

THE UNHOLY GRAIL. A GREY MOUSER
TALE BY FRITZ LEIBER

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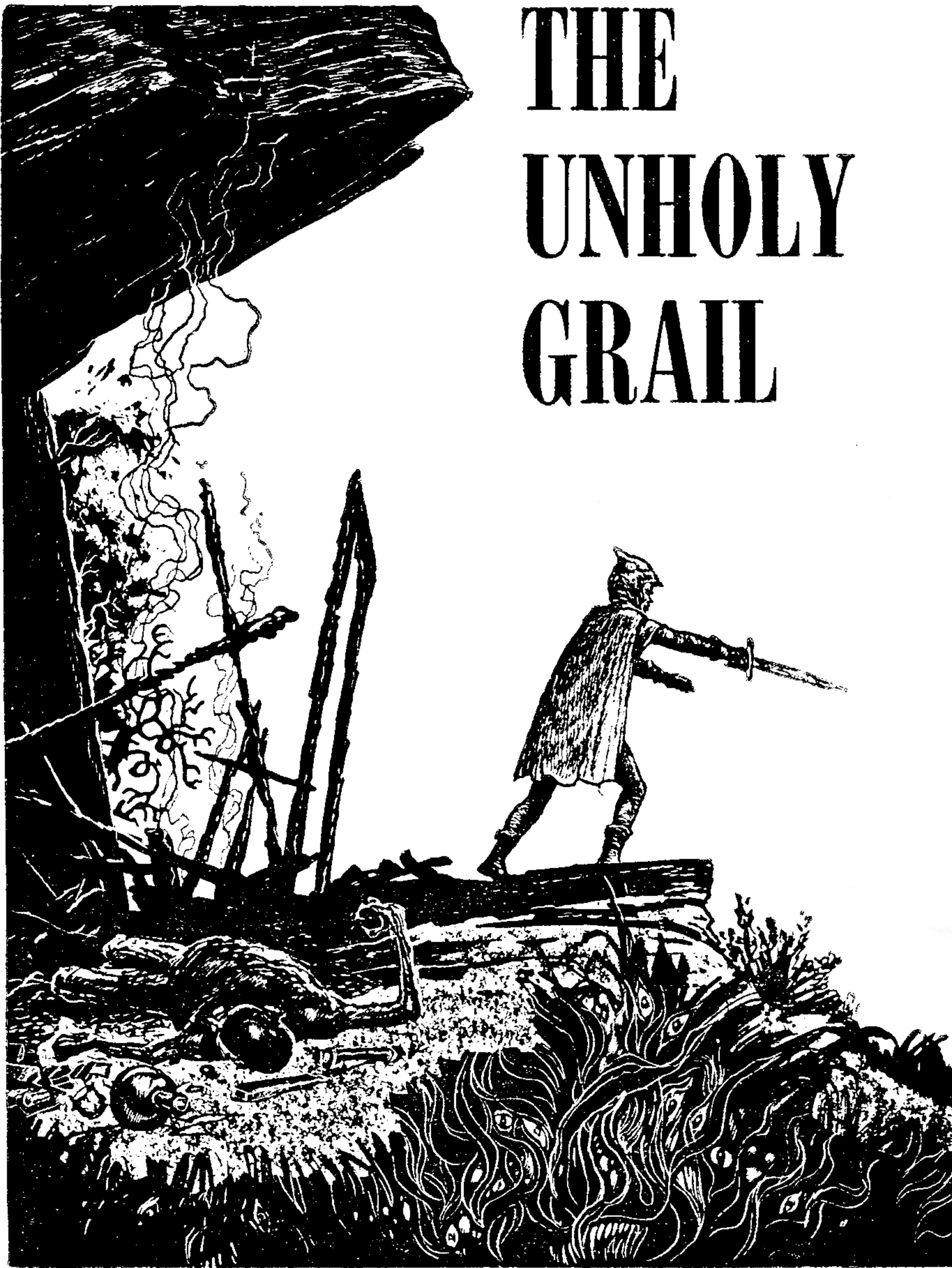
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By FRITZ LEIBER

THE UNHOLY GRAIL



"How did he get that way?" is a question asked about all heroes, villains . . . and hero-villains. So, depending chiefly on the records of Srith of the Scrolls, turn back to the day when the Gray Mouser was only Mouse, a despised and untested apprentice of a hedge-wizard.

THREE things warned the wizard's apprentice that something was wrong: first the deep-trodden prints of iron-shod hooves along the forest path—he sensed them through his boots before stooping to feel them out in the dark; next, the eerie drone of a bee unnaturally abroad by night; and finally, a faint aromatic odor of burning. Mouse raced ahead, dodging tree-trunks and skipping over twisted roots by memory and by a bat's feeling for rebounding whispers of

sound. Gray leggings, tunic, peaked hood and streaming cloak made the slight youth, skinny with asceticism, seem like a rushing shadow.

The exaltation Mouse had felt at the successful completion of his long quest and his triumphal return to his sorcerous master Glavas Rho, now vanished from his mind and gave way to a fear he hardly dared put into thoughts. Harm to the great wizard, whose mere apprentice he was?—"My Gray Mouse, still

Illustrator ESMH



midway in his allegiance between white magic and black," Glavas Rho had once put it—no, it was unthinkable that that great figure of wisdom and spiritual might should come to harm. The great magician . . . (There was something hysterical about the way Mouse insisted on that "great," for to the world Glavas Rho was but a hedge-wizard, no better than a Mingol necromancer with his second-sighted spotted dog or a conjurer beggar of Quarmall) . . . the great magician and his dwelling were alike protected by strong enchantments no impious outsider could breach—not even (the heart of Mouse skipped a beat) the lord paramount of these forests, Duke Janarri, who hated all magic, but white worse than black.

And yet the smell of burning was stronger now and Glavas Rho's low cottage was built of resinous wood.

THERE also vanished from Mouse's mind the vision of a girl's face, perpetually frightened yet sweet—that of Duke Janarri's daughter Ivrian, who came secretly to study under Glavas Rho, figuratively sipping the milk of his white wisdom side by side with Mouse. Indeed, they had privately come to call each other Mouse and Misling, while under his tunic Mouse carried a plain green glove he had teased

from Ivrian when he set forth on his quest, as if he were her armored and beweaponed knight and not a swordless wizardling.

By the time Mouse reached the hilltop clearing he was breathing hard, not from exertion.

There the gathering light showed him at a glance the hoof-hacked garden of magic herbs, the overturned straw beehive, the great flare of soot sweeping up the smooth surface of the vast granite boulder that sheltered the wizard's tiny house.

But even without the dawn light he would have seen the fire-shrunk beams and fire-gnawed posts a-creep with red ember-worms and the wraithlike green flame where some stubborn sorcerous ointment still burned. He would have smelt the confusion of precious odors of burnt drugs and balms and the horribly appetizing kitchen-odor of burnt flesh.

His whole lean body winced. Then, like a hound getting the scent, he darted forward.

The wizard lay just inside the buckled door. And he had fared as his house. The beams of his body bared and blackened. The priceless juices and subtle substances boiled, burnt, destroyed forever or streamed upward to some cold hell beyond the moon.

From all around came very faintly a low sad hum, as the unhoused bees mourned.

Memories fled horrorstricken through Mouse's mind: these shriveled lips softly chanting incantations, those charred fingers pointing at the stars or stroking a small woodland animal.

TREMBLING, Mouse drew forth from the leather pouch at his belt a flat green stone, engraved on the one side with deep-cut alien hieroglyphs, on the other with an armored, many-jointed monster, like a giant ant, that trod among tiny fleeing human figures. That stone had been the object of the quest on which Glavas Rho had sent him. For sake of it, he had rafted across the Lakes of Pleea, tramped the foothills of the Mountains of Hunger, hidden from a raiding party of red-bearded pirates, tricked lumpish peasant-fishermen, flattered and flirted with an elderly odorous witch, robbed a tribal shrine, and eluded hounds set on his trail. His winning the green stone without shedding blood meant that he had advanced another grade in his apprenticeship. Now he gazed dully at its ancient surface and then, his trembling controlled, laid it carefully on his master's blackened palm. As he stooped he realized that the soles of his feet were painfully hot, his boots smoking a little at the edges, yet he did not hurry his steps as he moved away.

It was lighter now and he no-

ticed little things, such as the anthill by the threshold. The master had studied the black-armored creatures as intently as he had their cousin bees. Now it was deeply dented by a great heel mark showing a semi-circle of pits made by spikes—yet something was moving. Peering closely he saw a tiny heat-maimed warrior struggling over the sand-grains. He remembered the monster on the green stone and shrugged at a thought that led nowhere.

He crossed the clearing through the mourning bees to where pale light showed between the tree trunks and soon was standing, hand resting on a gnarly bole, at a point where the hillside sloped sharply away. In the wooded valley below was a serpent of mist, indicating the course of the stream that wound through it. The air was heavy with the dissipating smoke of darkness. The horizon was edged to the right with red from the coming sun. Beyond it, Mouse knew, lay more forest and then the interminable grain fields and marshes of Lankhmar and beyond even those the ancient world-center of Lankhmar city, which Mouse had never seen, yet whose overlord ruled in theory even this far.

But near at hand, outlined by the sunrise red, was a bundle of jagged-topped towers—the

stronghold of Duke Janarri. A wary animation came into Mouse's masklike face. He thought of the spiked heelmarch, the hacked turf, the trail of hoof-marks leading down this slope. Everything pointed to the wizard-hating Janarri as the author of the atrocity behind him, except that, still revering his master's skills as matchless, Mouse did not understand how the Duke had broken through the enchantments, strong enough to dizzy the keenest woodsman, which had protected Glavas Rho's abode for many a year.

He bowed his head . . . and saw, lying lightly on the springing grassblades, a plain green glove. He snatched it up and digging in his tunic drew forth another glove, darkly mottled and streakily bleached by sweat, and held them side by side. They were mates.

HIS lips writhed back from his teeth and his gaze went again to the distant stronghold. Then he unseated a thick round of scraggy bark from the tree-trunk he'd been touching and delved shoulder-deep in the black cavity revealed. As he did these things with a slow tense automatism, the words came back to him of a reading Glavas Rho had smilingly given him over a meal of milkless gruel.

"Mouse," the mage had said,

firelight dancing on his short white beard, "when you stare your eyes like that and flare your nostrils, you are too much like a cat for me to credit you will ever be a sheepdog of the truth. You are a middling dutiful scholar, but secretly you favor swords over wands. You are more tempted by the hot lips of black magic than the chaste slim fingers of white, no matter to how pretty a misling the latter belong—no, do not deny it! You are more drawn to the beguiling sinuosities of the lefthand path than the short steep road of the right. I fear me you will never be mouse in the end but mouser. And never white but gray—oh well, that's better than black. Now wash up these bowls and go breathe an hour on the newborn agueplant, for 't'iz a chill night, and remember to talk kindly to the thorn-bush."

The remembered words grew faint, but did not fade, as Mouse drew from the hole a leather belt furred green with mold and dangling from it a moldy scabbard. From the latter he drew, seizing it by the thong-wrapped grip, a tapering bronze sword showing more verdigris than metal. His eyes grew wide, but pin-point-pupiled, and his face yet more masklike, as he held the pale-green, brown-edged blade against the red hump of the rising sun.

From across the valley came faintly the high, clear, ringing

note of a hunting horn, calling men to the chase.

Abruptly Mouse strode off down the slope, cutting over to the trail of the hooves, moving with long hasty strides and a little stiff-leggedly, as if drunk, and buckling around his waist as he went the mold-furred sword-belt.

* * *

A DARK four-footed shape rushed across the sun-specked forest glade, bearing down the underbrush with its broad low chest and trampling it with its narrow cloven hooves. From behind sounded the notes of a horn and the excited shouts of men. At the far edge of the glade, the boar turned. Breath whistled through its nostrils and it swayed. Then its half-glazed little eyes fixed on the figure of a man on horseback. It turned toward him and some trick of the sunlight made its pelt grow blacker. Then it charged. But before the terrible up-turning tusks could find flesh to slash, a heavy-bladed spear bent like a bow against the knob of its shoulder and it went crashing over half backwards, its blood spattering the greenery.

Huntsmen clad in brown and green appeared in the glade, some surrounding the fallen boar with a wall of spear point, others hurrying up to the man on the horse. He was clad in rich garments of yellow and brown. He

laughed, tossed one of his huntsmen the bloodied spear and accepted a silver-worked leather wine flask from another.

A second rider appeared in the glade and the Duke's small yellow eyes clouded under the tangled brows. He drank deep and wiped his lips with the back of his sleeve. The huntsmen were warily closing their spear-wall on the boar, which lay rigid but with head lifted a finger's breadth off the turf, its only movements the darting of its gaze from side to side and the pulse of bright blood from its shoulder. The spear-wall was about to close when Janarrl waved the huntsmen to a halt.

"Ivrian!" he called harshly to the newcomer. "You had two chances at the beast, but you flinched. Your cursed dead mother would already have sliced thin and tasted the beast's raw heart."

His daughter stared at him miserably. She was dressed as the huntsmen and rode astride with a sword at her side and a spear in her hand, but it only made her seem more the thin-faced, spindle-armed girl.

"You are a milksop, a wizard-loving coward," Janarrl continued. "Your abominable mother would have faced the boar a-foot and laughed when its blood gushed in her face. Look here, this boar is scotched. It cannot harm you. Drive your spear into it now! I command you!"

THE huntsmen broke their spear-wall and drew back to either side, making a path between the boar and the girl. They sniggered openly at her and the Duke smiled at them approvingly. The girl hesitated, sucking at her underlip, staring with fear and fascination too at the beast which eyed her, head still just a-lift.

"Drive in your spear!" Janarrl repeated, sucking quickly at the flask. "Do so, or I will whip you here and now."

Then she touched her heels to the horse's flanks and cantered down the glade, her body bent low, the spear trained at its target. But at the last instant its point swerved aside and gouged the dirt. The boar had not moved. The huntsmen laughed raucously.

Janarrl's wide face reddened with anger as he stepped his horse over to the girl's. His hand whipped out suddenly and trapped her wrist, tightened on it. "I'll blood you!" he roared. "Your damned mother could cut men's throats and not change color. I'll see you flesh your spear in that carcass, or I'll make you dance, here and now, as I did last night, when you told me the wizard's spells and the place of his den."

He leaned closer and his voice sank to a whisper. "Know, chit, that I've long suspected that

your mother, fierce as she could be, was—perhaps ensorced against her will—a wizard-lover like yourself . . . and you the whelp of that burnt charmer."

Her eyes widened and she started to pull away from him, but he drew her closer. "Have no fear, chit, I'll work the taint out of your flesh one way or another. For a beginning, prick me that boar!"

She did not move. Her face was a cream-colored mask of fear. He raised his hand. But at that moment there was an interruption.

A figure appeared at the edge of the glade at the point where the boar had turned to make its last charge. It was that of a slim youth, dressed all in gray. Like one drugged or in a trance, he walked straight toward Janarrl. The three huntsmen who had been attending the Duke drew swords and moved leisurely toward him.

The youth's face was white and tensed, his forehead beaded with sweat under the gray hood half thrown back. Jaw muscles made ivory knobs. His eyes, fixed on the Duke, squinted as if they looked at the blinding sun.

His lips parted wide, showing his teeth. "Slayer of Glavas Rho! Wizard-killer!"

THEN his bronze sword was out of its moldy scabbard. Two of the huntsmen moved in

his way, one of them crying, "Beware poison!" at the green of the newcomer's blade. The youth aimed a terrific blow at him, handling his sword as if it were a sledge. The huntsman parried it with ease, so that it whistled over his head, and the youth almost fell with the force of his own blow. The huntsman stepped forward and with a snappy stroke rapped the youth's sword near the hilt to disarm him, and the fight was done before begun—almost. For the glazed look left the youth's eyes and his features twitched like those of a cat and, recovering his grip on the sword, he lunged forward with a twisting motion at the wrist that captured the huntsman's blade in his own, whipping it out of his hand, and continued the lunge straight toward the heart of the second huntsman, who escaped only by collapsing backward to the turf.

Janarri leaned forward tensely in his saddle, muttering, "The whelp has fangs," but at that instant the third huntsman, who had circled past, struck the youth with the sword-hilt on the back of his neck. The youth dropped his sword, swayed and started to fall, but the first huntsman grabbed him by the neck of his tunic and hurled him towards his companions. They received him in their own jocular fashion with cuffs and slaps, slashing his head

and ribs with sheathed daggers, eventually letting him fall to the ground, kicking him, worrying him like a pack of hounds.

Janarri sat motionless, watching his daughter. He had not missed her frightened start of recognition when the youth appeared. Now he saw her lean forward, lips twitching. Twice she started to speak. Her horse moved uneasily and whinnied. Finally she hung her head and cowered back while low retching sobs came from her throat. Then Janarri gave a satisfied grunt and called out, "Enough for the present! Bring him here!"

Two huntsmen dragged between them the half-fainting youth clad now in red-spattered gray.

"Coward," said the Duke. "This sport will not kill you. They were only gentling you in preparation for other sports. But I forget you are a pawky wizardling, an effeminate creature who babbles spells in the dark and curses behind the back, a craven who fondles animals and would make the forests mawkish places. Faught! My teeth are on edge. And yet you sought to corrupt my daughter and—Hearken to me, wizardling, I say!" And leaning low from his saddle he caught the youth's sagging head by the hair, tangling in his fingers. The youth's eyes rolled wildly and he gave a convulsive

jerk that took the huntsmen by surprise and almost tumbled Janarri out of the saddle.

Just then there was an ominous crackling of underbrush and the rapid thud of hooves. Someone cried, "Have a care, master! Oh Gods, guard the Duke!"

The wounded boar had lurched to its feet and was charging the group by Janarri's horse.

The huntsmen scattered back, snatching for their weapons.

Janarri's horse shied, further overbalancing its rider. The boar thundered past, like red-smeared midnight. Janarri almost fell atop it. The boar swung sharply around for a return charge, evading three thrown spears that thudded into the earth just beside it. Janarri tried to stand, but one of his feet was snagged in a stirrup and his horse, jerking clear, tumbled him again.

The boar came on, but other hooves were thudding now. Another horse swept past Janarri and a firmly-held spear entered near the boar's shoulder and buried itself deep. The black beast, jarred backward, slashed once at the spear with its tusk, fell heavily on its side and was still.

Then Ivrian let go the spear. The arm with which she had been holding it dangled unnaturally. She slumped in her saddle, catching its pommel with her other hand.

Janarri scrambled to his feet, eyed his daughter and the boar. Then his gaze traveled slowly around the glade, full circle.

Glavas Rho's apprentice was gone.

* * *

NORTH be south, east be west.
Copse be glade and gully crest. Dizziness all paths invest. Leaves and grasses, do the rest."

Mouse mumbled the chant through swollen lips almost as though he were talking into the ground on which he lay. His fingers arranging themselves into cabalistic symbols, he thumbed a pinch of green powder from a tiny pouch and tossed it into the air with a wrist-flick that made him wince. The charm completed, he lay still and the pains in his bruised flesh and bones became more bearable. He listened to the sounds of the hunt trail off in the distance.

His face was pushed close to a patch of grass. He saw an ant laboriously climb a blade, fall to the ground, and then continue on its way. For a moment he felt a bond of kinship between himself and the tiny insect. He remembered the black boar whose unexpected charge had given him a chance to escape and for a strange moment his mind linked it with the ant.

Vaguely he thought of the pirates who had threatened his life in the west. But their gay ruth-

lessness had been a different thing from the premeditated and presavored brutality of Janarrl's huntsmen.

Gradually anger and hate began to swirl in him. He saw the gods of Glavas Rho, their formerly serene faces white and sneering. He heard the words of the old incantations, but they twanged with a new meaning. Then these visions receded, and he saw only a whirl of grinning faces and cruel hands. Somewhere in it the white, guilt-stricken face of a girl. Swords, sticks, whips. All spinning. And at the center, like the hub of a wheel on which men are broken, the thick strong head of the Duke.

What was the teaching of Glavas Rho to that wheel? It had rolled over him and crushed him. What was white magic to Janarrl and his henchmen? Only a priceless parchment to be besmirched. Magic gems to be trampled in filth. Thoughts of deep wisdom to be pulped with their encasing brain.

BUT there was the other magic. The magic Glavas Rho had forbidden, sometimes smilingly but always with an underlying seriousness. The magic Mouse had learned of only by hints and warnings. The magic which stemmed from death and hate and pain and decay, which dealt in poisons and night-shrieks, which

trickled down from the black spaces between the stars, which as Janarrl himself had said, cursed in the dark behind the back.

It was as if all Mouse's former knowledge—of small creatures and stars and beneficial sorceries and Nature's codes of courtesy—burnt in one swift sudden holocaust. And the black ashes took life and began to stir, and from them crept a host of night shapes, resembling those which had been burnt, but all distorted. Creeping, skulking, scurrying shapes. Heartless, all hate and terror, but as lovely to look on as spiders swinging along their geometrical webs.

To sound a hunting horn for that pack! To set them on the track of Janarrl!

The thought was exhilarating.

Deep in his brain an evil voice began to whisper, "The Duke must die. The Duke must die." And he knew that he would always hear that voice, until its purpose was fulfilled.

Laboriously he pushed himself up, feeling a stabbing pain that told of broken ribs. He wondered how he had managed to flee this far. Grinding his teeth, he stumbled across a clearing. By the time he had gotten into the shelter of the trees again, the pain had forced him to his hands and knees. He crawled on a little way, then collapsed.

NEAR evening of the third day after the hunt, Ivrian stole down from her tower room, ordered the smirking groom to fetch her horse, and rode through the valley and across the stream and up the opposite hill until she reached the rock-sheltered house of Glavas Rho. The destruction she saw brought new misery to her white taut face. She dismounted and went close to the fire-gutted ruin, trembling lest she come upon the body of Glavas Rho. But it was not there. She could see that the ashes had been disturbed, as though someone had been searching through them and sifting them for any objects that might have escaped the flames. Everything was very quiet.

An inequality in the ground off toward the side of the clearing caught her eye and she walked in that direction. It was a new-made grave, and in place of a headstone was a small flat greenish stone with strange carvings on its surface.

A sudden little sound from the forest set her trembling and made her realize that she was very much afraid, only that up to this point her misery had outweighed her terror. She looked up and gave a gasping cry, for a face was peering at her through a hole in the leaves. It was a wild face, smeared with dirt and grass stains, smirched here and

there with old patches of dried blood, shadowed by a stubble of beard. Then she recognized it.

"Mouse," she called haltingly.

She hardly knew the answering voice.

"So you have returned to gloat over the wreckage caused by your treachery."

"No, Mouse, no!" she cried, "I did not intend this. You must believe me."

"Liar! It was your father's men who killed him and burnt his house."

"But I never thought they would!"

"Never thought they would!—as if that's any excuse. You are so afraid of your father that you would tell him anything. You live by fear."

"Not always, Mouse. In the end I killed the boar."

"So much the worse!—killing the beast the gods had sent to kill your father."

"But truly I never killed the boar. I was only boasting when I said so—I thought you liked me brave. I have no memory of that killing. My mind went black. I think my dead mother entered me and drove the spear."

"Liar and changer of lies! But I'll amend my judgment: you live by fear except when your father whips you to courage. I should have realized that and warned Glavas Rho against you. But I had dreams about you."

"You called me Misling," she said faintly.

"Aye, we played at being mice, forgetting cats are real. And then while I was away, you were frightened by mere whippings into betraying Glavas Rho to your father!"

MOUSE, do not condemn me." Ivrian was sobbing. "I know that my life has been nothing but fear. Ever since I was a child my father has tried to force me to believe that cruelty and hate are the laws of the universe. He has tortured and tormented me. There was no one to whom I could turn, until I found Glavas Rho and learned that the universe has laws of sympathy and love that shape even death and the seeming hates. But now Glavas Rho is dead and I am more frightened and alone than ever. I need your help, Mouse. You studied under Glavas Rho. You know his teachings. Come and help me."

His laughter mocked her. "Come out and be betrayed? Be whipped again while you look on? Listen to your sweet lying voice, while your father's huntsmen creep closer? No, I have other plans."

"Plans?" she questioned. Her voice was apprehensive. "Mouse, your life is in danger so long as you lurk here. My father's men are sworn to slay you on sight. I

would die, I tell you, if they caught you. Don't delay, get away. Only tell me first that you do not hate me." And she moved toward him.

Again his laughter mocked her.

"You are beneath my hate," came the stinging words. "I feel only contempt for your cowardly weakness. Glavas Rho talked too much of love. There are laws of hate in the universe, shaping even its loves, and it is time I made them work for me. Come no closer! I do not intend to betray my plans to you, or my new hidey-holes. But this much I will tell you, and listen well. In seven days your father's torment begins."

And then his face was gone and the leaves framed only a dark hole. She blundered into the forest after him, calling out "Mouse! Mouse!" and trying to follow the receding laughter. But it died away, and she found herself in a gloomy hollow, and she began to realize how evil the apprentice's laughter had sounded. Then panic seized her, and she fled back through the undergrowth, brambles catching at her clothes and twigs stinging her cheeks, until she had regained the clearing and was galloping back through the dusk, a thousand fears besetting her and her heart sick with the thought there was now no one in the wide world who did not hate and despise her.

When she reached the stronghold, it seemed to crouch above her like an ugly jag-crested monster, and when she passed through the great gateway, it seemed to her that the monster had gobbled her up forever.

* * *

COME nightfall on the seventh day, when dinner was being served in the great banquet hall, with much loud talk and crunching of rushes and clashing of silver plates, Janarrl stifled a cry of pain and clapped his hand to his heart.

"It is nothing," he said a moment later to the thin-faced henchman sitting at his side. "Give me a cup of wine! That will stop it twinging."

But he continued to look pale and ill at ease, and he ate little of the meat that was served up in great smoking slices. His little eyes kept roving about the table, finally settling on his daughter.

"Stop staring at me in that gloomy way, girl!" he called. "One would think that you had poisoned my wine and were watching to see green spots come out on me. Or red ones edged with black, belike."

This brought a general guffaw of laughter which seemed to please the Duke, for he tore off the wing of a fowl and gnawed at it hungrily, but the next moment he gave another sudden cry of pain, louder than the first,

staggered to his feet, clawed convulsively at his chest, and then pitched over on the table where he lay groaning and writhing in his pain.

"The Duke is stricken," the thin-faced henchman announced portentously after bending over him. "Carry him to bed. One of you loosen his shirt. He gasps for air."

A flurry of whispering went up and down the table. As the great door to his private apartments was opened for the Duke, a heavy gust of chill air made the torches flicker and turn blue, so that shadows crowded into the hall. Ivrian felt the others draw away from her with suspicious glances and mutterings, as if they were certain there had been truth in the Duke's jest. She did not look up. After a while someone came and told her that the Duke commanded her presence. Without a word she rose and followed.

The Duke's face was gray and furrowed with pain, but he had control of himself, though with each breath his hand tightened convulsively on the edge of the bed until his knuckles were like knobs of rock. He was propped up with pillows and a furred robe had been tucked closely about his shoulders and long-legged braziers glowed around the bed. In spite of all he was shivering convulsively.

COME here, girl," he ordered in a low, labored voice that hissed against his drawn lips. "You know what has happened. My heart pains as though there were a fire under it and yet my skin is cased in ice. There is a stabbing in my joints as if long needles pierced clear through the marrow. It is wizard's work."

"Wizard's work, beyond doubt," confirmed Giscorl, the thin-faced henchman, who stood at the head of the bed. "And there is no need to guess who. That young serpent whom you did not kill quickly enough ten days ago! He's been reported skulking in the woods, aye, and talking to . . . certain ones," he added, eyeing Ivrian narrowly, suspiciously.

A spasm of agony shook the Duke. "I should have stamped out whelp with sire," he groaned. Then his eyes shifted back to Ivrian. "Look, girl, you've been seen poking about in the forest where the old wizard was killed. It's believed you talked with his cub."

Ivrian wet her lips, tried to speak, shook her head. She could feel her father's eyes probing into her. Then his fingers reached out and twisted themselves in her hair.

"I believe you're in league with him!" His whisper was like a rusty knife. "You're helping him to do this to me. Admit it! Ad-

mit!" And he thrust her cheek against the nearest brazier so that her hair smoked and her "No" became a shuddering scream. The brazier swayed and Giscorl steadied it. Through Ivrian's scream the Duke snarled, "Your mother once held red coals to prove her honor."

A ghostly blue flame ran up Ivrian's hair. The Duke jerked her from the brazier and fell back against the pillows.

"Send her away," he finally whispered faintly, each word an effort. "She's a coward and wouldn't dare to hurt even me. Meantime, Giscorl, send out more men to hunt through the woods. They must find his lair before dawn, or I'll rupture my heart withstanding the pain."

Curtly Giscorl motioned Ivrian toward the door. She cringed, and slunk from the room, fighting down tears. Her cheek pulsed with pain. She was not aware of the strangely speculative smile with which the hawk-faced henchman watched her out.

* * *

IVRIAN stood at the narrow window of her room watching the little bands of horsemen come and go, their torches glowing like will o' the wisps in the woods. The stronghold was full of mysterious movement. The very stones seemed restlessly alive, as if they shared the torment of their master.

She felt herself drawn toward a certain point out there in the darkness. A memory kept recurring to her of how one day Glavas Rho had showed her a small cavern in the hillside and had warned her that it was an evil place, where much baneful sorcery had been done in the past. Her fingertips moved round the crescent-shaped blister on her cheek and over the rough streak in her hair.

Finally her uneasiness and the pull from the night became too strong for her. She dressed in the dark and edged open the door of her chamber. The corridor seemed for the moment deserted. She hurried along it, keeping close to the wall, and darted down the worn rounded hummocks of the stone stair. The tramp of footsteps sent her hurrying into a niche, where she cowered while two huntsmen strode glum-faced toward the Duke's chamber. They were dust-stained and stiff from riding.

"No one'll find him in all that dark," one of them muttered. "It's like hunting an ant in a cellar."

The other nodded. "And wizards can change landmarks and make forest paths turn on themselves, so that all searchers are befuddled."

As soon as they were past Ivrian hastened into the banquet hall, now dark and empty, and

through the kitchen with its high brick ovens and its huge copper kettles glinting in the shadows.

Outside in the courtyard torches were flaring and there was a bustle of activity as grooms brought fresh horses or led off spent ones, but she trusted to her huntsman's costume to let her pass unrecognized. Keeping to the shadows, she worked her way around to the stables. Her horse moved restlessly and neighed when she slipped into the stall, but quieted at her low whisper. A few moments and it was saddled, and she was leading it around to the open fields at the back. No searching parties seemed to be near, so she mounted and rode swiftly toward the wood.

HER mind was a storm of anxieties. She could not explain to herself how she had dared come this far, except that the attraction toward that point in the night—the cavern against which Glavas Rho had warned her—possessed a sorcerous insistence not to be denied.

Then when the forest engulfed her, she suddenly felt that she was committing herself to the arms of darkness and putting behind forever the grim stronghold and its cruel occupants. The ceiling of leaves blotted out most of the stars. She trusted to a light rein on her horse and her

memory to guide her straight. And in this she was successful, for within a half hour she reached a shallow ravine which led past the cavern she sought.

Now, for the first time, her horse became uneasy. It balked and uttered little whinnying cries of fear and tried repeatedly to turn off as she urged it along the ravine. Its pace slowed to a walk. Finally it refused to move further. Its ears were laid back and it was trembling all over.

Ivrian dismounted and moved on. The forest was portentously quiet, as if all animals and birds—even the insects—had gone. The darkness ahead was almost tangible, as if built of black bricks just beyond her hand.

Then Ivrian became aware of the green glow, vague and faint at first as the ghosts of an aurora. Gradually it grew brighter and acquired a bickering quality, as the leafy curtains between her and it became fewer. Suddenly she found herself staring directly at it—a thick, heavy, soot-edge flame that writhed instead of danced. If green slime could be transmuted to fire, it would have that look. It burned in the mouth of a shallow cavern.

Then, beside the flame, she saw the face of the apprentice of Glavas Rho, and in that instant an agony of horror and sympathy tore at her mind.

The face seemed inhuman—more a green mask of torment than anything alive. The cheeks were drawn in; the eyes were unnaturally wild; it was very pale, and dripping with cold sweat induced by intense inward effort. There was much suffering in it, but also much power—power to control the thick twisting shadows that seemed to crowd around the green flame, power to master the forces of hate that were being marshalled. At regular intervals the cracked lips moved and the arms and hands made set gestures.

It seemed to Ivrian that she heard the mellow voice of Glavas Rho repeating a statement he had once made to Mouse and to her. "None can use black magic without straining the soul to the utter most—and staining it into the bargain. None can inflict suffering without enduring the same. None can send death by spells and sorcery without walking on the brink of death's own abyss, aye and dripping his own blood into it. The forces black magic evokes are like two-edged poisoned swords with grips studded with scorpion stings. Only a strong man, leather-handed, in whom hate and evil are very powerful, can wield them, and he only for a space."

IN Mouse's face Ivrian saw the living example of those words.

Step by step she moved toward him, feeling no more power to control her movements than if she were in a nightmare. She became aware of shadowy presences, as if she were pushing her way through cobweb veils. She came so near that she could have reached out her hand and touched him, and still he did not notice her, as if his spirit were out beyond the stars, grappling the blackness there.

Then a twig snapped under her foot and Mouse sprang up with terrifying swiftness, the energy of every taut muscle released. He snatched up his sword and lunged at the intruder. But, when the green blade was within a hand's breadth of Ivrian's throat, he checked it with an effort. He glared, lips drawn back from his teeth. Although he had checked his sword, he seemed only half to recognize her.

AT that instant Ivrian was buffeted by a mighty gust of wind, which came from the mouth of the cavern, a strange wind, carrying shadows. The green fire burned low, running rapidly along the sticks that were its fuel, and almost snuffing out.

Then the wind ceased and the thick darkness lifted, to be replaced by a wan gray light heralding the dawn. The fire turned from green to yellow. The wizard's apprentice staggered, and

the sword dropped from his fingers.

"Why did you come here?" he questioned thickly.

She saw how his face was wasted with hunger and hate, how his clothing bore the signs of many nights spent in the forest like an animal, under no roof. Then suddenly she realized that she knew the answer to his question.

"Oh Mouse," she whispered, "Let us go away from this place. Here is only horror." He swayed, and she caught hold of him, "Take me with you, Mouse," she said.

He stared frowningly into her eyes. "You do not hate me then, for what I have done to your father? Or what I have done to the teachings of Glavas Rho?" he questioned puzzledly. "You are not afraid of me?"

"I am afraid of everything," she whispered, clinging to him. "I am afraid of you, yes, a great deal afraid. But that fear can be unlearned. Oh Mouse, will you take me away?—to Lankhmar or to Earth's End?"

He took her by the shoulders. "I have dreamt of that," he said slowly. "But you . . . ?"

"Apprentice of Glavas Rho!" thundered a stern, triumphant voice, "I apprehend you in the name of Duke Janarrl for sorceries practiced on the Duke's body!"



FOUR huntsmen were springing forward from the undergrowth with swords drawn and Giscorl three paces behind them. Mouse met them halfway. They soon found that this time they were not dealing with a youth blinded by anger, but with a cold and cunning swordsman. There was a kind of magic in his primitive blade. He ripped up the arm of his first assailant with a well-judged thrust, disarmed the second with an unexpected twist, then coolly warded off the blows of the other two, retreating slowly. But other huntsmen followed the first four and circled round. Still fighting with terrible intensity and giving blow for blow, Mouse went down under the sheer weight of their attack. They pinioned his arms and dragged him to his feet. He was bleeding from a cut in the cheek, but he carried his head high, though it was beast-shaggy. His bloodshot eyes sought out Ivrian.

"I should have known," he said evenly, "that having betrayed Glava Rho, you would not rest until you had betrayed me. You did your work well, girl. I trust you take much pleasure in my death."

Giscorl laughed. Like a whip, the words of Mouse stung Ivrian. She could not meet his eyes. Then she became aware that there was a man on horseback behind Giscorl and, looking up,

she saw that it was her father. His wide body was bent by pain. His face was a death's mask. It seemed a miracle that he managed to cling to the saddle.

"Quick, Giscorl!" he hissed.

But the thin-faced henchman was already sniffing around in the cavern's mouth like a well trained ferret. He gave a cry of satisfaction and lifted down a little figure from a ledge above the fire, which he next stamped out. He carried the figure gingerly as though it were exceedingly delicate. As he passed by her, Ivrian saw that it was a clay doll wide as it was tall and dressed in brown and yellow leaves, and that its features were a grotesque copy of her father's. It was pierced in several places by long bone needles.

"This is the thing, oh Master," said Giscorl, holding it up, but the Duke only repeated, "Quick, Giscorl!" The henchman started to withdraw the largest needle which pierced the doll's middle, but the Duke gasped in agony and cried, "Forget not the balm!" Whereupon Giscorl uncorked with his teeth and poured a large vial of sirupy liquid over the doll's body and the Duke sighed a little with relief. Then Giscorl very carefully withdrew the needles, one by one, and as each needle was withdrawn the Duke's breath whistled and he clapped his hand to his shoulder

or thigh, as if it were from his own body that the needles were being drawn. After the last one was out, he sat slumped in his saddle for a long time. When he finally looked up, the transformation that had taken place was astonishing. There was color in his face, and the lines of pain had vanished, and his voice was loud and ringing.

"Take the prisoner back to our stronghold to await our judgment," he cried. "Let this be a warning to all who would practice wizardry in our domain. Giscorl, you have proved yourself a faithful servant." His eyes rest on Ivrian. "You have played with witchcraft too often, girl, and need other instruction. As a beginning you will witness the punishment I shall visit on this foul wizardling."

"A small boon, oh Duke!" Mouse cried. He had been hosted onto a saddle and his legs tied under the horse's belly. "Keep your spying daughter out of my sight. And let her not look at me."

"Strike him in the lips, one of you," the Duke ordered. "Ivrian, ride close behind him—I command it."

SLOWLY the little cavalcade rode off toward the stronghold through the brightening dawn. Ivrian's horse had been brought to her and she took her

place as bidden, sunk in a nightmare of misery and defeat. She seemed to see the pattern of her whole life laid out before her—past, present, and future—and it consisted of nothing but fear, loneliness, and pain. Even the memory of her mother, who had died when she was a little girl, was something that still brought a palpitation of panic to her heart. A bold handsome woman, who always had a whip in her hand, and whom even her father had feared. Ivrian remembered how when the servants had brought word that her mother had broken her neck in a fall from a horse, her only emotion had been fear that they were lying to her, and that this was some new trick of her mother's to put her off guard, and that some new punishment would follow.

Then, from the day of her mother's death, her father had shown her nothing but a strangely perverse cruelty. Perhaps it was his disgust at not having a son that made him treat her like a cowardly boy instead of a girl and encourage his lowliest followers to maltreat her—from the maids who played at ghosts around her bed to the kitchen wenches who put frogs in her milk and nettles in her salad.

Sometimes it seemed to her that anger at not having a son

was too weak an explanation for her father's cruelties, and that he was revenging himself through Ivrian on his dead wife, whom he had certainly feared and who still influenced his actions, since he had never married again or openly taken mistresses. Or perhaps there was truth in what he had said of her mother and Glavas Rho—no, surely that must be a wild imagining of his anger. Or perhaps, as he sometimes told her, he was trying to make her live up to her mother's vicious and bloodthirsty example, trying to recreate his hated and adored wife in the person of her daughter, and finding a queer pleasure in the refractoriness of the material on which he worked and the grotesquerie of the whole endeavor.

Then in Glavas Rho Ivrian had found a refuge. When she had first chanced upon the white-bearded old man in her lonely wanderings through the forest, he had been mending the broken leg of a fawn and he had spoken to her softly of the ways of kindness and of the brotherhood of all life, human and animal. And she had come back day after day to hear her own vague intuitions revealed to her as deep truths and to take refuge in his wide sympathy . . . and to explore her timid friendship with his clever little apprentice. But now Glavas Rho was dead and Mouse had

taken the spider's way, or the cat's path, as the old wizard had sometimes referred to bale magic.

SHE looked up and saw Mouse riding a little ahead and to one side of her, his hands bound behind him, his head and body bowed forward. Conscience smote her, for she knew she had been responsible for his capture. But worse than conscience was the pang of lost opportunity, for there ahead of her rode, doomed, the one man who might have saved her from her life.

A narrowing of the path brought her close beside him. She said hurriedly, ashamedly, "If there is anything I can do so that you will forgive me a little . . ."

The glance he bent on her, looking sidewise up, was sharp, appraising, and surprisingly alive.

"Perhaps you can," he murmured softly, so the huntsmen ahead might not hear. "As you must know, your father will have me tortured to death. You will be asked to watch it. Do just that. Keep your eyes riveted on mine the whole time. Sit close beside your father. Keep your hand on his arm. Aye, kiss him too. Above all, show no sign of fright or revulsion. Be like a statue carved of marble. Watch to the end. One other thing—wear, if you can, a gown of your mother's, or if not a

gown, then some article of her clothing." He smiled at her thinly. "Do this and I will at least have the consolation of watching you flinch—and flinch—and flinch!"

"No mumbling charms now!" cried the huntsman suddenly, jerking Mouse's horse ahead.

Ivrian reeled as if she had been struck in the face. She had thought her misery could go no deeper, but Mouse's words had beaten it down a final notch. At that instant the cavalcade came into the open, and the stronghold loomed up ahead—a great horned and jag-crested blot on the sunrise. Never before had it seemed so much like a hideous monster. Ivrian felt that its high gates were the iron jaws of death.

* * *

JANARRL, striding into the torture chamber deep below his stronghold, experienced a hot wave of exultation, as when he and his huntsmen closed in around an animal for the kill. But atop the wave was a very faint foam of fear. His feelings were a little like those of a ravenously hungry man invited to a sumptuous banquet, but who has been warned by a fortuneteller to fear death by poison. He was haunted by the feverish frightened face of the man arm-wounded by the wizardling's corroded bronze sword. His eyes met those of Glavas Rho's apprentice,

whose half-naked body was stretched—though not yet painfully so—upon the rack, and the Duke's sense of fear sharpened. They were too searching, those eyes, too cold and menacing, too suggestive of magical powers.

He told himself angrily that a little pain would soon change their look to one of trapped panic. He told himself that it was natural that he should still be on edge from last night's horrors, when his life had almost been pried from him by dirty sorceries. But deep in his heart he knew that fear was always with him—fear of anything or anyone that some day might be stronger than he and hurt him as he had hurt others—fear of the dead he had harmed and could hurt no longer—fear of his dead wife, who had indeed been stronger and crueller than he and who had humiliated him in a thousand ways that no one but he remembered.

But he also knew that his daughter would soon be here and that he could then shift off his fear on her; by forcing her to fear, he would be able to heal his own courage, as he had done innumerable times in the past.

So he confidently took his place and gave order that the torture begin.

AS the great wheel creaked and the leathern wristlets and

anklets began to tighten a little, Mouse felt a qualm of helpless panic run over his body. It centered in his joints—those little deep-set hinges of bone normally exempt from danger. There was yet no pain. His body was merely stretched a little, as if he were yawning.

The low ceiling was close to his face. The flickering light of the torches revealed the mortices in the stone and the dusty cobwebs. Toward his feet he could see the upper portion of the wheel, and the two large hands that gripped its spokes, dragging them down effortlessly, very slowly, stopping for twenty heartbeats at a time. By turning his head and eyes to the side he could see the big figure of the Duke—not wide as his doll of him, but wide—sitting in a carven wooden chair, two armed men standing behind him. The Duke's brown hands, their jeweled rings flashing fire, were closed over the knobs on the chair-arms. His feet were firmly planted. His jaw was set. Only his eyes showed any uneasiness or vulnerability. They kept shifting from side to side—rapidly, regularly, like the pivoted ones of a doll.

"My daughter should be here," he heard the Duke say abruptly in a flat voice. "Hasten her. She is not to be permitted to delay."

One of the men hurried away.

Then the twinges of pain com-

menced, striking at random in the forearm, the back, the knee, the shoulder. With an effort Mouse composed his features. He fixed his attention on the faces around him, surveying them in detail as if they formed a picture, noting the highlights on the cheeks and eyes and beards and the shadows, wavering with the torchflames, that their figures cast upon the low walls.

Then those low walls melted and, as if distance were no longer real, he saw the whole wide world beyond them: great reaches of forest, bright amber desert, and turquoise sea; the Lake of Monsters, the City of Ghouls, magnificent Lankhmar, the Land of the Eight Cities, the Trollstep Mountains, the fabulous Cold Waste and by some chance striding there an open-faced, hulking red-haired youth he'd glimpsed among the pirates—all places and persons he'd never now encounter, but showing in wondrous fine detail, as if carved and tinted by a master miniaturist.

WITH startling suddenness the pain returned and increased. The twinges became needle stabs—a cunning prying at his insides—fingers of force crawling up his arms and legs toward his spine—an unsettling at the hips. He desperately tensed his muscles against them.

Then he heard the Duke's voice, "Not so fast. Stop a while." Mouse thought he recognized the overtones of panic in the voice. He twisted his head despite the pangs it cost him and watched the uneasy eyes. They swung to and fro, like little pendulums.

Suddenly then, as if time were no longer real, Mouse saw another scene in this chamber. The Duke was there and his eyes swinging from side to side, but he was younger and there was open panic and horror in his face. Close beside him was a boldly handsome woman in a dark red dress cut low in the bosom and with slashes inset with yellow silk. While stretched upon the rack itself in Mouse's place was a strappingly beautiful but now pitifully whimpering maid, whom the woman in red was questioning, with equal coldness and insistence on detail, about her amorous encounters with the Duke and her attempt on the life of herself, the Duke's wife, by poison.

Footsteps broke that scene, as stones destroy a reflection in water, and brought the present back. Then a voice: "Your daughter comes, oh Duke."

Mouse steeled himself. He had not realized how much he dreaded this meeting, even in his pain. He felt bitterly certain that Ivrian would not have heeded his words. She was not evil, he knew,

and she had not meant to betray him, but by the same token she was without courage. She would come whimpering, and her anguish would eat at what little self-control he could muster and doom his last wild wishful schemings.

Lighter footsteps were approaching now—hers. There was something curiously measured about them.

It meant added pain for him to turn his head so he could see the doorway; yet he did so, watching her figure define itself as it entered the region of ruddy light cast by the torches.

Then he saw the eyes. They were wide and staring. They were fixed straight on him. And they did not turn away. The face was pale, calm with a deadly serenity.

He saw she was dressed in a gown of dark red, cut low in the bosom and with slashes inset with yellow silk.

And then the soul of Mouse exulted, for he knew that she had done what he had bidden her. Glavas Rho had said, "The sufferer can hurl his suffering back upon his oppressor, if only there be a channel for his hate." Now there was a channel open for him, leading to Janarri's inmost being.

Hungrily, Mouse fastened his gaze on Ivrian's unblinking eyes, as if they were pools of black

magic in a cold moon. Those eyes, he knew, could receive what he could give.

He saw her seat herself by the Duke. He saw the Duke peer sidewise at his daughter and start up as if she were a ghost. But Ivrian did not look toward him, only her hand stole out and fastened on his wrist, and the Duke sank shuddering back into his chair.

"Proceed!" he heard the Duke call out to the torturers, and this time the panic in the Duke's voice was very close to the surface.

THE wheel turned. Mouse heard himself groan piteously. But there was something in him now that could ride on top of the pain and that had no part in the groan. He felt that there was a path between his eyes and Ivrian's—a rock-walled channel through which the forces of human spirit and of more than human spirit could be sent roaring like a mountain torrent. And still she did not turn away. No expression crossed her face when he groaned, only her eyes seemed to darken as she grew still more pale. Mouse sensed a shifting of feelings in his body. Through the scalding waters of pain, his hate rose to the surface, rode atop too. He pushed his hate down the rock-walled channel, saw Ivrian's face grow more

deathlike as it struck her, saw her tighten her grip on her father's wrist, sensed the trembling that her father no longer could master.

The wheel turned. From far off Mouse heard a steady, heart-tearing whimpering. But a part of him was outside the room now—high, he felt, in the frosty emptiness above the world. He saw spread out below him a nighted panorama of wooded hills and valleys. Near the summit of one hill was a tight clump of tiny stone towers. But as if he were endowed with a magical vulture's eye, he could see through the walls and roofs of those towers into the very foundations beneath, into a tiny murky room in which men tinier than insects clustered and cowered together. Some were working at a mechanism which inflicted pain on a creature that might have been a bleached and writhing ant. And the pain of that creature, whose tiny thin cries he could faintly hear, had a strange effect on him at this height, strengthening his inward powers and tearing away a veil from his eyes—a veil that had hitherto hidden a whole black universe.

For he began to hear about him a mighty murmuring. The frigid darkness was beaten by wings of stone. The steely light of the stars cut into his brain

like painless knives. He felt a wild black whirlpool of evil, like a torrent of black tigers, blast down upon him from above, and he knew that it was his to control. He let it surge through his body and then hurled it down the unbroken path that led to two points of darkness in the tiny room below—the two staring eyes of Ivrian, daughter of Duke Janarri. He saw the black of the whirlwind's heart spread on her face like an inkblot, seep down her white arms and dye her fingers. He saw her hand tighten convulsively on her father's arm. He saw her reach her other hand toward the Duke and lift her open lips to his cheek.

Then, for one moment while the torch flames whipped low and blue in a physical wind that seemed to blow through the morticed stones of the buried chamber . . . for one moment while the torturers and guards dropped the tools of their trades for one indelible moment of hate fulfilled and revenge accomplished, Mouse saw the strong, square face of Duke Janarri shake in the agitation of ulti-

mate terror, the features twisted like heavy cloth wrung between invisible hands, then crumpled in defeat and death.

* * *

The strand supporting Mouse snapped. His spirit dropped like a plummet toward the buried room.

An agonizing pain filled him, but it promised life, not death. Above him was the low stone ceiling. The hands on the wheel were white and slender. Then he knew that the pain was that of release from the rack.

Slowly Ivrian loosened the rings of leather from his wrists and ankles. Slowly she helped him down, supporting him with all her strength as they dragged their way across the room, from which everyone else had fled in terror save for one crumpled jeweled figure in a carven chair. They paused by that and he surveyed the dead thing with the cool, satisfied, masklike gaze of a cat. Then on and up they went, Ivrian and the Gray Mouser, through corridors emptied by panic, and out into the night.

THE END

