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PLANET

stories

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The soon-dead manned the black ship of Corun . . .

WITCH of the DEMON SEAS

A Novel by A. A. Craig

Also POUL ANDERSON

MARTIAN NIGHTMARE

by BRYCE WALTON

ALFRED COPPEL

M. L. COE

PLANET STORIES



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JAN., 1951

► *Powerful Novel of Alien Sorcery*

WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS A. A. Craig 4

Guide a black galleon to the lost, fear-haunted Citadel of the Xanthi wizards—into the very jaws of Doom? Corun, condemned pirate of Conahur, laughed. Aye, he'd do it, and gladly. It would mean a reprieve from the headman's axe—a few more precious moments of life and love . . . though his lover be a witch!

► *Two Space-Adventure Novels*

TIGER BY THE TAIL Poul Anderson 38

The haughty, horned aliens from the planet Scotha had very well organized intentions of conquering the Terran Empire—and Captain Dominic Flandry, Terra's ace saboteur, suddenly found himself in a strategic position to louse up the works. How? Well, Achilles had a heel . . . and what else could you call a Scothani?

MARTIAN NIGHTMARE Bryce Walton 80

Three tough, cynical fighting-men of Earth—Danton, Keith, Van Ness—rose from their tomb of forgetfulness . . . to find themselves space-wrecked on Mars, the last hope of mankind against the evil and immortal Oligarchs. It was weird, incredible, it was a horrible dream . . . but it was real. Or was it?

► *Four Thrilling Short Stories*

TASK TO LUNA Alfred Coppel 56

Two rocketships bit into lunar dust. Two men—a Yankee, a Russian—dueled in nightmare shadow and glare. What cosmic joke made them drop their weapons and die laughing?

POISON PLANET William Oberfield 60

It was only a muffled gun-shot, deep in the rank, fetid jungles of Venus . . . but it plunged the crew of the VENUS I into a Hell from which there was no return . . .

GUEST EXPERT Allen K. Lang 71

A problem—a strange and deadly problem—confronted Earth . . . but the visitor from Mars was very confident that he could solve it. Which he did . . . in his strange and deadly way . . .

SAFETY MARGIN J. T. M'Intosh 73

The Vibro-spacedrive had one bad habit, and a mystery. The habit: It often exploded, which McCall already knew. He was to learn the mystery too . . .

► *Planet's Regular Feature*

THE VIZIGRAPH—Letters from Readers 2

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WITCH *of the* demon seas

● *A Novel of Alien Sorcery* by **A. A. CRAIG**

KHROMAN THE CONQUEROR, Thalassocrat of Achaera, stood watching his guards bring up the captured pirates. He was a huge man, his hair and square-cut beard jet-black despite middle age, the strength of his warlike youth still in his powerful limbs. He wore a plain white tunic and purple-trimmed cloak; the only sign of kingship was the golden chaplet on his head and the signet ring on one finger. In the gaudy crowd of slender, chattering courtiers, he stood out with a brutal contrast.

Guide a black galleon to the lost, fear-haunted Citadel of the Xanthi wizards—into the very jaws of Doom? Corun, condemned pirate of Conahur, laughed. Aye, he'd do it, and gladly. It would mean a reprieve from the headsman's axe—a few more precious moments of life and love . . .
though his lover be a witch!



Corun fell under that smashing attack . . . fangs gleamed, and claws sank into his muscles . . .

"So they've finally captured him," he rumbled. "So we're finally rid of Corun and his sea-going bandits. Maybe now the land will have some peace."

"What will you do with them, sire?" asked Shorzon the Sorcerer.

Khroman shrugged heavy shoulders. "I don't know. Pirates are usually fed to the erinyes at the games, I suppose, but Corun deserves something special."

"Public torture, perhaps, sire? It could be stretched over many days."

"No, you fool! Corun was the bravest enemy Achaera ever had. He deserves an honorable death and a decent tomb. Not that it matters much, but—"

Shorzon exchanged a glance with Chryseis, then looked back toward the approaching procession.

THE CITY TAUROS was built around a semicircular bay, a huge expanse of clear green water on whose surface floated ships from halfway round the world—the greatest harbor for none knew how many empty sea-leagues, capital of Achaera which, with its trade and its empire of entire archipelagoes, was the mightiest of the thalassocracies. Beyond the fortified sea walls at the end of the bay, the ocean swelled mightily to the clouded horizon, gray and green and amber. Within, the hulls and sails of ships were a bright confusion up to the stone docks.

The land ran upward from the bay, and Tauros was built on the hills, a tangle of streets between houses that ranged from the clay huts of the poor to the marble villas of the great. Beyond the city walls on the landward side, the island of Achaera lifted still more steeply, a gaunt rocky country with a few scattered farms and herds. Her power came all from the sea.

A broad straight road lined with sphinxes ran straight from the harbor up to the palace, which stood on the highest hill in the city. At its end, wide marble stairs lifted toward the fragrant imperial gardens in which the court stood.

Folk swarmed about the street, mobs straining to see the soldiers as they led their captives toward the palace. The word that Corun of Conahur, the most danger-

ous of the pirates, had finally been taken had driven merchants to ecstasy and brought insurance rates tumbling down. There was laughter in the throng, jeers for the prisoners, shouts for the king.

Not entirely so, however. Most of the crowd were, of course, Achaerans, a slim dark-haired folk clad generally in a light tunic and sandals, proud of their ancient might and culture. They were loudest in shouting at the robbers. But there were others who stood silent and glum-faced, not daring to voice their thoughts but making them plain enough. Tall, fair men from Conahur itself, galled by Achaeran rule; fur-clad barbarians from Norriki, blue-skinned savages from Umlotu, with a high professional regard for their fellow pirate; slaves from a hundred islands, who had not ceased dreaming of home and remembered that Corun had been in the habit of freeing slaves when he captured a ship or a town. Others might be neutral, coming from too far away to care, for Corun had only attacked Achaeran galleys; the black men from misty Orzaban, the copper-colored Chilatzis, the yellow wizards from mysterious Hiung-nu.

The soldiers marched their prisoners rapidly up the street. They were mercenaries, blue Umlotuan in the shining corselets, greaves, and helmets of the Achaeran forces, armed with the short sword and square shield of Achaera as well as the long halberds which were their special weapon. When the mob came too close, they swung the butts out with bone-snapping force.

The captive pirates were mostly from Conahur, though there were a number of other lands represented. They stumbled wearily along, clad in a few rags, weighted down hand and foot by their chains. Only one of them, the man in the lead, walked erect, but he strode along with the arrogance of a conqueror.

"That must be Corun himself, there in the front of them," said Chryseis.

"It is," nodded Shorzon.

THEY MOVED FORWARD for a better look. Imperceptibly, the court shrank from them. Khroman's advisor and daughter were feared in Tauros,

Shorzon was tall and lean and dry, as if the Heaven-Fire beyond the eternal clouds had fallen on him and seared all moisture out of the gaunt body. He had the noble features of the old Achaeran aristocracy, but his eyes were dark and sunken and smoldering with strange fires. Even in the warmth of midday, he wore a black robe falling to his feet, and his white beard streamed over it. Folk knew that he had learned sorcery in Hiung-nu, and it was whispered that for all Khroman's brawling strength it was Shorzon who really dominated the realm.

Khroman had married Shorzon's daughter—none knew who her mother had been, though it was thought she was a witch from Hiung-nu. She had not lived long after giving birth to Chryseis, whose grandfather thus came to have much of her upbringing in his hands. Rumor had it that she was as much a witch as he a warlock.

Certainly she could be cruel and ungovernable. But she had a strange dark beauty over her that haunted men; there were more who would die for her than one could readily count . . . and, it was said, *had* died after a night or two.

She was tall and lithe, with night-black hair that streamed to her waist when unbound. Her eyes were huge and dark in a face of coldly chiseled loveliness, and the full red mouth denied the austere, goddess-like fineness of her countenance. Today she had not affected the heavy gold and jewels of the court; a white robe hung in dazzling folds about her—and there might as well not have been another woman present.

The prisoners came through the palace gates, which clashed shut behind them. Up the stairs they went and into the fragrance of green trees and bushes, blooming plants, and leaping fountains that was the garden. There they halted, and the court buzzed about them like flies around a dead animal.

Khroman stepped up to Corun. "Greeting," he said, and there was no mockery in his voice.

"Greeting," replied the pirate in the same even tones.

They measured each other, the *look* cunning, you could have gone far in

two strong men who understood what they were about. Corun was as big as Khroman, a fair-skinned giant of a man in chains and rags. Weather-bleached yellow hair hung to his shoulders from a haughtily lifted head, and his fire-blue eyes were unwavering^t on the king's. His face was lean, long-jawed, curve-nosed, hardened by bitterness and suffering and desperate unending battle. A chained erinye could not have looked more fiercely on his captors.

"It's taken a long time to catch you, Corun," said Khroman. "You've led us a merry chase. Once I almost had the pleasure of meeting you myself. It was when you raided Serapolis—remember? I happened to be there, and gave chase in one of the war-galleys. But we never did catch you."

"One of the ships did." Corun's voice was strangely soft for so big a man. "It didn't come back, as you may recall."

"How did they finally catch you?" asked Khroman.

CORUN SHRUGGED, and the chains about his wrists rattled. "You already know as much as I care to talk about," he said wearily. "We sailed into Iliotis Bay and found a whole fleet waiting for us. Someone must finally have spied out our stronghold." Khroman nodded, and Corun shrugged a shoulder: "They blocked off our retreat, so we just fought till everyone was dead or captured. These half-hundred men are all who live. Unfortunately, I was knocked out during the battle and woke up to find myself a prisoner. Otherwise—" his blue gaze raked the court with a lashing contempt—"I could be peacefully feeding fish now, instead of your witless fish-eyes."

"I won't drag out the business for you, Corun," said Khroman. "Your men will have to be given to the games, of course, but you can be decently and privately beheaded."

"Thanks," said the pirate, "but I'll stay with my men."

Khroman stared at him in puzzlement. "But why did you ever do it?" he asked finally. "With your strength and skill and

Achaera. We take mercenaries from conquered provinces, you know. You could have gotten Achaeran citizenship in time."

"I was a prince of Conahur," said Corun slowly. "I saw my land invaded and my folk taken off as slaves. I saw my brothers hacked down at the battle of Lyr, my sister taken as concubine by your admiral, my father hanged, my mother burned alive when they fired the old castle. They offered me amnesty because I was young and they wanted a figurehead. So I swore an oath of fealty to Achaera, and broke it the first chance I got. It was the only oath I ever broke, and still I am proud of it. I sailed with pirates until I was big enough to master my own ships. That is enough of an answer."

"It may be," said Khroman slowly. "You realize, of course, that the conquest of Conahur took place before I came to the throne? And that I certainly couldn't negate it, in view of the Thalassocrat's duty to his own country, and had to punish its incessant rebelliousness?"

"I don't hold anything against you yourself, Khroman," said Corun with a tired smile. "But I'd give my soul to the nether fires for the chance to pull your damned palace down around your ears!"

"I'm sorry it has to end this way," said the king. "You were a brave man. I'd like to drain many beakers of wine with you on the other side of death." He signed to the guards. "Take him away."

"One moment, sire," said Shorzon. "Is it your intention to lock all these pirates in the same dungeon cell?"

"Why—I suppose so. Why not?"

"I do not trust their captain. Chained and imprisoned, he is still a menace. I think he has certain magical techniques—"

"That's a lie!" spat Corun. "I never needed your stinking woman's tricks to flatten the likes of Achaera!"

"I would not leave him with his men," advised Shorzon imperturbably. "Best he be given his own cell, alone. I know a place."

"Well—well, let it be so." Khroman waved a hand in dismissal.

As Shorzon turned to lead the guards ~~to~~ of Conahur's philosophers, that the

off, he traded a long glance with Chryseis. Her eyes remained hooded as she looked after the departing captives.

II

THE CELL WAS NO LONGER than a man's height, a dripping cave hewed out of the rock under the palace foundations. Corun crouched on the streaming floor in utter darkness. The chains which they had locked to ringbolts in the wall clashed when he stirred.

And this was how it ended, he thought bitterly. The wild career of the exiled conqueror, the heave and surge of ships under the running waves, the laughter of comrades and the clamor of swords and the thrum of wind in the rigging, had come to this—one man hunched in a loneliness and darkness like a colder womb, waiting in timeless murk for the day when they would drag him out to be torn by beasts for the amusement of fools.

They fed him at intervals, a slave bringing a bowl of prison swill while a spear-armed guard stood well out of reach and watched. Otherwise he was alone. He could not even hear the voices of other captives; there was only the slow dripping of water and the harsh tones of iron links. The cell must lie below even the regular dungeons, far down in the very bowels of the island.

Vague images floated across his mind—the high cliffs about Iliotis Bay, the great flowers blooming with sullen fires in the jungle beyond the beach, the slim black corsair galleys at anchor. He remembered the open sky, the eternally clouded sky under which blew the long wet winds, out of which spilled rain and lightning and grew the eerie blue of dusk. He had often wondered what lay beyond those upper clouds.

Now and then, he remembered, one could see the vague disc of the Heaven-Fire, and he had heard of times when incredibly violent storms opened a brief rift in the high cloud layers to let through a shaft of searing brilliance at whose touch water boiled and the earth burst into flame. It made him think of the speculations of Conahur's philosophers, that the

world was really a globe around which the Heaven-Fire swung, bringing day and night. Some had gone so far as to imagine that it was the world which did the moving, that the Heaven-Fire was a ball of flame in the middle of creation about which all other things revolved.

But Conahur was in chains now, he remembered, its folk bowed to the will of Achaera's greedy proconsuls, its art and philosophy the idle playthings of the conquerors. The younger generation was growing up with an idea that it might be best to yield, to become absorbed into the thalassocracy and so eventually gain equal status with the Achaerans.

But Corun could not forget the great flames flapping against a wind-torn night sky, the struggling forms at ropes' ends swaying from trees, the long lines of chained people stumbling hopelessly to the slave galleys under Achaeran lashes. Perhaps he had carried the grudge too long—no, by Breannach Brannor! There had been a family which was no longer. That was grudge enough for a lifetime.

A lifetime, he thought sardonically, which wouldn't be very much protracted now.

HE SIGHED WEARILY in the stinking gloom of the cell. There were too many memories crowding in. The outlaw years had been hard and desperate, but they'd been good ones too. There had been song and laughter and comradeship and gigantic deeds over an endless waste of waters—the long blue hush of twilight, the soft black nights, the gray days with a sea running gray and green and gold under squalls of rain, the storms roaring and raging, the eager leap of a ship—frenzy of battle at the taking of town or galley, death so close one could almost hear the beat of black wings, orgy of loot and vengeance—the pirate town, grass huts under jungle trees, stuffed with treasure, full of brawling bawdy life, the scar-faced swaggering men and the lusty insolent women, ruddy fire-light hammering back the night while the surf thundered endlessly along the beach—

Well, all things came to a close. And while he would have wished a different

sort of death for himself, he didn't have long to wait in this misery.

Something stirred, far down the narrow corridor, and he caught the flickering glow of a torch. Scowling, he stood up, stooped under the low ceiling. Who in all the hells was this? It was too soon for feeding, unless his time sense had gone completely awry, and he didn't think the games could have been prepared in the few days since his arrival.

They came up to the entrance of the cell and stood looking in by the guttering red torchlight. A snarl twisted Corun's lips. Shorzon and Chryseis—"Of all the scum of Achaera," he growled, "I had to be inflicted with you."

"This is no time for insolence," said the sorcerer coldly. He lifted the torch higher. The red light threw his face into blood-splashed shadow. His eyes were pits of darkness in which smoldered two embers. His black robe blended with the surrounding shadow, his face and hands seemed to float disembodied in the dank air.

Corun's eyes traveled to Chryseis, and in spite of the hate that burned in him he had to admit she was perhaps the loveliest woman he had ever seen. Tall and slim and lithe, moving with the soundless grace of a Sanduvian pherax, the dark hair sheening down past the chill sculptured beauty of her marble-white face, she returned his blue stare with eyes of dark flame. She was dressed as if for action—a brief tunic that left arms and legs bare, a short black cloak, and high buskins—but jewels still blazed at throat and wrists.

Behind her padded a lean shadow at sight of which Corun stiffened. He had heard of Chryseis' tame erinye. Folk said the devil-beast had found a harder heart in the witch's breast and yielded to her; some said less mentionable things.

The slitted green eyes flared at Corun and the cruel muzzle opened in a fanged yawn. "Back, Perias," said Chryseis evenly.

Her voice was low and sweet, almost a caress. It seemed strange that such a voice had spoken the rituals of black sorcery and ordered the flaying alive of a thousand helpless Issarian prisoners and counseled some of the darkest intrigues in Achaera's

bloody history.

She said to Corun: "This is a fine end for all your noble thoughts, man of Conahur."

"At least," he answered, "you credit me with having had them. Which is more than I'd say for you."

THE RED LIPS curved in a cynical smile. "Human purposes have a habit of ending this way. The mighty warrior, the scourge of the seas, ends in a foul prison cell waiting for an unimaginative death. The old epics lied, didn't they? Life isn't quite the glorious adventure that fools think it to be."

"It could be, if it weren't for your sort." Wearily: "Go away, won't you? If you won't even let me talk with my old comrades, you can at least spare me your own company."

"We are here with a definite purpose," said Shorzon. "We offer you life, freedom—and the liberation of Conahur!"

He shook his tawny head. "It isn't even funny."

"No, no, I mean it," said Chryseis earnestly. "Shorzon had you put in here alone not out of malice, but simply to make this private talk possible. You can help us with a project so immeasurably greater than your petty quarrels that anything you can ask in return will be as nothing. And you are the one man who can do so."

"I tell you this so that, realizing you have some kind of bargaining position, you will meet as us as equal to equal, not as prisoner to captor. If you agree to aid us, you will be released this instant."

With a sudden flame within him, Corun tautened his huge body. O gods—O almighty gods beyond the clouds—if it were true—!

His voice shook: "What do you want?"

"Your help in a desperate venture," said Chryseis. "I tell you frankly that we may well all die in it. But at least you will die as a free man—and if we succeed, all the world may be ours."

"What is it?" he asked hoarsely.

"I cannot tell you everything now," said Shorzon. "But the story has long been current that you once sailed to the lairs of the Xanthi, the Sea Demons, and

returned alive. Is it true?"

"Aye." Corun stiffened, with sudden alarm trembling in his nerves. "Aye, by great good luck I came back. But they are not a race for humans to traffic with."

"I think the powers I can summon will match theirs," said Shorzon. "We want you to guide us to their dwellings and teach us the language on the way, as well as whatever else you know about them. When we return, you may go where you choose. And if we get their help, we will be able to set Conahur free soon afterward."

Corun shook his head. "It's nothing good that you plan," he said slowly. "No one would approach the Xanthi for any good purpose."

"You did, didn't you?" chuckled the wizard dryly. "If you want the truth, we are after their help in seizing the government of Achaera, as well as certain knowledge they have."

"If you succeeded," argued Corun stubbornly, "why should you then let Conahur go?"

"Because power over Achaera is only a step to something too far beyond the petty goals of empire for you to imagine," said Shorzon bleakly. "You must decide now, man. If you refuse, you die."

Chryseis moved one slim hand and the erinye padded forward on razor-clawed feet. The leathery wings were folded back against the long black body, the barbed tail lashed hungrily and a snarl vibrated in the lean throat. "If you say no," came the woman's sweet voice, "Perias will rip your guts out. That will at least afford us an amusing spectacle for our trouble." Then she smiled, the dazzling smile which had driven men to their doom ere this. "But if you say yes," she whispered, "a destiny waits for you that kings would envy. You are a strong man, Corun. I like strong men—"

The corsair looked into the warm dark light of her eyes, and back to the icy glare of the devil-beast. No unarmed man had ever survived the onslaught of an erinye—and he was chained.

At thought of returning to the dark home of the Xanthi, he shuddered. But still wondrous sweet, and—once

free to move about, he might still have some chance of escape or even of overpowering them.

Or—who knew? He wondered, with a brief giddiness, if the dark witch before him could be as evil as her enemies said. Strong and ruthless, yes—but so was he. When he learned the full truth about her soaring plans, he might even decide they were right.

In any case—to live! To die, if he must, under the sky!

"I'll go," he said hoarsely. "I'll go with you."

The low exultant laughter of Chryseis sang in the flare-lit gloom.

Shorzon came up and took a key from his belt. For a bare moment, the thought of snapping that skinny neck raged through Corun's mind.

The magician smiled grimly. "Don't try it," he said. "As a small proof of what we can do—"

Suddenly he was not there. It was a monster from the jungles of Umlothu standing in the cell with Corun, a scaled beast that hissed at him with grinning jaws and spewed poison on the floor.

SORCERY! Corun shrank back, a chill of fear striking even his steely heart. Shorzon resumed human shape and wordlessly unlocked the chains. They fell away and Corun stumbled out into the corridor.

The erinye snarled and slipped closer. Chryseis laid a hand on the beast's head, checking that gliding rush as if with a leash. Her smile and the faint sweet scent of her hair were dizzying.

"Come," she said. One hand slipped between his own fingers and the cool touch seemed to burn him.

Shorzon led the way, down a long sloping tunnel where only the streaming torch-flames had life. Their footsteps echoed hollowly in the wet black length of it.

"We go at once," he said. "When Khroman learns of your escape, all Tauros will be after us. But it will be too late then. We sail swiftly tonight."

Sail—whither?

"What of my men?" asked Corun.

"They're lost, I'm afraid, unless Khroman spares them until we get back,

Chryseis. "But we saved you. I'm glad of that."

A faint smell of fresh salty air blew up the tunnel. It must open on the sea, thought Corun. He wondered how many passages riddled the depth under Tauros.

They came out, finally, on a narrow beach under the looming western cliffs. The precipices climbed into the utter dark of night, reaching into the unseen sky. Before them lay open sea, swirling with phosphorescence. Corun drew deep lungfuls of air. Salt and seaweed and wet wild wind—sand under his feet, sky overhead, a woman beside him—by the gods, it was good to be alive!

A galley was moored against a tiny pier. By the light of bobbing torches, Corun's mariner's eye surveyed her. She was built along the same lines as his own ship, a lean black vessel with one square sail; open-decked save at stem and stern, rower's benches lining the sides with a catwalk running between. There would be quarters for the men under the poop and forecabin decks, supplies in the hold beneath. A cabin was erected near the waist, apparently for officers, and there was a ballista mounted in the bows—otherwise no superstructure. A carved sea monster reared up for figurehead, and the sternpost curved back to make its tail. He read the name on the bows: *Briseia*. Strange that that dark vessel should bear a girl's name.

About a fifty-man capacity, he judged. And she would be fast.

The crew were getting aboard—they must have come down the cliffs along some narrow trail. They were all Umlothuan blues, he noticed, a cutthroat gang if ever he saw one but silent and well disciplined. It was shrewd to take only the mercenary warriors along; they had no patriotic interest in what happened to Achaera, and their reckless courage was legendary.

A burly one-eyed officer came up and saluted. "All set, sir," he reported.

"Good," nodded Shorzon. "Captain Imazu, this is our guide, Captain Corun."

"The raider, eh?" Imazu chuckled and shook hands in the manner of the barbarians. "Well, we could hardly have a

better one, I'm sure. Glad to know you, Corun."

The pirate murmured polite phrases. But he decided that Imazu was a likeable chap, and wondered what had led him to take service under anyone with Shorzon's reputation.

They went aboard. "The Sea of Demons lies due north," said Shorzon. "Is that the right way to sail?"

"For the time being," nodded Corun. "When we get closer, I'll be able to tell you more exactly."

"Then you may as well wash and rest," said Chryseis. "You need both." Her smile was soft in the flickering red light.

Corun entered the cabin. It was divided into three compartments—apparently Imazu slept with his men, or perhaps on deck as many men preferred. His own tiny room was clean, sparsely furnished with a bunk and a washbowl. He cleaned himself eagerly and put on the fresh tunic laid out for him.

When he came back on deck the ship was already under way. A strong south wind was blowing, filling the dark sail, and the *Briseia* surged forward under its thrust. The phosphorescence shone around her hull and out on the rolling waters. Behind, the land faded into the night.

He'd certainly been given no chance to escape, he thought. Barring miracles, he had to go through with it now—at least until they reached the Sea of Demons, after which anything might happen.

He shivered a little, wondering darkly whether he had done right, wondering what their mission was and what the world's fate was to be as a result of it.

Chryseis slipped quietly up to stand beside him. The erinye crouched down nearby, his baleful eyes never leaving the man.

"Outward bound," she said, and laughter was gay in her voice.

He said nothing, but stared ahead into the night.

"You'd better sleep, Corun," she said. "You're tired now, and you'll need all your strength later." She laid a hand on his arm, and laughed aloud. "It will be an interesting voyage, to say the least."

Rather! he thought with wry humor.

It occurred to him that the trip might even have its pleasant aspects.

"Goodnight, Corun," she said, and left him.

Presently he went back to his room. Sleep was long in coming, and uneasy when it did arrive.

III

WHEN HE CAME OUT ON DECK in the early morning, there was only a gray emptiness of waters out to the gray horizon. They must have left the whole Achaeran archipelago well behind them and be somewhere in the Zurian Sea now.

There was a smell of rain in the air, and the ship ran swiftly before a keening wind over long white-maned rollers. Corun let the tang of salt and moisture and kelp, the huge restless vista of bounding waves, the creak and thrum of the ship and the thundering surge of the ocean, swell luxuriously up within him, the simple animal joy of being at home. The sea was his home now, he realized vaguely; he had been on it so long that it was his natural environment—his, as much as that of the laridae wheeling on white wings in the cloud-flying heavens.

He looked over the watch. It seemed to be well handled—the sailors knew their business. There were armored guards at bow and stern, and the rest—clad in the plain loincloth of ordinary seamen the world over—were standing by the sail, swabbing the decks, making minor repairs and otherwise occupying themselves. Those off duty were lounging or sleeping well out of the watch's way. The helmsman kept his eye on the compass and held the tiller with a practiced hand—good, good.

Captain Imazu padded up to him on bare feet. The Umilotuan wore helmet and corselet, had a sword at his side, and carried the whip of authority in one gnarled blue hand. His scarred, one-eyed face cracked in a smile. "Good morning to you, Captain Corun," he said politely.

The Conahurian nodded with an amiability he had not felt for a long time. "The ship is well handled," he said.

"Thanks. I'm about the only Umilotuan

who's ever skippered anything bigger than a war-canoe, I suppose, but I was in the Achaeran fleet for a long time." Again the hideous but disarming smile. "I nearly met you professionally once or twice before, but you always showed us a clean pair of heels. Judging from what happened to ships that did have the misfortune to overhaul you, I'm just as glad of it." He gestured to the tiny galley below the poop deck. "How about some breakfast?"

OVER FOOD which was better than most to be had aboard ship, they fell into professional talk. Like all captains, Imazu was profoundly interested in the old and seemingly insoluble problem of finding an accurate position. "Dead reckoning just won't do," he complained. "Men's estimates always differ, no matter how good they may be. There isn't even a decent map to be had anywhere."

Corun mentioned the efforts of theorists in Achaera, Conahur, and other civilized states to use the Heaven-Fire's altitude to determine position north and south of a given line. Imazu was aware of their work, but regarded it as of little practical value. "You just don't see it often enough," he objected. "And most of the crew would consider it the worst sort of impiety to go aiming an instrument at it. That's one reason, I suppose, why Shorzon shipped only Umlotians. We don't worship the Heaven-Fire—our gods all live below the clouds." He cut himself a huge quid of liangzi and stuffed it into his capacious mouth. "Anyway, it doesn't give you east and west position."

"The philosophers who think the world is round say we could solve that problem by making an accurate timepiece," said Corun.

"I know. But it's a lot of gas, if you ask me. A sand-glass or a water-clock can only tell time so close and no closer, and those mechanical gadgets they've built are worse yet. I knew an old skipper from Norriki once who kept a joss in his cabin and got his position in dreams from it. Only had one wreck in his life." Imazu grinned. "Of course, he drowned then."

"Look," said Corun suddenly, "do you

know where the hell we're going, and why?"

"To the Sea of Demons is all they told me. No reason given." Imazu studied Corun with his sharp black eye. "You don't know either, eh? I've a notion that most of us won't live to find out."

"I'm surprised that any crew could be made to go there without a mutiny."

"This gang of bully boys is only frightened of Shorzon and his witch granddaughter. They—" Imazu shut up. Looking around, Corun saw the two approaching.

In the morning light, Chryseis did not seem the luring devil-woman of the night. She moved with easy grace across the rolling deck, the wind blowing her tunic and her long black hair in careless billows, and there was a girlish joy and eagerness in her. The pirate's heart stumbled and began to race.

She chattered gaily of nothing while she and the old man ate. Shorzon remained silent until he was through, then said curtly to the two men: "Come into the cabin with us."

They filled Corun's tiny room, sitting on bunk and floor. Shorzon said slowly, "We may as well begin now to learn what you know, Corun. What is the truth about your voyage to the Xanthi?"

"It was several seasons ago," replied the corsair. "I got the thought you seem to have had, that possibly I could enlist their help against my enemies." He smiled mirthlessly. "I learned better."

"What do we know of them, exactly?" said Shorzon methodically. He ticked the points off on his lean fingers. "They are an amphibious non-human race dwelling in the Sea of Demons, which is said to grow grass so that ships become tangled there and never escape."

"Not so," said Corun. "There's kelp on the surface, but you can sail right through it. I think the Sea is just a dead region of water around which the great ocean currents move."

"I know," said Shorzon impatiently, and resumed his summary: "Generations ago, the Xanthi, of whose presence men had only been vaguely aware before, fell upon all the islands in their sea and slew

the people living there. They had great numbers, as well as tamed sea monsters and unknown powers of sorcery, so that no one could stand against them. Since then, they have not gone beyond their borders, but they ruthlessly destroy all human vessels venturing inside. King Phidion III of Achaera sent a great fleet to drive the Xanthi from their stolen territory. Not one ship returned. Men now shun the whole region as one accursed."

Imazu nodded. "There's a sailor's legend that the souls of the damned go to the Xanthi," he offered.

Shorzon gave him an exasperated look. "I'm only interested in facts," he said coldly. "What do you know, Corun?"

"I know what you just said, as who doesn't?" answered the Conahurian. "But I think they must have limits to their powers, and be reasonable creatures—but the limits are far beyond man's, and their reason is not as ours.

"I didn't try an invasion, of course. I took one small fast boat manned with picked volunteers and waited outside the Sea for a storm that would blow me into it. When that came, we ran before it—fast! In the rain and wind and waves, I figured we could get undetected far into their borders. So, it seemed, we could, and in fact we made it almost to the largest island inside. Then they came at us.

"They were riding cetaraea, and driving sea serpents before them. They had spears and bows and swords, and there were hundreds of them. Any one of the snakes could have smashed our boat. We ran for land and barely made it.

"We hadn't come to fight, so we held up our hands as the Xanthi leaped ashore and wondered if they'd just hack us down. But, as I'd hoped, they wanted to know what we were there for. So they took us to the black castle on the island."

MOMENTARILY Corun was cold as the memory of that wet dark place of evil shuddered through his mind. "I can't tell you much about it. They have great powers of sorcery, and the place seemed somehow unreal, never the same—always wrong, always with something horrible just beyond vision in the shadows.

I remember the whole time as if it were a dream. There were treasures beyond counting. I saw gold and jewels from the sea bottom, mixed in with human skulls and the figureheads of drowned ships. The light was dim and blue, and there was always fog, and noises for which we had no name hooting out in the gloom. It stank, with the vile fishy smell they have. And the walls seemed to have a watery unreality, as I said, shifting and fading like smoke. You could smell sorcery in the very air of that place.

"They kept us there for many ten-days. We'd brought rich gifts, of course, which they accepted ungraciously, and they housed us in a dungeon under guard. They didn't feed us so badly, if you like a steady fish diet. And they taught us their language."

"How does it sound?" as Chryseis.

"I can't make it come out right. No human throat can. Something like this—" They stiffened at the chill hissing that slithered from Corun's lips. "It has words for things I never did understand, and it lacks many of the commonest human words—fear, joy, hope, adventure—" His glance slid to Chryseis—"love—"

"Do they have a word for hate?" asked Shorzon.

"Oh, yes," Corun grinned without humor. After a moment he went on: "They wanted to know more of the outside world. That was why they spared our lives. When we knew the language well enough, they began to question us. *How* they questioned us! It got to be torture, those unending days of answering the things that hissed and gabbled at us in those shadowy rooms. It was like a nightmare, where mad happenings go on without ever ending. Politics, science, philosophy, art, geography—they wanted to know it all. They pumped us dry of knowledge. When we came to something they didn't understand, such as—love, say—they went back and forth over the same ground, over and over again, until we thought we'd go crazy.

And at last they'd give up in bafflement. I think they believe humans to be mad.

"I made my offer, of course: the loot of Achaera in exchange for the freedom of Conahur. They—I might almost say

they laughed. Finally they answered in scorn that they could take whatever they wanted, the whole world if need be, without my help."

Shorzon's eyes glittered. "Did you find out anything of their powers?" he asked eagerly.

"A little. They put any human magician to shame, of course. I saw them charm sea monsters to death just to eat them. I saw them working on a new building on the island—they planted a little package somewhere, and set fire to it, and great stones leaped into the air with a bang like thunder. I saw their cetaraea cavalry, their tamed war-snakes—oh, yes, they have more powers than I could name. And their numbers must be immense. They live on the sea bottom, you know—that is, their commoners do. The leaders have strongholds on land as well. They farm both sea and land, and have great smithies on the islands.

"Well, in the end they let us go. They were going to put us to death for our trespass, I think, but I did some fast talking. I told them that we could carry word of their strength back to humans and overawe our race with it, so that if they ever wanted to collect tribute or something of the sort, they'd never have to fight for it. Probably that carried less weight than the fact that we had, after all, done no harm and been of some use. They had no logical reason to kill us—so they didn't." Corun smiled grimly. "We were a pretty tough crew, prepared to take a few Xanthi to death with us even if we were disarmed. Their killing-charms seem to work only on animals. That was another reason to spare us.

"One of their wizards was for having me, at least, slain. He said he'd had a prevision of my return with ruin in my wake. But the others—laughed?—at him, at the very thought of a human's being dangerous to them. Moreover, they pointed out, if that was to be the case then there was nothing they could do about it; they seem to believe in a fixed destiny. But the idea amused them so much that it was still another reason for letting us go." Corun shrugged. "So we sailed away. That's all. And never till now did I have

any smallest thought of returning."

He added bleakly after a moment when silence had been heavy: "They have all they want to know from my visit. There will be no reason for them to spare us this time."

"I think there will," said Chryseis.

"There'd better be," muttered Imazu.

"You can start teaching us their language," said Shorzon. "It might not be a bad idea for you to learn too, Imazu. The more who can talk to them, the better."

The Umilotuan made a wry face. "Another tongue to learn! By the topknot of Mwanzi, why can't the world settle on one and end this babble!"

"The poor interpreters would starve to death," smiled Chryseis.

She took Corun's arm. "Come, my buccaneer, let's go up on deck for a while. There's always time to learn words."

THEY FOUND a quiet spot on the fore-castle deck, and sat down against the rail. The erinye settled his long body beside Chryseis and watched Corun with sleepy malevolence, but he was hardly aware of the devil-beast. It was Chryseis, Chryseis, dark sweet hair and dark lambent eyes, utter loveliness of face and form, singing golden voice and light warm touch and—

"You are a strange man, Corun," she said softly. "What are you thinking now?"

"Oh—nothing." He smiled crookedly. "Nothing."

"I don't believe that. You have too many memories."

Almost without knowing it, he found himself telling her of his life, the long terrible struggle against overwhelming power, the bitterness and loneliness, the death of comrades one by one—and the laughter and triumphs and wild exultance of it, the faring into unknown seas and the dicing with fate and the strong, close bonds of men against the world. He mused wistfully about a girl who was gone—but her bright image was strangely fading in his heart now, for it was Chryseis who was beside him.

"It has been a hard life," she said at the end. "It took a giant of a man to endure it." She smiled, a small closed smile

that made her look strangely young. "I wonder what you must think of this—sailing with your sworn foes to the end of the world on an unknown mission."

"You're not my foe!" he blurted.

"No—never your enemy, Corun!" she exclaimed. "We have been on opposite sides before—let it not be thus from this moment. I tell you that the purpose of this voyage, which you shall soon know, is—good. Great and good as the savagery of man has never known before. You know the old legend—that someday the Heaven-Fire will shine through opening clouds not as a destroying flame but as the giver of life—that men will see light in the sky even at night—that there will be peace and justice for all mankind? I think that day may be dawning, Corun."

He sat dumbly, bewildered. She was not evil—she was not evil—It was all he knew, but it sang within him.

Suddenly she laughed and sprang to her feet. "Come on!" she cried. "I'll race you around the ship!"

IV

RAIN AND WIND CAME, A lightning-shot squall in which the *Briseia* wallowed and bucked and men strained at oars and pumps. Toward evening it was over, the sea stilled and the lower clouds faded so that they saw the great dull-red disc of the Heaven-Fire through the upper clouds, sinking into the western sea. There was almost a flat calm, the glassy water was ruffled only by a faint breeze which half filled the sail and sent the galley sliding slowly and noiselessly northward.

"Man the oars," directed Shorzon.

"Give the men a chance to rest tonight, sir," begged Imazu. "They've all worked hard today. We can row all the faster tomorrow if we must."

"No time to spare," snapped the wizard.

"Yes, there is," said Corun flatly. "Let the men rest, Imazu."

Shorzon gave him a baleful glance. "You forget your position aboard."

Corun bristled. "I think I'm just beginning to remember it," he answered with metal in his voice.

Chryseis laid a hand on her grandfather's arm. "He's right," she said. "So is Imazu. It would be needless cruelty to make the sailors work tonight, and they will be better fitted by a night's rest."

"Very well," said Shorzon sullenly. He went into his room and slammed the door. Presently Chryseis bade the men good-night and went to her quarters with the erinye trotting after.

Corun's eyes followed her through the deepening blue dusk. In that mystic light, the ship was a shadowy half-real background, a dimness beyond which the sea swirled in streamers of cold white radiance.

"She's a strange woman," said Imazu. "I don't understand her."

"Nor I," admitted Corun. "But I know now her enemies have foully lied about her."

"I'm not so sure about that—" As the Conahurian turned with a dark frown, Imazu added quickly, "Oh, well, I'm probably wrong. I never had much sight of her, you know."

They wandered up on the poop deck in search of a place to sit. It was deserted save for the helmsman by the dimly glowing binnacle, a deeper shadow in the thick blue twilight. Sitting back against the taffrail, they could look forward to the lean waist of the ship and the vague outline of the listlessly bellying sail. Beyond the hull, the sea was an arabesque of luminescence, delicate traceries of shifting white light out to the glowing horizon. The cold fire streamed from the ship's bows and whirled in her wake, the hull dripped liquid flame.

The night was very quiet. The faint hiss and smack of cloven water, creak of planks and tackle, distant splashing of waves and invisible sea beasts—otherwise there was only the enormous silence under the high clouds. The breeze was cool on their cheeks.

"How long till we get to the Sea of Demons?" asked Imazu. His voice was oddly hushed in the huge stillness.

"With ordinary sailing weather, I'd say about three ten-days—maybe four," answered Corun indifferently.

"It's a strange mission we're on, aye,

that it is." Imazu's head wagged, barely visible in the dark. "I like it not, Corun. I have evil feelings about it, and the omens I took before leaving weren't good."

"Why then did you sail? You're a free man, aren't you?"

"So they say!" Sudden bitterness rose in the Umlotuan's voice. "Free as any of Shorzon's followers, which is to say less free than a slave, who can at least run away."

"Why, doesn't he pay well?"

"Oh, aye, he is lavish in that regard. But he has his ways of binding servants to him so that they must do his bidding above that of the very gods. He put his geas on most of these sailors, for instance. They were simple folk, and thought he was only magicking them a good-luck charm."

"You mean they are bound? He has their souls?"

"Aye. He put them to sleep in some sorcerous way and impressed his command on them. No matter what happens now, they must obey him. The geas is stronger than their own wills."

Corun shivered. "Are you—Pardon. It's no concern of mine."

"No, no, that's all right. He put no such binding on me—I knew better than to accept his offer of a luck-bringing spell. But he has other ways. He lent me a slave-girl from Umlotu for my pleasure—but she is lovely, wonderful, kind, all that a woman should be. She has borne me sons, and made homecoming ever a joy. But you see, she is still Shorzon's and he will not sell her to me or free her—moreover, he did put his geas on her. If ever I rebelled, she would suffer for it." Imazu spat over the rail. "So I am Shorzon's creature too."

"It must be a strange service."

"It is. Mostly all I have to do is captain his bodyguard. But I've seen and helped in some dark things. He's a fiend from the lowest hell, Shorzon is. And his granddaughter—" Imazu stopped.

"Yes?" asked Corun roughly. His hand closed bruisingly on the other's arm. "Go on. What of her?"

"Nothing. Nothing. I really have had little to do with her." Imazu's face was

lost in the gloom, but Corun felt the one eye hard on him. "Only—be careful, pirate. Don't let her lay her own sort of geas on you. You've been a free man till now. Don't become anyone's blind slave."

"I've no such intention," said Corun frostily.

"Then no more need be said." Imazu sighed heavily and got up. "I think I'll go to bed, then. What of you?"

"Not yet. I'm not sleepy. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

CORUN sat back alone. He could barely discern the helmsman—beyond lay only glowing darkness and the whispering of the night. He felt loneliness like a cold hollow within his breast.

Father and mother, his tall brothers and his laughing lovely sister, the comrades of youth, the hard wild stout-hearted pirates with whom he had sailed for such a long and bloody time—where were they now? Where in all the blowing night were they?

Where was he and on what mission, sailing alone through a pit of darkness on a ship of strangers? What meaning and hope in all the cruel insanity of the world?

Suddenly he wanted his mother, he wanted to lay his head on her lap and cry in desolation and hear her gentle voice—no, by the gods, it wasn't her image he saw, it was a lithe and dark-haired witch who was crooning to him and stroking his hair—

He cursed tonelessly and got up. Best to go to bed and try to sleep his fancies away. He was becoming childish.

He went down the catwalk toward the cabin. As he neared it, he saw a figure by the rail darkly etched against a shimmering patch of phosphorescence. His heart sprang into his throat.

She turned as he came near. "Corun," she said. "I couldn't sleep. Come over here and talk to me. Isn't the night beautiful?"

He leaned on the rail, not daring to look at the haunting face pale-lit by the swirling sea-fire. "It's nice," he said clumsily.

"But it's lonely," she whispered. "I

never felt so sad and alone before."

"Why—why, that's how I felt!" he blurted.

"Corun—"

She came to him and he took her with a sudden madness of yearning.

Perias the erinye snarled as they thrust him out of her cabin. He padded up and down the deck for a while. A sailor who stood watch near the forecabin followed him with frightened eyes and muttered prayers to the amulet about his neck.

Presently the devil-beast curled up before the cabin. The lids drooped over his green eyes, but they remained unwinkingly fixed on the door.

V

UNDER A HOT SULLEN SKY, the windless sea swelled in long slow waves that rocked the tangled kelp and ocean-grass up and down, heavenward and hellward. To starboard, the dark cliffs of a small jungled island rose from an angry muttering surf, but there were no birds flying above it.

Corun pointed to the shore. "That's the first of the archipelago," he said. "From here on, we can look for the Xanthi to come at any time."

"We should get as far into their territory as possible, even to the black palace," said Shorzon. "I will put a spell of invisibility on the ship."

"Their sorcerers can break that," said Chryseis.

"Aye, so. But when they come to know our powers, I think they will treat with us."

"They'd better!" smiled Imazu grimly.

"Steer on toward the island of the castle," said Shorzon to the pirate. "I go to lay the spell."

He went into his cabin. Corun had a glimpse of its dark interior before the door was closed—draped in black and filled with the apparatus of magic.

"He will have to be in a trance, physically, to maintain the enchantment," said Chryseis. She smiled at Corun, and his pulses raced. "Come, my dearest, it is cooler on the afterdeck."

The sailors rowed steadily, sweat glis-

tening on their bare blue hides. Imazu paced up and down the catwalk, flicking idlers with his whip. Corun stood where he could keep an eye on the steersman and see that the right course was followed.

It had been utter wonder till now, he thought, unending days when they plowed through seas of magic, nights of joy such as he had never known. There had never been another woman such as Chryseis, he thought, never in all the world, and he was the luckiest of men. Though he died today, he had been more fortunate than any man ever dared dream.

Chryseis, Chryseis, loveliest and wisest and most valiant of women—and she was his, before all the jealous gods, she loved him!

"There has only been one thing wrong," he said. "You are going into danger now. The world would go dark if aught befell you."

"And I should sit at home while you were away, and never know what had happened, never know if you lived or died—no, no, Corun!"

He laid a hand on the sword at his waist. They had given him arms and armor again after she had come to him. Logical enough, he thought without resentment—he could be trusted now, as much as if he were one of Shorzon's ensorcelled warriors.

But if this were a spell too, the gods deliver him from ever being freed of it!

He blinked. There was a sudden breath of chill on him, and his eyes were blurring—no, no, it was the ship that wavered, ship and men fading—He clutched at Chryseis. She laughed softly and slipped an arm around his waist.

"It is only Shorzon's spell," she said. "It affects us too, to some extent. And it makes the ship invisible to anyone within seeing range."

Ghost ship, ghost crew, slipping over the slowly heaving waters. There was only the foggiest outline to be seen, shadow of mast and rigging against the sky, glimpses of water through the gray smoke of the hull, blobs of darkness that were the crewmen. Sound was still clear; he heard the mutter of superstitious awe, the crack of the whip, and Imazu's oaths that sent

the oars creaking and splashing again. Corun's hand was a misty blur before his eyes. Chryseis was a shadow beside him.

She laughed once more, a low exultant throb, and pulled his lips down to hers. He ruffled the streaming fragrant hair and felt a return of courage. It was only a spell.

But what were the spells? he wondered for the thousandth time. He did not hold with the simple theory that wizards were in league with gods or demons. They had powers, yes, but he was sure that somehow these powers came only from within themselves. Chryseis had always evaded his questions about it. There must be some simple answer to the problem, some real process, as real as that of making a fire, behind the performances of the sorcerers—but it baffled him to think what it might be.

Blast it all, it just wasn't reasonable that Shorzon, for instance, should have been able actually to change himself into a jungle monster many times his size. Yet he, Corun, had seen the thing, had felt its wet scales and smelled its reptile stink. How?

THE SHIP plowed slowly on. Now and then Corun looked at the compass, straining his eyes to discern the blurred needle. Otherwise they could only wait.

But waiting with Chryseis was remarkably pleasant.

It was at the end of a timeless time, perhaps half a day, that he saw the Xanthian patrol. "Look," he pointed. "There they come."

Chryseis stared boldly over the sea. The hand beneath his was steady as her voice: "So I see. They're—beautiful, aren't they?"

The cetaraea came leaping across the waves, big graceful beasts with the shapes of fish, their smooth black hides shining and the water white behind their thrashing tails. Astride each was a great golden form bearing a lance. They quartered across the horizon and were lost to sight.

The crew mumbled in fear, shaken to their hardy souls by the terrible unhuman grace of the Xanthi. Imazu cursed them back to work. The ship went on.

Islands slipped by, empty of man-sign. They had glimpses of Xanthian works, spires and walls rearing above the jungle. These were not the white colonnaded buildings of Tauros or the timbered halls of Conahur—of black stone they were, with pointed towers climbing crazily skyward. Once a great sea serpent reared its head, spouted water, and writhed away. All creatures save man could sense the presence of wizardry and refused to go near it.

Night fell, an abyss of night broken only by faint glimmers of sea-fire under the carpeting weed. Men stood uneasy watch in full armor, peering blindly into the somber immensity. It was hot, hot and silent.

Near midnight the lookout shouted from the masthead: "Xanthi to larboard!"

"Silence, you fool!" called Imazu. "Want them to hear us?"

The patrol was a faint swirl and streaking of phosphorescence, blacker shadows against the night. It was coming nearer.

"Have they spotted us?" wondered Corun.

"No," breathed Chryseis. "But they're close enough for their mounts—"

There was a great snorting and splashing out in the murk. The cetaraea were refusing to go into the circle of Shorzon's spell. Voices lifted, an unhuman croaking. The erinye, the only animal who did not seem to mind witchcraft, snarled in saw-edged tones, eyes a green blaze against the night.

Presently the squad turned and slipped away. "They know something is wrong, and they've gone for help," said Corun. "We'll have a fight on our hands before long."

He stretched his big body, suddenly eager for action. This waiting was more than he could stand.

The ship drove on. Corun and Chryseis napped on the deck; it was too stiflingly hot below. The long night wore away.

In the misty gray of morning, they saw a dark mass advancing from the west. Corun's sword rasped out of the sheath. It was a long, double-edged blade such as they used in Conahur, and it was thirsty.





"Kill them!" roared Imazu. "Kill the misbegotten snakes!"

"Get inside, Chryseis," he said tightly.

"Get inside yourself," she answered. There was a lilt in her voice like a little girl's. He felt her quiver with joyous expectation.

The ghostly outlines of the ship wavered, thickened, faded again, flickered back toward solidity. Suddenly they had sight; the vessel lay real around them; they saw each other in helm and corselet, face look-

ing into tautened face.

"They have a wizard along—he broke Shorzon's spell," said the Conahurian.

"We looked for that," answered Chryseis evenly. "But as long as Shorzon keeps fighting him, there will be a roiling of magic around us such that none of their beasts will approach."

She stood beside him, slim and boyish in polished cuirass and plumed helmet,

shortsword belted to her waist and a bow in one hand. Her nostrils quivered, her eyes shone, and she laughed aloud. "We'll drive them off," she said. "We'll send them home like beaten iaganaths."

Imazu blew the war-horn, wild brazen echoes screaming over the sea. His men drew in the oars, pulled on their armor, and stood along the rails, waiting.

"But did we come here to fight them?" asked Corun.

"No," said Chryseis. "But we've known all along that we'd have to give them a taste of our might before they'd talk to us."

The Xanthian lancers were milling about half a league away, as if in conference. Suddenly someone blew a harsh-toned horn and Corun saw half the troop slide from the saddle into the water. "So—they'll swim at us," he muttered.

THE ATTACK came from all sides, converging on the ship in a rush of foam. As the Xanthi neared, Corun saw their remembered lineaments and felt the old clutch of panic. *They weren't human.*

With the fluked tail, one of them had twice the length of a man. The webbed hind feet, on which they walked ashore, were held close to the body; the strangely human hands carried weapons. They swam half under water, the dorsal fins rising over. Their necks were long, with gills near the blunt-snouted heads; their grinning mouths showed gleaming fangs. The eyes were big, dark, alive with cold intelligence. They bore no armor, but scales the color of beaten gold covered back and sides and tail. They came in at furious speed, churning the sea behind them.

Chryseis' voice rose to a wild shriek. "Perias! Perias—kill!"

The erinye howled and unfolded his leather-webbed wings. Like a hurled spear he streaked into the air, rushed down on the nearest Xanthian like a thunderbolt—claws, teeth, barbed tail, a blinding fury of blood and death, ripping flesh as if it were parchment.

The ship's ballista *chunked* and balls of the ever-burning Achaeran fire were hurled out to fall blazing among the enemy. Chryseis' bow hummed beside Corun, a Xan-

thian went under with an arrow in his throat—the air was thick with shafts as the crew fired.

Still the Xanthi rushed on, ducking up and down, near impossible to hit. The first of them came up to the hull and sank their clawed fingers into the wood. The sailors thrust downward with pikes, howling in fear-maddened rage.

The man near Corun went down with a hurled javelin through him. At once a huge golden form was slithering over the rail, onto the deck. The sword in his hand flashed, another Umlotuan's weapon was knocked spinning from his hand and the reptile hewed him down.

Corun sprang to do battle. The swords clashed together with a shock that jarred the man backward. Corun spread his feet and smote out. His blade whirled down to strike the shoulder, gash the chest, and drive the hissing monster back.

With a rising cold fury, Corun followed it up. *That* for the long inquisition—*that* for being a horror out of the sea bottom—*that* for threatening Chryseis! The Xanthian writhed with a belly ripped open. Still he wouldn't die—he flopped and struck from the deck. Corun evaded the sweeping tail and cut off the creature's head.

They were pouring onto the ship through gaps in the line. Chryseis stood on the foredeck in a line of defending men, her bow singing death. Battle snarled about the mast, men against monsters, sword and halberd and ax belling in cloven bone.

A giant's blow bowled Corun off his feet, the tail of a Xanthian. He rolled over and thrust upward as the Sea Demon sprang on him. The sword went through the heart. Hissing and snapping, his foe toppled on him. He heaved the struggling body away and sprang back to his stance.

"To me!" bellowed Imazu. "To me, men!"

He stood wielding a huge battle ax by the mast, striking at the beasts that raged around him, lopping heads and arms and tails like a woodman. The scattered humans rallied and began to fight their way toward him, step by bloody step.

Perias the erinye was everywhere, a flying fury, ripping and biting and smash-

ing with wing-blows. Corun loomed huge over the men who fought beside him, the sword shrieking and thundering in his hands. Imazu stood stolidly against the mast, smashing at all comers. A rush of Xanthi broke past him and surged against the foredeck. The defenders beat them off, Chryseis thrusting as savagely with her sword as any man, and they reeled back against the masthead warriors to be cut down.

A Xanthian sprang at Corun, wielding a long-shafted ax that shivered the sword in his hand. The Conahurian struck back, his blade darting past the monster's guard to stab through the throat. The Xanthian staggered. Corun wrenched the blade loose and brought it down again to sing in the reptile skull.

Before he could pull it loose, another was on him. Corun ducked under the spear he carried and closed his hands around the slippery sides. The clawed feet raked his legs. He lifted the thing and hurled it into another with bone-shattering force. One of them threshed wildly, neck broken—the other bounded at Corun. The man yanked his sword free and it whistled against the golden head.

BACK AND FORTH the struggle swayed, crashing of metal and howling of warriors. And the Xanthi were driven to the rails—they could not stand against the rallying human line in the narrow confines of the ship.

"Kill them!" roared Imazu. "Kill the misbegotten snakes!"

Suddenly the Xanthi were slipping overboard, swimming for their mounts beyond the zone of magic. Perias followed, harrying them, pulling them half out of the water to rip their throats out.

The ship was wet, streaming with human red and reptile yellow blood. Dead and wounded littered the decks. Corun saw the Xanthi cavalry retreating out of sight.

"We've won," he gasped. "We've won—"

"No—wait—" Chryseis inclined her head sharply, seeming to listen, then darted past him to open a hatch. Light streamed down into the hold. It was filling—the bilge was rising. "I thought so," she said

grimly. "They're below us, chopping into the hull."

"We'll see about that," said Corun, and unbuckled his cuirass. "All who can swim, after me!"

"No—no, they'll kill you—"

"Come on!" gapped Imazu, letting his own breastplate clang to the deck.

Corun sprang overboard. He was wearing nothing but a kilt now, and had a spear in one hand and a drink in his teeth. Fear was gone, washed out by the red tides of battle. There was only a bleak, terrible triumph in him. Men *had* beaten the Sea Demons!

Underwater, it was green and dim. He swam down, down, brushing the hull, pulling himself along the length of the keel. There were half a dozen shapes clustered near the waist, working with axes.

He pushed against the keel and darted at them, holding the spear like a lance. The keen point stabbed into the belly of one monster. The others turned, their eyes terrible in the gloom. Corun took the dirk in his hand, got a grip on the next nearest, and stabbed.

Claws ripped his flanks and back. His lungs were bursting, there was a roaring in his head and darkness before his eyes. He stabbed blindly, furiously.

Suddenly the struggling form let go. Corun broke the surface and gasped in a lungful of air. A Sea Demon leaped up beside him. At once the erinye was on him. The Xanthian screamed as he was torn apart.

Corun dove back under water. The other seamen were down there, fighting for their lives. They outnumbered the Xanthi, but the monsters were in their native element. Blood streaked the water, blinding them all. It was a strange, horrible battle for survival.

In the end, Corun and Imazu and the others—except for four—were hauled back aboard. "We drove them off," said the pirate wearily.

"Oh, my dear—my dearest dear—" Chryseis, who had laughed in battle, was sobbing on his breast.

Shorzon was on deck, looking over the scene. "We did well," he said. "We stood them off, killed about thirty, and only

lost fifteen men."

"At that rate," said Corun, "it won't take them long to clear our decks."

"I don't think they will try again," said Shorzon.

He went over to a captured Xanthian. The Sea Demon had had a foot chopped off in the battle and been pinned to the deck by a pike, but he still lived and rasped defiance at them. If allowed to live, he would grow new members—the monsters were tougher than they had a right to be.

"Hark, you," said Shorzon in the Xanthian tongue, which he had learned with astonishing ease. "We come on a mission of peace, with an offer that your king will be pleased to hear. You have seen only a small part of our powers. It is not beyond us to sail to your palace and bring it crumbling to earth."

Corun wondered how much was bluff. The old sorcerer might really be able to do it. In any case—he had nerve!

"What can you things offer us?" asked the Xanthian.

"That is only for the king to hear," said Shorzon coldly. "He will not thank you for molesting us. Now we will let you go to bear word back to your rulers. Tell them we are coming whether they will or no, but that we come in friendship if they will but show it. After all, if they wish to kill us it can be just as easily done—if at all—after they have heard us out. Now go!"

Imazu pulled the pike loose and the yellow-bleeding Xanthian writhed overboard.

"I do not think we will be bothered again," said Shorzon calmly. "Not before we get to the black palace."

"You may be right," admitted Corun. "You gave them a good argument by their standards."

"Friends?" muttered Imazu. "Friends with those things? As soon expect the erinye to lie down by the bovan, I think."

"Come," said Chryseis impatiently. "We have to repair the leak and clean the decks and get under way again. It is a long trip yet to the black palace."

She turned to Corun and her eyes were dark flames. "How you fought!" she whispered. "How you fought, beloved!"

THE CASTLE STOOD ATOP ONE of the high gray cliffs which walled in a little bay. Beyond the shore, the island climbed steeply toward a gaunt mountain bare of jungle. The sea rolled sullenly against the rocks under a low gloomy sky thickening with the approach of night.

The *Briseia* rowed slowly into the bay, twenty men at the oars and the rest standing nervous guard by the rails. On either side, the Xanthi cavalry hemmed them in, lancers astride the swimming cetaraea with eyes watchful on the humans, and behind them three great sea snakes under direction of their sorcerers followed ominously.

Imazu shivered. "If they came at us now," he muttered, "we wouldn't last long."

"We'd give them a fight!" said Corun.

"They will receive us," declared Shorzon.

The ship grounded on the shallows near the beach. The sailors hesitated. To pull her ashore would be to expose themselves almost helplessly to attack. "Go on, jump to it!" snapped Imazu, and the men shipped their oars and sheathed their weapons, waded into the bay and dragged the vessel up on the strand.

The chiefs of the Xanthi stood waiting for them. There were perhaps fifty of the reptiles, huge golden forms wrapped in dark flowing robes on which glittered ropes of jewels. A few wore tall miters and carried hooked staffs of office. Like statues they stood, waiting, and the sailors shivered.

Shorzon, Chryseis, Corun, and Imazu walked up toward them with all the slow dignity they could summon. The Conahurian's eyes sought the huge wrinkled form of Tsathu, king of the Xanthi. The monster's gaze brightened on him and the fanged mouth opened in a bass croak:

"So you have returned to us. You may not leave this time."

"Your majesty's hospitality overwhelms me," said Corun ironically.

A stooped old Xanthian beside the king plucked his sleeve and hissed rapidly: "I told you, sire, I told you he would come

back with the ruin of worlds in his train. Cut them all down now, before the fates strike. Kill them while there is time!"

"There will be time," said Tsathu.

His unblinking eyes locked with Shorzon's and suddenly the twilight shimmered and trembled, the nerves of men shook and out in the water the sea-beasts snorted with panic. For a long moment that silent duel of wizardry quivered in the air, and then it faded and the unreality receded into the background of dusk.

Slowly the Xanthian monarch nodded, as if satisfied to find an opponent he could not overcome.

"I am Shorzon of Achaera," said the man, "and I would speak with the chiefs of the Xanthi."

"You may do so," replied the reptile. "Come up to the castle and we will quarter your folk."

At Imazu's order, the sailors began unloading the gifts that had been brought: weapons, vessels and ornaments of precious metals set with jewels, rare tapestries and incenses. Tsathu hardly glanced at them. "Follow me," he said curtly. "All your people."

"I'd hoped at least to leave a guard on the ship," murmured Imazu to Corun.

"Would have done little good if they really wanted to seize her," whispered the Conahurian.

It did not seem as if Tsathu could have heard them, but he turned and his bass boom rolled over the mumbling surf: "That is right. You may as well relax your petty precautions. They will avail nothing."

IN A LONG FILE, they went up a narrow trail toward the black palace. The Xanthian rulers went first, with deliberately paced dignity, thereafter the human captains, their men, and a silent troop of armed reptile soldiery. *Hemmed in*, thought Corun grimly. *If they want to start shooting—*

Chryseis' hand clasped his, a warm grip in the misty gloom. He responded gratefully. She came right behind him, her other hand on the nervous and growling erinye.

The castle loomed ahead, blacker than the night that was gathering, the gigantic

walls climbing sheer toward the sky, the spear-like towers half lost in the swirling fog. There was always fog here, Corun remembered, mist and rain and shadow; it was never full day on the island. He sniffed the dank sea-smell that blew from the gaping portals and bristled in recollection.

They entered the cavernous doorway and went down a high narrow corridor which seemed to stretch on forever. Its bare stone walls were wet and green-slimed, tendrils of mist drifted under the invisibly high ceiling, and he heard the hooting and muttering of unknown voices somewhere in the murk. The only light was a dim bluish radiance from fungoid balls growing on the walls, a cold unhealthy shadowless illumination in which the white humans looked like drowned corpses. Looking behind, Corun could barely make out the frightened faces of the Umlotians, huddled close together and gripping their weapons with futile strength.

The Xanthi glided noiselessly through the mumbling gloom, tall spectral forms with faint golden light streaming from their damp scales. It seemed as if there were other presences in the castle too, things fitting just beyond sight, hiding in lightless corners and fluttering between the streamers of fog. Always, it seemed, there were watching eyes, watching and waiting in the dark.

They came into a cavernous antechamber whose walls were lost in the dripping twilight. Tsathu's voice boomed hollowly between the chill immensities of it: "Follow those who will show you to your quarters."

Silent Xanthi slipped between the human ranks, herding them with spears—the sailors one way, their chiefs another. "Where are you taking the men?" asked Imazu with an anger sharpened by fear. "Where are you keeping them?" The echoes flew from wall to wall, jeering him—*keeping them, keeping them, them, them—*

"They go below the castle," said a Xanthian. "You will have more suitable rooms."

Our men down in the old dungeons— Corun's hand whitened on the hilt of his sword. But it was useless to protest, unless

they wanted to start a battle now.

The four human leaders were taken down another whispering, echoing tunnel of a corridor, up a long ramp that seemed to wind inside one of the towers, and into a circular room in whose walls were six doors. There the guards left them, fading back down the impenetrable night of the ramp.

THE ROOMS were furnished with grotesque ornateness—huge hideously carved beds and tables, scaled tapestries and rugs, shells and jewels set in the mold-covered walls. Narrow slits of windows opened on the wet night. Darkness and mist hid Corun's view of the ground, but the faintness of the surf told them they must be dizzily high up.

"Ill is this," he said. "A few guards on that ramp can bottle us up here forever. And they need only lock the dungeon gates to have our men imprisoned below."

"We will treat with them. Before long they will be our allies," said Shorzon. His hooded eyes were on Chryseis. It was with a sudden shock that Corun remembered. Days and nights of bliss, and then the violence of battle and the tension of approach, had driven from his mind the fact that he had never been told what the witch-pair was really here for. It was *their* voyage, not his, and what real good could have brought them to this place of evil?

He shoved his big body forward, a tawny giant in the foggy chill of the central room. "It is near time I was told something of what you intend," he said. "I have guided you and taught you and battled at your side, and I'll not be kept blindfolded any longer."

"You will be told what I tell you—no more," said Shorzon haughtily. "You have me to thank for your miserable life—let that be enough."

"You can thank me that you're not being eaten by fish at the bottom of the sea right now," snapped Corun. "By Breannach Brannor, I've had enough of this!"

He stood with his back against the wall, sweeping them with ice-blue eyes. Shorzon stood black and ominous, wrath

in the smoldering, sunken eyes. Chryseis shrank back a little from both of them, but Perias the erinye growled and flattened his belly to the floor and stared greenly at Corun. Imazu shifted from foot to foot, his wide blue face twisted with indecision.

"I can strike you dead where you stand," warned Shorzon. "I can become a monster that will rip you to rags."

"Try it!" snarled Corun. "Just try it!"

Chryseis slipped between them and the huge dark eyes were bright with tears. "Are we not in enough danger now, four humans against a land of walking beasts, without falling at each other's throats? I think it is the witchcraft of Tsagu working on us, dividing us—fight *him!*"

She swayed against the Conahurian. "Corun," she breathed. "Corun, my dearest of all—you shall know, you shall be told everything as soon as we dare. But don't you see—you haven't the skill to protect yourself and your knowledge against the Xanthian magic?"

Or against your magic, beloved.

She laughed softly and drew him after her, into one of the rooms. "Come, Corun. We are all weary now, it is time to rest. Come, my dear. Tomorrow—"

VII

DAY CREPT PAST IN A BLINDNESS of rain. Twice Xanthians brought them food, and once Corun and Imazu ventured down the ramp to find their way barred by spear-bearing reptiles. For the rest they were alone.

It ate at the nerves like an acid. Shorzon sat stiff, unmoving on a couch, eyes clouded with thought; his gaunt body could have been that of a Khemrian mummy. Imazu squatted unhappily, carving one of the intricate trinkets with whose making sailors pass dreamy hours. Corun paced like a caged beast, throttled rage mounting in him. Even Perias grew restless and took to padding up and down the antechamber, passing Corun on the way. The man could not help a half smile. He was growing almost fond of the erinye and his honest malevolence, after the intriguing of humans and Xanthi.

Only Chryseis remained calm. She lay curled on her bed like a big beautiful animal, the long silken hair tumbling darkly past her shoulders, a veiled smile on her red lips. And so the day wore on.

It was toward evening that they heard slow footfalls and looked out to see a party of Xanthi coming up the ramp. It was an awesome sight, the huge golden forms moving with deliberation and pride under the shimmering robes that flowed about them. Some were warriors, with saw-edged pikes flashing in their hands, but the one who spoke was plainly a palace official.

"Greeting from Tsathu, king of the Demon Sea, to Shorzon of Achaera," the voice boomed. "You are to feast with the lords of the Xanthi tonight."

"I am honored," bowed the sorcerer. "The woman Chryseis will come with me, for she is equal with me."

"That is permitted," said the Xanthian gravely.

"And we, I suppose, wait here," muttered Corun rebelliously.

"It won't be for long," smiled Chryseis softly. "After tonight, I think it will be safe to tell you what you wish to know."

She had donned banquetting dress carried up with her from the ship, a clinging robe of the light-rippling silk of Hiung-nu, a scarlet cloak that was like a rush of flame from her slim bare shoulders, barbarically massive bracelets and necklaces, a single fire-ruby burning at her white throat. Pearls and silver glittered like dewdrops in her night-black hair. The loveliness of her caught at Corun's throat. He could only stare with dumb longing as she went after Shorzon and the Xanthi.

She turned to wave at him. Her whisper twined around his heart: "Goodnight, beloved."

When they were gone, the erinye padding after them, Imazu gave Corun a rueful look and said, "So now we are out of the story."

"Not yet," answered the Conahurian, still a little dazed.

"Oh, yes, oh, yes. Surely you do not think that we plain sailormen will be asked for our opinions? No, Corun, we are only pieces on Shorzon's board. We've

done our part, and now he will put us back in the box."

"Chryseis said—"

Imazu shook his scarred bald head sadly. "Surely you don't believe a word that black witch utters?"

Corun half drew his sword. "I told you before that I'd hear no word against Chryseis," he said thinly.

"As you will. It doesn't matter, anyway. But be honest, Corun. Strike me down if you will, it doesn't matter now, but try to think. I've known Chryseis longer than you, and I've never known anyone to change their habits overnight—for anyone."

"She said—"

"Oh, I think she likes you, in her own way. You make as handsome and useful a pet as that erinye of hers. But whatever else she is after, it is something for which she would give more than the world and not have a second thought about it."

Corun paced unhappily. "I don't trust Shorzon," he admitted. "I trust him as I would a mad pherax. And anything Tsathu plans is—evil." He glared down the cavernous mouth of the ramp. "If I could only hear what they say!"

"What chance of that? We're under guard, you know."

"Aye, so. But—" Struck with a sudden thought, Corun went over to the window. The rain had ceased outside, but a solid wall of fog and night barred vision. It was breathlessly hot, and he heard the low muttering of thunder in the hidden sky.

THERE WERE VINES growing on the wall, tendrils as thick as a man's leg. The broad leaves hung down over the sill, wet with rain and fog. "I remember the layout of the castle," he said slowly. "It's a warren of tunnels and corridors, but I could find my way to the feasting hall."

"If they caught you, it would be death," said Imazu uneasily.

Corun's grin was bleak. "It will most likely be death anyway," he said. "I think I'll try."

"I'm not as spry as I once was, but—"

"No, no, Imazu, you had best wait

here. Then if anyone comes prying and sees you, he'll think we're both here—maybe."

Corun slipped off tunic and sandals, leaving only his kilt. He hung his sword across his back, put a knife in his belt, and turned toward the window.

"It may be all wrong," he said. "I should trust Chryseis—and I do, Imazu, but they might easily overpower her. And anything is better than this waiting like beasts in a trap."

"The gods be with you, then," said Imazu huskily. He shook a horny fist. "To hell with Shorzon! I've been his thrall too long. I'm with you, friend."

"Thanks." Corun swung out the window. "Good luck to both—to all of us, Imazu."

The fog wrapped around his eyes like a hood. He could barely see the shadowy wall, and he groped with fingers and toes for the vines. One slip, one break, and he would be spattered to red ruin in the courtyard below.

Down and down and down—Twigs clawed at him. The branches were slick in his hands, buried under a smother of leaves. His muscles began to ache with the strain. Several times he slipped and saved himself with a desperate clawing grip.

Something moaned in the night, under the deepening growl of thunder.

He clung to the wall and strained his eyes down. A breath of wind parted the fog briefly into ragged streamers through which winked the savage light of a bolt of lightning, high in the murky sky. Down below was the courtyard. He saw the metallic gleam of scales, guards pacing between the walls.

Slowly, he edged his way across the outjutting tower to the main wall of the castle. Slantwise, he crept over its surface until a slit of blackness loomed before him, another window. He had to squeeze to get through, the stone scraping his skin.

For a moment he stood inside, breathing heavily, the drawn sword in his hand. There was a corridor stretching beyond this room, on into a darkness lit by the ghostly blue fungus-glow. He saw and heard nothing of the Xanthi, but some-

thing scuttled across the floor and crouched in a shadowed corner, watching him.

On noiseless bare feet, he ran down the hall. Fog eddied and curled in the tenebrous length of it, he heard the dripping of water and once a shuddering scream ripped the dank air. He thought he remembered where he was in that labyrinth—left here, and there would be another ramp going down—

A huge golden form loomed around the corner. Before the jaws could open to shout, Corun's sword hissed in a vicious arc and the Xanthian's head leaped from his shoulders. He kicked the flopping body behind a door and sped on his way, panting.

Halfway down the ramp, a narrow entrance gaped, one of the tunnels that riddled the building through its massive walls. Corun slithered down its lightless wet length. It should open on the great chamber and—

Black against the dim blue light of the exit, a motionless form was squatting. Corun groaned inwardly. They had a guard against intruders, then. Best to go back now—no! He snarled soundlessly and bounded forward, clutching the sword in one hand and reaching out with the other.

Fingers rasping across the scaly hide, he hooked the thing's neck into the crook of his elbow and yanked the heavy body back into the tunnel with one enormous wrench. Blind in the darkness, he stabbed into the mouth, driving the point of his sword through flesh and bone into the brain.

The dying monster's claws raked him as he crouched over the body. He reflected grimly that no matter how benevolent the Xanthi might be, he would die for murder if they ever caught him. But he had no great fear of their suddenly becoming tender toward mankind. The bulk of the reptile race was peaceable, actually, but their rulers were relentless.

The tunnel opened on a small balcony halfway up the rearing chamber wall. Corun lay on his belly, peering down over the edge.

THEY SAT at a long table, the lords of the Demon Sea, and he felt a dim

surprise at seeing that they were almost through eating. Had his nightmare journey taken that long? They were talking, and the sound drifted up to his ears.

At the head of the table, Tsathu and his councillors sat on a long ornate couch ablaze with beaten gold. Shorzon and Chryseis were reclining nearby, sipping the bitter yellow wine of the Xanthi. It was strange to hear the hideous hissing and croaking of the reptile language coming from Chryseis' lovely throat.

"—interesting, I am sure," said the king.

"More than that—more than that!" It seemed to Corun that he could almost see the terrible fire in Shorzon's eyes. The wizard leaned forward, shaking with intensity. "You can do it. The Xanthi can conquer Achaera with ease. Your sea cavalry and serpents can smash their ships, your devil-powder can burst their walls into the air, your legions can overrun their land, your wizardry blind and craze them. And the terror you will inspire will force the people to do our bidding."

"Possibly you overrate us," said Tsathu. "It is true that we have great numbers and a strong army, but do not forget that the Xanthi are actually a more peaceful race than man. Your kind is hard and savage, murdering even each other, making war simply for loot or glory or no real reason at all. Until the king-race arose, the Xanthi dwelt quietly on the sea bottom and a few small islands, without wish to harm anyone.

"They have not even the natural capacity for magic possessed, however undeveloped, by all humans. As a result they are much more susceptible to it than men. Thus, when the king-race was born with such powers, they were soon able to control all their people and make themselves the absolute masters of the Xanthi. But we, kings and wizards and lords of the Demon Sea, are all one interbred clan. Without us, the Xanthi power would collapse; they would go back to what they were.

"Even Xanthi science is all of our making. *We*, the king-race, developed the devil-powder and all that we have ever made is stored in the dungeons of this very

building—enough to blow it into the sky."

TSATHU made a grimace which might have been a sardonic smile. "Do not read weakness into that admission," he said. "Even though all the lords who make Xanthian might are gathered in this one room, that power is still immeasurably greater than you can imagine. To show you how helpless you are—your men are locked into the dungeons and your geas has been lifted from their minds."

"Impossible!" gasped Shorzon. "A geas cannot be lifted—"

"But it can. What is it but a compulsion implanted in the brain, so deeply as to supersede all other habits? One mind cannot erase that imposed pattern, but several minds working in concert can do so, and that I and my councillors have done. As of today, your folk are free in soul, hating you for what you made them. You are alone."

The great scaled forms edged closer, menacingly. Corun's fist clenched about his sword. If they harmed Chryseis—

But she said coolly: "It does not matter. Our men were simply to bring us here, nothing else. We can dispense with them. What matters is our plan to impose magic control over Achaera."

"And I cannot yet see what benefit the Xanthi would get of it," said Tsathu impatiently. "Our powers of darkness are so much greater than yours already that—"

"Let us not use words meant to impress the ignorant among ourselves," said Chryseis scornfully. "Every sorcerer knows there is nothing of heaven or hell about magic. It is but the imposition of a pattern on other minds. It creates, by control of the senses, illusions of lycanthropy or whatever else is desired, or it binds the subject by the unbreakable compulsion of a geas. But it is no more than that—one mind reaching through space to create what impressions it wills on another mind. Your devil-powder, or an ordinary sword or ax or fist, is more dangerous—if the fools only knew."

Corun's breath hissed between his teeth. If—if that—O gods, if *that* was the secret of the magicians—!

"As you will," said Tsathu indifferently.

"What matters is that there are more of our minds than your two, and thus we can beat down any attempt you may make against us. So it comes back to the question, why should we help you seize and hold Achaera? What will we gain?"

"I should say nothing of its great wealth," said Shorzon. "But it is true, as you say, that many minds working together are immeasurably more powerful than one—more powerful, even, than the sum of all those minds working separately. I have worked with as many as a dozen slaves, having them concentrate with me, so that I could draw their mind-force through my own brain and use it as my own, and the results have amazed me. Now if the entire population of Achaera were forced to help us, all at one time—"

The Xanthi's eyes glittered and a low murmur rose among them. Shorzon went on, rapidly: "It would be power over the world. Nothing could stand before that massed mental force. With us, skilled sorcerers, to direct, and the soldiers of Xanthi to compel obedience, we could lay a geas on whole nations without even having to be near them. We could span immeasurable gulfs of space and contact minds on those other worlds which philosophers think exist beyond the upper clouds. We could, by thus heightening our own mental powers, think out the very problems of existence, find the deepest secrets of nature, forces beside which your devil-powder would be a spark. Drawing life-energy from other bodies, we would never grow old, we would live forever.

"Tsathu—lords of Xanthi—I offer you a chance to become gods!"

THE STILLNESS was broken only by the muttering and whispering of the Xanthi among themselves. Mist drifted through the raw wet night of the hall. The walls seemed to waver, shift and blur like smoke.

"Why could we not do this in our own nation?" asked Tsathu.

"Because, as you yourself said, the Xanthi do not have the latent mental powers of humans—save for you few who are the masters. It must be mankind who is controlled, with the commoners of your

race as overseers."

"And why could we not kill you and do this ourselves?"

"Because you do not understand humans. The differences are too great. You could never control human thoughts as Chryseis or I could."

Another Xanthian spoke: "But do you realize what this will do to the human race? Your Achaerans will become mindless machines under such control. Drained of life-energy, they will age and die like animals. I doubt that any will live ten seasons."

"What of that?" shrugged Chryseis. "There are other nations nearby to draw on—Conahur, Norriki, Khemri, ultimately the world. We will have centuries, remember—we will never die!"

"And you do not care for your own race at all?"

"It will no longer be our race," said Shorzon. "We will be gods, thinking and living and wielding such powers as they—as we ourselves right now—could never dream. Why, do what you will with our men here, to start. What does it matter?"

"But do not harm the yellow-haired man from Conahur," said Chryseis sharply. "He's mine—forever."

Tsathu sat thinking, like the statue of a Khemrian beast-god cast in shining gold. Slowly, at last, he nodded, and an eerie sigh ran down the long table as the lords of the Xanthi hissed agreement.

"It will be done," said Tsathu.

Corun stumbled back down the tunnel, reckless of discovery, blind and deaf with madness that roared in his skull. Chryseis—Chryseis—Chryseis—

It was not the horror of the scheme, the ruin that it would bring even if it failed, the revelation of how immeasurably powerful were the forces leagued against man. He could have stood that, and braced himself to fight it as long as there was breath in his lungs. But Chryseis—

She had been part of it. She had helped plan it, had coldly condemned her whole race to oblivion. She had lied to him, cheated him, betrayed him, used him, and now she wanted him for a toy, an immortal puppet—Witch! Witch! Witch!

Less human than the erinye at her feet,

than the Xanthi themselves, mad with a cold madness such as he had never thought could be—*Chryseis, Chryseis, Chryseis, I loved you. With all my heart, I loved you.*

There was no hope in him, no longing for anything but the fullest revenge he could take before they hewed him to the ground. Had the old Xanthian wizard foretold he would bring death? Aye, by the mad cruel gods who ruled men's destinies, he would!

He reached the corridor and began to run.

VIII

DOWN A LONG CURVING RAMP that led into a pit of blackness—the dungeons could not be far, they lay this way—

He hugged himself into the shadows as a troop of guards went by. They were talking in their hoarse croaking language, and did not peer into the corners of the labyrinth. When they were past, Corun sped on his way.

The stone walls became rough damp tunnels, hewed out of the living rock under the castle. He groped through a blackness relieved only by the occasional dull glow of fungi. The darkness hissed and rustled with movements; he caught the glimmer of three red eyes watching, and something slithered over his bare feet. A far faint scream quivered down the hollow length of passages. It had shaken him when he was here before, but now—

What mattered? What was important, save to kill as many of the monsters as he could before they overwhelmed him?

The tunnel opened on a great cave whose floor was a pool of oily black water. As he skirted its rim along a narrow slippery ledge, something stirred, a misshapen giant thing darker than the night. It roared hollowly and swam toward him. A wave of foul odor came with it, catching Corun's throat in a sick dizziness.

He swayed on the edge of the pool and the swimmer began to crawl out of it toward him. Corun saw its teeth gleam wetly in the vague blue light, but there were no eyes—it was blind. He retreated

along the ledge toward the farther exit. The ground trembled under the bulk of the creature.

Its jaws clashed shut behind him as he leaped free. Racing down the tunnel, he heard the bellowing of it like dull thunder through the reeking gloom. It wouldn't follow far, but that way of return would be barred to him.

No matter, no matter. He burst out into another open space. It was lit by a dim flickering fire over which crouched three armed Xanthi. Beyond, the red light glimmered on an iron-barred doorway, and behind that there were figures stirring. Men!

Corun bounded across the floor, the sword shrieking in his hand. It whirled down to crash through the skull-bones of one guard. Before he could free it, the other two were on him.

He ducked a murderous pike thrust and slipped close to the wielder, stabbing upward with his dagger. The Xanthian screamed and hugged Corun close to himself, fastening his jaws in the man's shoulder. Corun slashed wildly, ripping open the throat. They tumbled to the ground, locked in each other's arms, raging like beasts. Corun's knife glanced off the Xanthian's ribs and he felt the steel snap over. He got both hands into the clamped jaws, heedless of the fangs, and wrenched. The jawbone cracked as he forced the reptile's mouth open.

He rolled from beneath the still feebly struggling creature and glared around for the third. That one lay in a hacked ruin against the cell; he had backed up too close to the bars, and the men inside still had their weapons.

GASPING, Corun climbed to his feet. An eager baying of fierce voices rolled out from the cell; men gripped the bars and howled in maddened glee.

"Corun— Captain Corun—get us out of here—let us out to rip Shorzon's guts loose—Aaarrgh!"

The Conahurian lurched over to a dead Xanthian at whose waist hung a bundle of keys. His hands shook as he tried them in the lock. When he got the door open, the men were out in a single tide,

He leaned heavily on an Umlotuan's arm. "What happened to you?" he asked.

"The devils led us down here and then closed the door on us," snarled the blue man. "Later a group of them in rich dress came down—and suddenly we saw what a slavery we'd been in to Shorzon, suddenly it no longer seemed that obedience to him was the only possible thing—Mwanzi, let me at his throat!"

"You may have that chance," said the pirate. He felt strength returning; he stood erect and faced them in the flickering firelight. Their eyes gleamed back at him out of the shadows, fierce as the metal of their weapons.

"Listen," he said. "We might be able to fight our way out of here, but we'd never escape across the Demon Sea. But I know a way to destroy this whole cursed house and every being in it. If you'll follow me—"

"Aye!" The shout filled the cavern with savage thunder. They shook their weapons in the air, gleam of red-lit steel out of trembling darkness. "Aye!"

Corun picked up his sword and trotted down the nearest passageway. He was bleeding, he saw vaguely, but he felt little pain from it—he was beyond that now. The thing was to find the devil-powder. Tsathu had said it was somewhere down here.

They went along tunnel after winding tunnel, losing all sense of direction in the wet hollow dark. Corun had a sudden nightmare feeling that they might wander down here forever, blundering from cave to empty cave while eternity grayed.

"Where are we going?" asked someone impatiently. "Where are Xanthi to fight?"

"I don't know," snapped Corun.

They came suddenly into another broad cavern, beyond which was another barred door. Four Xanthi stood guard in front of it. They never had a chance—the air was suddenly full of hurled weapons, and they were buried under a pile of edged steel.

Corun searched the bodies but found no keys. In the murk beyond, he could dimly see boxes and barrels reaching into fathomless distances, but the door was held fast. Of course—Tsathu would never

trust his men-at-arms with entrance to the devil-powder.

The corsair snarled and grabbed a bar with both hands. "Pull, men of Umlotu!" he shouted. "Pull!"

They swarmed close, thirty-odd big blue men with the strength of hate in them, clutching the cell bars, grabbing each other's waists, heaving with a force that shrieked through the iron. "Pull!"

The lock burst and they staggered back as the door swung wide. Instantly Corun was inside, ripping open a box and laughing aloud to see the black grains that filled it.

For a wild moment he thought of plunging a brand into the powder and going up in flame and thunder with the castle. Coldness returned—he checked himself and looked around for fuses. His followers would not have permitted him to commit a suicide that involved them. And after all—the longer he lived, the more enemies he'd have a chance to cut down personally.

"I've heard talk of this stuff," said one of the men nervously. "Is it true that setting fire to it releases a demon?"

"Aye." Corun found the long rope-like fuses coiled in a box. He knotted several together and put one end into the powder. The ignition of one container would quickly set off the rest—and the cavern was huge, and filled with many shiploads of sleeping hell.

"If we can fight our way to our ship, and get clear before the fire reaches the powder—" began the Umlotuan.

"We can try that, I suppose," said Corun.

He estimated the burning time of his fuse from memories of the use he'd seen the Xanthi make of the devil-powder. Yes, there would be a fair allowance for escape, though he doubted that they would ever reach the strand alive.

He touched a stick from the fire to the end of the fuse. It began to sputter, a red spark creeping along it toward the open box. "Let's go!" shouted Corun.

They pounded along the tunnel, heedless of direction. There should be an upward-leading ramp somewhere—ah! There it was!

Up its length they raced, past levels of the dungeons toward the main floor of the castle. At the end, there was a brighter blue light than they had seen below. Up—up!

Up—and out!

THE CHAMBER was enormous, a pillared immensity reaching to a ceiling hidden in sheer height; rugs and tapestries of the scaled Xanthian weave were strewn about, and their heavy, intricately carved furniture filled it. At the far end stood a towering canopied throne, on which sat a huge golden form. Other shapes stood around it, and there were pikemen lining the walls at rigid attention.

Through the haze of mist and twilight, Corun saw the black robe of Shorzon and the flame-colored cloak of Chryseis. He shrieked an oath and plunged for them.

A horn screamed and the guards sprang from the walls to form a line before the throne. The humans shocked against the Xanthi with a fury that clamored through the building.

Swords and axes began to fly. Corun hewed at the nearest grinning reptile face, felt the sword sink in and roared the war-cry of Conahur. He spitted the monster on his blade, lifted it, and pitchforked it into the ranks of the guards.

Tsathu bellowed and rose to meet him. Suddenly the Xanthian king was not there; it was a tentacled thing from the sea bottom that filled the room, a thing whose bloated dark body reared to the ceiling. Someone screamed—fear locked the battlers into motionlessness.

“Magic!” It was a sneering rattle in Corun’s throat. He sprang into the very body of the sea creature.

He felt the shock of striking its solid form, the rasp of its hide against him, the overwhelming poisonous stench of it. One tentacle closed around him. He felt his ribs snapping and the air popping from his burst lungs.

It wasn’t real, his mind gasped through the whirling agony. It wasn’t real! He plowed grimly ahead, blind in the illusion that swirled around him, striking, striking.

Dimly, through the roaring in his nerves, he felt his blade hit something solid. He bellowed in savage glee and smote again, again, and again. The smashing pressure lifted. He sobbed air into himself and looked with streaming eyes as the giant form dissolved into smoke, into mist, into empty air. It was Tsathu writhing in pain at his feet, Tsathu with his head nearly chopped off. It was only another dying Xanthian.

Corun leaped up onto the throne and looked over the room. The guards and the sailors were still standing in shaken silence. “Kill them!” roared the pirate. “Strike them down!”

Battle closed again with a snarl and a clang of steel. Corun glared around after other Xanthi of the sorcerer breed. There were none in sight; they must prudently have fled into another part of the castle. Well—let them!

But other Xanthi were swarming into the chamber, battle horns were hooting and the guttural reptile voices crying a summons. If the humans were not to be broken by sheer numbers, they’d have to fight their way out soon.

And down in the dungeons a single red spark was eating its way toward a box of black powder.

Corun jumped down again to the floor. His sword leaped sideways, cut a Xanthian spine across, bit the tail from another. “To me!” he bawled. “Over here, men of Umlotu!”

The blues heard him and rallied, gathering into compact knots that slashed their way toward where his dripping sword whined and thundered. He never stopped striking; he drove the reptiles before him until they edged away from his advance.

The men formed into one group and Corun led it across the floor in a dash for the looming doorway. A red thought flashed across his brain: Where were Shorzon and Chryseis?

The Xanthi scattered before the desperate human rush. The men came out into a remembered hallway—it led to the outside, Corun recalled. By Breannach Brannor, they might escape yet!

“Corun! Corun, you sea-devil! I knew it was your doing!”

The Conahurian turned to see Imazu bounding toward him with a bloody ax in one hand. Imazu—thank all the gods, Imazu was free!

"I heard a noise of fighting, and the tower guards went off toward it," gasped the Umlotuan captain. "So I came too. On the way I met Shorzon and Chryseis."

"What of them?" breathed Corun.

The blue warrior smiled savagely and flung a red thing down at Corun's feet. "There's Shorzon's scheming head. My woman is free!"

"Chryseis—"

Imazu leaned on his ax, panting.

"She launched her erinye at me. I ducked into a room and slammed the door in its face, then came here through another entrance."

Chryseis was loose—"We've got to get clear," said Corun. "The devil-powder is going to go off any time now."

The Xanthi were rallying. They came at the humans in another rush. Corun and Imazu and their best men filled the corridor with a haze of steel, backing down toward the outer portal.

It was a crazy blur of struggle, hewing at faces that wavered out of night, slapping down thrusts and reaching for the life of the enemy. Men fell, and others took their places in the line. Down the corridor they retreated, fighting to get free, and they left a trail of dead.

The end of the passage loomed ahead. And the monstrous iron door was swinging shut.

Chryseis stood in the entrance. A wild storm-wind outside sent her cloak flapping about her, red wings beating in the lightning-shot darkness about the devil's rage of the goddess face.

"Stay here!" she screamed. "Stay here and be cut down, you triple traitor!"

The nearest Umlotuan sprang at her. The door clashed shut in his face—they heard the great bolt slam down outside. They were boxed in the end of the hall, and the Xanthi need only shoot them down with arrows.

Down in the dungeons, the fuse burned to its end. A sheet of flame sprang up in the opened box of powder, reaching for the stacks around it.

THE FIRST EXPLOSION CAME as a muffled roar. Corun felt the floor tremble under his feet. Men and Xanthi stood motionless, looking at each other with widening eyes in which a common doom arose.

So it ended. Shorzon and Tsathu and their wizard cohorts would be gone, but Chryseis, mad, lovely Chryseis, was loose, and the gods knew what hell she could brew among the leaderless Xanthi.

The walls groaned as another boom echoed down their length.

Well, death came to every man, and he had not done so badly. Corun began to realize how weary he was; he was bleeding from wounds and breath was raw in his lungs.

The Umlotuans hammered on the door in panic. But the twenty or fewer survivors could never break it down.

The devil-powder roared. The floor heaved sickeningly under Corun's feet. He heard the crash of collapsing masonry.

Wait—wait—one chance! One chance, by the gods!

"Be ready to run out when the walls topple," he shouted. "We'll have a little time—"

The Xanthi were fleeing in terror. The humans stood alone, waiting while the explosions rolled and banged around them. Cracks zigzagged across the walls, dust choked the dank air.

Crash!

Corun saw the nearer wall swaying, toppling. The floor lifted and buckled and he fell to the lurching ground. All the world was an insanity of racket and ruin.

The lintel caved in, the portal sagged. Corun leaped for the opening like a pouncing erinye. The men swarmed with it, out through the widening hole while the roof came down behind them.

Someone screamed, a faint lost sound in the grinding fury of sundering stone. Rocks were flying—Corun saw one of them crack a man's head like a melon. Wildly he ran as the outer facade came down.

There was a madness of storm outside, wind screaming to fill the sky, driving solid sheets of rain and hail before it.

The incessant blinding lightning glared in a cold shadowless brilliance, the bawling thunder drowned the roar of exploding devil-powder. They fought out through the courtyard, past the deserted outer gate.

There came a blast which seemed to crack the sky. Corun was knocked down as by a giant's fist. He lay in the mud and saw a pillar of flame lift toward the heavens with the castle fountaining up on its wings. Thunder roared over the earth, shouting to the storm that raged in the heavens.

Corun picked himself up and leaned dizzily against a tree stripped clean by the blast. Rain slanted across the ground, churning the mud beneath his feet, the livid lightning-glare blazing above. Vaguely, through ringing, deafened ears, he heard the wild clamor of the sea. Looking down the cataract which the upward trail had become, he saw the *Briseia* rocking in the wind where she lay on the beach.

He gestured to Imazu, who staggered up to join him. His voice was barely audible over the shouting wind: "Take the men down there. We can't sail in this storm, but make the ship fast, stand guard over her. If I'm not back when the storm is done, start for home."

"Where are you going?" cried the Umlotuan.

"I'll be back—maybe. Stay with the ship!"

Corun turned and slogged across the ground toward the jungle.

WEARINESS was gone. He was like a machine running without thought or pain until it burned out. Chryseis would have fled toward high ground, he thought dully.

Behind him, Imazu started forward, then checked himself. Something of the ultimate loneliness that was in Corun must have come to the Umlotuan. It was not a mission on which any other man might go. And they had to save the ship. He gestured to his few remaining men and they began the slow climb down to the beach.

The castle was a heap of shattered rock, still moving convulsively as the last few boxes of devil-powder exploded. The rain

boiled down over it, churning through the fragments. Lightning flamed in the berserk heavens.

Corun pushed through underbrush that clutched at his feet and clawed at his skin. The sword was still hanging loosely in one hand, nicked and blunted with battle. He went on mechanically, scarcely noticing the wind-whipped trees that barred his way.

It came to him that he was fighting for Khroman, the thalassocrat of Achaera, ruler by right of conquest over Conahur. But there were worse things than foreign rule, if it was human, and one of the greater evils had fled toward the mountain.

Presently he came out on the bare rocks above the fringe of jungle growth. The rain hammered at him, driven by a wind that screamed like a maddened beast. Thunder boomed and rolled overhead, a roar of doom answering the thud of his heart. The water rushed over his ankles, foaming down toward the sea.

She stood waiting for him atop a high bare hill. Her cloak was drawn tightly about her slender body, but the wind caught at it, whipped and tore it. Her rain-wet hair blew wild.

"Corun," she called under the gale. "Corun."

"I am coming," he said, not caring if she heard him or not. He struggled up to where she stood limned against the sheeted fire in heaven. They faced each other while the storm raged around them.

"Corun—"

She read death in his eyes as he lifted the sword. Her form blurred, the outlines of a monster grew to his eyes.

He laughed bitterly. "I know what your magic is," he said. "You saw me kill Tsathu."

She was human again, human and lovely, a light-footed spirit of the hurricane. Her face was etched white in the lightning-glare.

"Perias!" she screamed.

The erinye crept forth, belly to the ground, tail lashing. Hell glared out of the ice-green eyes. Corun braced himself, sword in hand.

Perias sprang—not straight at the man,

but into the air. His wings caught the wind, whirling him aloft. Twisting in mid-flight, he arrowed down. Corun struck at him. The erinye dodged the blow and one buffeting wingtip caught the man's wrist. The sword fell from Corun's hand. At once the erinye was on him.

Corun fell under that smashing attack. The erinye's fangs gleamed above his throat, the claws sank into his muscles. He flung up an arm and the teeth crunched on it, grinding at the bone.

Corun wrapped his legs in a scissor-lock around the gaunt body, pressing himself too close for the clawed hind feet to disembowel him. His free hand reached out, gouging—he felt an eyeball tear loose, and the erinye opened his mouth in a thin scream. Corun pulled his torn arm free. He struck with a balled fist at the devil-beast and felt his knuckles break under the impact. But bone snapped. Perias' jaw hung suddenly loose.

The erinye sprang back and Corun lurched to hands and knees. Perias edged closer, stiff-legged. Corun stumbled erect and Perias charged. One great wing smashed out, brought the man toppling back to earth. Perias leaped for his exposed belly.

Corun lashed out with both feet. The thud was dull and hollow under the racking thunder. Perias tumbled back and Corun sprang on him. The barbed tail slashed, laying Corun's thigh open. He fell atop the struggling beast and got his free hand on the throat.

The mighty wings threshed, half lifting man and erinye. Corun pulled himself over on the writhing back. He locked legs around the body, arms around the neck, and heaved.

The erinye yowled. His wings clashed together with skull-cracking force, barely missing the head of the man who hugged his back. His tail raked against Corun's back, seeking the vitals. Corun gave another yank. He felt the supple spine bending. Heave!

Perias lifted a brassy scream. The strange dry sound of snapping vertebrae cracked out. Corun rolled away from the threshing form.

Perias gasped, lifted his broken head,

and looked with filming green eyes at Chryseis where she stood unmoving against the white fire of the sky. Slowly, painfully, he dragged himself toward her. Breath rattled in and out of his blood-filled lungs.

"Perias—" Chryseis bent over to touch the great head. The erinye sighed. His rough tongue licked her feet. Then he shuddered and lay still.

"Perias."

Corun climbed to his feet and stood shaking. There was no strength left in him—it was running out through a dozen yawning wounds. The ground whirled and tilted crazily about him. He saw her standing against the sky and slowly, slowly, he came toward her.

Chryseis picked up a stone and threw it. It seemed to take an immense time, arcing toward him. Some dim corner of his buckling consciousness realized that it would knock him out, that she could then kill him with the sword and escape into the hills.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

The stone crashed against his skull and the world exploded into darkness.

X

HE WOKE UP, SLOWLY AND painfully, and lay for a long time in a state of half-awareness, remembering only confused fragments of battle and despair.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that the storm was dying. Lightning was wan in the sky, and thunder mumbled farewell. The wind had fallen, the rain fell slow and heavy down on him.

He saw her bending over him. The long wet hair tumbled past her face to fall on his breast. He was wrapped in her cloak, and she had ripped bandages from her robe for his hurts.

He tried to move, and could only stir feebly. She laid a hand on his cheek. "Don't," she whispered. "Just lie there, Corun."

His head was on her lap, he realized dimly. His eyes questioned her. She laughed, softly under the falling rain.

"Don't you see?" she said. "Didn't you

think of it? Shorzon's geas was put on me as a child. I was always under his will. Even when he was dead, it was strong enough to drive me along his road.

"But I love you, Corun. I will always love you. My love warred with Shorzon's will even as I tried to kill you. And when I saw you lying there helpless, after such a fight as no man has ever waged since the gods walked the earth—

"I tried to stab you. And I couldn't. Shorzon's geas was broken."

Her hands stroked his hair. "You aren't too badly hurt, Corun. I'll get you down to the ship. With my witch's powers, we can win through any Xanthi who try to stop us—not that I think they will, with their leaders destroyed. We can get safely to Achaera."

She sighed. "I will see that you escape my father's power, Corun. If you will return to the pirate life, I will follow you."

He shook his head. "No," he whispered. "No, I will take service under Khroman,

if he will have me."

"He will," she vowed softly. "He needs strong men. And someday you can be thalassocrat of the empire—"

It wasn't so bad, thought Corun drowsily. Khroman was a good sort. A highly placed Conahurian could gradually ease the burdens of his people until they had full equality with Achaera in a united and peaceful domain.

The menace of the Xanthi was ended. To be on the safe side, Achaera had better make them tributary; an expedition which he, Corun, could lead. After that, there would be enough to keep a man busy. As well as the loveliest and best of women for wife.

He slept. He did not waken when Imazu led a squad up in search of him. Chryseis laid a finger on her lips and a flash of understanding passed between her and the captain. He nodded, smiling, and clasped her hand with sudden warmth.

They bore the sleeping warrior back through the rain, down to the waiting ship.