I asked, but she shook her head. "Older than that," she answered. "Nurnir brought them from a lost place."

"Are they harmful?"

"Not to Sula," she responded ambiguously. I was about to question her further when she raised a silencing hand and cocked her head, listening. She frowned as she turned to me. "It's the imps," she said. "I mean the other world beings. Hear their drums? It means trouble when they beat that rhythm—they're up to some mischief. I'm going to see what it's all about. You stay here—you're in no danger, now that it's day. I'll be back soon."

Nodding imperiously, she strode toward the trees which bordered the meadow. I took a step or two after her, but she turned to wave at me, and motioned for me to remain where I was. She grew tiny with distance and was lost in the trees.

I could hear the drum but faintly. It sounded like the rumblings of far earthquake. Curious, I took a few paces in the direction in which Las-

cima had gone, then several others and still more until I was near the woods and the rumbling had become distinct. Lascima might be in danger, alone with those black servants of the sorceress, I told myself. Louder grew the thumming, vibrating in the air like beating wings, making the treetops and grass quiver. The trees thinned.

I looked down into a barren hollow a hundred yards in diameter. At first I thought that it was a well dropping to unplumbed black depths, from which two immense silvery pillars arose, and out of which the drumming climbed like sooty smoke of sound. Then I sensed movement in the blackness and saw that it was a thickly packed crowd of Sula's imps waving frantically and leaping up and down. They made no vocal sound.

Between the pillars stretched a prodigious web, more like a colossal piece of window screen than a spider's snare; caught in it were three imps, struggling to extricate themselves. In the middle of the mob was Lascima; I thought that the shadowy folk drew away from her as though in fear. She stood grim-faced, making snaky movements with her hands as though drawing a picture of something reptilian and loathsome. Her tattered dress was so rent as to be hardly on her body, as though she had run through brambles or been clawed by unfriendly hands. Though the shadows shrank from her weaving fingers, the drumming continued unabated.

"You dare!" Lascima cried to the imps. "You dare!"

I HEARD a shrill whistling, faint and far away. Lascima dropped her tortuous hands and stared to one side. The wailing augmented

like the ululations of a nearing siren. I followed her gaze and imagined that over the heads of the imps, like a wisp of black vapor, hung something which pulsed to, and grew denser with, every drum beat—as though the sound were food. Its vague outlines sharpened: it attained shape. It was one of Sula's familiars, but many times their ordinary size, a giant. From the head of every one of the imps, like a tethering leash, ran a thread of blackness communicant with the black shape.

Was it a monster summoned from another plane, or their combined, visible wills? After all, what were these people? Shadows? Certainly not substance—and yet, what is substance after all by the incredibly swift movements of energy?

The gigantic shape reached toward the net and the trio of frenzied imps which struggled in the swaying mesh. Lascima's eyes blazed; her hands filled the air with urgent gesticulations, but the black monster did not heed her, and the drum throbbed persistently.

Lascima tilted her head, gazing into the zenith, and sent out a call. Abruptly the drumming ceased, and the black giant hovered motionless in midair, as if frozen. Again Lascima called, and I thought that I heard an answering cry.

In the heavens a tiny light budded, swelled and unfolded into a flower of writhing flame. It enlarged, its fires brightening, until it covered a third of the sky; I was forced to shut my eyes against its intolerable radiance. But I heard Lascima's laughter and peered at her. She was rocking with mirth, one hand on a hip, the other pointing derisively at the frightened imps, some of whom were dashing out of the hollow into

the forest. The black threads which linked them to the floating monster trailed behind them, and the huge shape was dissolving—unravelling!—as they pulled away from it. From the three imps caught in the mesh came a mournful ghost of sound, as though not the atmosphere but telepathy carried it or the illusion of sonance. Lascima gestured reassuringly to them.

The giant had completely vanished by now, and the hollow was empty save for the slattern and the three in the web. Raising her eyes to the seething flower of flame overhead, Lascima sent up another cry. The turgid fires became momentarily quiescent, then continued to contort. Lascima shouted again, and the swirling shape began to lessen in size and splendor. As it diminished, the woman faced the well; her hands flitted from point to point upon it, and suddenly she thrust both palms under it as it collapsed and fell into her grasp like tangled black scarves. The imps dropped free, and lingered briefly to kiss the slut's feet before scampering into the woods. Lascima deftly untwisted the strands of the web and rolled them into a little ball of blackness which she tossed carelessly on the drum. Looking my way, she observed me, and for a fleeting space her eyes were narrowed and menacing. As she ascended from the hollow, her gait held all the strength and belligerence of a man's.

"I thought that I told you to wait!" she demanded, arms akimbo.

"I couldn't let you go alone," I said. "You might have been in danger."

"I'd have asked your help if I had needed it," she said. Her eyes had been prying into mine, but now she turned away, relaxing. "What do

you think of the spectacle you just witnessed?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what it was all about," I said.

"THOSE blacks — Sula's companions," she murmured, "were performing an old rite which Sula has forbidden them. Cannibalistic — vampirish—" She hesitated as though uncertain of her words. "They can unite their inner selves into a large shape which would have fed upon those snared in the web until nothing remained of them; then the large shape would have returned to the individuals who created it, feeding them with the lives it had absorbed. Sula doesn't permit it because it means the thinning of the ranks of her ablest allies—though, lately"—and Lascima's voice became pensive—"Lately the little dark ones are not quite so trustworthy as before."

"And why is that?"

"They are tired of this place. They want to go back to the world from which Sula drew them."

"Can't they find their way back by themselves?"

"They might — if Sula's arts weren't too strong for them. The fiery thing which you saw in the sky is one of her later works, proof against even the devices of Yephor and Aibur."

"But why were you interested in stopping the rite? You haven't any special liking for Sula's familiars, have you?"

"I've told you that I know how to handle them—and at times they can be very useful."

"Does Sula know that you can command them?"

"Sula knows of everything that happens in Celeise, because of her

crystal—the jewel which the wizards sent you to thief.”

“Then she knows that I’m coming, of course—” I sighed.

We had resumed our walk toward the sorceress’ castle, which loomed larger and larger above the trees, its black walls shimmering as though ghosts of opals were imprisoned in its mortar, and the irid bubbles of its domes like fantastic, Cyclopean eyeballs, vigilant and unwearying.

“You at last realize the futility of trying to steal the crystal?” Lascima asked. “You’re willing to come back to my home with me—to live with me?”

I pondered aloud: “I can’t go back through that curtain of fire in the tunnel. I’m homesick for my own world, my own body. I’ve got to get that crystal!”

“You fool! Even now she hears your words!”

“All the same, I’m going ahead. Maybe she’s asleep? Surely she can’t keep track of everything happening simultaneously in Celeise?”

“Then go ahead. We’re nearly there now. But don’t say that I didn’t warn you.”

THE castle was indeed very close. We emerged from the copse and stared up at it. I noted now that its walls were cracked and decaying, that there were star-shaped splinterings in the spherical domes. The structure arose from a smooth butte, around which spiralled a narrow path. Like a moat, a black abyss circled the conical hill, and I could see no way of crossing it.

“Sula’s magic could get you across with no trouble at all,” Lascima said disagreeably. “What do you think you can do?”

I answered her with action; I strode to the brink of the abyss and

peered into it: there seemed to be no bottom. The chasm was easily thirty feet across, and though I can jump nearly twenty feet—with a good running start, of course—I had no chance here. I went to the woods and began searching for a strong piece of fallen timber. There was no dead wood anywhere at all, and I wondered whether Sula’s imps were her gardeners, or what.

Lascima was puzzled when I began to uproot grass, but as I began to braid it, she sensed my intention and sat down to help me, all the while smiling secretively as if I were acting in an asinine manner. It took us several hours to achieve a rope long enough to span the chasm, and we were hungry. We ate the hard bread and leathery meat which we had brought along with us, and then I carried our grass-plaited rope along the margin of the black trench until I spied a projection of rock on the opposite brink; I attempted to lasso it. My attempts further amused Lascima, and her giggling further disturbed me; as I turned hotly toward her, she took the rope from my hand. “Give it to me!” she laughed, and I surrendered it.

The slattern shouted something very rapidly; I thought that it was an unfamiliar language, but it was probably the names of the three imps which she had freed. After a moment’s wait, the three shadows flitted from the woods and to the woman. She pointed to the projecting rock. The black things nodded sagely, indistinct faces curiously turned my way as she whispered something to them. They huddled together near the verge of the pit; absolutely immobile, they seemed to be concentrating.

I saw a mist forming over their heads; it grew to a writhing tentacle

which floated, like smoke, across the abyss, and coiled around the rocky protuberance opposite. Lascima threw the rope, and as its end flicked against the rock, the black tendril seized it, held it, slowly wound it around the upthrust of stone and tied it. Lascima clapped her hands; the mist drew back across the chasm to the trio which had sent it, thinned and disappeared. The three imps arose.

"Thanks," murmured Lascima; a nod of her head toward the trees dismissed them.

She handed me the end of the rope. Tugging upon it, I found it secure.

"Sula could have made a bridge of light-vibrations," Lascima said. "Much faster than your way—and safer. You're going to cross now, and try to steal the jewel?" Her eyes were hurt. "Why won't you listen to reason—and stay with me?"

"Lascima, I can't just hang on here and be hunted down as you are," I replied. "Although, so far, you seem to have been doing all right for yourself. I don't see how Sula could hurt you much when you're in league with her familiars—"

"All the same, she's sworn to kill me," Lascima said. "I want you to know your dangers, of course. But—I like you. I'm lonely. You don't know how lonely I've been—" She was near tears. "Don't think that Sula will be as truthful to you as I've been; she'll always be on her guard with you. Once you see her, you'll never want to come back to me, because she's so beautiful—"

"Listen, Lascima, if I can help it, Sula isn't going to see me at all! Do you think I want her to know I'm about—"

"She knows already, and you'll see her all right," the slut said. "Please stay with me. If you're afraid of

Sula's hating you because you'll be in my company, I'll guarantee that you'll never be in any danger. With me you can know that you're safe—"

She was clutching my arms, her face close to mine. I tried to disengage myself, but her grasp was unyielding. As I opened my mouth to speak, she went on, "This morning you kissed me: didn't you mean it?"

"Surely, Lascima, just because I kissed you, you don't think that I'm in love with you—"

"Couldn't you learn to love me?" I thought of her Amazonian body, and must have unconsciously made a grimace of disgust, for she said quickly, "Then go to the witch!" She released her hold on me and stepped back, her eyes narrowing with resentment. "Laugh at me—as she does—because I'm ugly, and inferior! Can I help it if I was born in a body like this? Isn't my character of any importance?" She stamped her foot. "Oh, I hate you! I thought that you were kind—but what are you? Only a thief! What has Sula done to you that you should rob her—"

My jaw dropped in surprise. Now it was I who grasped her. "You're loyal to her!" I cried.

"I never said that I hated her," Lascima replied, eyes downcast.

"But she wants to kill you!"

"Must I hate her in return! Don't you think that sometimes I pity her—for her vanity—for her lack of understanding—for her misery over her self-treachery—"

"So you don't want to hurt her—and you don't want me to hurt her!"

"She's not done any harm to you."

"But Lascima! Can't you see! I want to be back in my own body, back in my own world! Only Sula's jewel, given to the wizards, can accomplish that—"

"Well, go ahead. And I hope she

makes a plant out of you. A byrat bulb!" Which was the same thing as naming a skunk cabbage.

CHAPTER VI

STARSTONE QUEEN

THE slattern turned on her heel and pranced furiously toward the woods. I called after her, but though she almost turned, she continued away. Dropping the rope I ran after her; she heard my approaching footsteps and whirled to face me. Her face in its bliss of expectancy was almost beautiful. She stretched out her arms. "Oh, you do love me!"

"Well, now, I—" But as the glory on her face began to fade, I felt like a dog. I took her in my arms. "If you really want me to stay—" I said. Her face, close to mine, was honest, even if not lovely. Perhaps I could get her to wash a little oftener—

Our lips merged for a very long time; the sincerity of her passion began to have more effect on me than mere beauty might have had. Suddenly she pushed me away, smiling shyly.

"You can go now," she almost whispered. "I know that you're staying only to please me—and maybe that from pity only. Always, if you were not to go now, you would want to leave me. I couldn't bear things that way. So, go. But—show Sula the gentleness you have shown me. She may know of a way to send you home without your having to go back to the priests. Before you go, however, give me that talisman which Yephor gave you: knowing me, you won't need it, and Sula will know instantly that you have it, and feel enemy at once."

"How did you know that Yephor

gave me this?" I drew the amulet from my belt-wallet.

She took it. "You don't know probably that there's an element in this metal which blankets the force-waves used by Sula in her science—oh, it has only a slight sphere of influence. Nothing which she can do by magic can harm whoever bears it or is within a few yards of its emanations."

"Then why do you want me to leave it?"

"If you go to her as a friend, telling her your story, throwing yourself on her mercy—and I advise that—you won't need it. If you go as an enemy, her detectors will pick up the radiations and sound an alarm."

"What if they do? Her arts are harmless against this, you said."

"True; knowing that, do you think she'll wait calmly to surrender the crystal to you? Don't be a fool! I assure you that if you take the charm along with you, you'll not find Sula in her castle! Nor her crystal, either."

I considered: Lascima loved me, I was sure. Therefore, not wanting me to come to any harm, she was giving me instructions which I ought to obey. As I pondered, she slipped an arm around me.

"I can't fathom you," I said. "First you want me to stay, then to go."

"I wanted to see how you felt about me," she replied. "I wanted to know if you're as really worth saving as I thought you were when we first met."

"And am I?"

She rubbed her cheek against my shoulder like an ingratiating cat. "Yes!"

We kissed again; the more we kissed, the more I liked it. I began to wonder whether I was really homesick for my own body after all. I'd hated this new world mainly because no one had been friendly to me . . .

As I returned to the abyss, Lascima stood watching from the edge of the wood. I fastened the hither end of the rope to a heavy rock and after again testing its strength, slid my legs over the margin of the chasm and began to work hand over hand toward the opposite brink. Once my hand skidded, and I almost fell—but as if by magic I managed to reach up in time and save myself. Gaining the other side, I lay a few feet from the edge, panting. I looked across at Lascima. She waved, and I waved back.

"How was it?" she called.

"All right," I shouted over. I scrambled to my feet, waved again, and headed for the ramp which wound around the hill where Sula's castle reared. When I next looked back, Lascima had disappeared.

As I toiled up the spiralling path, I wondered why a stair had not been built straight up the hill. It would have saved much time and footwork. When I had finally reached the hill's summit, I had encircled it thrice. I speculated whether the entrance of the castle would be guarded, and decided that since Sula was all-seeing, it would not. Then, recalling Sula's rebellious imps and the fiery shape in the sky, I concluded that it might be protected after all. Should I try scaling a wall and entering through a window? As I was planning a course of action, Sula forced the issue by appearing at the palace door and beckoning to me.

SHE was tall, birch-slender, and though voluminous draperies cloaked her, they were so airy and thin that the slightest movement pressed them close to her body, revealing every lithe line of it. The opaque scarves were sky-blue, and the clouds of hair which swirled over her shoulders, and which at first I

thought were other scarves of a turban, so silky were they, were shimmeringly golden.

If it were possible for a master artisan to melt white rose-petals like wax and then mould them into the face of Titania, he could have created Sula's face. Her skin was very white, its shadows pinkly pearl-like. Her face was oval, and her eyes were like oval sapphires. Her pale mouth was very small and seemed pursed for a kiss. For a sorceress, she was not frightening at all. She impressed me as being a gentle nymph, harmless as an animate flower. I did not guess then that even her beauty was a product of her peculiar science.

She crooked her finger at me again, and I went to her. The blue fabric floated around her like twilight clouds. I could only gaze helplessly into her vast eyes.

She reached out and touched me; a thrill swept over me like oil spreading on water. She seemed aware of it, and smiled. Turning, she nodded toward the doorway, and spoke; her voice was high and tense, so much more a bird's than human that I had difficulty in understanding her words.

"I saw you coming up the hill. Won't you come in—and apprise me as to your mission?"

I was still petrified by her unbelievable loveliness; she plucked my sleeve, and I awoke to motion. We stepped over the threshold; my eyes swept the hall once—it was a cavernous place, with bands of tinted sculpture striping its walls—and returned to Sula: as they roved from her face over her body and back again, she intercepted them. I flushed, wondering if she could read my thought, and was about to look away from discomfiture when she smiled—provocatively—yes, and

placed a hand sensuously on her hip. My heart leaped; my eyes asked foolish questions which hers answered.

I stopped stock-still and she moved closer; her slender arm slipped around my back; she pressed herself to me and we kissed. Almost instantly she stepped away and waited a few paces in front of me, smiling maliciously. It took me a few seconds to come back to normal after that kiss, and inwardly I cursed my legs, which insisted on trembling. My heart was thudding as if it had become a sledgehammer pendulum banging against the walls of my body.

She took my hand, led me through the sculptured hall; we came to a door beyond which a stairway arose; dropping my hand, she preceded me upward. Like the perspective in an art student's drawing, the lines of walls and steps drew into a point with distance, so that I wondered just how high we must climb. Several times during our ascent the woman peeped back at me coyly; I felt a bit like Merlin, chasing the Gleam.

My thighs began to ache, but by the time we reached the top of the flight, I was moving like an automaton. Sula waited for me, and as I stood looking back at the steps which now seemed to descend to Hell itself, my knees almost buckled. Instantly Sula was beside me, her fragile hands attempting to steady me—a pretty gesture; she probably couldn't have held up a toppling doll. They lingered on my chest, thrilling me, and I thrust them away.

"Where to, now?" I asked. "I only hope it's not up more stairs."

She laughed, letting her head fall back, showing white teeth. "I didn't think! We might have ridden up by my magic."

"You didn't think of that as we came upstairs?" I queried.

"Oh, yes," she responded candidly. "Only—I thought that I'd rather see you a little weary and less amorous—" In any other woman the flute-like tremolo of her voice would have seemed affected, even ludicrous; but Sula was surely more bird than woman. Angel, rather.

She pulled my sleeve. "Come; we can't go any higher: we're in the top of one of the towers." The steps had ended on a roomy passage, along which she led me.

"Maybe your science can get you upstairs with a minimum of effort, but so can an elevator," I said—and wished I hadn't, for the green charm imbedded in my forehead sent ripples of pain through me.

"ELEVATOR?" She frowned perplexedly: despite the pangs shooting through my temples I had to explain the word; it left me sweating and sick. "But that is more trouble than magic!" she cried. "Look!" She reached under the scarves which covered her bosom, and withdrew a slender gold chain from which hung a flashing diamond star. "With the aid of this I can command the elemental forces—the energies—in the air around us."

She turned the star over and over in her hands, her agile fingers pressing here, prying there, altering the shape of the thing, increasing the number of facets from which the reflected light danced prismatically. Suddenly a great clang—like the prolonged booming of a great bell—resounded not so much from the star as from the very walls themselves.

I felt myself gripped by something invisible; when I tried to thrust out defensive hands, I discovered that I was temporarily paralyzed. I was lifted from the floor as if meshed in a net gripped by an unseen hand,

and borne down the hall, Sula floating beside me. We were carried far down the passage to a door; apparently of its own volition the portal swung wide, and we were wafted into a room whose walls were hung with filmy textiles the turquoise tint of an autumn sky. Streaks of scented smoke oozed lazily from ponderous and ornate brass braziers.

The invisible hold upon me relaxed, dropping me to the floor. Sula stood near, laughing as she tucked the diamond into her dress.

"That isn't all that my star can do," the sorceress remarked, while I scrambled to my feet. "It can make many kinds of sound, dreadful heat, and a strange light—which I will afterward show you when I take you to my garden." She moved to a silken divan. "But now, be seated and tell me why you are here." She patted the space beside her, and when I did not sit as close as she had indicated, she moved nearer.

I told her my predicament, and as I spoke her eyes grew wide with interest. Suddenly she interrupted: "You want to get back to your body—!" She arose, motioning for me to stand also. "I'm curious to see what that shell may be to which you are so eager to return."

She brushed aside one of the hangings on the wall, disclosing another doorway through which we stepped into a smaller chamber cluttered like a store-room with furniture and inexplicable things built of twisted tubing, huge metal spheres, and oddly vascular fretwork of iridescent waxy substances. Small windows admitted dim light which was supplemented by a luminous globe on a tall pedestal. I thought that the light flickered, for the shadows among the furnishings had begun to stir. Sula murmured something in her treble

voice, and the shadows rushed past us from the room; I recognized them as the black folk which Lascima had named Sula's familiars.

THE sorceress halted at a table and lifted the lid of a small coffer on it. Intensely brilliant ripples of light gushed from the box, like the rhythmically spreading light which had come from the enormous crystals where I had first met Lascima.

"Give me your hand," the sorceress commanded, and grasped my reluctant fingers. In her other hand she held the jewel. "By my knowledge I can extend the influence of the charm which fetters your thought until it permits unlimited psychic travel. The effect will be only temporary, though. Your thought must return to its present house, thanks to the charm in your head." She tapped my chest. "Now close your eyes." As I obeyed, something like a drab curtain slipped across my brain; I started involuntarily. Sula whispered imperiously, "Keep your eyes closed!"

The drab curtain disintegrated. Though my eyes were shut, I thought that I was seeing through their lids, for I discerned, if faintly, the room in which we were standing, and Sula looking intently at me. The crystal in her hand did not glimmer, however.

We appeared to arise from the floor and glide toward a wall. The stored things were in our path, and involuntarily I flinched from a collision with them, but as Sula and I met them, there was no impact: we passed through them! As I directed my gaze behind me to peer at them, Sula hissed pressingly, "Eyes always front!" and I saw that we were only a few inches from the wall; in another instant we had passed through

it. Our movement accelerated. Here came other walls, through which we passed; we were fleeting over forestland as though on a magic carpet; we moved faster: the forest became a blur. Now we were in airless space, rushing through a gantlet of stars.

Far ahead glinted a speck of light: I guessed it to be the sun. It swelled with our approach like a nightmare growth, dazzling me; we passed it. I glimpsed a vast disc, and then, after a period of whirling blur, had entered the furnished room where I had lived, prior to my arrival on Sula's planet. There was no sign of my body; the landlady was cursorily making the bed.

I had forgotten that Sula held my hand, and when I tried to point, she shook my arm impatiently.

"That woman's my landlady," I said. "She ought to know what's happened to me; can't we ask her?"

"She can neither see nor hear us," Sula replied. "Don't forget, it is only our egos, our personalities, which are travelling."

"But what's happened to me? How can I ever get back if I don't know where to find my body?"

Disregarding my query, Sula murmured softly, "Nurnir! Help me now!"

A black curtain fell over my mind; when I unconsciously thrust up my hands as though to remove the blindfold, Sula's fingers did not cling to mine. A dreadful sensation of being snatched up and flung dizzily by a whirlwind swept me; violently sick, green lightning darting before me, I fell. Opening my eyes, I found myself on the floor at Sula's feet; crystal in hands, she stood with closed lids like a sleep-walker. Perhaps it was an ephemeral illusion caused by my vertigo, for I thought that something hung in the air above the sorceress

—something like many thick black pen lines which persistently writhed, curiously angular, into complex patterns. It vanished almost in the same instant in which I had become conscious of it.

SULA shuddered as if an invisible being had shaken her, and raising her eyelids, turned to me.

"I warned you not to open your eyes!" she muttered. "Come—we've found your body." She reached her hand to me; we interlaced fingers. The smirched curtain fell over my mind: I could see with an inner vision. Again we floated from the room in the tower over the forest, faster and faster. Once more I glimpsed stars streaking past, the painful effulgence of the sun, the nearing disc which was my own world, and a subsequent blur. We came to rest in a white room. My body lay as if in death on a bed. A woman in a white uniform was writing something on a chart taken from the foot of the bed.

"A hospital," I explained to Sula. "A place where they take sick people. That car must have done something terrible when it hit me—" In my eagerness I strained forward.

"Careful!" Sula murmured. "What are you trying to do?"

"Get back into that body," I said. "Help me!"

"I cannot, now," she replied. "Perhaps later—with Nurnir's help—"

"But Lascima said that Nurnir is dead!" I cried—and drew away guiltily. In recounting my experiences to Sula I had omitted the slattern; until that moment I had not uttered her name.

Sula's hand drew me back to her. "A fine body," she mused, "and I don't blame you for wanting to return to it. What an interesting place

you come from! Strange sciences everywhere. The light—the wonderfully-made furniture—the clever cut of the woman's clothes! Now that I know in what part of space to find this world of yours, I think that I will visit it often—perhaps take up temporary residence in someone's person . . .”

I WAS whisked from the room and over the reeling structures of a city; we shot up among the stars. We reached the bloodstone world that was Sula's, sped over rolling woodland; I noted a spark which grew into the enchantress' castle; we were within. Sula dropped my hand, and I opened my eyes. She was placing the crystal back into its metal box.

Had it been hypnotism? There was no use in figuring out what had happened. Whether mesmerism, telepathy, actual journey of two disembodied intelligences through space, it made little difference. It had happened; I had to accept it as real.

Sula took an easy position on the divan, and I sat near her.

“And what else did Lascima say?” As I dropped my eyes, temporising, she wheedled, “You thought she was a slut, of course?”

I didn't know what to say. If this woman could replace my mind in its former vessel, I hardly wanted to antagonize her. She hated Lascima, the slattern had said; very well, I would be diplomatic and pretend to hate Lascima too. But as I remembered the woman who had sheltered me in her hovel, I could not lie convincingly. I said, “I—rather liked her.”

“You didn't find her—repugnant? Didn't she make love to you?”

“Well, yes,” I said uncomfortably, answering both questions.

“But you didn't love her—not as you'd like to love me?”

I regarded the sorceress' exquisite body, the lips which seemed so eager for kisses, and curbed an impulse to crush her against me and capture her mouth with mine.

“I didn't love her,” I said.

“I was watching you!”

“Through the crystal? But she said that Yephor's token neutralized your—magic!” I cried. Her uplifted hand silenced me.

“You will not go back to her, naturally, if I ask you not to go! If I offer myself in her stead?” The lovely witch arose and stood very close to me, her azure draperies fluttering at the movement and then settling revealingly against her like loving blue ghosts.

“She was helpful to me; she's waiting for me. I ought to go back to her,” I mumbled.

“But not if it means losing me!” It did not take the thought of playing politics to make me agree with the sorceress, for as her gracile hands touched my shoulders, and she brought her face to mine, I forgot Lacima, my yearning to regain my lost body—everything.

She straightened, smiling evilly, reached into her scarves and brought out the diamond star.

“Come along,” she said. “I am taking you down to my garden.”

Her unpleasant expression frightened me. It faded; I stretched out my hands. “Let's wait a while,” I murmured.

“So you want to kiss me—after admitting that you let that filthy Lascima make love to you!”

“I couldn't help it if she took it into her head to kiss me!” I protested.

“You could have told her outright that you didn't like it.”

“I didn't want to hurt her feelings!”

SULA made a disparaging, disdainful grimace which altered her mouth into a more kissable thing than ever; as I drew nearer her, she shook the diamond star, and I felt the invisible net of her enchantment close around me. We were lifted gently and carried from the room along a corridor, down a stair and through a suite of immense rooms, one of which I shall never forget; we seemed not to have entered a four-walled chamber, but to have emerged upon a polished jet platform under a throbbing starless sky. A muted booming, as of a mourning drum, pulsed in unison with the thought that linked things — Sula's imps? — shot through the air in serpentine coils. We did not move straight across this murky floor toward the doorway which gleamed, a rectangular spark, far ahead; I felt myself rising, being borne around an invisible corner, lowered, move sideways, then backward, again to a side and forward, as though we were being carried through an invisible maze. Sula raised the diamond high and opened her mouth to shout something aloft, but glimpsed my interest in her action, and shook her fingers at my face as though casting something unclean from them. A film of blackness closed over me; I could neither see nor hear. Our gliding motion halted for an instant, then resumed. The black veil writhed free of me and contracted into a little knot which vanished in midair. Sula's eyes mocked mine.

The door was near now, but still we did not approach it horizontally. We arose on a diagonal and it also reared up as if to meet us, the gleaming floor dropping away. We reached the doorway and passed into a consecutive array of gloomy vaults on whose walls hung dimly apparent

paintings and from whose floors uprose tarnished silvery things curiously like miniature Gothic cathedrals, feebly luminous gems like cluster of tiny lights surmounting them. Sula noted my interest in them, but did not explain their nature; I decided that they must be scientific implements.

"The garden," Sula said at last, and pointed her diamond star toward a titanic gate to which we were advancing. The portals creaked apart, and we passed them. The force carrying us slacked its hold; I stood free of it as the sorceress cabalistically touched her diamond.

CHAPTER VII

SULA'S SECRET

IT WAS A courtyard in the palace. We were at the bottom of a square well whose black walls shafted upward until they almost met; from the moon-sized opening above fell only the faintest of lights. Rough pebbled soil was under our feet, and from it—not far ahead—sprouted thick distorted forms like scaly cactus which moved slowly, jerkily, as though in pain. They averaged seven feet in height.

"My garden," Sula purred.

We passed between an alley of the bloated spiky things, which bent toward us from the roots like suppliants. On some of them were waxen crimson buds, and suddenly some of these buds burst open with an audible crackling; a piercingly sweet perfume—unlike anything which I had ever scented before—assailed us, as if tangible. Sula stopped at once, stood rigid, inhaling, her face glowing with pleasure. The flowers wilted almost at once, becoming drooping

and brown; Sula motioned for me to follow her again.

The thickest part of this strange garden lay just ahead, and I detected action within it. Sula exclaimed sharply, and a number of her imps scurried out of the thicket; I glimpsed others hanging back, as if loath to go, but when Sula spoke again and reached for her diamond pendant, the lingering dark folk hurriedly joined their departing fellows.

The sorceress paused before a gnarled stalk which bore a mottled, evil-looking purple flower whose odor combined sweetness with an almost charnel stench. Sula nodded toward it.

"Pluck it for me," she ordered; as I hesitated, a premonition of horror chilling my blood, she repeated the command. I reached up to the bloom, grasped its short stem and wrenched upon it. "Harder!" exclaimed the witch, eyes glittering, her lips parting excitedly.

I jerked at the stem again, but still I could not break the flower loose. I shrugged my helplessness; Sula pointed commandingly to the flower. This time I tugged with all my strength; the knotty arms of the plant twitched spasmodically. The blossom broke free, and a spurt of nauseating green sap splattered me. I held out the flower to Sula, but she did not accept it. The purple bloom began to wither in my hands, losing color, shrinking. There was something strange about its texture, which was emphasized with every speeding minute—and as I suddenly realized that what I had thought to be a flower was in reality a scrap of human flesh, I dropped it aghast and stepped back, mouth agape; I stared at Sula. She smiled coyly, provocative as ever, but I felt no desire for her now. My hands were sticky with the

plant's sap; I looked at them to find that the green had become brown, and that the brown was growing warmer, redder—blood!

Then if this garden were sown with people—what did it actually look like to eyes uninfluenced by Sula's trickery?

Sula minced ahead and beckoned me. "I always hated that man," she said. "He was an especially odious spy of the wizards." She turned. "What, are you afraid to follow?" I skulked after her, numb with foreboding.

The growths began to thin out; we were almost at the far wall of the court. Sula furrowed the soil with her toe. "Yes, this is about the best place," she said. "Come here."

I took a forward step and stopped. "What are you going to do?"

She pointed to the ground which she had just spurned. "Come here!" she said again, her bird's voice shrill. I obeyed reluctantly; she held up the diamond. Her fingers twitched, and from the gem a ray of intense and somehow loathesome yellow light, like jaundice expressed in visible radiations, stabbed from it and touched my forehead like a burning finger. A dreadful pang forked me; I reeled. The ochreous luminescence had diffused around me like mist; I perceived Sula indistinctly through this haze. She loomed above me, her teeth gleaming in a sneer.

Beyond her I perceived the garden, but it had grown swiftly, or else I was dwindling. The quilled green arms of the shrubs were waving violently. Another pain racked me, and I thought that the plants changed, that all over the courtyard in the places of all the bulbous growths were human beings, faces pressed to the ground, arms and legs frantically flailing, bodies streaked with blood

which dripped from the marks of raking claws. A third stab of anguish struck me, and as I struggled to move, to run from this dreadful place, I realized that something was happening to my body. My skin was stiffening, becoming rough; my joints refused to function; I was seized with twitching cramps. When I saw the green leaves budding on my hands, I knew that I could not escape. I was being buried alive, Sula's fashion, as Aibur had hoped. I had come to regain my terrestrial body and lost even the makeshift one.

Lascima had warned me what to expect. If only she were here now to help me!

"Lascima!" I called. "Lascima!" My words ended in a rasping choke. My tongue tasted the damp soil and snaked hungrily into it. My head was wedged as though by brutal hands into the earth, and I could no longer see. The cramps ceased, and when I attempted to move, I found that I could do so only with great pain. I rested in cold darkness.

"You called Lascima!" Faintly I heard the witch's murmur. "Perhaps you do love her—after all!"

I felt the vibration of her footfalls as she moved away. For a space there was only silence and a bitter taste in my mouth.

Then I sensed a scurrying overhead, and the pound of many excited feet. Something scratched my body painfully; as I flinched involuntarily I experienced even greater pain. Talons slashed me again and again—

I knew who was doing it, of course: Sula's imps, returned to the courtyard.

And I was a human plant in Sula's garden!

thicket, sucking nourishment from the ground. Occasionally there was a slight rain from above, at which times Sula's familiars absented themselves. I had much time to ponder on the events which had brought me here. Most puzzling were Lascima's contradictory statements regarding Sula.

I was lonely and in constant dread of the return of the imps and their torture-diversions. I wept, but without tears. I swore that if I could ever break loose, Sula would regret it. I wished that I had stayed with Lascima.

I heard nearing footsteps; they halted directly over my buried head. Something touched me; I winced; Lascima's voice murmured, "Don't be afraid!"

Heat seared me; I writhed in torment and found that I was able to move with increasing freedom. My head popped out of the ground; I tumbled on my back. Wiping the mould from my eyes, I blinked at the dazzling light which I had once thought dim, and saw the slattern, dressed in rags, waiting with her hands shrewishly on her hips.

"You called for me when you needed me," she said contemptuously. "Well, I'm here. I've come to bargain with you." I arose with difficulty and faced her, teetering weakly, like a hospital patient leaving his bed after an illness of months. "Do you still love Sula and want to kiss me to spare my feelings?"

I gasped and put out a hand toward her which she thrust away. "How did you know—?" I began.

She held up the amulet which Yephoh had given to me. "Because I am Sula," she replied astonishingly. "Sula—and Lascima—both. I was born a peasant, the clumsy, ugly Lascima. Why do you think I became in-

I DON'T know how long I continued upside down in that dark

terested in Nurnir and his researches? Because I wanted to be beautiful, to be"—her voice broke briefly—"loved! I learned the arts of illusion first of all, and became—Sula! But Yephor's talisman nullifies even that illusion."

Laughing angrily, she hurled the bit of carved brass away, and when it had passed perhaps twenty feet from her, she became Sula, bird-like and beautiful; the tattered clothing turned to fluttering crimson gauze. As I gaped again, she laughed. "You like Sula best, don't you? Now you understand why Lascima met you on the plain and not Sula—why Sula hated Lascima and was able to spy on you despite the wizards' charm! I had to inveigle the charm away from you when you started for the castle, else you would never have seen Sula, for the amulet's emanations protected you from my influence. You wonder why I played the part of two people? At first because I could not help it." She sighed. "Then you seemed to care for me, and I thought that perhaps I had found someone willing to share my lonely world with me. But I thought it best to test you—as Sula—to make certain as to your worthiness. I tested you—and you are unworthy. I ought to let you rot in that garden of mine, but I can use you. So I have come to bargain with you. I will send you back to that body of yours in the world which our minds visited, providing that you deliver my crystal to the wizards."

I considered a moment. "Sula—or rather, Lascima—it's Lascima to whom I want to speak—I've done a lot of thinking while here. I realize that I did care for Lascima, more than I thought—"

Her mouth curled scornfully. "You mean, you're afraid to return to the

priests? You think that you can appease me with studied words?"

"But I mean it!" I said. "I'd as soon stay here—not with Sula so much as with Lascima—I am grateful for much—"

She lifted an eyebrow. "Including the way in which I—planted—you? Not that you didn't deserve it. Hear me now. Nurnir has told me that if you deliver the jewel, he will help me overcome the wizards so that together he and I can rule both this land and the one on the other side of the mountains."

"But Lascima said—" I began. "When you were Lascima, you said that Nurnir was killed by Yephor and Aibur!" Doubt possessed me. "Are you truly Lascima and Sula together? Or is this a trick?"

"No trick," Sula answered, and immediately became Lascima, rags, dirt and all. I almost shuddered at the transition. "I did love you—yes; but now that I know you for an untruthful person, I cannot trust you. I could not have you here."

I, too, decided that it were best to return to my hospitalized body rather than consort with a female kaleidoscope who might take it in her head on the slightest occasion to transform me into a plant or worse. Suppose I were kissing Sula and found Lascima in my arms instead?

The woman continued, "As for Nurnir—yes, he was killed. But he had been expecting treachery from Aibur and Yephor, and made preparations which projected his vitality into another dimension. I don't mind telling you this, because part of our agreement is that you will tell the priests nothing of this when you take the crystal to them." She looked around her. "We can talk at ease up in my apartments. What's your choice—to stay here as a posy, or

deliver the crystal to those two *yodks*?"

"To deliver the crystal," I said.

"Good!" She examined her smudged hands with distaste. "I am tired of being Lascima. Nurnir's science can kill that part of me for good—if he bests the priests through you!" She became Sula again and, producing the diamond pendant from draperies which this time were royal purple, she handled it; her motive forces lifted us from the ground. We were carried across the garden to the door, and as we went I peered back at the clustered shrubs, which stretched frantic arms after us as though pleading for release. From the blackness of the court's walls emerged the enchantress' familiars; they slipped in among the plants and began to torment them. Then we had passed the door, and I saw no more of the garden.

WE reached the chamber of the blue-hung walls and were set down near the divan. At our entrance, a pair of imps stepped from behind a hanging, one carrying a basin of water, the other, sparkling cloths.

"You'd better wash," said Sula, motioning to the imps, who began to pluck at my clothes, trying to remove them. I pushed the little black folk away—for shadows they were certainly solid enough—and hung onto my clothing protectively. Sula's laughter rippled. "You're modest? I'll screen you!"

She waved a hand, and streaks of purple haze appeared and hung in the air wherever her fingers swerved. She wove other streaks at right-angles to the first ones, so that almost at once I was concealed from her by the screen. Or was I? I felt a distaste for her tricks, and yearned to tell

her to be Lascima for a while so that she might give her slattern portion a badly needed washing. It must be fine, I reflected bitterly, submitting to the ministrations of the imps, to be able when dirty to transform one's self into a clean other-person. This gave rise to other speculations, including the question of what Sula did when Lascima had a toothache, so that before I knew it, the mould from Sula's garden had been removed from me and my clothes were returned to me magically refreshed and laundered.

The shadows gathered the towels together, removed the bowl, and left the room. One of them scampered back and knelt briefly before the woman. She nodded, as if in answer to a silent question, and her familiar snatched a corner of the purple screen and pulled it out of the room after him.

"What did he want with that?" I asked.

"They eat it," Sula answered. "Well, you look a good deal better. I'll give you this crystal" — she showed me a metal box—"in this case; you're to take it at once to the priests. Tell them that you stole it while I was asleep. Once it's in their hands, you've only to wait for deliverance—and I promise you it will not be long. For this is the crystal through which we sent our minds in quest of your body, and through which I can send more than minds." She stared beyond me, brooding. "I could change the priests into the things that were in my garden—with this—"

She handed the box brusquely to me. "Is there anything you need? You're hungry?"

"I would like a taste of proper food," I admitted. "My mouth still tastes of the dirt—" So, after I had

dined, I set out for the tunnel which led from Celeise to the wizards. Sula's craft carried us from the castle, across the black moat, through the woods to the great plain where humped the ruined entrance of the tunnel leading from Celeise to the domain of the sorcerers. I phrased a regretful goodbye, but Sula halted me in the middle of it.

"You'll be seeing me shortly," she said. "Now remember—fail in your part of the bargain and you'll never regain that body!"

SHE stood like a gossamer-hung statue, her rippling scarves making strange designs on the air, as I entered the tunnel. I felt my way cautiously, for it was miserably dark. Soon I perceived the glimmering of the far curtain of fire; I reached it and called, "Aibur! Yephor!" There was no reply except for a faint burring sound that I did not immediately recognize. Had the wizards anticipated Sula's scheme? Again I called, "Aibur! Yephor! Isn't anyone there?" The burring sounds, which I knew now for snores, suddenly ended. I heard feet scraping the pavement beyond the opaque veil of yellow lightnings. A startled voice, evidently that of one of Aibur's soldiers, called, "Who is it? Who's calling?"

I cried, "I've come back from Sula's castle; I've got her crystal, without which she is powerless. Bring Aibur and Yephor! Hurry!"

"In a moment! In a moment!" I heard the fool's feet clatter away from the web's writhing fires. There was a silent space. Then I heard a returning clatter of many people, exclaiming excitedly among themselves. Aibur called, "Be still, you dolts!" His voice came from near the web: "Who is it?"

"The slave you sent for Sula's jewel. I've got it—hurry—she's after me!"

There was an instant's pause.

Suddenly Aibur's hand, wrapped in scarlet, burst through the yellow flame, which slid over it like water on an oiled cloth. "Give it to me!" he ordered.

"No," I answered, "not until you let me in through the fire. Don't forget, you promised a reward if I got it!"

Aibur muttered something to himself. "Stand aside!" he called, "I'm coming!" His scarlet robe wrapped around him, he pushed through the web of fire, leaving a slowly closing hole in it. Removing a fold of the protective cloth from his face, he stepped over to me and held out his palm. "The jewel, now," he growled. "Where is it?"

I removed it from the metal box and held it up so that he could see it, but my fingers were nimbler than his, and when he swooped forward clutching the hand which held Sula's jewel, I tossed it to my other hand. Aibur stepped away, glowering.

"Sula's after me," I warned; the priest bit his underlip, wrapped the scarlet robe around himself.

"Follow me, but be quick!" he barked, returning through the fire. Alert for treachery — not that it really mattered — I peered through the slowly contracting opening in the flickering barrier before following him. My feet had barely touched the floor on the opposite side of the web when Aibur unmasked himself and whirled upon me, snatching at the gem. The web knitted together slowly.

"You *kyl*! Hand over that crystal!" Aibur signalled his men, and half a dozen came trotting up to him. I braced myself against them, back

against the wall, and as one lunged at my legs as if in flying tackle, I swung my foot and kicked him; he fell sidewise, howling. Almost at once the others rushed me and dragged me down to the floor. Their hasty fingers tore at my clothing. One of them found the crystal and offered it to Aibur. "Here, Lord."

Aibur took the gem. He peered deep into its bright core from which pulsed the rippling light.

"Sula's jewel!" he cried triumphantly, and brushed past the men who held me.

"What about this slave?" one of the men asked subserviently.

"Let the man he kicked throw him into the yellow fire!" Aibur jerked over his shoulder. The men lifted me, though I struggled, twisting my body, flailing my arms and legs, butting with my head. I hadn't counted on this. I was raised and about ready to be swung into the flaming veil when I heard Aibur's cry: "Hold! Stop!" The men set me on my feet. "Bring the *kyi* here!" The guards led me down the tunnel to Aibur.

"THAT'S better," said another voice, and I saw Yephor arranging his robe as though he had just arrived in the underground crypt. "I agreed that you could bury this man alive, Aibur, but I did not say that he was to burn. He's brought you the crystal, I see—I owe him something for that—" He bowed slightly, sardonically, my way. "Hand me the jewel—I've a right to hold it too."

Aibur backed away. "I've got it, and I'm going to keep it," he warned. "Now that Sula's powers are mine, I've no need for you any longer, Yephor. I've endured enough of your tricks!"

Yephor drew himself erect; I had

forgotten that he was so tall. "So you intended from the very first to get the stone for yourself."

Aibur backed farther away. "Even as you, false friend!"

"But it was I who gave him the amulet! Without it, could he have reached the jewel? I doubt it! Let me have the crystal—I demand to see it!" As Aibur shook his head in denial, Yephor raised his hand and pointed two fingers. Aibur hastily flung the scarlet cloth over his head, shrieking, "Men, kill this evil priest! He threatens me with sorcery!"

Yephor's hand lowered in his surprise, and he stared at the men around him. They stepped forward uncertainly, glancing from the cowering Aibur to the looming Yephor.

"Kill him, I say!" shouted Aibur, dropping the scarlet cloth and pointing vengefully. Encouraged, the guards rushed forward, and Yephor's eyes widened fleetingly with disbelief, then narrowed to a squint of demoniac rage. He raised both hands toward the approaching soldiers, and I overheard him muttering, "You cannot come; your legs won't hold you—" It was probably hypnotism, but it failed him; the men seized him and he was indistinguishable in the general scuffle that ensued. A knife flashed; I heard a moan, and the soldiers parted from the huddled, gasping man, who choked as he attempted to lift his hand toward Aibur in a last bit of malefic activity, and dropped his hand in death.

Aibur gingerly approached the body. "Carry it away," he ordered. Then he raised the crystal again and stared into its vibrant heart; he seemed to be concentrating. Suddenly he dashed the jewel to the floor—it glanced across the room, and one of the men retrieved it—and swung upon me.

"Liar! That's not Sula's crystal—it's a counterfeit. It does not respond to me!"

"But that's because you're wearing an amulet," I answered hurriedly, as Sula had coached me. "Its radiations neutralize those of the crystal—"

Aibur held out his palm to the guards. "The jewel!" The man who had retrieved it placed the gem in the wizard's hand. Aibur's other hand ripped away the heavy brass fetishes at his throat, and as he discarded them, the stone's spreading emanations brightened. He peered into the gem, and his jaw dropped with amazement. Satisfied, he lowered the jewel, and pointed at me.

"Throw this slave into the fire!" he cried. The guard to whom he had entrusted his amulets held them toward him; he waved them away. Two of the men grasped my arms and hauled on me, when a protesting shriek rang from Aibur.

The wizard was staring into the crystal in utter horror. He raised one hand unbelievably, and became rigid. That was all. The crystal's pulsing light flickered outward.

Aibur's scarlet robe fell apart as though rotted by the years; it disintegrated as it dropped to the floor, where it crumbled to powder. Still the wizard did not move, his arm upraised. He did not seem to breathe. One of the men holding me murmured to the other: they dropped my arms. The man with the brass fetishes approached the wizard cringingly.

"Lord Aibur!" he cried. "Lord Aibur!" He clapped a hand on the warlock's shoulder as if to shake him from a trance, and Aibur, like a figure of sand, collapsed into colorless grains at the touch, strewing the guard's feet and the floor near him with dust, in the midst of which lay

the crystal, still sending out its widening glimmers.

For a moment the guard stared stupidly down at the granulations which had been Aibur; reeling back, he screamed. The amulets fell from his hand; I sprang to where they; and threw the chain of them down the tunnel, through the fiery web.

BUT of the pulsing crystal, riding the waves of light as if they were harnessed steeds, came the black familiars of Sula! They carried shadowy ropes which at sight of the soldiers they uncurled and threw like lariats. They poured from the crystal, enlarging with the spread of light, like smoke from a chimney, darkening the room as though a fitful lamp were casting monstrous shadows.

The soldiers huddled back against the wall, protecting themselves with knives and whips. One ran; the others followed. The crowding horde of imps rode the pulsing light after them, hurling their dark ropes, which clung to the fleeing men like octopus tentacles. Those of the imps who had snared men hauled them in hand over hand, while the others flowed rank upon ever-increasing rank out of the crypt in pursuit of the escaping guards.

A flung rope curled about my throat as if it were a living thing, and I was jerked toward an imp, who upon recognizing me released the loathesomely writhing thing from about me. He pointed after the others and nodded to me. I headed out of the vault; a pair of the black demons snatched me up and held me, though weakly, so that for a space I rode upon the waves of light out of the temple and into the sunlit streets of the wizards' white city. The imps could hold me no longer, and I

dropped to a cobbled road, along which screeching townfolk milled. The riding imps leaped from their perches on the gliding light and flailed their whips, in which I now discerned eyes, and knew them to be alive . . .

The throng into which I had been dropped struggled among itself as its members fought to push the others aside in a break for concealment within the city's buildings. The whips fell upon them, tightening and crushing, or, obeying the tactile commands of the imps, carried their victims to the black folk, who pressed their mouths to the eyes of the captured. When the victims were released, they shrieked and sightlessly clawed the air, stumbling into each other; blood ran down their cheeks from hollow eye-sockets.

One of the live ropes coiled about me and almost at once whipped away. Its thrower pointed: I saw an opening in the eddying mob and took advantage of it. I found myself in a recessed doorway from which I could look upon the street. People from within brushed raging past me to join the crowd.

Abruptly the frantic howling stopped; the contestants became still as wooden figures. Iridescent mists raced overhead, casting opalescent shadows on the throng; I saw Sula gliding out of the sky, green garments fluttering like multiple fantastic wings. As she neared the ground she held up her diamond pendant. I heard a booming note—apparently within my own head—which shook my mind into depths of blackness. My body relaxed; falling, I saw that everyone else was falling, too. But when I opened my eyes, I was in the dead Yephor's blue grotto, and Sula was bending over me.

"What—where—?" I began, but

her uplifted hand checked my words.

"You wonder how you come to be here? I silenced the people—cast sleep upon them, with this." She touched the diamond star. "They sleep even as you have slept. When the time is more propitious, I shall rouse them. But first there are things which I must do to ascertain complete domination over them."

"Such as changing them into plants?" I asked. Her eyes hardened.

"You will not be here to learn. You've fulfilled your share of the bargain, yes;—and so I shall fulfill mine, and now. Come." We were carried down into the cellar crypt of the temple, into the tunnel of the yellow flame—but the web was no longer there.

Sula said, "It was no longer needed, so I put it in storage, lest later emergency arise." We passed out of the tunnel and upon the grassy plain of Celeise.

CHAPTER VII

RETURN

THE PRAIRIE was black with Sula's familiars, around hulking blacknesses which proved to be drums. At our appearance they leaped and waved frenziedly in pantomimed excitement and eagerness. We floated into their midst, and were set afoot on a trampled space. Near me was a coffin; I drew Sula's attention to it.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"For your body," said the woman. "Hold still." She touched my forehead with her long fingers; I was powerless to move. "So—now you are leaving," she said. "The only man who was ever kind to Lascima! Even Nurnir loved only the Sula part of me."

She gestured wildly: the gorgeous raiment vanished; she was the slut once more. "It is thus that I will have you last see me," she murmured, "and it is thus that I shall last kiss you." She pressed her mouth to mine. "Now I shall make the signal over you, so that Nurnir looking from his other-dimension will know whom to take—and then I will hold the soulless body which you will have left—and perhaps I will preserve it to look upon at times—"

She stepped away from me. "The only one who was kind to Lascima!" she repeated.

Diamond in hand, she sketched a pattern in the air over my head. The drums nearest us began to boom, and those beyond them took up the beat until the atmosphere was filled with swelling sound. The imps blended together and were visible only as a ragged-edged mass. Sula turned from me and flashed her diamond at the heavens, calling "Nurnir! Nurnir!"

For a moment there was only the thundering of the drums, but as it grew still louder, even more insistent, the very air shook; I felt little gusts rhythmically tattooing on my eyes. A bolt of greenish lightning shuddered at the horizon, and after a space, another and another; then others, keeping time with the rumbling drums. The flashes brightened, became greater, streaking across the whole sky. They widened, until it was like looking at broad rivers of green fire cutting a blue-black plain.

The booming of the drums accelerated, and the lightnings flared in unison, so that it was one continuous flash which illumined us. The tumult had become so forceful now that the sound was visible, moving from the drums in widening nooses of darkness, reminiscent of Sula's crystal

and its spreading light. Was there an analogy concerning the two?

The persistent glare of lightning overhead widened in accordance with the tempo of the drums. With every crash a wave of blackness spread from each drum, and as these ripples met and interwove, there seemed to be a curious cohesion at every point of intersection, as though the linked darknesses and sounds were reluctant to break away from each other. They clung, tenuous, quivering like threads of sooty jelly, before breaking apart and rolling onward, forming a vast net which hung above the plain and which was strengthened, fed, by every successive drumbeat.

Suddenly all the heavens became vivid with lightning, as though a fiery chimney had been opened; Lascima dropped her arms and turned to me. Something fell through the green fire and landed on the shuddering web which I thought hung steady for an instant. What this shape was, I could not tell, for it moved too swiftly for the eye to comprehend, hopping from strand to strand of the swaying net, nearer and nearer to me. I knew only that it was very huge, the color of congealed blood, and that it seemed to contort with violent inner movement, as though it were a sack filled with contending abominations. Still paralyzed, I felt like a man tied to a railroad track, watching a locomotive bearing down on himself.

It struck me squarely, and before I had the opportunity of even thinking defense, I was strangely cold. Lascima and her imps dropped away; I glimpsed the now decomposing web of shadows; the river of lightning was narrowing.

Whatever it was that carried me—and I seemed wrapped in it—shook with alarm, and I sensed its intense

mustering of effort. We dropped out of the green radiance into starry ether: I knew this course, recalling the flare of the sun and the looming disc of my native world . . .

The thing released me and stopped short; I flew from it like a ball from a thrower's hand—on and on and on—to the hospital, to the still white shape on the bed . . .

I CAME out of coma to a crippled body. Strange joke! When the car hit me, it mashed me up pretty thoroughly. It wasn't until months later that I was able to get out of bed and struggle along on crutches.

I couldn't return to my old routine

of work; I wasn't any longer equipped for it. I had to find simpler work with poorer pay.

Sometimes I thought regretfully of the body which I had not wanted—there, on Sula's planet. If I had been given my choice between this form and that, would I accept it now? I knew that I would, and be glad of it.

Does Lascima—not Sula—remember? She said that she intended to visit my world often. Perhaps she is watching me at this very moment.

SOMETIMES I am tempted to go out on the street and step in front of another car.

—THE END—