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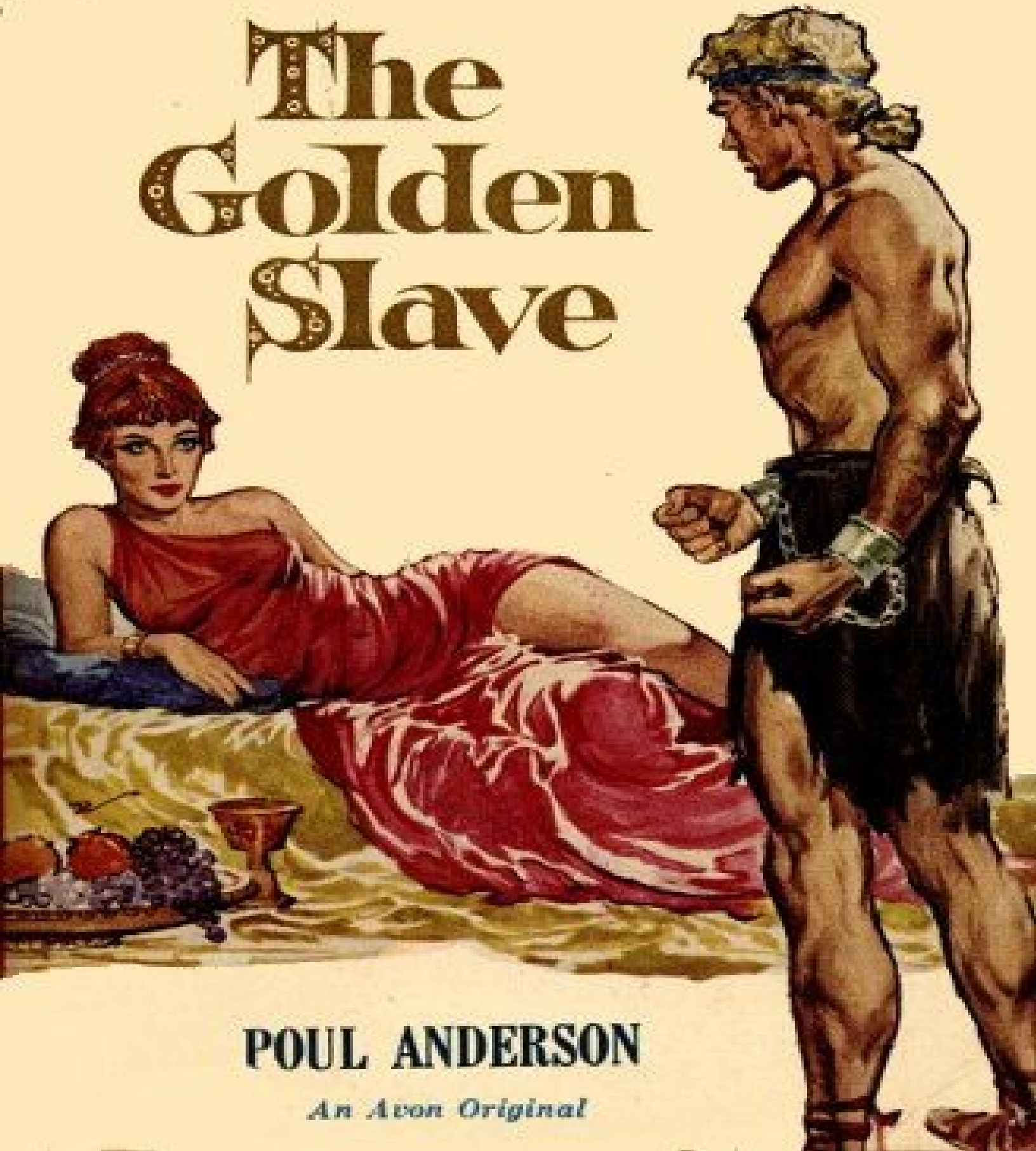
The Golden Slave



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POUL ANDERSON

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Cordelia lay on the couch before him.

Light rippled along her gown of sheerest silk, and her flesh seemed to glow through.

Beside her the table bore wine and food prepared for two.

Eodan gaped.

"Hail Cimbrian," Cordelia raised her hand and beckoned him. "Come," she said.

Eodan swayed toward her, the blood roaring in his temples.

"Will you drink with me?" she asked softly.

"Yes," he answered thickly.

Their hands touched as she poured the wine into his goblet, and he felt his flesh leap with excitement.

"My husband was wrong to set a king to work in his fields," she murmured. "Perhaps we two can reach a better understanding."

She lifted her goblet. "To our tomorrows, may they be better than our yesterdays."

They drank in turn.

Suddenly her arms went around him and her mouth was hot on his. "I meant this to be leisurely with much fine play," she whispered. "But that would be wrong with you. I see it now."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This might have happened. The Cimbri are still remembered by the old district name Himmerland. Plutarch describes the battle at Vercellae, which took place 101 B.C., and its immediate aftermath. Other classical writers, such as Tacitus and Strabo, and a treasure of archeological material enable us to guess at the Cimbri themselves. Apparently they were a Germanic tribe from Jutland, with some elements of Celtic culture; by the time they reached Italy they had grown into a formidable confederation.

King Mithradates the Great (more commonly but less correctly spelled Mithridates) is, of course, also historical. His expedition into Galatia in 100 B.C. is not mentioned by the scanty surviving records; but it is known that he had already fought with that strange kingdom and annexed some of its territory, so border trouble followed by a punitive sweep down past Ancyra is quite plausible.

At that time the area now called southern Russia was dominated by the Alanic tribes, among whom the Rukh-Ansa were prominent. They are presumably identical with the "Rhoxolani" whom Mithradates' general Diophantus defeated at the Crimea about 100 B.C.

The tradition described in the epilogue may be found in the thirteenth-century *Heimskringla* and, in a different form, in the chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus.

Otherwise my sources are the usual ancient and modern ones. I have tried to keep the framework of verifiable historical fact accurate. For whatever brutality, licentiousness and unreasonable prejudice is shown by the people concerned, I apologize, adding only that by the standards of the modern free world the era was a good deal worse than I care to describe explicitly.

For the sake of connotation, cities and other political units are generally referred to by their classical rather than contemporary names. It should be obvious from context where any particular spot lies on the map. However, the following list of geographical equivalents may be found interesting.

Ancyra: Ankara, Turkey
Aquitania: West central France
Arausio: Orange, France

Asia: In ordinary Roman usage, the modern Asia Minor plus India
Byzantium: Istanbul, Turkey
Cimberland: Himmerland, northern Jutland, Denmark
Cimmerian Bosporus: A Greek kingdom in the Crimea
Colchis: Mingrelian Georgia, U.S.S.R.
Dacia: Rumania
Galatia: Central Turkey
Gaul: France
Halys River: Kizil River, Turkey
Hellas: Greece
Hellespont: Dardanelles
Helvetia: Switzerland
Macedonia: Northern Greece
Massilia: Marseilles
Narbonensis: Provence, i.e., southern France
Noreia: Near Vienna, Austria
Parthian Empire: Iran and Iraq
Persia: Iran
Pontus: Eastern half of northern Turkish coast, and southward
Sinope: Sinop, Turkey
Tauric Chersonese: The Crimea
Trapezus: Trabzon, Turkey (medieval Trebizond)
Vercellae: Vercelli, Italy, between Turin and Milan

100 B.C.

The Cimbrian hordes galloped across the dawn of history and clashed in screaming battle against the mighty Roman legions.

Led by their chief, Boierik, and his son, Eodan, the hungry and homeless pagan tribes hurled back the Romans time after time in their desperate search for land. But for all the burning towns, the new-caught women weeping, the wine drunk, the gold lifted, the Cimbri did not find a home.

And now it was over. At Vercellae the Roman armies shattered them completely. Only a few survived—and for them death would have been more merciful.

Eodan, the proud young chieftain, had been caught and sold into slavery, his infant son murdered and his beautiful wife, Hwicca, taken as a concubine.

But whips and slave chains could not break the spirit of this fiery pagan giant who fought, seduced and connived his way to a perilous freedom to rescue the woman he loved.

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The Golden Slave

I

The night before the battle, there were many watchfires. As he walked from the Cimbri, out into darkness, Eodan saw the Roman camp across the miles as a tiny ring of guttering red. Now the search has ended, he thought; this earth we shall have tomorrow, or be slain.

He thought, while his blood beat swiftly, I do not await my death.

Only the ghostliest edge of a moon was up, and the stars seemed blurred after the mountain sky. He felt Italy's air as thick. And the ground underfoot was dusty where tens of thousands of folk, their horses and cattle, had tramped over ripening grain. A poplar grove nearby stood unmoving in windless gloom. Suddenly, sharp as a thrown war-dart, Eodan recalled Jutland, Cimberland—great rolling heathery hills and storm-noisy oaks, a hawk wheeling in heaven and the far bright blink of the Limfjord.

But that was fifteen years ago. His folk, angry with their gods, had wandered since then to the world's edge. And now the Cimbrian bull must meet for one last time that she-wolf they said guarded Rome. It was unlucky to call up forsaken places in your head.

Besides, thought Eodan, this was good land here. He could make it a pastureland of horses ... yes, he might well take his share of Italy on the Raudian plain, beneath the high Alps.

The night was hot. He rested his spear in the crook of an arm while he took off his wolfskin cloak. Under it he wore the legginged coarse breeches of any Cimbrian warrior; but his shirt was red silk, made for him by Hwicca from a looted bolt of cloth. The twining leaves and leaping stags of the North looked harsh across its shimmer. He wore a golden torque around his neck, gold rings on his arms and a tooled-leather belt heavy with silver god-masks. The dagger it held bore a new hilt of ivory on the old iron blade. The Cimbri had reaved from many folk, until their wagons were stuffed with wealth. Yet it was only land they sought.

There was not much more air to be found beyond the watchfires than within the camp. And it was hardly less full of noise here: the cattle lowed enormously outside the wagons, one great clotted mass of horned flesh. Eodan remembered

Hwicca and turned back again.

A guard hailed him as he passed. "Hoy, there, Boierik's son, are you wise to go out alone? *I* would have scouts in the dark, to slice any such throat that offered itself."

Eodan grinned and said scornfully, "How many miles away would you hear a Roman, puffing and clanking on tiptoe?"

The warrior laughed. A Cimbrian of common mold, the wagons held thousands like him. A big man, with heavy bones and thews, his skin was white where sun and wind and mountain frosts had not burned it red, his eyes were snapping blue under shaggy brows. He wore his hair shoulder length, drawn into a tail at the back of the head; his beard was braided, and his face and arms showed the tattoo marks of tribe, clan, lodge or mere fancy. He bore an iron breastplate, a helmet roughly hammered into the shape of a boar's head and a painted wooden shield. His weapons were a spear and a long single-edged sword.

Eodan himself was taller even than most of the tall Cimbri. His eyes were green, set far apart over high cheekbones in a broad, straight-nosed, square-chinned face. His yellow hair was cut like everyone else's, but like most of the younger men he had taken on the Southland fashion of shaving his beard once or twice a week. His only tattoo was on his forehead, the holy triskele marking him as a son of Boierik, who led the people in wandering, war and sacrifice. The other old ties, clan or blood brotherhood, had loosened on the long trek; these wild, youthful horsemen were more fain for battle or gold or women than for the rites of their grandfathers.

"And besides, Ingwar, there is a truce until tomorrow," Eodan went on. "I thought everyone knew that. I and a few others rode with my father to the Roman camp and spoke with their chief. We agreed where and when to meet for battle. I do not think the Romans are overly eager to feed the crows. They won't attack us beforehand."

Ingwar's thick features showed a moment's uneasiness in the wavering firelight. "Is it true what I heard say, that the Teutones and Ambrones were wiped out last year by this same Roman?"

"It is true," said Eodan. "When my father and his chiefs first went to talk with Marius, to tell him we wanted land and would in turn become allies of Rome, my father said he also spoke on behalf of our comrades, those tribes which had gone to enter Italy through the western passes. Marius scoffed and said he had already given the Teutones and Ambrones their lands, which they would now

hold forever. At this my father grew angry and swore they would avenge that insult when they arrived in Italy. Then Marius said, 'They are already here.' And he had the chief of the Teutones led forth in chains."

Ingwar shuddered and made a sign against trolldom. "Then we are alone," he said.

"So much the more for us, when we sack Rome and take Italy's acres," answered Eodan gaily.

"But—"

"Ingwar, Ingwar, you are older than I. I had barely seen six winters when we left Cimberland; you were already a wedded man. Must I then tell you of all we have done since? How we went through forests and rivers, over mountains, along the Danube year after year to Shar Dagh itself ... and all the tribes there could not halt us—we reaped their grain and wintered in their houses and rolled on in spring, leaving their wives heavy with our children! How we smote the Romans at Noreia twelve years ago, and again eight and four years ago—besides all the Gauls and Iberians and the Bull knows how many others that stood in our way—how we pushed one Roman army before us across the Adige, when they would bar Italy—how this is the host they can hope to raise against us, and we outnumber it perhaps three men to one!"

The victories rushed off Eodan's tongue, a river in springtime flood. He thought of one Roman tribune after the next, tied like an ox to a Cimbrian wagon, or stark on a reddened field among his unbreathing legionaries. He remembered roaring songs and the whirlwind gallop of Cimberland's young men, drunk with victory and the eyes of their dear tall girls. It did not occur to him—then—how the trek had nevertheless lasted for fifteen years, north and south, east and west, from Jutland down to the Balkan spine and back to the Belgic plains, from the orchards of Gaul to the gaunt uplands of Spain. And for all the burning towns and weeping new-caught women, all the men killed and all the gold lifted, the Cimbri had not found a home. There had been too many people, forever too many; you could not plow when the very earth spewed armed men up into your face.

"Well," said Ingwar. "Well, yes. Yes." He nodded his bushy head. "It's plain to see whose son you are. His youngest, perhaps, not counting the baseborn, but still son to Boierik. And that's something. Me, I am only a crofter, or will be when I get my bit of land, but you'll be a king or whatever they call it. So remember me, old Ingwar that bounced you on his knee back home, and let me

bring my mares for your fine stallions to breed, eh?"

"Eh, indeed." Eodan slapped the broad back and went on into the camp.

The wagons were drawn up in many rings, the whole forming a circle bound together by low breastworks of earth and logs. It seethed with folk, there among the wheels. Even from his own height, Eodan could not see far across that brawl of big fair men and free-striding girls.

Here a band of boys whooped and wrestled at a campfire, while an old wife stirred a kettle of stew, naked towheaded children rolled in the dust, dogs barked and horses stamped. There a gang of men knelt about the dice, shouting as the wagers went, betting all they owned down to their very weapons—for tomorrow they would settle with Marius and own Rome herself. An aged bard, chilly even in summer, huddled into a worn bearskin and listened dumbly to the war-song of a beardless lad whose hands had already been bloodied. A youth and a maiden stole between wagons, seeking darkness; her mother shook her head after them in some bitterness, for it was not like the time when she was young—all this rootless drifting had ended the staid old ways, and no good would come of it. A thrall from the homeland, hairy and ragged, grabbed lumberingly for a timid lass stolen out of Gaul, and got a kick and a curse from the warrior who owned them both. A man whetted an ax against tomorrow's use; beside him snored three friends, empty wine cups in their hands. Here, there, here, there, it became one great whirl for Eodan, and the voices and feet and ringing iron were like the surf he had not heard in fifteen years.

He pushed his way through them all, grinning at those he knew, taking a horn of beer offered by one man and a bite of blood sausage from another, but not staying. Out there, alone in the night, he had remembered Hwicca, and it came to him that the night was not so long after all.

His own wagons stood near his father's, which were close to the god-cars. In two of these lived the hags who tended the holy fire, took omens and cast spells for luck—ugh, they looked like empty leather sacks, and it was said they rode broomsticks through the air. But another held the mightiest Cimbrian treasures, ancient lur horns and a wooden earth-god and the huge golden oath-ring. Eodan and Hwicca had laid their hands on that ring last year to be wedded. The Bull rode in the same wagon, but tonight Boierik had ordered it set in an open cart, that all might see it and be heartened. It was a heavy image, cast in bronze, with horns that seemed to threaten the stars.

They had wandered far, the Cimbri, and they had lost much of old habit and

belief and belongingness. They were not even the Cimbri any longer. That was only the chief tribe of many which had joined their trek. There were other Jutes, driven from Jutland by the same succession of wild wet years when no harvest ripened and hail fell like knuckle-bones on Midsummer Eve. There were Germans gathered in along the way; Helvetians from the Alps and Basques from the Pyrenees, neighbors to the sky; even adventurous Celts, throwing in with these newcomers who so merrily ransacked all nations. They had no gods in common, nor did they care much for any gods; they had no high ancestors whose barrows must be sacrificed to; they had not even a single language.

Red Boierik and the Bull held them together. Eodan, with scant reverence for anything else, shaded his eyes in awe as he passed the green, horned bulk of it.

Then he saw his own wagon and his best horses tethered beside it. A low fire was burning, and Flavius was squatting above it, poking with a stick.

"Well," said Eodan, "are you cold? Or afraid?"

The Roman stood up, slowly and easily as a cat. He wore only a rag of a tunic, thrown him one day by his master, but he wore it like a toga in the Senate. Men had advised Eodan not to trust such a thrall—stick a spear in him, or at least beat the haughtiness out, or one day he'll put a knife in your back. Eodan had disregarded them. Now and then he would knock Flavius over with a single open-handed cuff, when the fellow spoke too sharply, but nothing worse had been needed; and he was more use than a dozen shambling Northern oafs.

"Neither," he said. "I wanted a little more light, to see the camp better. This may be my last night in it."

"Hoy!" said Eodan. "Speak no unlucky words, or I'll kick your teeth in."

He made no move against the Roman. War or the chase were one thing; beating those who could not fight back was another, a distasteful work. Eodan laid the whip on his thralls less often than most. Lately he had given Flavius the job, and the Roman had shown Roman skill at it.

"After all, master, I could have meant that tomorrow we will sleep in Vercellae, and a few nights thereafter in Rome." Flavius smiled, the odd closed-lipped smile with drooping eyelids that made Cimbrian men somehow raw along the nerves but seemed to draw Cimbrian women. In his mouth the rough, burring Northern language became something else, almost a song.

He was about ten years older than Eodan, not as tall or as broad of shoulder, but more supple. His skin was nearly as fair, though his hair curled black; his face

was narrow, smooth, with wide red lips, but his jaw jutted, and his nose was curving chiseled beauty; his rust-colored eyes had lashes a woman might envy. Four years as a Cimbrian slave had put certain skills in his hands, but did not seem to have dulled his gaze or numbed his tongue.

Eodan gave him a hard stare. "If I were you, not tied to the wheel tonight and my fellows close by, I'd slip from here. You'd have a better chance of escaping now than you ever had before."

"Not a good enough chance," said Flavius. "Tomorrow you will win and I would be scourged or killed if caught. Or the Romans will win and I shall be released. I can wait. My folk are older than yours—you are a nation of children, but we are schooled in waiting."

"Which makes you less trouble to me!" laughed the Cimbrian. "You can be my overseer, when I build my garth. I'll even get you a Roman wife."

"I told you I have one. Such as she is." Flavius grimaced delicately. Eodan bristled. It meant nothing for Flavius to bed with thrall women—any man would do that if no better were to be had. The ugly, hardly understandable gossip about boys could be overlooked. But a man's wife was his *wife*, sworn to him in the sight of proud folk. Even if he did not get on with her, he was less than a man for speaking her name badly before others.

Well—

"What is the Roman consul's name?" went on Flavius. "Not Catulus, whom you beat at the Adige, but the new one they say has been given supreme command."

"Marius."

"Ah, so. Gaius Marius, I am sure. I have met him. A plebeian, a demagogue, a self-righteous and always angry creature who actually boasts of knowing no Greek ... indeed. His one lonely virtue is that he is a fiend of a soldier."

Flavius had murmured his remark in Latin. The Cimbric, the speech of barbarians, could not have been used to say it. Eodan followed him without much trouble; he had had Flavius teach him enough Latin for everyday use, looking forward to the day when he dealt with many Italian underlings.

Eodan said, "In my baggage cart you will find my chest of armor. Polish the helmet and breastplate. I would look my best tomorrow." He paused at the wagon. "And do not sit close to here."

Flavius chuckled. "Ah—I see what you have in mind. You are to be envied. I

know all Aristotle's criteria of beauty, but you sleep with them!"

Eodan kicked at him, not very angrily. The Roman laughed, dodged and slipped off into darkness. Eodan stared after him for a little, then heard him strike up a merry melodious whistling.

It was the same air Gnaeus Valerius Flavius had been singing at Arausio in Gaul, to hearten his fellow captives. That was after the Cimbri had utterly smashed two consular armies, while Boierik was sacrificing all the prisoners and booty to the river god. Ha, but the hag-wagon had stunk of blood! Eodan had been a little sickened, as one helpless man after another went to be hanged, speared, cut open and brains dashed out—the river had been choked with the dead. He had heard Flavius singing. He did not know Latin then, but he had guessed from the kind of laughter (the Romans had laughed, waiting to be murdered!) that the words were bawdy. On an impulse he had bought Flavius from the river for a cow and calf. Later he had learned that he now owned a Roman of the equestrian class, educated in Athens, possessor of rich estates and tall ambitions, serving in the army as every wellborn Roman must.

Eodan went up two steps and drew aside the curtain in his doorway. This was a chief's wandering home, drawn by four span of oxen, walled and roofed against the rain.

"What is that?" The low woman-voice was taut. He heard her move in the dark wagon body, among his racked weapons.

"I," he said. "Only I."

"Oh—" Hwicca groped to the door. The dim light picked out her face—broad, snub-nosed, a little freckled, the mouth wide and soft, the eyes like summer heavens. Her yellow hair fell so thickly past the strong shoulders that he could hardly see her crouched body.

"Oh, Eodan, I was afraid."

Her hands felt cold, touching his. "Of a few Romans?" he asked.

"Of what could happen to you tomorrow," she whispered. "And even to Othrik.... I thought you would not come at all tonight."

His arm slipped down under the wheaten mane, across her bare back, and he kissed her with a gentleness he had never had for other women. It was not only that she was his wife and had borne his son. Surely it was not that she also came of a high Cimbrian house. But when he saw her it was like a springtime within

him, a Jutland spring in lost years when the Maiden drove forth garlanded under blossoming hawthorns; and he knew that being a man was more than mere war-readiness.

"I went out to look at things," he told her, "and spoke with some men and with Flavius."

"So.... I fell asleep, waiting. I did not hear. Flavius sang me a song to make me sleep when I could not ... he had first made me laugh, too." Hwicca smiled. "He promised to bring me some of these flowers they have—roses, he calls them—"

"That is enough of Flavius!" snapped Eodan. May the wind run off with that Roman, he thought, the way he bewitches all women. I come back and the first thing I hear from my wife is how wonderful Flavius is.

Hwicca cocked her head. "Do you know," she murmured, "I think you are jealous? As if you had any reason!"

She withdrew. He followed, awkwardly taking off his clothes in the black, cramped space. He heard Hwicca go to Othrik, the small, milky wonder who would one day sit in *his* high seat, and draw a skin over the curled-up form. He waited on their own straw. Presently her arms found him.

II

The Cimbri met the joint forces of Marius and Catulus on the Raudian plain near the city Vercellae. It was on the third day before the new moon in the month Sextilis, which is now called August. The Romans numbered 52,300; no one had counted the Cimbri, but it is said each side of their army took up thirty furlongs and that they had 15,000 horses.

Eodan led a wing of these. He was not on one of the shaggy, short-legged, long-headed Northern ponies that had trotted across Europe—the tall black stallion he had found in Spain snorted and danced beneath him. He dreamed about herds of such horses, his own stock on his own land. He would raise horses like none the world had ever seen. Meanwhile he rode with silver-jingling harness to cast down Consul Marius.

His big body strained against a plate of hammered iron; his helmet carried the mask of a wolf, and plumes nodded above it; a cloak like flame blew from his shoulders; he wore gilt spurs on boots inlaid with gold. He shouted and bandied jokes—the lusty mirth of a stock-breeding people—with comrades even younger than he, shook his lance to catch the sun on its metal, put the aurochs horn to his lips and blew, till his temples hammered, for the joy of hearing it. "*Hoy-ah*, there, Romans, have you any word I can take to your wives? I'll see them before you do!" And the young riders galloped in and out, back and forth, till dust grayed their banners.

Boierik—huge and silent, scarred hawk face and grizzled red hair beneath a horned helmet, armed with a two-pronged spear—rode more steadily in the van of the army. And not all the Cimbri who marched after the horses owned so much as an iron head covering: there were many leather caps and arrows merely fire-hardened. Yet even some bare-legged twelve-year-old boy, wielding no more than a sling, might be wearing a plundered golden necklace.

The Romans waited, quiet under the eagles, their cuirasses and greaves, oblong shields and round helmets blinding bright in the sun. Among them waved officers' plumes and an occasional blue cloak, but they seemed as much less colorful than the barbarians as they seemed smaller—a dark short race with cropped hair and shaven chins, holding their ranks stiff as death. Even their horsemen stood rigid.

Eodan strained his eyes through the dust that was around him like a fog, kicked up by hoofs and feet. He could scarcely see his own folk; now and then he caught the iron gleam of chains by which the Cimbri had linked their front-line men together, to stand fast or die. He thought, with a moment's unease, that it aided the Romans, not to be able to see how great were the numbers they must face.... Then a war-horn screamed, and he blew his own in answer and smote spurs into his horse.

Hoofs drummed beneath him. He heard the wild, lowing *du-du-du* of the holy lur horns; closer now, the Romans tubas brayed brass and the Roman pipes skirled. He heard even the rattle of his own metal and the squeak of leather. But then it was all drowned in the Cimbrian shouts.

"*Hau-hau-hau-hau-hoo!*" shrieked Eodan into his horse's blowing mane. "*Hau, hau! Hee-ee-yi!*" So did we shout at Noreia, when Rome first learned who we are; so did we cry on the Alps, when we romped naked in the snow and slid down glaciers on our shields; so did we howl as we ripped up a forest to dam the Adige, break the Roman bridge and wring the eagle's neck! *Hee-hoo!*

It was a blink of time, and it was forever, before he saw the enemy cavalry before him. A shape sprang out of whirling gray dust, a shadow, a face. Eodan saw that the man's chin was scarred. He reached into his belt, whipped out one of his darts, and hurled it. He saw it glance off the Roman cuirass. He veered his horse to the right and shook his lance as he went by.

Around him it was all thudding and yelling. He only glimpsed the Roman charge, fragments through the dust, a helmet or a sword, once the eye of a horse. He leaned low in the saddle and reached for his second dart. The Cimbrian riders were moving slantwise across the advancing Roman front, and only those on the left actually met that charge. Eodan edged toward the fighting.

A mounted man loomed up, sudden as a thunderclap. Eodan threw the dart. It struck the Roman's horse in a nostril, and blood squirted out. The horse screamed and lunged. Eodan knew a moment of reproach; he had not meant to hurt the poor beast! Then he was upon the enemy. The fellow was too busy with his frantic mount to raise shield. Eodan drove his lance two-handed into the man's throat. He toppled from his seat, and the shaft was almost wrenched from Eodan's hands. With a single harsh movement, he freed it, nearly falling himself.

Another shape came out of the racketing dust. Eodan was able to see this one more clearly. He could have counted the iron bands of the cuirass or the iron-studded leather strips falling down the thighs above the kilt. He braced his lance

in his hands and waited. The Roman came in at a trot. His shaft struck out. Eodan parried it, wood smote dully on wood. The horses snorted and circled while their riders probed. The Roman's steel hit Eodan's shield, where it hung on the Cimbrian's arm, and stuck there for a tiny moment. Eodan grabbed the lance with his left hand and shoved his own weapon forward, clumsily, with his right arm. The Roman's shield blocked him. Eodan whipped his shaft down like a club, and it hit the Roman's knee. The man yelped and dropped his shield. Eodan's iron went through his jaws. The Roman fell backward, dragging the lance with him, strangling in blood. His horse bucked, brought down a chance hoof and cracked the wood across.

Panting, Eodan drew his sword and looked about. He could dimly see that men were skirmishing through dust and heat—the Bull help us, but it was hot!—and that the battle was moving toward the Cimbrian right. Sweat runneled from him, stung his eyes and drenched his padded undergarment. He should have been crowing his victory. Two men slain for certain; it was not often you knew what a blow of yours had done. But he felt too choked in the dust.

He rode after the fight in search of an enemy. Boierik's plan had worked, to draw the Roman horse away while the Cimbrian foot struck their center. He could hear the screeches and hammering as men battled on the ground; he could not see it.

Slowly his mount gained speed. He was riding at gallop when he saw the knot of men. Two Romans ahorse were circling about four dismounted Cimbri, who stood back to back and glared. Eodan felt the heart spring in his breast. "*Hee-ya-hau! Hau, hau, hau!*" He whirled the great iron blade up over his head and charged.

The nearest Roman saw him and had time to face the attack. Eodan struck down, two-handed, guiding the stallion with his knees. The blow cried out on the Roman shield, and he felt it shock back into his own bones. He saw the shieldframe crumple. The Roman whitened and fell from the saddle, rolled over and sat up holding a broken arm.

The other one darted to his rescue. Eodan took a savage spear-thrust on his breastplate; it glanced down and furrowed his thigh. He reached out, hammering with his sword. It bounced on helmet and shoulder pieces, clamored against wood and steel. The lance broke across. The Roman rider sat firm, working his way in, shield upraised. Eodan hewed at his leg. The Roman caught the blow on his own sword, but the sheer force of it pushed both blades down. Eodan struck with the edge of his small shield and hit the Roman on the shoulder, knocking

him from his saddle. The four dismounted Cimbri roared and rushed in.

A wolf-fight snarled by. Eodan followed it. All at once he found himself out of the dust cloud. The ground was torn underfoot, and a dead barbarian glared empty-eyed at a cloudless sky. Not many miles off gleamed Vercellae's white-washed walls. He could almost see how the townsfolk blackened them, standing and staring. If Marius fell, Vercellae would burn. High over all, floating like a dream, remote and lovely, were the snowpeaks of the Alps.

Eodan gasped air into lungs like dry fire. He grew aware that his leg bled ... and when had he been wounded in the hand? No matter. But he would sell his best ox for a cup of water!

His eyes went back to the battle. The cavalry skirmished in blindness. The Cimbrian foot raged against Catulus' legions, and Catulus buckled. Where was Marius?

Even as he watched, Eodan saw Roman standards in the dust, a gleam, a rippling steely line, and the army of Marius came from chaos and fell upon the Cimbri!

Eodan jogged back, scowling. It was not well. He could see how the barbarians were suddenly caught and chopped—and they had the sun in their eyes, and never had men fought in so much heat.... What had become of Boierik?

He entered the dust again. His tongue felt like a block of wood. Presently he found some of his young riders streaming back to the main fight. Their cloaks were tattered and their helmets stripped of feathers; one man's cheek gaped open, and his teeth grinned through.

"*Hau-hau-hau!*" Eodan gave the war-cry, because someone must, and hurled himself at the Roman lines. There was a whirling and a shock, and then the earth came up and struck him. His horse galloped off, a javelin in its flank.

Eodan cursed, rose to his feet and ran to the Cimbrian foot. Behind the chained first rank he saw men who were stabbing with spears, hewing with axes and swords, throwing stones and shooting arrows. They leaped into the air, howled, shook their tawny manes and rushed to do battle. The Romans stood firm, shield by shield, and worked.

Eodan reached the front-line flank of the Cimbrian host. He faced a dimly-seen foe; the sun in his brows blinded him almost as much as the dust and sweat. He heard a whistling, like the wind before rain, and felt three thumps in his shield. The Romans had launched their massed javelins.

Cimbri clawed at whetted iron in their flesh. Eodan was unhurt, but his shield was useless. What new trick was this? Only one metal pin left in the javelin head—it was bent and held fast by its crooked point; he could not wrench it free. He knew a chill. This Marius had thought of such a trick!

Casting his shield from him, Eodan joined the charge.

Elsewhere the invaders were already locked face to face with the enemy; now this part of their host met him. Eodan struck at a shield. His sword was blunted; it would not bite. A Roman blade flashed at him. He dodged it, planted his feet wide and hewed two-handed. A Roman helmet stopped his swing. He heard neckbones snap across. The man crashed to the ground. One behind him stepped into line. The legion advanced.

Gasping, Eodan retreated. It was a hailstorm of blows now—shouts, shocks, no more war-cries for lack of breath, but always the din of weapons. And the rising wildcat song of the pipes ... where were the lurs? No one blew the holy lurs? He yelled and struck out.

Backward step by step. His boot crushed something, the bones of a face. He looked down and saw it was Ingwar, with a Roman javelin in his armpit. He looked up again from the dead eyes, sobbed and hit through redness at a face above a shield. The Roman had a long thin nose like a beak. And he grinned. He grinned at Eodan.

Crash and clang and boom of iron. No more voices, except when a man hooted his pain. Eodan saw one of the linked Cimbri fall, holding his belly, trying to keep in his bowels. He died. His comrades dragged him backward. The man beside the corpse gasped—a slingstone had smashed his teeth—and sat down. A Roman took him by the hair and slashed off his head. Four Romans, close together, stepped into the gap and cut loose.

The battle banged and thundered under a white-hot sky. Italy's earth rose up in anger and stopped the nostrils of the Cimbri.

Eodan slipped and fell in a pool of blood. He looked stupidly at his hands, empty hands—where had his sword gone? Pain jagged through his skull. He looked up; the Roman line was upon him. He glimpsed the hairy knees of a man, drew his dagger and thrust weakly upward. A shield edge came down hard on his wrist. He cried out and lost the knife. The shield struck his helmet and darkness clapped down. The legionaries walked over him.

He sat up again, looking at their backs. For a little while he could not move. He

could only watch them as they broke his people. There was a tuba being sounded. Was it in his head, or did it blow victory for Marius? His wrist was numb. Blood dripped slowly from a forearm gashed across.

At least he lived, he thought. The dead around him were thick. Never had he seen so many dead. And the wounded groaned until he sickened of their anguish. He sat there for a while longer. The field grew black with flies. The sun got low, a huge blood-colored shield seen through dust.

The Romans took the field, gathered themselves together and quick-marched after the fleeing.

Eodan struggled for wakefulness. He kept slipping back into night; it was like trying to climb out of a watery pit. There was something he must remember.... Was it his father? No, surely Boierik was dead; he would not outlive this day. He would fall on his own double-headed spear if he must. His mother had died two years ago, now let her ghost thank the earth Powers for that. And Hwicca—

It came to him. He reeled to his feet. "Hwicca," he croaked. "Othrik."

The Romans would take the wagon camp. They would take the camp. The Cimbri would be slaves.

Eodan lurched through nightmare across the Raudian plain. The hurt wailed at him. The gathering crows flew up as he passed and then settled down again. A riderless horse rushed past; he groped for its reins, but it was many yards away. The horizon seemed to shrink until it lay about him like bonds; then it stretched until he was the only thing that was; he heard the fever-hum of the world's brain under his feet.

When he neared the camp, miles beyond the battle, he had to rest for a while. His legs would carry him no more. He had some thought that there would be horses about; he and Hwicca and Othrik could get away. Oh, the wide cool Jutland moors! He remembered how the first snow fell in winter.

He saw the beaten Cimbri, such as lived, pouring into the camp. He got up again and stumbled among them. The Romans were already over the earthworks, briskly, like men who round up cattle.

Eodan went among them somehow. He saw the Cimbrian women stand in black clothes on their wagons, spears and swords in hand, screaming. They struck at their husbands and fathers and sons and brothers—"Coward! Whelp! You fled, you fled—" They strangled their own children, threw them under the wheels or the feet of the milling kine. Eodan passed a woman he knew who had hanged

herself from the pole of a wagon, and her children were tied dangling at her heels.

Men who had thrown away their weapons, and saw the Romans gather in their folk, took what rope they could find. There were no trees here; they must tie themselves to the horns of the oxen, or by the neck to a steer's legs, to die.

The Romans worked hard, prodding prisoners into groups, stunning, binding. They took some sixty thousand alive.

Eodan paid small heed. It was happening elsewhere. He was a pair of feet and a pair of eyes, searching for Hwicca ... no more.

He found her at last. She stood beside the wagon that had been her household. She held Othrik to her breast and a knife in her hand. Eodan slipped, fell, picked himself up, fell again, crawled on hands and knees toward her. She did not see him. Her eyes were too wild. He had no voice left to call.

"Othrik," said Hwicca. Her words wavered. He could barely hear them above the noise. "Good Othrik." The hand with the dagger stroked across his fine pale-gold hair as he slept in the curve of her arm. "Be not afraid, Othrik," she said. "It is well. All is well."

A Roman squad came from beyond the god-cars. "There's a beauty!" Eodan heard one of them shout. "Get her!"

Hwicca sucked in a gasp. She laid the knife at her son's throat. The blade fell out of her fingers. Two of the Romans ran toward her. She looked at them at they neared. She picked up the baby by his ankles and dashed his head against the wagon boards.

"Othrik," she said numbly, and let the thing drop to earth.

The Romans—they were both young, hardly more than boys—stopped and gaped. One of them took a backward step. Hwicca went down on her knees and fumbled blindly after the dagger. "I am coming, I am coming," she called. "Wait for me, Othrik. You are too little to go down hellroad alone. I will come hold your hand."

The Roman squad was kicking some of Eodan's thralls toward the main slave group. Their officer looked over his shoulder at the two boys he had sent after Hwicca. "Snatch her up or she'll kill herself!" he barked. "You can't peddle dead meat!"

They broke into a run again. Hwicca's hand touched the dagger.

Flavius the slave sprang from behind the baggage cart. He put his foot on the knife. Hwicca stared like a clubbed animal up into his face. He smiled. "No," he said.

Eodan hitched himself forward another yard. She had not seen him, even yet. The two legionaries reached her, pulled her erect and hustled her off. Flavius went after them. Presently another Roman detachment came by and found Eodan.

III

Early the next year, only a few days after the feast of Mars had signaled the vernal equinox, they brought an injured slave to the master's house. This was on a Samnian latifundium owned by Gnaeus Valerius Flavius.

It was a raw day—low smoky clouds scudded over the fields, with a cold whistle of wind and a few rain-spatters. The rolling land lay wet and dark, its trees nearly bare save for a clump of pines. A rutted road gleamed with wind-ruffled puddles, and a few cows and goats, still winter-shaggy, huddled behind the sheds. The field slaves stamped their feet, blew on chafed hands and bent to their task; no idleness now, this was plowing and sowing time, that the flax might clothe Rome next winter. Their overseers rode up and down the lines, touching a back here and there with a skilled lash, but lightly; today the air did all the needful whipping for them.

Phryne came out of the house and felt how the wind bit. Her stola skirts streamed from her girdle, and she almost lost the blue palla before she got it on. Nevertheless, she could not have stayed another hour in the villa. Mistress Cordelia would have it hot as Ethiopia, and drown the brazier fumes in enough incense to throttle a mule!

As she walked over the sere lawn, smiling to old gardener Mopsus but hurrying on (he was a dear, and so lonely since the master sold his last grandchild—and a Greek—but *how* he talked), she saw two field hands approach. They were common dark men, some or other kind of barbarian, she didn't know what. But the one they supported was something else. She had not seen so big a man in a long time, and his unkempt yellow hair and beard tossed a blaze across the sunless sky.

Why ... he must be a Cimbrian ... one of the very people who had captured Master Flavius in Gaul! It was a Euripidean situation. Phryne went down the hill for a closer look. One of the dark men saw her and bobbed his head with coarse deference—a household slave, personal attendant to the mistress herself, was not common folks.

"What is the matter?" asked Phryne. "What happened?"

The Cimbrian lifted his head. He bore a strongly molded face, heavy about the

jaw and brows but almost Hellenic of nose. His eyes were wide apart beneath a tattooed triskele (how had the yelping barbarians of Thule ever come on that most ancient symbol?) and a green color like winter seas. He was white about the lips. His left leg dragged.

"He got hurt by a bull," said the first of the dark slaves. "The big white stud bull broke out of the pen and come ramping down in the field. Gored one man."

"They didn't dare kill him," added the other. "He's worth too much, you see. And we couldn't lay a rope on him. Then this fellow got in, took him by the horns, threw him and held him down till help come."

Phryne felt how the blood flew into her face. "But that was wonderful!" she cried. "Another Theseus! And only hurt in the leg!"

The Cimbrian laughed, a short inhuman bark, and said: "I would not have been hurt at all—we used to throw bulls every year at the spring rites—but when those trained pigs of cowherds let him up they held the ropes too slack." His Latin was rough and ungrammatical, but it flowed quickly.

"Foreman says get him to the barracks and fix the bone," said one of those who upbore him. "Best we go."

Phryne stamped her foot. At once she realized that she had driven her small shoe into the mud. She saw the Cimbrian's eyes slide down, and a grin went like a ghost over his mouth. He looked back at her and nodded wryly. He knew.

She blurted in confusion: "Certainly not! I know what you would do, have that fool of a blacksmith splint it—and he will limp for the rest of his life. Up to the villa!"

They followed her, bashfully. No, not the Cimbrian—he jumped one-footed—but, when they entered the kitchen and put him in a chair, he sprawled as if he owned it. He was caked with mud, he had on only a sleazy gray tunic, there were shackle scars on his wrists and ankles, but he said, "Give me some wine," and the chief cook himself poured a full stoup. The Cimbrian emptied it in three long gulps, sighed, and held it out again.

Phryne went off after the house physician. He was Greek like herself, all the most valuable slaves were Greek, even as the only valuable free folk had once been—an aging man, with a knowledge of herbs and poultices to ease Cordelia, who suffered loudly and would not be without him. He came readily enough, looked at the wound, called for water and began sponging it.

"A clean break," he said. "The muscle was little torn. Stay on a crutch for a few weeks and it should heal as good as new. But first we'll hear some of those famous Cimbrian howls, for I must set it."

"Do you take me for a Southlander?" snorted the hurt man. "I am a son of Boierik."

"There are philosophers in *my* family," said the physician, with an edge in his voice. "Very well, then."

Phryne could not look at the leg, nor could she look away from the barbarian's face. It was a good face, she thought, it would be handsome in a wild fashion if some god would smooth off the slave-gauntness. She saw how sweat spurted out on the skin, when his bones grated, and how he bit his lip till the blood trickled.

The physician splinted and bound the leg. "I will see about a crutch," he said. "It might also be well to speak to the major-domo, or the mistress. Otherwise, if I know the chief field overseer, they'll put this man back at work before he is properly healed."

Phryne nodded. "You may go," she said to the gaping sowers. The cook bustled off on some errand. Phryne found herself alone with the barbarian.

"Rest a while," she said. She noticed his cup was empty for the second time; she risked the steward's wrath and poured him a third.

"Thank you." He nodded curtly.

"It was heroic of you," she said, more clumsy with words than she was wont.

He spat an obscenity. "The bull was something to fight."

"I see." She found a chair and sat down, elbows on knees, looking at her folded hands.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Phryne." Though it meant nothing to him, she was obscurely grateful to hear no sniggering reference to her historic namesake's profession; why did they never remember that the first Phryne had modeled for Praxiteles, and forget what else she had been?

"I am Eodan, Boierik's son. Are you a Roman?"

She started, met a smoldering in his eyes and laughed a little. "Zeus, no! I am a Greek. A slave like yourself."

"A well-tended slave," he fleered. He was drunk—not much, but enough to loosen the wariness learned in the dealers' pens. "A darling of the house."

Anger leaped in her—it stung that he should snap when she had offered only help—and she said, "Are you so brave to make war on me with your tongue?"

He checked himself. As he sat rubbing his shaggy chin, she could almost see him turning the thought over in his mind. Finally, pushed out with an effort that roughened it: "You are right. I spoke badly."

"It is nothing," she said, altogether melted. "I think I understand. You were a free man. A king, did you say?"

"We have ... we had no kings," he mumbled. "Not as you seem to mean the word here—what little I've heard. But truly I was a free man once."

A gust of rain went over the tiled roof. The hearthfire leaped and sputtered; smoke caught Phryne's eyes, and she coughed and threw back her cloak. Eodan's gaze fixed on her.

She knew that look. Every woman in the Roman world knew it, though the high-born paid it no heed. A slave girl must. It was the look of a man locked away from all women for months and years, lucky to have a rare hurried moment in a strawstack at festival time. The penalty for attacking expensive female property could be death, if her owner cared (Phryne doubted Cordelia would) ... still, a desperate hand might seize her one night. She stayed close to the villa when she was here.

She said quickly, "I have heard Master Flavius telling he was a prisoner among your folk for four years."

Eodan laughed, deep laughter from full lungs, but somehow grim. At last he answered, "Flavius was my slave."

"Oh—". A hand stole to her lips.

Still he looked at her. She was not tall, but she was lithely formed. The simple white dress fell about long slim legs, touched the curve of thigh and waist, drew over small firm breasts. Her hair was of deep bluish-black, piled on a slender neck and caught with a bone fillet. Her face did not have classic lines; perhaps that, and her quietness when Roman men were about, was why she remained a virgin at twenty. But more than one lovesick slave had tried to praise deep violet eyes, smoky-lashed under arching brows, a wide clear forehead, tilted nose and delicate chin, soft mouth and pale cheeks.

Eodan lifted his cup. "Be not afraid," he said. "I cannot leave this chair before they bring me a staff."

Phryne received his bluntness with relief. Some of the educated household men simpered about so she could vomit. She could give no better reason, in all honesty, for not taking a lover or even a husband. Cordelia had not forbidden her, and the memory of a certain boy was chilly comfort.

"I should think," she whispered, leaning close lest it be overheard, "that if you treated Flavius kindly—and he did not look much abused when he came back—he could have found something better for you than field labor. That destroys—" She stopped, appalled.

Eodan said bleakly, "Destroys men. Of course. Do you think I have not seen what a few years of it do to a man? He could have done worse, I suppose—resold me to the games I hear tell of, or as a rower on a ship. But he could never trust me running about a house, even another man's house, as freely as you do."

"Why not? You can have no more dreams of escape. You have seen crucified men along the roads."

"Some things might be worth a crucifixion," said Eodan. He made no great point of it; his tone was almost matter-of-fact, wherefore Phryne shuddered.

"Hercules help me, why?" she breathed.

Eodan said from a white face, "He took my wife."

He drained his cup.

Phryne sat very still for a while. The wind mourned about the house, wailed in the portico and rubbed leafless branches together. Another rain-burst pelted the roof.

"Well!" said Eodan at last, "Enough of that, little Greek. I should not have said anything, but for the wine, eh, and this leg feels as if there were wolves at it." The arrogance slipped from him and she looked into eyes hurt and helpless, which begged her to leave him his last rags of pride. "You will not speak of what I said?"

"I swear so," she answered.

He regarded her for a very long while. Finally he nodded. "I think I can believe that," he said.

Steps sounded on the brick floor. Phryne stood up, folding her hands before her

and casting duly meek eyes downward. Eodan remained as he was, his gaze challenging those who entered. They were the major-domo and Mistress Cordelia.

The major-domo, an Illyrian grown fat and bald in his own self-importance till he could imagine nothing more than accounts and ordering other slaves about, said: "Here the Cimbrian is, I am told, my mistress. I shall call porters and have him carried back down to his barracks."

Cordelia said: "Wait. I told you I would like to speak with this bull wrestler."

Phryne raised her eyes, suddenly afraid for Eodan. He was so proud, too much so for his own good. Slaves whom the dealer failed to break inwardly, so that they let him chain their spirits as well as their hands, might sometimes rise high and even regain freedom; but they were more likely to end on a cross or in the arena. And Eodan was drunk and—O sea-born Cyprian—he was looking at his owner's wife as he had looked at her!

"You are a bold man," said Cordelia.

Eodan nodded.

She laughed. "And not overburdened with modesty," she went on. "Do not tell me we have another of these barbarian kings!"

Eodan replied: "If you are Flavius' wife, then we have your husband's one-time owner."

Phryne's heart seemed to crash to a halt. She stood for a brief space feeling blood drain from her. Now the gods would have their revenge, when a man bore his head so high.

Cordelia stepped back. For a moment she flushed.

She was a tall woman of Etruscan stock, perhaps descended from Tarquin himself and some jewel of Tarquin's harem. Thirty years old, she had the fullness of body that would turn to fat in another decade but was as yet only superb. A silken dress violated every sumptuary law the Republic had ever passed to emphasize hip and bosom, insolently. Her hair was thick, its black copper-tinged, her face curve-nosed and heavy-lipped, her eyes like southern nights. She had the taste to wear only one ornament, a massive silver bracelet.

The major-domo turned red and gobbled his indignation. Cordelia glanced at him, back at Eodan, then suddenly she laughed aloud.

"So this is what he looks like! And my husband, who has wearied Roman dinners this half a year with his stories of the Cimbri, did not bring you to show off!"

She paused, looked closely into Eodan's face—their eyes met like swords—and murmured, "But I see why."

Phryne leaned against the wall; she did not think her knees would hold her unaided. Now they were on a well-marked path; she knew what came next. The final fate of Eodan was hidden—it could be gay or gruesome, but this part of the way was mapped.

Young Perseus had entered the Gorgon's lair and come back alive.

She wondered why she felt like weeping.

IV

"He has deserved well of us," Cordelia said. "Let him be kept in the household, at least till he is properly healed. Give him good raiment and light work. And first of all a bath!"

Thereafter she did not hurry matters. Eodan limped about with a crutch, ate and drank and slept enormously, scoured pots or helped old Mopsus the gardener. He spent much time down at the stables, where he soon had the friendship of the head groom, a dour Cappadocian who was believed to have been hatched rather than born since not even a mother could have loved him. Phryne did not understand how a man of intelligence—and Eodan had a good mind in his rough way—could sit hour after hour talking about currycombs and fetlocks and spavins and whatever else there was; but so it went and, after all, divine Homer dwelt lovingly on horses.

Washed, shaved, his hair cut and combed, a white tunic and sandals on him, Eodan might almost have been a Homeric warrior himself—Diomedes, perhaps, or Ajax the haughty. As he grew rested and fleshed out, his manners became milder, he snarled or cuffed at men less often, his smiles were sometimes nearly warm instead of a mere wolfish baring of teeth. But he dropped his green eyes for no one, and the house slaves who shared their room with him were kept at a frosty distance.

The major-domo was afraid of him. "I would not trust that barbarian, not one inch," he told Phryne. "My dear, you should have seen his back when he first bathed. I would not even try to count all the whip scars. And many slashes were new—he got them here, in the months we have had him, the last of them perhaps only yesterday! Mark my words, it is the sign of an unruly heart. It is such men who lead slave revolts. If he were mine, I would geld him and sell him to the lead mines."

"Some men were born gelded," said Phryne coldly, and left. She could almost see the crisscrossing of thin white lines on Eodan's shoulderblades. She avoided him for a while, uncertain why she did so.

And the springtime waxed. Each day the sun stood higher; each day a new bird-song sounded in the orchard. One morning fields and trees showed the finest transparent green, as if the goddess had only breathed on them in the night. And

then at once, unable to wait, the leaves themselves burst out and the orchard exploded in pale fire.

It happened Cordelia was complaining of a headache again; she must lie in a dark room and make everyone creep by. Phryne, who considered her mistress as strong as a cow, found an excuse to leave the villa. She would gather apple blossoms and arrange them for Cordelia's delight.

The morning was still wet, after a short rain. Where the sun struck the grass, it flashed white. A thrush sat on a bough and chanted of all bright hopes; a milk cow grazed in a meadow, impossibly red. When Phryne went among the gnarled little trees, they shook down raindrops upon her. She took a low branch in her arms and buried her face in its flowers.

"Poor blooms," she whispered. "My poor babies. It is wrong to take away your springtime."

The knife bit at the twigs; she filled her arms with apple blossoms.

Eodan came from the villa. He crutched along as readily as a three-legged dog, bound for the stables carrying a mended bridle. The endlessly gossiping slaves had told Phryne the barbarian was clever with his hands.

But when he saw her he halted. He had never thought much about beauty—land, workmanship, live flesh was good or bad, no more. Now, briefly, the sight of a girl's dark head and slim waist, with dew and white radiance between, went through him like a spear.

The moment passed by. He thought only as he swung about toward her that—by the Bull!—it was a new year and she was a handsome wench. "*Ave*," he called.

"*Atque vale*," said Phryne, smiling at him. His hair needed cutting again, and it was uncombed, tangled with sunlight.

"Hail and farewell? Oh, now, wait!" Eodan reached her and barred the path. "You have no haste. Come talk to me."

"My task here is finished," she said in a quick, unsure voice.

"Must they know that?" Eodan's coldest laugh snapped out. "I've learned how to stretch an hour's task into a day. You, having been a slave longer, must be even more skilled at it."

The fair planes of her cheeks turned red. She answered, "At least I have learned not to insult those who do me no harm."

"I am sorry," he said, contrite. "My people were not mannered. Is that why you have kept yourself from me?"

"I have not," she said, looking away. "It—it only happened ... I was busy—"

"Well, now you are not busy," he said. "Can we be friends?"

The gathered blossoms shivered on her breast. Finally she looked up and said, "Of course. But I really cannot stay here long. The mistress has one of her bad days."

"Hm. They say in the kitchen that's only from idleness and overeating. They say her husband sent her down here because her behavior made too much of a scandal even for Rome."

"Well—well, it was a—a rest cure...."

Ha, thought Eodan, I would like to help Mistress Cordelia rest her tired nerves! The story went that Flavius needed her family's help too much in his political striving to divorce her. And, if ever a man deserved the cuckoo sign, it was Flavius!

Eodan clamped on that thought and tried to snuff it out. He could taste its bitterness in his throat.

He said: "You have a Cimbrian habit, Phryne, which I myself was losing. You do not speak evil of folk behind their backs. But tell me, how long have you been here?"

"Not long. We came down perhaps a week before your accident." Phryne looked past a stile, over the meadow to the blue Samnian hills. Tall white clouds walked on a lazy wind. "I only wish we could stay forever, but I'm afraid we will go back to the city in a few months. We always do."

"How do you stand with the mistress?" asked Eodan. He hitched himself a little closer to the girl. "Just what is your position?"

"Oh—I have been her personal attendant for a couple of years. Not a body servant; she has enough maids."

Eodan nodded. His thoughts about Cordelia's younger maids were lickerish, and their eyes had not barred him. But so far there had been no chance. He listened to Phryne:

"I am her amanuensis. I keep her records and accounts, write her letters for her, read and sing to her when she wants such diversion. It is not a hard life. She is

not cruel. Some matrons—" The girl shivered.

"You are from Greece?"

She nodded. "Plataea. My grandfather lost his freedom in the war of—No matter, it would mean nothing to you." She smiled. "How tiny our vaunted world of Greeks and Romans is, after all!"

"So you were born a slave?" he went on.

"In a good household. I was educated with care, to be a nurse for their children. But they fell on evil times two years ago and had to sell me. The dealer took me to Rome, and Mistress Cordelia bought me."

He felt a dull anger. He said, "You wear your bonds lightly."

"What would you have me do?" she replied with a flash of indignation. "I should give thanks to Artemis for a situation no worse than this—my books, at least, and a measure of respect, and an entire life's security. Do you know what commonly happens to worn-out slaves? But my mind will not wear out!"

"Well, well," he said, taken aback. "It is different for you." And then wrath broke loose, and he lifted his fist against heaven. "But I am a Cimbrian!" he shouted.

"And I am a Greek," she said, still cold to him. "Your people did not have to come under the Roman yoke. You could have stayed in the North."

"Hunger drove us out. We were too many, when the bad years came. Would you have us peaceably starve? We did not even want war with Rome, at first. We asked for land within their domains. We would have fought for them, any enemies they wished. We sent an embassy to their Senate. And they laughed at us!" Eodan dropped the bridle, leaned against his crutch and held out shaking claw-curved fingers. "I would tear down Rome, stone by stone, and flay every Roman and leave their bones for ravens to pick!"

She asked in a steel-cool tone: "Then why do you think it evil of them to do likewise to you, since the gods granted them victory?"

He felt the tide of his fury ebb. But it still moved in him; and the ocean from which it had come would always be there. He said thickly, "Oh, I do not hate them for that. I hate them for what came afterward. Not clean death, but marching in a triumph, shown like an animal, while the street-bred rabble jeered and pelted us with filth! Chained in a pen, day upon day upon day, lashed and kicked, till we finally went up on a block to be auctioned! And afterward shoveling muck, hoeing clods, sleeping in a hogpen barracks with chains on,

every night! That is what I have to revenge!"

He saw how she shrank away. It came to him then that he had his own purposes for her. He forced a stiff smile. "Forgive me. I know I am uncouth."

She said with a break in her voice, "Were you put on the block? Did it only happen that Flavius bought you?"

"Actually, I was not," he admitted. "He had inquiry made for me, and bought me directly. He saw me and said with that smile of his that he wanted to be sure of my fate, so he could pay me back the right amount of both good and evil. Then I was walked down here with some other new laborers."

"And your—" She stopped. "I must go now, Eodan."

"My wife?" He heard his heart knocking, far away in a great hollowness. "He told me that he had Hwicca, too—in Rome ..."

His hands leaped out. He seized her by both arms so she cried out. The apple blossoms fell from her grasp, and his foot crushed them.

"*Hau!*" he roared. "By the Bull, only now do I think of it! You attend the mistress? And she still shares her husband's town house? Then you have seen Flavius in Rome this winter! You have seen *her*!"

"Let me go!" she shrieked.

He shook her so her teeth rattled. "How is she? You must have seen her, a tall fair girl, her name is Hwicca. What has become of her?"

Phryne set her jaws against the pain. "If you let me go, barbarian, I will tell you," she said.

His hands dropped. He saw finger marks cruelly deep on her white skin. She touched the bruises with fingers that trembled while tears ran silent down her face. She caught her lip in her teeth to hold it steady.

"I am sorry," he mumbled. "But she is my wife."

Phryne leaned against the tree. At last she looked up, still hugging herself. The violet eyes were blurred. She whispered, "It is I who must ask pardon. I did not realize it was the same—I did not know."

"How could you have known? But tell me!" He held out his empty hands like a beggar.

"Uicca ... I saw her once in a while. The Cimbrian girl, they all called her. She seems well thought of by Flavius. He keeps her in a room of her own, with her own servants. He is—often there. But no one else sees her much. We never spoke. She was always very quiet. Her servants told me she was gentle to them."

"Flavius—" Eodan covered his eyes against the unpitying day.

Phryne laid a hand on his shoulder. It shuddered beneath her palm. "The Unknown God help you," she said.

He turned around and looked upon her, then reached out and gathered her against him. He kissed her so her mouth was numb.

She writhed free, scraped down his ankle with a sandaled foot and clawed with her nails until he let her go. She was white; her loosened dark hair fell about her like a thunder-cloud.

"You slobbering pig!" she cried. "So that is all you miss of your wife!"

She spun about and ran.

"Wait!" he cried. "Wait, let me tell you—I only—"

She was gone. He stood upon the fallen blossoms and cursed. Hwicca would have understood, he thought in wrath and desolation; Hwicca is a woman, not a book-dusty prune, and knows what the needs of a man are.

He looked down, and up again, and finally north, toward Rome. Then he picked up the bridle and went on to the stables. That day he contrived to be given a task at the forge, shaping iron, and the courtyard rang with his hammerblows until dark.

The days passed. The flax was sown. They paid less heed to the ancient festivals now than formerly; once these acres had belonged to free men; now it was all one plantation staffed with slaves. But some custom still lived. The week of the Floralia was observed, not as immoderately as in Rome, but with a degree of ease and a measure of wine.

On the day before the Floralia the physician examined Eodan's leg. "It has knit," he grunted. "Give me back my crutch."

Eodan asked wearily, "Will they return me to the fields?"

"That is not my province." The physician left him.

Eodan walked slowly out of the villa into the walled flower garden behind the kitchen. His leg felt almost a stranger to him. No matter, he would be running in an hour. Running hence? They were *not* going to make a field hand of him again! It ground away, not only the body, but mind and pride and hope, until a mere two-legged ox remained.

Phryne was talking with one of Cordelia's maids. She saw him and said, "Enough. Come with me." The girl's eyes lingered on Eodan as she went by. He swore at Phryne; in all the time since the orchard morning, she would not speak to him—the winds take her! He considered how to get the maid alone.

"There you are! And well at last! You've been loafing too long, you lazy dog, and eating like a horse the while! Come here!"

Eodan strolled toward the major-domo. He rubbed his fist, looked at it and back at the man's nose, nodded and said: "I did not hear you. Would you repeat your wish?"

"There, there are some—heavy barrels to move," stammered the major-domo. "If

you will kindly come this way ..."

Eodan was willing enough to trundle the wine casks about. It was a glory to feel his strength returned. And the villa was all in a bustle—they were hanging up garlands everywhere, the girls giggled and the men laughed, o ho ho, tonight! Eodan drew a pretty wench, a maid, into a corner, they scuffled a little, she whispered breathlessly that she would meet him in the olive grove after moonrise or as soon as she could get away....

The Roman correctness of household eased. Men helped themselves openly to wine, laughed with their overseers, drew buckets of water to pour over sweaty skin, combed the fleas from their hair and wove garlands. Eodan, rolling a great cheese from the storehouse, chanted a Cimbrian march for his friend the groom.

"*High stood our helmets,*
host-men gathered,
bows were blowing
bale-wind of arrows—"

But no one understood the words.

At sundown the lamps were lit with those sulfur-tipped sticks Eodan still thought a rash risk of Fire's anger. The villa glowed with a hundred small suns of its own. He stood in the garden with Mopsus. "I must go in now and help feed my fellows," he said.

"So, so. A good feed tonight. A good feed. My granddaughter used to live for Floralia night—or was it my daughter, she was a baby too, once ... I wonder, though, why Mistress hasn't asked any high-born guests. It isn't like Mistress not to have fun when she can."

Eodan shrugged. He had seen Cordelia often enough, seated on a couch or borne in a litter, but his world had been far from here, even in the house; she rarely entered the kitchen or the stables. She was only a task his little maidservant must finish before joining him under the olive trees.

He went back into the villa. At its rear were the rooms where the household's male property ate and slept. As he passed out of the kitchen toward those chambers, he saw Phryne.

The lamp that she held turned her pale skin to gold. He moved forward, smiling, a little tipsy, meaning only to explain himself to her. She lifted her hand. "Stop."

"I'm not about to touch you," he flared.

"Good!" Her mouth twisted upward. He had seldom heard so whetted a voice. "I was sent to fetch you. Come."

She turned about and walked quickly toward the atrium. He followed. "But Phryne, what is this?"

Her fist clenched. "You do not know?"

He halted and said harshly, "If I am about to be sent back to the barracks—"

She looked over her shoulder. Tears stood in her eyes. "Oh, not that," she said. "Be not afraid of that. Be glad! You are about to be honored and pleasured."

"What?"

"In fact, the highest honor and the noblest pleasure of which *you* are capable." She stamped her foot, caught her breath and strode on. He followed in bewilderment.

They crossed an open peristyle, where the first stars mirrored themselves shakenly in a mosaic pool. Beyond was a door inlaid with ivory, Venus twining arms about beautiful Adonis. A Nubian with a sword stood on guard. Eodan had seen him about—a huge man, cat-footed, but betrayed by his smooth cheeks and high voice.

Phryne knocked on the door. "Go in," she said. "Go on in."

Someone giggled, down in the flickering darkness of the corridor. Eodan pushed his way through, and the door swung shut behind him.

He stood in a long room, marble-floored, richly strewn with rugs and with expensive furnishings. Many lamps hung from the ceiling, till the air seemed as full of soft light as of incense. The window was trellised with climbing roses.

A table bore wine and carefully prepared food for two. But there was only one broad couch beside it.

Cordelia was stretched out on the couch. Light rippled along her gown. It was of the sheerest silk; her flesh seemed to glow through. She sat up, smiling, so that her copious breasts were thrust at him. "Hail, Cimbrian," she said.

Eodan gaped. The blood roared in his temples.

She stood up, took a big two-handled silver cup and walked across to him. Her gait was a challenge. When she stood before him he could look down the loose

open front of her dress. "Will you not drink with me?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, in his own tongue, for Latin had no such simple way of agreeing. He took the goblet and hoisted it in hands that shook. He was no judge of wine, nor would he have cared tonight, but he noticed dimly that this was smooth and strong.

"I have watched you go about," said Cordelia. "I wanted to thank you for your—services—but it seemed best to let your wound heal first. And then today I saw you lift a cask I would have set two men to carry. I am very glad of that."

He handed her back the cup, still mute. "All of it?" she laughed. "But I wanted to share it with you. As a pledge of friendship. Now we must pour another."

Her thigh brushed his as she turned. He gulped for air. "Come," she said, took his hand and led him to the couch.

The flask gurgled as she poured from it. "My husband was wrong to set a king to work in his fields," she went on. "For I will not believe you were anything less than a king of your people. Perhaps we two can reach a better understanding—for a while ..." She looked up at him, slantwise. "It will depend on you, largely." She lifted the beaker again. "To our tomorrows. May they be better than our yesterdays."

They drank in turn. She sat down and drew him beside her. "I have tried and tried to pronounce that barbarous name of yours," she said. "I will give you another. Hercules? Perhaps!"

Suddenly her mouth was hot upon his.

She stood up, breathing heavily. "I meant to eat first," she said, quick slurred words through curling sweet smoke. "It would be leisurely, civilized, with much fine play. But that would be wrong with you, I see that now." She reached out her arms. "Take off your tunic. Take off my gown. Let us keep the Floralia."

Much later, when the wine and the food were gone, the lamps burned out and the first thin gray creeping into the eastern sky, she ruffled his hair and smiled sleepily. "I will surely call you Hercules."

V

After festival time, the latifundium went back into harness. Up in the villa there was the measured pace of days—housework, garden work, much dawdling until some overseer went by, backbiting gossip, petty intrigues for women and position, sometimes after dark a furtive Asiatic ritual of magic or mystery. A womanish world. Eodan considered himself well out of it.

But riding through the fields, where the sun and the whip blistered a hundred naked backs and all a man's dreams finally narrowed to the day's hoeing and the night's shackled sleep, Eodan wondered with a chill how he had remained himself even for those few months he served. Winter had helped—days on end where he sat idle with the others, dozing, cracking fleas, once or twice knocking a tooth out of someone who offered him loathsome consolations.... Nevertheless, he searched himself as no Cimbrian had done before and knew that his servile time had indeed touched him. He went more warily through life, slowly learning how to guard his words. He would never again live wholly in the moment's joy; he would always be thinking beyond—where would the next attack come from, or how should he himself attack?

Even when Cordelia taught him some new pleasure—and she had given her life to such arts—a part of him wondered how long this would endure. For the rest, however, it had been a good month, or whatever time had passed. He had the name of bodyguard, though only the surly Nubian was allowed to bear weapons. He accompanied her on impulsive journeys about the countryside, organized hunts in the forests for her to watch, matched himself in athletic exhibitions with the brawnier slaves from this and surrounding farms. A few times she even sent him on errands of two or three days, as to a town to arrange for certain supplies. He thought of using the chance to escape—but no, he knew too little of Italy; they would snare him and tie him up to die. Wait a little longer, make careful plans, or even win freedom for himself and Hwicca within this Roman world. It was not impossible, given patience.... Meanwhile, aloneness with a blooded horse, among hazy hills and through woods where only dryads and charcoal burners dwelt, was a gift to him, almost like being free again.

Now he was coming back from such a trip. He rode at an easy mile-eating pace, soothed by hoof-plop and saddle-squeak, the breeze in his face amid the clean summery odor of his mount. He was richly clad; his tunic, cloak, and boots were

of simple cut and muted color, but he liked the sensuous fabrics. His hair fluttered in the light wind, and he sat straight as a lancer; and, when he saw the villa itself, dark against a sky turning pink and gold with sunset, he was close to letting out a Cimbrian whoop. After all—Cordelia! He checked the noise and merely grinned instead, but he set the horse to a gallop, and they came ringing and snorting into the rear courtyard.

"*Hoy-ah!*" Eodan jumped to the flagstones, tossed his reins at a stableboy and strode quickly toward the garden gate. The shortest way to the atrium was through the roses.

As he passed into their fragrance, he stopped. Phryne was alone between the walls, gathering a few early blooms. A great cloud of hot bronze lifted far, dizzyingly far above her head; the sky beyond it was taking on the color of her eyes.

"Hail," he said.

She straightened herself. The plain white stola fell in severe folds, but could not hide a deerlike grace. She had not Cordelia's opulence, and she barely reached to his heart; yet it came to him that he had never thought of her as boyish, nor as just a little bit of a thing.

Her face, all soft curves and a few pert, nearly rakish angles, stiffened. She turned as if to go, but resolve came back; she continued her work, ignoring him.

He did not know why, unless it was that his small journey had given certain unseen chain-galls time to heal, but he went toward her and said, "Phryne, if I have wronged you, how can I mend it unless you tell me what I did?"

Her back was turned, her head bent. Under the softly piled black hair, he saw that her nape was still almost childish. Somehow that filled him with tenderness. She said, so low he could scarcely hear it, "You have not harmed me."

"Then why have you circled so wide of me? You never answered when I greeted you in passing. You have said me no word in weeks."

Her voice rose a little but shook: "Well, some women may be glad of your pawing. I was not!"

Eodan felt himself flush, as deeply as the western sky. He responded clumsily, "Why have you given me no chance to say what I meant? It was wrong of me to —to kiss you. I ask your pardon. But I was driven; there was a Power in that place—and did I hurt you so much?"

Then she looked up at him and said in a tone heavy with unshed tears: "It was chiefly yourself you harmed."

Eodan looked away. For a moment he trod from her, up and down a graveled path that mumbled beneath his feet. The bronze cloud cooled toward newly blown roses. In the west, just above the crumbling vine-covered wall, he could see a green streak, unutterably clear. Somewhere a cow lowed; otherwise it was very quiet.

Eodan said at last, slowly, word by word, as he hammered it into shape within himself: "I understand. But you do not understand me. They say you are still a maiden. Well, you have called a curse on me for doing something of which you have no knowledge."

Phryne's fingers clenched about a rose stalk. The thorns bit. She stared at the bright blood drops, wiped them on her gown in a blind fashion and said through unfirm lips: "Perhaps it is true. I thought one thing of you. When you did something else, *that* is how you hurt me. But perhaps I have indeed not understood."

"I am not wont to speak of these matters," he told her, with effort. "Among the Cimbri, it was not so—so twisted together. Wives did not betray their husbands. Husbands—well—a man is otherwise than a woman. He has other needs. I was driven by the Powers of earth; the Bull was within me that day, Phryne. And more than that—Can you understand how it felt to hear you tell what has—has become of my wife, the mother of my son, whom she killed to keep him free? Can you understand how I would turn for any—what is the word?—any comfort that you could give—or anyone could—Do you see?" he pleaded, facing her with his hands outspread.

She rubbed her eyes. "I see," she whispered.

He doubled up one fist and smote it softly into the other palm, again and again. "It would help Hwicca not a bit if I let the Bull roar within me so loud I could think of nothing else," he said. "Indeed it was a new thought to me, this you bring forth—that what is between a man and his wife, for good or ill, can in any way be changed by whether he sleeps alone or not when she is gone."

"I am not so sure of that," she answered. "No man will say it is true of her!" When she lifted her face, he saw it was streaked with silent tears. "But I could be wrong. I do know little of these matters."

Eodan said, with a sad smile tugging up one corner of his mouth, "Between the

time I wed Hwicca and the time a year afterward, when we came to the Raudian field, I touched no other woman. It was not that I lacked the chance, but only that none seemed worth the time I could be with her. Will you believe that?"

She nodded dumbly.

"Well, then." Eodan held out his hand, in the manner he had learned from the Romans. "Shall we be friends?"

She caught it tightly. Sunset smoldered to dusk. He could see her as little more than a paler shadow.

She said at last, in a tone gone remote from sorrow, "I would not have you think, Eodan, that I ever condemned you because of some dead philosopher's thoughts on chastity. It was that I believed your case was like mine. I have been lonely too, now and then. But I see it was a false hope. No man, no woman ever has the same destiny; we are all pursued by our private Furies. Help me remember that, Eodan!"

He asked her, out of a newly reborn pain, "What happened, Phryne?"

"There was a boy in the household at Plataea," she said, still in the small voice that spoke to itself, knowing him only as a shadow under the evening star. "He was a slave too—not much older.... He walked like the sun before me. We would have had each other somehow—oh, there are families among slaves, even a slave can build a home. But then our master's creditors closed in. Antinous went first. I saw him led off; they said he would be shipped to Egypt.... Well," she finished wearily, "that was three years ago. But sometimes at night I still wake up from a dream where he kisses me."

Eodan's thought was jagged: His ghost will not let her look on another man. And even if she did, would she wish to bear a son that might be sold in Egypt?

He said aloud, "Phryne, have you heard that the Cimbri do not lie on an oath?"

She stirred, as if awakening. "What do you want to say?"

"The oath-ring on which I was wedded must have been cast into bangles for some Roman whore," he said bitterly. "However, I shall swear anyway to lay no hand upon you, as a man does on a woman, unless you ask it yourself. And I do not expect you will."

"Why—"

"I would like you to think you had one friend to trust," he blurted. And he did

not know why he had made such an offer, unless it was that his memories of Hwicca had begun to shriek again.

"I will take your oath," she whispered.

Suddenly she fled. He heard her weeping in the dark. At such times most folk would liefer be alone. He went on into the villa, heavily.

Cordelia was sitting in the atrium, lamplight glowing on her; she was a roundedness of shadow and rich highlights. She was toying with a loom, because it was fashionable still for Roman matrons to pretend they were housewives. Outside, among the white pillars of the portico, a boy-slave from Sicily was singing and playing an illegal lyre. His high clear tones were so lovely it had been decided he should always keep them.

She looked up. Her teeth flashed wet and white. "Hail, my Hercules!"

"Hail, Mistress," snapped Eodan, not able to smooth his words. He stood with folded arms, looking down upon her.

"Well! You have a face like Jupiter's wrath, my friend." Cordelia leaned back, regarding him through narrowed dark eyes. "Did you have trouble on your journey?"

"No trouble, Mistress. Here is the money I did not spend." He slipped the heavy purse from his belt and flung it on the table. The denarii crashed so loudly that she started.

She rose, in one rippling motion, and the thin silk showed him how she tautened. Her lips parted. A scream would bring the Nubian, the porter and half a dozen watchdogs to bind him and do whatever she wished. Eodan felt coldness along his backbone. He had to be more careful.

The knowledge that he, Boierik's son, must be careful of a woman tasted like vomit.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked in anger.

"I beg your pardon, Mistress." Eodan went to one knee and bowed his head stiffly. "I felt a little out of sorts."

Cordelia chuckled in her throat, left the chair and came to him. She ran her hand through his tangled hair as he knelt. "And why were you so at odds with the world ... Hercules?" she murmured.

He saw the answer. "I was parted from you," he got out. Then suddenly, because

he must do something in his shame, he grasped her about the knees and pulled her to him. His face he buried in soft darkness.

"Oh," she gasped. "Oh—not here—wait—" But her hands were pressing his head close. He forced her down to the floor. She laughed without sound and tried to roll from him. He used his strength to pull her back. The frail spidery silk ripped open in his fingers. "Beast!" she said, her lips stretched wide, her eyes closed.

Outside, the boy faltered for an instant, then recollected his orders and continued the song. It dealt with a legionary in far Asia remembering his mother.

Afterward Cordelia led Eodan to her sleeping chamber. A maid brought them wine and cakes. She drooped an eye at him, her mouth quivering faintly upward, and he recalled that once she had agreed to meet him after moonrise.

"Hercules," said Cordelia, not heeding the girl at all. She snuggled herself against Eodan's side, as they lay on the bed, and nuzzled his cheek. "You big crazy Hercules."

He did not feel the stallion's contentment she had given him before. Tonight she had only left him hollow, in some fashion he did not understand. He had never felt he was betraying anyone—until now. He held his wine cup in slack fingers and asked, "Mistress, why will you not try to speak my right name?"

"Because anyone might bear it," she said, "but there is only one son of Alcmene."

He could not speak what he really felt, not if he wished to live. But he could at least shake off all canine eagerness to please. He could say bluntly, "Mistress, you have been kind to me, but it was my habit once to give kindness. It hurts to receive it, and to make no gift in return."

He wanted to roar out: I am no pet animal, no toy of yours, I am a free man with my own name my father gave me. I am not ungrateful for ease, and chains removed, and your body. But between us is merely a shallowness. On your part, an amusing few weeks; on my part, a slave's scrabbling for what he can get, a slave's sly revenge on his master, and a slave's worry about what will become of him when you grow weary. I will be no more a slave, I will go hence to my wife.

But he listened to her say, "Hercules, you have given me more than you know."

Startled, he turned to face her. He had not seen her blush before now: it rose up over breasts and throat and cheeks and brow like a tide. Her nails bit his wrist,

and she did not meet his eyes. He heard the slurred, hurried tone:

"Have you ever wondered why I drink and take men and disgrace myself as well as my husband? Did you think it was simple idleness and lust? Well, it is in part; I will not say otherwise. But only in part. Flavius forsook me long before I turned on him. He gave me a few weeks, and they were sweet, but then he turned elsewhere. I was locked away to be a proper Roman matron and bear his children. Do you think you are the only slave in this room, Hercules? When I remained barren, he hardly spoke to me. For nine years, before he went off to be captured by you, he hardly said me a word. And yet it was him the gods had cursed, not me. For hear! I turned in my need to a young lad who visited our house now and again, a curly-headed boy who loved me, loved me. And by him I was quickened! It could have been Flavius' son. He could have set the child on his knee, no one had to know.... He had my baby destroyed! I could have brought the law on him—perhaps my lover might have helped—I do not know. Perhaps not. A father has so much power. I did not try. It was better to come out of the woman's world, begin to give my own banquets and have many men—many, many. I dared have no more children, especially when he was away in captivity. I possess an old slave woman, a witch from Thrace, who knows how to keep the occasional accident from ever becoming noticeable. I thought it was as well. I did not wish to carry on my own sickness in the world. Let it die with me.

"Hercules—" Her head burrowed into the crook of his arm, she shivered beneath his touch—"I found a kind of hope in you."

Eodan thought, Did earth's last happy folk leave their bones on the Raudian plain?

Blindly, he drew Cordelia to him. Her hands were cold on his skin. But the rest of her seemed ablaze.

And later, humbly, she said, "Thank you."

The night wore on. They did not sleep. But it was curious how much they talked, and how dryly, almost like two consuls mapping a campaign, when they were not kissing.

"This cannot be too open," she said. "Flavius can endure being whispered about on my account, for the sake of my father's help. An equestrian cannot rise far without some such figurehead. And a Roman wife's affairs with Romans are common enough—but not with barbarians. That would make him a laughingstock! And he would avenge his slain political ambitions more than his honor." After a moment, thoughtfully: "And even if his reputation were not

harmed—I am unsure what he feels toward you, who owned him—"

"I too," said Eodan, surprised. He had imagined Flavius was grateful at first, after Arausio, and friendly later, and malicious after Vercellae. Now it grew upon him that he had only seen chance waves across a deep and secret pool. Flavius' soul was locked away from him.

"So we will keep you here, with the title of guardsman," decided Cordelia. "He seldom comes to this estate. You can arrange to be elsewhere if he should come. This may take a few months, you realize. I must work on my father and others; I must make sure that when I finally do divorce him, I will come at once under some other man's powerful protection. And, of course, that you come with me." A slow, cruel smile lifted her lips. "And that *I* rule my next household. Some Senator, doddering with age, and very rich.... Then you can be brought to Rome, Hercules. There will be wealth for you.... many slaves are wealthy in their own right—or you can even be freed, if you think a change of title makes any difference." She melted against him. "It does not. You already have me in freehold."

He embraced her again. As she trembled in his hands, he wondered how much of her speaking was real and how much only the she-animal of this night.

He waited until she had rested again, and drunk again, and returned to him on the bronze bed. Then, as he lay tangled in her hair, he said—it had taken less courage to charge the Roman army—"When can you get release for my wife?"

She sprang from him, spitting like a cat. "Do you dare?" she yelled.

Eodan stood up, smiling by plan, and said, "I would not forget any—friend—even her. Can she not be bought back, or released somehow?"

Cordelia paused. Her look grew narrow, as he had seen before. "Do you think of this brood-mare as merely a friend?" she asked.

Eodan swallowed. He could not answer, only nod.

"Then forget her, as you will have to forget all the Cimbri," said the woman in a cold voice. "I will not arouse Flavius' suspicions by speaking of that mop-headed sow he has been wallowing with all winter. Let him sell her to a brothel when he tires of her, as he has done with so many others."

Through a shimmering and a humming, Eodan saw how she stood crouched, ready to escape his violence and call for help. Neither of them moved—until at last she walked by him, threw herself upon the bed and beckoned him as she

would a dog.

He came. There was nothing else possible, save to die.

Toward sunrise, Cordelia murmured drowsily, "I forgive you, Hercules. We will forget what was said, because of what was done."

He made his lips touch hers.

"Now good night," she laughed. "Or is it good morning?"

He waited until she slept—by the colorless, heartless false dawn she looked blowsy enough—then put on his tunic and stole from the room. He felt the need of a bath and, yes, he would borrow a horse and gallop it for some miles. He was empty with weariness, but there was no sleep in him. Not even when they bound him amidst the wagons had he felt so alone.

"Eodan."

He stopped under the garden wall. The buildings were blacknesses that shouldered among paling stars; rails and roofs gleamed with dew. Beyond the stableyard the land was still full of night. Phryne came to him. "Are you up so early?" he asked in a small wonderment.

"I could not sleep," she answered.

"Nor I," he mumbled bitterly. "Though for another reason. I never thought I could hate a woman while I embraced her."

"She must have found that interesting," said Phryne.

He heard the scorn in her voice; he did not know how much was intended for him, but he felt the whole burden of it. He said through a thickness in his lungs, "Why do I not bid them crucify me and be done? I let her call my Hwicca foul names, and then I kissed her!"

"You must live," said Phryne gently.

"Why?"

"For—well—" She stood beside him, and somehow he came to think of a certain brook, sun-speckled under airy beeches, long ago in Cimberland. "Well, for what help you can give your wife," she finished, looking straight before her, across the Samnian darkness.

"Which is none," he groaned.

Suddenly it burst within him. As if the sun had taken him full in the eyes, he

gasped and cried low, "But I can!"

"What?" Fear shadowed the face that swung to him. "How?"

"Hear me, Phryne," he whispered, rapidly, shaking with the knowledge of it. "I will go hence. I know the road to Rome, I walked it the other way last year. I can find his house there, and steal Hwicca away, and—O Bull whose horns are the moon, why did you not make it clear to me before?"

"You cannot!" A muted shriek. "You do not know the land, the city ... every man who sees you will know your height and hair and—What use will it be, to die on a cross or thrown to wild beasts?"

"Why, if my ghost has any strength at all, it may try again somehow," he said. "Or if not—well, I tried once. I gave Hwicca a man for a husband to the very end." He lifted his hands to the eastern light, and in Cimberland's tongue he called upon the day and the dark, the wind and sea and all the Powers of earth to witness his promise.

Phryne flung herself to her knees. "Eodan, Eodan, you are a little child among wolves! You know not what you say!"

"I know what I have said," he replied slowly. "I have sworn an oath that is not able to be broken."

He felt the cold and the wet gloom before dawn close in on him. What had he done, indeed? he thought. It was not well to make such enormous promises without thinking carefully. He had belike pledged himself to death.

But, if so, death was his weird and would not be stayed; for he had invoked the very river of Time.

He shuddered with the awe of it, his teeth clenched together. "I will leave in a few days, as soon as I can," he said. "You will forget we ever spoke of this, will you not?"

Phryne rose again. She leaned against the wall, her cheek and palms to its rough brick, her eyes closed. It was as though she drew on her own roots of strength. At last, in a faraway voice, she answered him: "No, I shall help you."

VI

Not till four days afterward did Phryne stop Eodan on the portico and breathe: "I have made ready. Meet me in my chamber—do you know where it is?—after sunset, and I will try to disguise you. Can you get horses?"

His heart raced within him. He thought for a moment, standing under fluted pillars with a green lawn and broad fields before him, standing among thunders and drawn swords. At last he nodded. "There are stableboys who sleep among the animals, but it will be simple enough to frighten them, if I have any weapon. No one else will know until morning."

"Then the gates of Tartarus will be opened!" Her eyes were huge and her cheeks pale. "Let me see," she murmured. "I will have a sword for you—I know where such tools are kept—and a couple of daggers as well. You can overawe the boys, so they let themselves be bound and gagged one by one. Drop a little word here or there, as if in carelessness, to make them think you plan to flee into the mountains. That would be the expected direction, anyhow, to reach Helvetia. Where did you think to go, in truth, after Rome, Eodan?"

"I do not know," he said. "North, to some place where men are still free. I do not know what the best way is."

"There is none," she told him. "They are all beset." Quickly, leaning close so he could feel her breath upon his breast, swift and frightened: "I am not so sure your best hope lies to the north. You would have to cross too much Roman country. In the east or the south, now.... But we can speak of that later. We dare not be seen lingering like this. After dark, then—do not fail! I have contrived that the two girls who sleep with me be out tonight. My supplies would be discovered before another such chance came. So tonight!"

She went from him, almost running, the breeze fluttering her light white gown about her. Eodan could not hold himself from staring. A slave with the soul of a chief's daughter, he thought; surely some Power had sent her across his path. He would have promised sacrifices if he had known what Power it was, but the gods of this land were unknown to him, and Cimberland's too far away to have heard about his trouble.

Well—tonight!

He went on into the villa. It was hours till sundown; how would he live through them without roaring his secret to the world? He would get Cordelia's permission to go for a gallop. Yes, a good plan, thus he could spy out his road of escape....

He found her in the peristyle. Her maids twittered and giggled, a plump little scurrying bevy, wisps of cloth gay about a delicious roundedness fore and aft. They were laying out towels, clean garments, the mistress was pleased to swim in the pool. Cordelia stood aloof among them. As she saw Eodan come between the pillars, she drew her half-discarded stola about her. The dark Etruscan head lifted, and she said with an unwonted chill, "What would you? Did you not hear the household was forbidden to come here?"

"I beg pardon," said Eodan. "I was out—"

"Out! You have been out far too much. This is the place you are supposed to guard. Where were you?"

Eodan thought back. On a certain morning he had made his vow to quit this kept life. The next night she had still been exhausted, and he slept in the guards' chamber. Since she had said nothing about it, he had again slept with the guards the following darkness. The next morning he offered the cattle overseer to help bring several beasts of good stock from a neighboring plantation; they had not come back till well after sundown, and he was tired and went directly to his pallet.... Yes, by Fire itself, he had scarcely seen Cordelia in three days!

"I am sure you knew my whereabouts, Mistress," he answered her. "If you do not summon me to—to help you—." An uncontrollable giggling tinkled around the sunlit space; Cordelia frowned and thinned her lips—"I would not trouble you, Mistress," he finished.

She said slowly, "Is gratitude, then, not a barbarian habit?"

"But how have I done wrong?" he asked. He knew very well, and he could not dissemble bewilderment he did not feel. Cordelia's face darkened.

"Go, all you women!" she snapped. "Let no one in here."

They fled, with squeaks of dismay; now Mistress was angry! Cordelia walked slowly toward Eodan across gleaming mosaic. Her knuckles, where she held up the loosened ungirdled stola, were bloodlessly taut.

"If you think so little of me that you will only come on command ... that you will drive cows till midnight rather than even ask me if that is my wish—" She was close to him now, speaking through knotted jaws. "Don't think I have not seen

you in corners with that Phryne! If you find me dull, you may as well go back to the fields!"

I find you not dull but a foe, he wanted to say. There is too much blood between us.

Aloud: "Mistress, I did not understand. I thought you would summon me."

Something eased within her. She laughed, low, and put her hands on his shoulders. The gown fell about her feet. It could have been one of the statues he had seen—Venus, in her aspect of hot sleepless nights—that stood before him, save that veins pulsed under this skin and sweat jeweled it in the sun. "Hercules, Hercules," she cried, "can you not get it into your thick yellow head, I want to be the one commanded?"

He stepped back, stammering, feeling the will of Venus but remembering she was Hwicca's enemy. "Mistress ... I cannot ... I am—"

"Tonight," she said eagerly. "Just at day's end. We will watch the sun go down and we shall not sleep before it rises again."

O my weird which I invoked, help me now! he thought.

It came to him what he must do. And because the day was warm, and she stood clothed only in sunlight and her loosened dark hair, and he had slept alone for three nights, and he might be a flayed corpse in a few days ... he trod forward with the Bull strong and exultant in his soul.

"Oh!" said Cornelia. "Hercules! No! Tonight, I told you!"

He grinned, pulled her to him, and held her one-handed with muscles that had wrestled horned kine to earth, while his lips bruised hers and his free hand roved up and down her body. "Well," she sighed finally, "well, just once—"

When they had rested for a time, he stood up. "Come, into the pool!" he said. She hung back. Laughing, he sprang. Water spouted, drenching her. He swam to the edge where she crouched and hauled her after him. She came up sputtering. He kissed her. She gave in and paddled about, while he snorted and churned, porpoiselike, darting in again and again, until at last it was she who urged him back onto the tiles.

Thereafter she complained that her body was sore from the hardness, so they sought her bedroom. After a while she clapped her hands and had a girl bring refreshments. And so it went till sundown.

As the first darkness came out of the east and up from the lower valley, like smoke, Cordelia drew Eodan's head down upon her bosom and held him there, with a grasp made gentle by weariness. "O Hercules," she whispered, "I thought there were no more men in the world worth caring for."

He lay with closed eyes, drained of strength, wishing he could sleep, wishing this were Hwicca.

"It is not only that you still my hunger," she murmured. Her voice was trailing off, swallowed by sleep. "It is yourself. I am not lonely under your kisses.... Be with me always, Hercules! I ask you—as a beggar—I who love you...."

Eodan waited until he was sure she slept deeply. Then he took her arms from about his neck and sat up. The room was dark and hot. He heard the night outside, noisy with crickets. It was hard to remember that he must not be contented with she who lay beside him. For a moment he cursed his own foolishness, which had laid a weird on him.

But what was said could not be unsaid. He sighed, got to his feet and fumbled about after his tunic. When he found it he stood for a little while looking down at Cordelia; but his eyes were blurred with night. Finally, not knowing why, he stooped and kissed her, not on the mouth, but the brow.

Barefooted, he slipped across marble to the small tiring room beyond. A bronze mirror caught enough light to prickle him with a thought of ghosts. Beyond stood Phryne's door. The only bar was on this side, but he knocked and waited till she opened it.

She stood with a lamp in her hand, dressed as during the day but with her hair tumbled about her shoulders. The smoky oil flame touched eyes that were too bright and lips that lacked steadiness. "So you came after all," she said.

"I agreed to, did I not?" Eodan sat down. His knees shook with exhaustion; he was unable even to feel afraid. He looked dully about the room—a mere cubicle, three pallets on the floor, a table with some combs and other things, a shelf holding many rolled-up books. Those must be hers, he thought. A window faced unshuttered on blackness.

"I hope you completed your task," spat Phryne. "It would not do to leave your owner unsatisfied before you go to your dear wife, would it?"

"Oh, be still," he said. "I had no choice. She would have had me come to her and stay all night."

"Did you enjoy your work?" jeered the whisper.

"I did," he said, flat and cold on the unmoving air. "I do not know how this concerns you. But, if you are so angry with me, I shall depart without your help."

He half stood up. She pushed down on his shoulders. "No, Eodan!" Suddenly frantic: "Zeus help us, no, it would be your death! I am sorry for what I said. It was indeed no—no c-concern of mine."

He looked up, startled. She had turned her head and was wiping her eyes with her knuckles, like a child. "Phryne," he asked, "what is the matter?"

"Nothing. Come, we are spilling time." She drew a shaky breath, squared her shoulders and went over to the table. From beneath it she dragged a small wooden box. Squatting on the floor—as he saw her by that guttering light, against monstrous unrestful shadows, he thought of a Cimbrian god-wife, but a newly initiated one, young, shy, fair, riven by the Powers she must now rein and drive—Phryne took out a bundle of harsh gray cloth, a sheathed Roman sword and two long daggers, some pots and bowls, and more.

"I have stolen enough money to fill a purse," she whispered. "And these clothes will pass for a poor smallholder's. The hat will shade your face from chance eyes. We will dye your hair black and cover that barbarous tattoo with a bandage, as though it were some injury. Here, bend over."

It was soothing to have her work upon his head, rinsing, rubbing in the dye, combing. He felt a little strength flow into him. When she was done she washed her blackened hands, cocked her head and smiled. "There! Though we must take along a razor and shave that flax stubble every day."

"We?" It grew upon him what she meant. He gaped. "But—you are coming, too?"

"Of course," she said. "It would be—Eodan, if you tried to go out alone, hardly knowing the road, not knowing Rome at all, with that atrocious Latin and—" Her words became feverish. "Oh, Eodan, Eodan, you Cimbrian mule, would you even know where to buy food? As well fall on this sword at once and save everyone trouble!"

"Phryne," he said, wholly overcome, as though he were caught in floating dreams, "your place here is good. What can I do for you? Why?"

She bit her lip and looked away. "It would be too easy to find out who had helped you. I dare not stay."

He leaned forward, taking her hands. "But what am I to you? Why should you help me at all, then?"

She jerked free, angrily. "I am a Greek," she snapped. "My grandfather was a free man. None of this concerns *you*!"

Eodan shook his head in wonderment. But indeed, he thought in the darkling Northern part of his soul, this was brought on when I invoked the Powers; she is a part of my weird.

He dared ask no further. There was too much awe about her. Had he indeed let a vessel of Power touch him, and lived?

"Freedom, freedom," said Phryne. "In a barbarous land, in sod huts and stinking leather clothes, with not a book or a harp for a thousand miles ... oh, truly, I shall be free!" Her laughter rattled. Eodan made the sign against trolldom.

"Well, quickly," she said. "I could not be taken for any peasant girl, so I must be a boy. There are the shears."

She crouched before him and waited. He took the long crow's-wing-colored tresses in his hands, feeling that he offended some spirit of loveliness. But—He cropped away until there were only ragged bangs falling over her brow and her ears could be seen. She looked in a mirror and sighed. "Gather them up," she said. "When we make a fire, I will offer them to Hecate."

She pointed to the clothes. "Now, put that on! Do not stand there gawping!" With a movement as of defiance, she undid her girdle, threw it on the floor and stepped from her gown. Indeed she was beautiful, thought Eodan. Her womanness did not flaunt itself, bursting through its clothes like Cordelia's; it waited cool among shadows for one discoverer. He grunted some apology when she glared, turned his back, and fumbled on the garments laid out for him—a gray, patched woolen tunic, scuffed sandals, a felt hat and a long wool cloak. He picked up the heavy purse, slung a sword next to his skin and put a knife in the rope belt.

As he took up his staff, he saw Phryne clad like him. The baggy cloth would hide the shape of her body; she must hope the dirty old cape would shield slim legs and high-arched feet. She was turning from the shelf of books. She had run her fingers over the scrolls, just once, and tears lay in her eyes.

"Come," she said. "We have only till morning; then they will start to hunt us."

VII

To Eodan, Rome had been two things. First was the city of the Cimbrian dream, all golden roofs above white colonnades, shimmering against a sky forever blue. Then was the avenue of the triumph, where he bent his weary head lest the hurled muck take him in the eyes, and thereafter the slave pens and finally a stumbling in chains, one dawn, out onto the Latin Way. Neither was of this earth.

Now he entered Rome herself, and he saw just a little of a city that toiled and played and sang and dickered and laughed, plotted, feasted, sacrificed, lied, swindled, and stood by friends—a city of men and women and children like any others, built by men's hands and guarded by men's bodies. He had thought Rome was walled, but he found as he trudged through hours of buildings that she eternally outgrew her walls, as though she were a snake casting skin, so that the old gates stood open in the midst of a brawling traffic. He had thought of Romans as divided into iron-sheathed rankers, piggish man-traders, and one woman who shuddered in his arms; but he saw a gang of children playing ball in the dust, a leathery smith in a clangorous tiny shop and a limping man who cried out the roasted nuts he bore for sale in panniers slung from a yoke. He saw Romans spread their wares in flimsy booths while a temple gleamed purity above them. He saw a Roman matron, in clothes no better than his, who scolded her small boy for being reckless about passing horse-carts. He saw a young girl weeping, for some reason he never knew, and he saw two young men, merry with wine, stop to rumple the ears of an itinerant dog.

It growled about him, the heavy sound of laden wheels, echoing between grimy brick walls. A haze hung in the air, smoke and dust, tinged with garlic, cooked meat, new bread, perfume, horse dung, sewage, garbage, human sweat. Folk milled about, shouting, waving their arms, chaffering, thrusting a way past the crowds, somehow, anyhow. Once Phryne was whirled from Eodan in such an eddy. He gasped with terror, knowing he was indeed lost without her. She found her way back to him, but thereafter he held her wrist.

They threaded their way toward the Esquiline Gate. "We must find an inn," Phryne said; she had to shout through the noise. "The house is on the Viminal Hill, but we could not go there clad as we are, nor before dark in any case."

Eodan nodded dumbly. He let her lead him under the portal. A distance beyond it

was a shabby district of tall wooden tenements, where the streets were slimy with refuse and the landless, workless scourings of war and debt crouched in their rags waiting for the next dole. He was too tired even to feel anger at the shouts from tooth-rotten mouths. "Hail, peasant! A son of the soil, there are straws in his hair! Aha, will you not lend us that pretty boy for a while? No, he will not—they're a hard-fisted lot, these farmers. Cisalpine Gauls for certain, see the ox look about 'em. But then where are their Gaulish breeches? Ha, ha, lost their breeches, did they—now was it at dice or what?"

Phryne, gone pale with wrath, led Eodan through twisted alleys until they found an inn. The landlord sat outside, yawning and picking his teeth with a thumbnail. "We would have a room for ourselves," she said. "Half a sesterce," said the landlord. "Half a sesterce for this flea pit? One copper as!" cried Phryne. They haggled while Eodan shuffled his feet and looked about.

When at last he was alone with her, in a windowless box of a room, he said, "The night winds take you, girl, what do we care for a copper more or less? I feel a fool every place we stop, listening to you!"

"I wonder what they would have thought of two people who did not bargain?" purred Phryne. "That they were in a suspicious haste to get off the streets?"

It was too murky to read her face, but he had come to know that tone. He could almost have traced out the quirk of her mouth and the mockery of her eyes. "Oh, well, you rescued me again," he said. "I am a blundering dolt. What shall we do next, captain, sir?"

"You have a wit like a bludgeon," she said. "Be quiet and let me think." She threw herself on a pile of moldy straw and looked up at a ceiling hidden as much by grime as by dimness.

Eodan hunched among the stinks and choked down his wrath. She had saved him too often, in the days that lay behind. Her right to badger him was earned.

He could have guided the first wild gallop himself, out of the estate and down ringing dirt roads to the south. When they reached a stream, they had dismounted and led their horses several miles northerly in its channel, slipping and stumbling while the dark hours fled them; but he would have done that, too, to cover his trail. They found another road at last and went mercilessly along it toward the Latin Way; the horses were ready to fall down by sunrise. Eodan would have turned them loose then and gone ahead on foot; Phryne had made him, unwillingly, lead them into a brushy ravine and kill them. But that was not a thought Eodan might never have had—it was another trail-covering, after all,

and a chance to sacrifice for luck. She had told him to offer the beasts to Hermes, whom he did not know, but he felt any god would have been pleased.

No, he thought, thus far he could have come without her. He might even have gone for many miles, sleeping by day and walking by night. But when he blundered into a sheep-fold, and the dogs flew at him and the shepherds came to club him for a thief, he could not have fobbed them off with so ready a tale as Phryne had. He could never have passed himself for a harmless man when they bought bread and wine on the way; he would have had to steal his food, with all the risks. He reckoned himself brave, but he had gone chill when she chattered merrily with a wagoner chance-met at an inn; yet it ended with two days of riding on a load of barley while the blisters on their soles eased. (He recalled seeing in the first dawn how her feet bled from the river stones; but she had said nothing.) She saved him having to answer any questions at all in his accent when she remarked calmly that her poor brother was a mute. The last two days, with houses and villages grown so thick they dared not sleep out in the grass like vagabonds, she had gotten rooms for them. (Formerly they had lain side by side, wrapped in their cloaks, looking up at a sky frosty with stars, and she had told him unbelievable things that the wise Greeks thought about heaven, until he begged her to spare his whirling head. Then she laughed very softly and said he knew the stars themselves better than she.) And now in Rome—Yes, surely she belonged to his weird, for he saw now how moonstruck had been his notion of entering Rome alone.

Nonetheless, at the few times weariness or wariness had not forbidden them to speak freely, she was apt to be curt with him. He wondered how he offended her. Once he asked, and she said for him to cease plaguing her with foolish questions.

She stirred on the straw. "I will go out and buy us better clothing," she said. "After sunset I will take you to Flavius' house. I know a way we can get in. But then it must be you who leads, for I have no more plans in me."

"I have none," he said. "I will trust in whatever gods are willing to guide us."

"If they guide us not to our doom," she said.

"That may well be. But if so, what can we do to stop it?" Eodan shrugged. "I had thought we might steal Hwicca from the house—buy boy's dress for her too, Phryne—and then if we could all get on a ship bound somewhere—"

The girl sighed and left. Eodan stretched himself out and went to sleep.

She came back with cloaks and tunics of better stuff than they wore, a lamp and

a jug of hot water and a basin borrowed from the innkeeper. Once again he submitted to her razor. When she was done, she gestured curtly at a loaf of bread and a cheese. "Eat," she said. "You may need your strength."

He had been tearing at it for some time when he noticed that she sat unmoving. "Will you not have some?" he asked.

Her tone was far-off, as if she had small care for what was to happen to them. "I have no appetite."

"But you, too—"

"Let me alone!" she flared.

Presently they were out again upon the street. It was sunset time and the crowds had thinned, so they moved quickly over mucked cobbles. "It is as well to get into a better part of the city before dark," muttered Phryne. "There could be robbers out."

Eodan lifted his staff. "I would give much for a good fight," he said.

Phryne looked at him, his eyes two heads above her own. "I understand," she said. Her fingers stroked lightly over his arm. "It will not be long now, Eodan."

The tightness in his breast grew with every pace. As dusk settled over the city, he found himself climbing a wide well-paved road up the Viminal Hill, so that he could gaze down across roofs and roofs and roofs, here and there a last pale gleam of temple marble, hazy blue fading into black in the east, and many lit windows making an eldritch earthbound star-sky, farther than a man could see. Faintly to him came smoke, a sound of wheels or tired feet, a distant hail that quivered upon still air. Once a horseman went by, casting the two plebeians an incurious glance.

Hwicca, thought Eodan. Hwicca, I have not seen you for a thousand years. I am going to see you tonight.

Though all the earth stood up to bar my way, I will hold you again tonight.

The darkness thickened, until at last he heard his footfalls hollow on unseen stones, until the houses on either side were little more than black blocks. His heart beat so loudly that he could almost not hear Phryne's final words: "We have found it." But he felt with unwonted keenness how her hand clenched about his.

They stood before a sheer ten-foot wall. "The house lies within a garden," she whispered. "No one watches the rear ... guests come in at the other side ... there

is a gate, but it would be locked now. If you can raise me to the top, I will tie my belt to a bough I know and you can follow."

Eodan made a cup of his hands. She stepped up, in a single flowing movement, caught at his head to steady herself and murmured, "Now." He lifted her carefully, but aware of her leg sliding along his cheek. Then she had scrambled to the top, and he felt his way past rough plaster until he found the cord she let down. He climbed it hand over hand.

"Where is your staff?" hissed Phryne. "Down below," he said. "Have the gods maddened you, to mark your own path? Back and get it!" she snapped.

When at last they stood in the garden, Eodan peered through the crooked branches of a tree. No lights showed on this side. He guessed, from remembering the villa, that kitchen and slave quarters were at this end, but there would be a separate corridor on one side that the owners used. Phryne led him to such a door. It creaked beneath her touch. She halted, and time stretched horribly while they waited.

"No one heard," she sighed. "Come."

Two hanging lamps gave just enough light for them to see down the hall. "To the atrium," whispered Phryne. "Nobody seems to be there. But the Cimbrian girl stayed here—" She stopped in front of a door and touched it with hands that shook. "Here, Eodan." He saw her mouth writhe, as if in pain. "O Eodan, the Unknown God grant she be here!"

He found himself suddenly, coldly his own master. His fingers were quite steady on the latchstring. The door opened upon darkness ... no, there was a window at the end, broader than most Italian windows; he had a glimpse of gray-blue night crossed with a flowering vine and one trembling star.

He went through. His dagger slid from its sheath. If Flavius was here, Flavius would not see morning. But, otherwise, he told himself, he must keep Hwicca from yelling in her joy. Put a hand over her mouth, if he must, or at least a kiss; silence was their only shield.

He padded over the floor, Phryne closing the door behind him. They stood in shadows.

"Hwicca?" he whispered.

It rustled by the window. He heard a single Latin word: "Here."

He glided toward it. Now he saw her, an outline; she had been seated by the

window looking out. Her long loose hair and a white gown caught what light there was.

"Is it you?" she asked, uncertainly. She used the "thou" form of closeness, and it twisted him.

He reached her. "Do not speak aloud," he said, low, in the Cimbric.

He heard her breath drawn in so sharply that it seemed her lungs must rip. He dropped his knife and made one more step, to take her in his hands. She began to shiver.

"Eodan, no, you are dead," she cried, like a lost child.

"If he told you that, I shall tear his tongue out," he answered in a wrath that hammered against his skull. "I am alive—I, Eodan, your man. I have come to take you home, Hwicca."

"Let me go!" Horror rode her voice.

He caught her arms. She shook as if with fever. "Can you give us light, Phryne?" he asked in Latin. "She must see I am no nightwalker."

Hwicca did not speak again. Having risen, she stood wholly mute. Her hand brushed him, and he felt the palm had changed, had gone soft; she had ground no grain and driven no oxen for nigh to a year. Oh his poor caged darling! He let his own grasp go about her shoulders and then her waist. He raised her chin and kissed her. The lips beneath his were dead. In an overwhelming grief, that she should have been so hurt, he drew her to him and laid her head on his breast.

Long afterward Phryne found flint and steel and a lamp. A tiny glow herded immense misshapen shadows into the corners. Eodan looked upon Hwicca.

She had not altered greatly to his eyes. Her skin was white now—the sun had touched it seldom, the rain and wind never; but the same dear small freckles dusted across her nose. She had taken on weight; she was fuller about breast and hip. Her hair streamed in a loose mane past a Roman gown and a Roman girdle, thin sheer stuff broidered with gold; she wore a necklace of opals and amber. He did not like the perfume smell, but—"Hwicca, Hwicca!"

Her eyes seemed black, wrenched upward to his. They were dry and fever-bright. Her shaking had eased, until he could only feel it as a quiver beneath the skin. "I thought you were killed," she told him, tonelessly.

"No. I was sent to a farm south of here. I escaped. Now we shall go home."

"Eodan—" The cold, softened hands reached down, pulling his arms away. She went from him to the chair in which she had been seated when he came in. She sat upon it, her weight against one arm, and stared at the floor. The curve of thigh and waist and drooping head was a sharp pain to him.

"Eodan," she said at last, wonderingly. She looked up. "I killed Othrik. I killed him myself."

"I saw it," he said. "I would have done so, too."

"Flavius brought me here," she mumbled.

"That was not your wish," he answered, through a wall in his throat he had raised against tears.

"There was only one thing that gave me the strength to live," she said. "I thought you had died."

Eodan wanted to take her in one arm, lead her out, hold a torch in the other hand; he would kindle the world and dance about its flames. He went to her, instead, and sat down at her feet, so she must look at him.

"Hwicca," he said, "it was I who failed. I brought you to this land of sorrow; when we were wedded, I could have turned our wagon northward. I let myself be overcome by the Romans. I even left you my own task, of free—freeing our son. The anger of the gods is on my head, not yours."

"Do you think I care for any gods now?" she said.

Suddenly she wept, not like a woman but like a man, great coughing gulping sobs that pulled the ribs and stretched the jaws. She lifted her head and howled, the Cimbrian wolf howl when they mourn for their slain. Phryne stepped back, drawing her knife by the door, but no one came. Perhaps, thought Eodan, they were used to hearing Flavius' new concubine yell.

Hwicca reached for him with unsteady hands and brushed them across his mouth. "You kissed me," she cried. "Now see what you kissed off." He looked upon a greasy redness. "My owner likes me painted. I have tried to please him."

Eodan sat in numbness.

Hwicca fought herself to quiet. Finally she said, stammering and choking, "He brought me here. He left me alone ... for many days ... until I had used up all my tears. At last he came. He spoke kindly. He offered his protection if—if—I should have asked him for a spear in my heart. I did not, Eodan. I gave him back

his kindness."

He had thought many ugly fates for her. This he had not awaited.

"Go," she said. "Go while it is still dark. I have money, I will give you what I have. Leave this place of men's deaths, go north and raise me a memory-stone if you will—Eodan, I am dead, leave the dead alone!"

She turned away, looking into night. He got up, slowly, and went to where Phryne was standing.

"Well?" said the Grecian girl. "What is the trouble?" Her tone was unexpectedly stinging, almost contemptuous; it jerked him like a whip.

He bridled with an anger at her that drained off some of the hurt Hwicca had given. "She yielded herself to Flavius."

"Did you expect otherwise?" asked Phryne, winter-cold. "It is one thing to fall on your own sword in battle's heat—another to be a captive alone, and get the first soft word spoken in weeks! Romans have long known how to harness a soul."

"Oh ... well—" Eodan shook his head, stunned. "It is not that. I looked for nothing else, I have seen too many women taken ... But she will not come with me now, Phryne!"

The Hellene stared across the room at Hwicca, who sat with her face hidden in her hair. Then she glanced about at clothes and jewels and whatever else a man was blind to. She nodded.

"Your wife told you she did not merely obey," she said to Eodan. "She tried to please Flavius. She wanted to."

He started. "Are you a witch?"

"Only a woman," said Phryne. "Eodan, think, if you are able. She believed you dead, did she not? I heard the gossip in this household last winter. And Flavius was a man, and there was life in this woman, enough life to draw you here into the she-wolf's throat to get her back! What would you have her do?"

Phryne brought down her foot so the floor thudded. Beneath the boy-cropped dark bangs she regarded Eodan with eyes that crackled. Her scorn flayed him: "She feels she has betrayed you because, for a while, she kissed Flavius willingly. She will send you off and remain here, caged, waiting for him to tire of her and sell her to a brothel and so at last to destruction and a corpse rotting in the Tiber. She will damn herself to that, for no other reason than that she

remained a living woman! And you, you rutting, bawling, preening man-thing, you think you might actually go from her as she asks?"

Phryne snatched up a vase and hurled it shattering at his feet. "Well, go then," she said. "Go, and the Erinyes have you, for I am done with you!"

Eodan stared, from one to another of them, for very long. Finally he said, "What thanks I owed you before, Phryne, can be forgotten beside this."

He went to Hwicca, stood behind her, pulled her head back against him and stroked her hair. "Forgive me," he said. "There is much I do not understand. But you shall come with me, for I have always loved you."

"No," she whispered. "I will not. There is no luck in me. I *will* not!"

He wondered, with a deep harsh wound in the thought, how wide of the mark Phryne, too, might have been. But if they lived beyond this night—if his weird should carry him back to Jutland horizons—he would have their lifetimes to learn, and to heal.

But first it was to escape.

Boierik's son said calmly, "You are going with us, Hwicca. Let me hear no more about that."

VIII

But still they tarried. A new thought had come to Eodan. When he asked Phryne, she said it was good—less hopeless, at least, than most things they might attempt.

They sat in the chamber and waited. Little was spoken. Hwicca lay on the couch, after Eodan told her to rest. She stared at the ceiling; only her lungs moved. Eodan sat beside her, stroking her hair. Phryne kept her back to them.

The night grew gray. Hwicca had said Flavius was out to some banquet. Eodan began to wonder if her own slave-girls might not come in to attend her before the Roman returned. That could be a risky thing, capturing them!

The Cimbrian had not dreamed he would be glad to see Flavius again, save as an object of revenge. But when "*Vale!*" and laughter sounded in the hall, and a little afterward the latch went up, he drew his sword and glided to the door with more happiness than the night had yet given him.

Flavius entered. He wore a wine-stained toga and a wreath slightly askew. He saw Hwicca sitting up on the couch and raised his free arm. "Are you awake, my dear? I did not mean to be so late. It was tedious without you—"

Eodan put the sword against his back and laid a hand on his shoulder. He closed his fingers as tightly as he could, so that Flavius gasped with pain. "If you cry out, you are a dead man," said Eodan.

Phryne closed the door. Flavius turned about with great care. Lamplight gleamed on steel. For a moment the Roman's narrow, curving face was nearly fluid, as he struggled to cast off bewilderment and wine. Then it steadied. The dim light sparkled wet across his brow, but he straightened himself.

"Eodan," he said. "I did not know you at once, with your hair black."

"Not so loudly," said Phryne. She barred the door and circled about, her own dagger cocked for an underhanded stab in the way Eodan had shown her.

"But where did you find this handsome boy?" asked Flavius as if a gibe would armor him.

"No matter that," snapped the Cimbrian. He looked into the other man's rust-

colored eyes. A lock of hair had fallen across one of them. Eodan thought of Hwicca's hands brushing it back, and for a moment he stood in flames.

A year ago he would have seen Flavius' heart. A few months back, he would have found some quiet place and stretched his revenge through days. But, on this night, he shuddered to stillness. His blade was almost at Flavius' throat; the Roman had backed against the wall, panting, trying to shed his clumsy toga.

Eodan skinned his teeth and said, "You owe me a heavy blood price. You can never pay it, not with all your lands. So for my honor I should kill you. But I will forego that. It is more to my honor that we three here gain our own lives back."

"I could manumit you," whispered Flavius through sandy lips.

Eodan laughed unmirthfully. "How long afterward would we live? No, you shall see us to safety. Once we are beyond Rome's reach, we can let you go. Meanwhile, you shall not be without us. This sword will be under my cloak. Do not think to trick us and call for help, because, if it even looks as if we are not going to get free, I will kill you."

Flavius nodded. "Let me past," he said. Eodan drew the blade back a few inches. Flavius walked to a table, shedding his toga. Eodan followed each step. Flavius took a wine jug and poured into a chalice; he drank with care.

Then, turning about and looking straight up at Eodan: "I would be interested to know how you escaped. It is a leak I must plug, when this affair is over."

The Cimbrian answered with relish: "Part of the road went through your wife's bed."

"Oh, so." Flavius nodded again. His wits had returned; they had never flown far. His face was almost a mask, save that the shadow of a smile played now and then across it. He moved with the wildcat ease Eodan remembered, unshaken and unhurried.

"No matter!" snapped Phryne. "I have thought what we must do." Flavius regarded her with measuring eyes. "At this season, ships leave each day for all ports. You will engage passage for a short trip—that can be done without exciting too much gossip—let us say to Massilia in Gaul. We shall all four go."

"Massilia is subject to Rome," Flavius reminded her.

"But it is not many days' travel by horse to the frontier. Beyond lies Aquitania, which is free. Even I have heard how the Gauls are still in upheaval after the Cimbrian trek. We can make our own way among them. And you can return

home from there."

Flavius stroked his chin. "Phryne, is it not?" he mused. "Cordelia's slave, become a most charming boy. Do you think to instruct the barbarians in Greek?"

"Enough," growled Eodan.

"I think you have breathed fever-mists," said Flavius. "Do you really believe you can make your way through all Rome and Gaul—alive?"

"We have come thus far," said Phryne. In the earliest sky-lightening, Eodan saw how her eyes were dark-rimmed from weariness. He himself felt bowstring tense; sleep would be his enemy.

"What have we to lose?" he added to the girl's words.

Flavius looked over at Hwicca. She sat on the bed's edge, white-mouthed and red-eyed, watching them like a leashed dumb beast. "Much, my friend," said Flavius. "As runaway slaves, you should be killed, or at least whipped and branded, but I could still save you. I could say you went on a secret errand for me. I could not save you if you were caught after having taken a Roman citizen hostage."

"Would you spare us even now?" snorted Eodan. "What oath can you give me?"

"None," said Flavius. "You would have to chance my mood. But be sure I have no complaint against Hwicca—yet. If she is taken with you, though, abetting your flight and my capture, she will also die, piece by piece." He shook his head. "Eodan, Eodan, you meant to save this girl, but you will give her to death!"

"Better that than you!"

"Do you not understand?" said Flavius gently. "It would not be a quick throat-cutting. The least she could await would be the arena beasts, under the eye of all Rome. But the people have developed more refined tastes in such matters—and they are savage in their fear of slave mutiny. A servile war was ended only months ago in Sicily; I do not think she would merely face lions."

It was as though some hand closed on Eodan's heart. His wrist went slack, the sword drooped downward.

"Hwicca," he mumbled, "what have we done to the Powers?"

Flavius smiled in his own locked manner and held out his hand. "Will you give me that sword?" he asked.

Phryne whirled upon Hwicca. "You lump!" she yelled. "Is it you that he would die for?"

The Cimbrian girl shook herself. She got to her feet and moved across the floor like a sleepwalker. "No, Eodan," she said in their own tongue. "Hold fast."

There was scant life in her voice, but it tapped the wells of his inward self. Eodan drew his head up again, so that he loomed over them all, and laughter grew in his mouth. He jabbed at Flavius' throat, forcing the Roman back. "We sail today," he said in Latin. "Or else you shall be spitted on this. And I will be swift enough afterward to kill the girls and fall on the blade myself."

Flavius caught a breath as though to speak, met Eodan's green gaze and blew out again. He spread his hands and shrugged.

"Now," said Phryne, "we must have a plausible story for your sudden departure. Eodan and I are Narbonensian Gauls who have brought you an urgent message from your kinsman Septimus, who resides in Massilia."

"You kept your ears wide while you ate my salt, Phryne," said Flavius, with a sidelong glance at Hwicca.

The Grecian girl swiped the air, angrily, and went on: "You need say little more. Speak of a chance to invest money, and all will expect you to be close-mouthed. No one knows Eodan, so he will accompany you about the house; but you will stay within doors, sending your slaves out on the needful errands. When the social calls are paid you in the forenoon, your doorkeeper must turn them back on the plea that you are sick from too much wine. I shall remain here, lest I be recognized. Food will be brought to this door for Hwicca and myself, but no one is to enter save you two."

She turned to the Cimbrian as she continued: "Eodan, do you know about writing—the marks made by stylus or quill? Good. Be sure he writes nothing that I do not see him write. Also, be sure that he speaks only in Latin. If he says two words running that you do not understand, kill him!"

Flavius pursed his lips. He regarded her for a long while before he said, very softly, "And I hardly knew you existed, little one."

"Well, go!" She stamped her foot. "It will take time to find out about ships. Rouse a man now to inquire."

Eodan draped his cloak around the sword, which he carried bare under his left arm, and followed Flavius out.

The morning dragged. There was a clepsydra in the atrium. Once, when Eodan asked, Flavius told him how it counted time. Thereafter the Cimbrian sat listening to its drip, drip, drip, and shuddered under a tightly held calm; for this was trolldom, where each falling drop eked out another measure of a man's life.

This waiting was the hardest thing he had yet done. Flavius himself suggested a casual remark to be made to the porter, explaining why the Gauls had not been seen entering the house—he had heard them talk beneath his garden wall, climbed a ladder in curiosity and invited them over! He dealt smoothly enough with his stewards and errand boys. He reclined on the couch, chatting plausibly of Gallic affairs, when food was served him and Eodan. He seemed to enjoy the scandalized faces of his older retainers when they saw a Roman so familiar with a provincial. Why, it was unheard-of—they went to the privy together! But chiefly there was nothing to do but wait. Eodan stayed within a quick lunge of Flavius, never taking eyes off him. Flavius shrugged lightly, called for some books and lay on a couch reading when he did not nap. It had never before seemed to Eodan that hours on end of silence could be a torment.

Word came about noon—a small galley was to leave Ostia for Massilia next sunrise. It carried only cheap wares, glass goods made in slave factories for barbarian markets ... perhaps a chance person or two paid a few sesterces for space on deck, carrying their own food. Surely the great Master Flavius would not travel in such a tub? And with three companions! In another few days a fine trireme with ample accommodations would depart—Well, if Master Flavius insisted—Well, if he would pay that generously, the officers would turn their cabin over to his party and sleep under canvas themselves, but of course Master Flavius must not expect the cabin to be very comfortable; one would advise that he bring his own mattress....

And then it was again to wait.

Once Eodan caught himself nodding. His eyes had closed; all at once he realized it and opened them with a gasp. Flavius looked up from a scroll and chuckled. "You only slept for a heartbeat," he said. "But how long do you think you can keep awake?"

"Long enough!" spat the Cimbrian.

The household bustled, shouted, chattered, a whirl of pompous orders and acknowledgments. There would be a hive's buzzing about this, thought Eodan, his mind creaking with weariness. And some of Rome's mighty folk would hear and wonder. No matter, though. He would be at sea by that time, ahead of any

messages. Once out of Massilia town, with a saddle beneath him and a string of remounts, he could race the whole Roman army to Aquitania.

They left for Ostia, in mid-afternoon, with four chariots. Flavius drove one, reckless and skilled. Eodan stood beside him and knew unsureness, as he hung onto the bumping, bouncing, rattling thing, not knowing whether he would be able to wield sword and not lose his feet. Hwicca and Phryne paced them in another. The Cimbrian girl held reins and whip; she had never driven such a wagon before, but she kept an even distance behind Flavius, and looking back Eodan saw in a glad leap of his heart that she smiled! The other two cars bore only a man apiece and the needful travel goods; also some purses, fat with auri, to see them through this land where gold had more strength than iron.

Even in these days of a dying Republic, when new wealth openly flouted old laws, this was no common faring on the Ostian Way. Wagoners, horsemen, foot travelers, porters, donkey drivers, men in tavern doors and cottage windows and haughty gates, the rich matron in a litter and all her bearers, child and laborer and aged beggar—all must stare at four galloping chariots with a Roman guiding one and a yellow-haired foreign woman the next. Well, let them talk too, thought Eodan. He wished he could give Rome a redder memory of his passage.

Though this road was broad and superbly paved, there were miles to go. Once they stopped to change teams. It was after dark when they entered the Ostian streets. Torches flared; the horses stumbled on cobblestones. Flavius looked wind-flushed at Eodan and laughed. "Thank you for a good ride, at least! Now, shall we to an inn?"

"No." It was hard to think clearly, with a skull full of sand. But every stop, every man they spoke to, was another hazard. "Let us go aboard at once."

Flavius clicked his tongue, but turned the chariot down toward the waterfront. There was just enough light, from the city and the pharos in the outer harbor, for Eodan to see a world of ships. Their spars hemmed in the sky. Many of them were lit by torch or firepot, so that slaves could continue loading. Such was the galley they sought.

It was, indeed, neither large nor beautiful. It was battered, in need of paint, reeking of tar and slavery. The small bronze figurehead was so corroded you could not tell what it had been intended to depict. Ten ports on a side showed where the oars would emerge; through them came a sound of chains and animal sleep. Phryne gagged at the smell. A line of near-naked dock workers moved up and down a gangplank, bearing cases to be stowed in the hold, while an overseer

and an armed guard watched. There was also a stout, dark, bearded man with a rolling gait who came up, gave a bear's bow and said he was Demetrios, captain of this vessel. He had not been expecting his distinguished passengers yet.

"Take us to our cabin," said Flavius. "We would sleep a few hours before you leave."

"The noise, master," said the captain. "You would not sleep at all, I fear."

Eodan looked wildly about. He had not thought of this ... if the Demetrios man grew suspicious—what to do, what to do?

Flavius winked and jerked his thumb at Hwicca and Phryne. "I should not have said 'sleep,' captain."

"Oh," said Demetrios enviously. "Of course."

They went up on deck. There was a high poop, where the great steering oar was lashed; the stem-post curled up over it like a flaunting tail. The forecastle stood somewhat lower, bearing a rough tent erected for the officers. The free deckhands would bed in the open, as always. Amidships rose the single mast, with a flimsy cabin just aft where Flavius' attendants laid down his gear. A lamp showed it windowless, though crannies let in ample cold air, and bare save for a little wooden sea-god nailed to his shelf.

Demetrios bowed in the doorway. "Good night, then, noble master," he said. "I hope we'll get a pleasant voyage."

Flavius smiled graciously. "I am sure we will."

IX

"Well, now!" said the Roman when they sat behind a closed door. He stretched himself across one of the mattresses, boylike on his belly, and reached for a leather bottle of good wine. His grin leaped at the others. "Thus far, my friends, well done. Shall we pledge our mutual success?"

Eodan opened his cloak and let the sword slide to his knees. His left arm was stiff and pained from holding the blade pressed to his ribs, hours at a time. He looked with sullen red eyes at his enemy and said: "No. I will pledge your ghost in your own blood, nothing else."

Phryne hugged her knees and stared from a drawn small face. "It is best that Flavius not leave this cabin all the voyage," she said. "He can plead seasickness. Two of us must be with him at any time, awake."

"Oh, one will do," said Eodan. His jaws felt rusty. "At least, if the other two are here, asleep but ready to be called."

"Bind him," said Hwicca timidly.

Flavius raised his brows. "If a sailor should chance to look in upon us and saw me bound—" he murmured.

"It is true." Eodan's head drooped. He jerked it back again. "Be as wise in our behalf as you have been, Roman, and you will see Rome again."

Flavius poured himself a cup. "Do you think so?" he asked lightly. "I doubt that."

"I have promised."

"How much will your word be worth to you, once we reach a wild land where you have no further need of me for shield?" Flavius' eyes rested candidly on Hwicca, above the rim of his cup. A slow, deep flush went up her throat and cheeks. She drew herself into a corner, away from them all, but her gaze remained locked with his.

"Not that I expect us ever to get that far," went on Flavius. "Your luck has been good until now—"

"A Power has been with me," said Eodan, and touched his forehead where the holy triskele lay under a grimy cloth.

"So you may think. But what educated man can take seriously those overgrown children on Olympus?" The Roman nodded at Hwicca. "We spoke of this now and then, you and I. Do you remember? There was a time you gathered jasmine blossoms—"

"Be still about that or I will forget my word!" roared Eodan in the Cimbric. Hwicca huddled back and lifted an arm, as though to ward off a blow.

"As you wish," said Flavius, unruffled. "To continue—" A crash outside, and the sound of swearing and a whip, interrupted him—"I myself do not believe in any Power except chance. There are blind moieties of matter, obeying blind laws; only the idiot hand of chance keeps each cycle of centuries from being the same. Now it is very possible, by chance, to throw the same number at dice several times sequentially. It is not possible forever, my friend. I think you have thrown about as many good numbers as any man in the world ever did. Soon your luck must turn. You shall be found out through some happenstance. You will then try to kill me. One way or another, we shall all die. You and Phryne and Hwicca and myself, all dead—mold in our mouths and our eye sockets empty." Flavius tossed off his wine and poured another cup. "It is inevitable."

Eodan snarled, out of a chill, dreary foreboding, "If you say more such unlucky words, I will—no, not kill you—each such word will cost you a tooth. Now hold your mouth!"

Flavius shrugged gracefully. Phryne closed her eyes. Beneath the booming and the voices on deck, there was silence.

Finally Eodan turned to his wife. She would not meet his look. When he took her hand, it lay slack on his palm.

"Hwicca," he said, burred Cimbric low and unsure in his throat. "Pay him no heed. We shall be free."

"Yes," she said, so he could scarcely hear it.

"That 'yes' was not meant," he told her. His heart lay a lump in his breast.

She said in a torn voice: "There is no freedom from that which was."

"Little Othrik," said Eodan. He looked at his wife's hand and remembered how his son's baby fingers had curled about his thumb. He shook his head and smiled. "No—him we shall always mourn.... But it would be worse if we sailed off leaving him to grow up a Roman's beaten beast. You could not have done otherwise. There will come more children to us, and some of them will die of

this or that; so it has ever been. But some will live, Hwicca."

She shook her head, still averting herself. "I am dishonored."

"Not so!" he said harshly. "If you would—" He glanced at Flavius, who raised brows and smiled. Then he put his lips by Hwicca's ear to breathe: "I gave him no true oath. We can sacrifice him in Gaul; that will remove all stain from you."

"*No!*" She cried it aloud, pulling free of him. The face he looked upon was filled with terror.

"As you like," he floundered. "Whatever you wish. But remember, I am your husband. It is for me to say if you are guilty, and I say you are not."

"Let me alone," she pleaded. "Let me alone."

Eodan sat listening to her dry sobs. He hefted his sword, dully thinking about its use. He had never fought with such a weapon; the Cimbrian blades were for hewing, and this was for stabbing....

Phryne crept over the narrow space and touched his arm. "Wait," she whispered. He saw a helpless look in her eyes, as if she sat watching a child being burned out by fever. "Give her time, Eodan. I know not what the Cimbrian law is—I suppose your women were chaste—it means more to her, what has happened, than you can know."

"I do not understand," he said. "There is some witchcraft here. I do not understand her any longer."

"Wait, Eodan. Only wait."

He squatted into his own corner, under the low roof, and looked across to Flavius. The Roman had closed his eyes and stretched out; could he really sleep now?

At last the noise ended. Eodan saw Hwicca fall asleep herself, curled like a child. There was that much to thank the dark Powers for. Phryne and he seemed too weary to rest, or too taut. Yet no thoughts ran in his head; it felt hollowed out, and time did not flow for him. When a new clamor began, and he felt the ship move, it was a jarring surprise. Already!

He opened the door and looked out. The deckhands had cast loose, the oars were walking, he heard rowlocks creak and the muffled gonging of the stroke-setter beneath his shoes. They slipped through a channel between many hulls still one dark mysterious mass. Ostia and Italy behind her lay misty under the first saffron

clouds; ahead, the Tyrrhenian Sea caught a few wan gleams. There were stars in the west.

The sailors, shivering in tunics or mere loincloths, scurried over the deck doing things unknown to Eodan. They were a ruffianly-looking lot, swept from many ports of the Midworld Sea—a hairy Pamphylian, a brown Libyan, a big-nosed Thracian, a brawny red-faced Gaul, another two or three whom Eodan could only guess about. Captain Demetrios walked among them, a sword at his waist, a light whip in his hand. He saw Eodan and came over, beaming snag-toothed in his beard.

"Good morning," he said. "You had a—hah!—pleasant night with your woman and your boy?"

Eodan grunted. "How long to Massilia?"

"Oh, perhaps five days, maybe more, maybe less. Much depends on the wind. I've a fear it will turn against us." Demetrios cocked his head. "Where are you from? I thought I'd seen 'em all, till you turned up."

Eodan said in Cimbric, "You Southland swine!"

"And where's that?" asked Demetrios. But Eodan had closed the door again. The cabin was smoky and foul after the deck. He wondered if he could really smell the human agony that seeped up from the rowers' pit.

Flavius opened an eye. "Have you foreseen you might get sick from the waves?" he asked amiably.

"I have foreseen kicking your ribs in!" grated Eodan.

Flavius nodded at Hwicca, who had also awakened. She sat up with chin on knees and shivered. "Do you see, my dear, it is too much to expect that I should be released if we ever get into Aquitania," he murmured. "It would be asking more of your husband than one may even ask of a god."

Hwicca gave Eodan a forlorn glance. He laid himself upon a mattress near her. "You will swear he shall have his life, will you not?" she asked fearfully.

He said, out of his bitterness: "You are loyal to your owner, Hwicca!"

She shrank back with a little whimper.

"No more of that," said Phryne sharply. "We are certain not to outlive this trip if we quarrel among ourselves." She regarded Hwicca closely. "You look strong," she said, "and I daresay you have some knowledge of weapons."

The Cimbrian girl nodded, wordless.

"Well, then," said Phryne, "Eodan and I can do no more without rest. You have slept a while, now watch Flavius for us. It is simple enough. Hold this sword. Stay out of his reach. If he makes a suspicious move, call us. If it looks as if he might escape, stab!"

Hwicca took the heavy blade. "That much ... yes," she said in the Cimbric.

Eodan laughed, without mirth, but not uncomforted. He curled on his side to face her. The last sight he had, before sleep smote, was the unsure smile with which she looked at him....

Her scream wakened Eodan.

He sprang to a crouch. He had a moment's glimpse of Flavius' tall form stooped beneath the roof. The Roman was at the door, and Hwicca was plunging toward him. Flavius kicked out. He got her swordbearing arm. She cried aloud, fell and tried to seize his feet. He fumbled with the latch, kicking her again.

Eodan roared and sprang, but it was too narrow a space. He stumbled over Hwicca. Phryne had just come awake. Sleep spilled from her, and she grabbed for her knife. Eodan picked himself up from his entanglement with Hwicca as Flavius got the door open. Eodan rushed for him.

They went backwards out on the deck. Eodan reached after Flavius' throat. The Roman's knees were doubled up before his stomach. He straightened them enough to fend off the Cimbrian, rolled over and shouted.

"Help! Captain! Slave mutiny! Help!"

Eodan grasped for him, missed again and saw the Libyan sailor's legs pounding up. The Libyan was swinging a club. Eodan scrambled back from the blow and bounced to his feet. The Libyan yelled and raised the club high. Eodan's fist leaped, and he felt bone and flesh crunch under his knuckles. The Libyan choked and sat down.

Wildly, Eodan looked toward the bow. He had a glimpse of sea that sparkled blue beneath a sun close to noon. The ship rolled gently, but to an opposing wind; they were still only oar-powered. The land was a thin streak to starboard. Flavius stood in a knot of men under the forecastle, pointing back to the cabin and yelling.

"Give me that sword!" bawled Eodan.

Phryne came out with it. The wind rumpled her short dark hair, the sun blinked on her knife blade. Her tilted face looked forward in the calm of—hopelessness? No, Hwicca sobbed behind her, saying, "There are worse endings. Kill me, Eodan."

"No!" he cried. "Come, follow me! *By the Bull*—"

He lifted his sword and ran aft. The sailors in the bow milled, unsure. Demetrios exhorted them. Up on the poop, the steersman gaped and let go his oar. The ship heeled as the wind brought it about. Eodan stumbled, regained his feet and reached the hatch he wanted.

It stood open. The stench of the grave boiled from it. Even in that moment he was close to retching. But—"Down in there!" he rapped, and sprang first, ignoring the ladder.

He struck a platform where the gong-beater stood, staring, mouth open like a fish. Eodan stabbed once. The gong-beater screamed, caught at his belly and sank to his knees.

Eodan looked down the length of the pit. Overhead was the main deck. Before him was an oblong well, with ten benches on either side and a man chained to each. He could not see them as more than a blur—here a bleached face, there a tangle of hair. A catwalk ran down the middle, above the seats. Light came in shafts through the hatch and the oar-ports. As the ship rolled, a sunbeam would sickle up and down, touching a rib or a strake or a human face, and then flee onward. It was noisy here—timbers groaned, waves slapped the hull, rowlocks creaked, chains rattled.

The overseer came at a run along the catwalk. He was a big man with a smashed, hating face. He was bearing a whip with leaded thongs and a trident for prodding or killing. "Pirates!" he whooped. "Pirates!"

A beast-howl lifted from the benches. Oars clattered in their locks; the men stood up and barked, grunted, yammered. Eodan could not tell whether it was fear or wrath. And his life depended on which it was.

As the overseer reached him, Eodan crouched. The overseer stabbed. Eodan swayed his body aside, as though this were a bull's horn in the Cimbrian springtime games. He should have thrust in his turn, but habit was too strong. He struck downward with his sword. The overseer's trident was wrenched loose and went ringing to the platform.

The man's mouth opened. Perhaps he cursed, but Eodan could not hear above the

slave-racket. His fingers clawed for a hold, to wrestle the Cimbrian. Eodan got him by belt and throat, heaved him up over his head, and roared aloud.

"Here! He's yours!"

And hurled the overseer into darkness.

"Eodan," cried Hwicca. Her hands fell frantic upon his body. He looked into wild eyes. "What would you do?"

"No time to hunt for keys to the locks," he rapped. "Pick up that trident. Pry the shackles off these men!"

Hwicca stood back, staring. The slaves hooted and jumped about. A swift sunbeam caught bared teeth down in the murk. They could hear the overseer being ripped apart.

"Can you hold the crew off long enough?" called Phryne.

"I had better!" said Eodan.

He pulled off his cloak and whirled it around his left arm. The gong-beater caught feebly at his heels. He stamped down the hand and bounded up the ladder.

The sailors were nearing. All of them had weapons, such as were kept against pirates. Demetrios was bearing a shield and helmet as well. Flavius was walking beside him.

"There he is!" bellowed the captain, and feet thudded on the planks. Eodan went down again and waited.

There was grunting and cursing at his back. Once the girls had a man or two free, it would go faster.... But if I were a slave, he thought, with the mind beaten out of me, I might not use a sudden woman for anything but—Here is a man to fight!

It was the Libyan, with a broken nose to avenge. He came down the ladder quickly, facing forward in sailor fashion, bearing a short spear. In the shifting gloom he was not much more than another shadow. Eodan poised himself. The spear punched at his stomach. He caught the point in his wadded cloak, shoved it aside and stepped in. The Libyan howled, but was scarcely heard above the howling of the galley slaves. Eodan slid the sword into him. The sailor did not seem to feel it. He backed against the ladder, pulled his spear free and struck. Eodan did not quite sidestep it. The edge raked his shoulder. As the Libyan

moved in, Eodan chopped at the wooden handle of his enemy's weapon. Roman iron bit; he caught it. The Libyan wrestled him for the shaft. Eodan jerked. The Libyan lost his balance, slipped in his own pouring blood and fell into the pit.

Eodan glanced up. The sky in the hatch blinded him. He could only see that someone was looking down. As if from far away, he heard Demetrios: "Throw a kettle of boiling water. He cannot withstand that!"

"He can retreat onto the catwalk," said Flavius, "and come back to meet the next man we send. No, let one sailor carry that kettle down the ladder. The barbarian cannot attack him without being scalded. Two or three others can come directly behind—"

Gasping, Eodan turned toward the benches. It had quieted a little. He heard links clash in the darkness. A staple screamed as it was torn out of a timber.

"Follow me!" shouted Eodan. "Break your oars for clubs! There are no more than six or seven men up there! You can be free!"

They shuffled and mumbled in the dark. He glimpsed a few who had been released holding up their dangling chains in a dull, wondering way. They were loathsome with sores and scars.

A voice yelled back to him: "We can be crucified, no more!"

"They have swords," another whispered. "They are masters."

Eodan shook his red blade high and yelled in rage: "Is there even one man among you?"

A moment longer, then a booming from the foul night before him: "Get these god-rotted irons off me, boy, and you'll have at least two more hands!"

X

The man who sprang up onto the catwalk and joined Eodan was huge—not as tall as the Cimbrian, but with a breadth of shoulder that made him look almost square. His arms, hanging down toward his knees, were cabled with muscle. His hair and beard were matted filth, but they still had the color of fire. Small blue eyes crackled under bony brows; the dented nose dilated, sucking air into a shaggy bow-legged frame clad only in its chains.

He trumpeted at the darkness: "Hear me! You had courage enough to kill one stunned man, tossed down to you. Now you've no hope for your flea-bitten lives but to fight. Whether you touched the overseer or not, d'you think the Romans would spare a man of us after this? They'll grind you up for pig-mash! Follow us, beat in a few heads—after all the beatings you've taken, it's your turn—and we'll have the ship!"

Whirling on Eodan, he said with a wolfish glee, "Come, let's at 'em—the rest will trail us!"

"There's a spear somewhere," said the Cimbrian.

"Ha! I have my chains!" The big man whirled the links still hanging on his wrists.

Eodan thought of Hwicca, of his son and his father, and of Marius' triumphal parade. He swung up the ladder.

The crew were gathered nearby on guard. One of them shouted as Eodan's head emerged and ran forward, holding a pike. Eodan braced himself. As the metal thrust at him, he caught its shaft and forced it up. He jerked back while he took the last few rungs. The sailor fell to one knee. Eodan came out on deck, yanked the pike away and tossed it under the legs of the two nearest men approaching him. They went down.

"Haw, well cast!" bawled Redbeard.

A man was going up the ladder to the poop deck. Over the heads of two or three sailors, Eodan saw that he had a bow. "See up there!" he cried, as he danced back from the Gaul's sword-thrust. Redbeard grunted, whirled his chain and let fly. The Thracian deckhand screamed as the staple end smashed across his face, and

dropped his ax. The redbeard picked it up, took aim and threw it. There was a gleam in the air and a meaty whack. The bowman fell off the ladder, wailing, the ax standing in his shoulder.

"Back to back," snapped Eodan. The crew were circling him, looking for a chance to rush in. He counted four—the Gaul, the Greek, the Pamphylian, and a stocky fellow with a leather apron, belike a carpenter. The Thracian, who rolled about moaning, and the archer, who lay bleeding to death, were out of the fight.

And here, from around the cabin, leaving their hot-water kettle, came Demetrios and Flavius!

Redbeard wrapped a chain about his right hand—the links on his left he kept dangling—and twirled it. "Hoy, down there in the pit!" he shouted. "Get off your moldy butts and come crack some bones!"

The Pamphylian and the Greek moved in side by side, facing Eodan. The first of them leaped about, thrusting lightly with his sword, not trying to do more than hold the Cimbrian's eyes. Then the Greek worked in from the left. Eodan's blade clanged against his. At once the Pamphylian darted close. Eodan could just whip his sword around in time to wound him and drive him back. It gave the Greek an opening. Eodan saw that assault from the edge of an eye; he got his cloak-shielded arm in the way. The Greek struck for his hip, but the thrust only furrowed Eodan's flesh. Then Redbeard swatted his chain-clad hand around, and the Greek reeled back. Eodan thrust savagely at the Pamphylian, who retreated. Redbeard batted the carpenter's pike aside with his right hand. The chain on his left wrist snapped forth and coiled around the Pamphylian's neck. Redbeard pulled him close, took him by an arm and kicked him down the hatch.

"You puking brats!" he roared into the pit, as the sailor fell. "Do I have to send 'em to you?"

Demetrios and Flavius were among their men now—only the Gaul, the Greek, and the carpenter! Eodan screamed and shook his sword at them. "*Hau-hau-hau-hau-hoo!*"

"Form ranks!" barked Flavius.

"Best we get back under the poop," panted Redbeard.

Eodan drifted aft across the deck, growling. Five men left, no more. But they marched in a line, their timidity gone. Two could not hope to stop them for long —

The slaves came out.

Not all had so much courage, perhaps ten. But those fell upon the crew with broken oars, chains, and bare hands. Eodan saw Flavius turn coolly, lift his sword, and sheathe it in a throat; pull it free and gouge the next man open. The sailors fell into a ring, the yelping slaves recoiled.

"*Hau-hau-hee-yi!*" shrieked Eodan, and charged.

It was Flavius' head he wanted, but the Greek's he got. The sailor, his face puffy from the chain-blow it had taken, stabbed. Eodan went to one knee and let the point tear his wadded cloak. He thrust upward. Blood ran from the Greek's thigh, but the man stood firm. Eodan jumped to his feet, got two hands on the Greek's sword wrist and put his weight behind them. He heard the arm leave the socket, and the Greek went down. Eodan saw that the fight had departed this place; the slaves were clubbing loose. He followed. A rower emerged from below, saw the Greek and the Thracian lying helpless and battered them to death.

Eodan glimpsed Redbeard across the ship, locked bare-handed with the carpenter. Those were two strong men. The carpenter broke free and ran, pursued by Redbeard. Under the forecastle stood a rack of tools. As the carpenter picked up a hammer, Redbeard smote him with a chain, and the hammer dropped. Redbeard caught it in midair, roared and struck the carpenter.

But now the battle had ended. The Gaul had fallen, pounded to ruin. Only Flavius and the captain still lived. They fought their way aft, to the poop; half a dozen wounded slaves and three dead lay behind them. When they stood on the upper deck and defended the way with their swords, the mutineers fell back.

For a while there was silence. The ship rolled easily, waves clapped the strakes, wind hummed in the rigging. The hurt men moaned, the dead men and the wreckage rolled about. But those were not loud noises, under so high a heaven.

Redbeard went to the foot of the poop and shook his hammer. "Will you come down, or must I fetch you?" he cried.

"Come if you will," said Flavius. "It would be a service to rid the earth of Latin as atrocious as yours."

Redbeard hung back, glowering. One by one, the rowers drifted up to join him. Flavius arched his brows at them and grinned. His hair was flung disarrayed by the breeze, his tunic was ripped and a bruise purpled one calf, but he stood as though in Rome's Forum. Beside him, Demetrios mouthed threats and brandished his blade.

Eodan went to the hatch. He heard the remaining slaves clamor down there, and a sickness choked him. By the Bull, he thought, if those creatures have so much as spoken to Hwicca or Phryne, the fish will get them—cooked!

"Hoy!" he shouted. "Come up, we have won!"

Something stirred on the ladder. And then the sun caught Hwicca's bright blowing hair. She trod forth, dropping the trident in an unaware gesture. One leg showed through a rent in her gown. Her broad snub-nosed face was still bewildered; the blue eyes were hazed, as though she had not fully awakened.

"Hwicca," croaked Eodan. "Are you hurt?"

"No...."

He flung his sword to the deck and drew her to him. "We have the ship," he said. "We are free."

A moment only, her fingers tightened on his arms. Then she pulled away and looked over the blood-smeared deck. "Flavius?" she whispered.

"Up there." Eodan pointed with a stabbing motion. "We'll soon snatch him down!"

Hwicca stepped aside. She shivered. "It does not seem real," she said in a child's high, thin voice.

Phryne's boy-figure emerged. She was holding a dripping dagger. She looked at it, shook her head, flung it from her and bent shut eyes down upon clenched fists.

Eodan laid a hand on her shoulder. He had been wild at thinking of harm to Hwicca; now a strange tenderness rose in him, and he asked very gently, "What happened, Phryne?"

She raised a blind violet stare. "I killed a man," she said.

"Oh. No more than that?" Thankfulness sang within Eodan.

"It was not so little." She rubbed a wrist across her forehead. "I think I will have evil dreams for a long time."

"But men are killed daily!"

"He was a slave," said Phryne without tone. "Hwicca and I went among them. She pulled out the staples, and I guarded her. This one man shouted and seized her dress. He would have had her down under the bench. I struck him. I struck

him twice in the neck. He slumped back, but it took him a while to die. A sunbeam came in. I saw that he did not understand. He was only a man—a young man—what did he know of us? Of our purpose down there? Of anything but bench and chains and whip and one niggard piece of sky? And now he is among the shades, and he will never know!"

She turned away, went to the rail and, stared out at the horizon.

Eodan thought for a moment. He would have given blood of his own to comfort her, though this seemed only some female craziness. At last: "Well, do you think it would have been better for him to dishonor the woman that wanted to free him?"

Phryne paused before answering. "No. That is true. But give me a while to myself."

Eodan picked up his sword and went to the poop ladder. The slaves milled about, grumbling. Their bodies were mushroom-colored, and they blinked in the bright day; they had not been starved, for their strength was worth money, but sores festered on them and their hair and beards were crusted. Only the big red man seemed altogether human. Belike he had not been long at the oars.

He turned about, bobbed his head awkwardly and rumbled: "I lay my life at your feet. You gave me back myself."

Eodan grinned. "I had small freedom to choose! It was get help or be cut down."

"Nonetheless, there is fate in you," said Redbeard. He lifted his hammer between both hands. "I take you for disa—for chieftain. I am your hound and horse, bow and quiver, son and grandson, until the sky is broken."

Eodan said, moved to see tears on a giant's face, "Who are you?"

"I am called Tjorr the Sarmatian, *disa*. My folk are the Rukh-Ansa, a confederation among the Alanic peoples. We dwell on the western side of the Don River, north of the Azov Sea. I carry *disa* blood myself, being a son of the clan chief Beli. The Cimmerian Greeks caught me in battle a few years ago. I went from hand to hand, being too quick of temper to make a good slave, until at last they pegged me into this floating sty. And now you have freed me!" Tjorr blew his nose and wiped his eyes.

"Well, I am Eodan, Boierik's son, of the Cimbri. We can trade stories later. How shall we dislodge those two up there?"

"A bow would be easiest," said Tjorr, brightening, "but I'd liefer throw things at

them."

Flavius went to the deck's edge and looked down. "Eodan," he called. "Will you speak with me?"

The Cimbrian bristled. "What can you say to talk back your life?"

"Only this." Flavius' tone remained cool. "Do you really think to man a ship with these apes? They know how to row. Can they lay a course, hold a rudder, set a sail or splice a line? Do you, yourself, even know where to aim, to reach some certain country? Now Captain Demetrios has mastered all these arts, and I, who own a small pleasure craft, have some skill. Eodan, you can kill us if you wish, but then you will be wrecked in a day!"

There was buzzing among the slaves. The ship heeled sharply, under a gust, and Eodan felt spray sting his face.

Phryne left the rail and came to him. "I have not seen much of the sea," she said, "but I fear Flavius is right."

Eodan looked back along the deck, toward Hwicca. She stood watching the Roman in a way he did not know, save that it was not hate. Eodan raised his sword until it trembled before his eyes. The blood running down the blade made the haft slippery. I had no real quarrel with any of the men whose blood this was, he thought.

Then he regarded the sea, where it curled white on restless greenish blue, and the sky, and the far dim line that was Italy. He spat on the planks and called, "Very well! Lay down your arms and be our deck officers. You shall not be harmed."

"What proof do you have?" snorted Demetrios.

"None, except that he wants to reach land again with his wife," said Flavius. "Come." He led the way down the ladder. The rowers muttered obscenity. Two of them moved close, their pieces of oar lifted. Tjorr waved them back with his sledge. Flavius handed his sword to Eodan, who pitched it down so it rang.

"I advise you to assert your authority without delay." Flavius folded his arms and leaned against the poop, amused of face. "You have an unruly band there."

By now the remaining oarsmen had come on deck. Eodan counted them. All told, he had sixteen alive, including Tjorr, though several of these had suffered wounds. He mounted halfway up the ladder. "Hear me!" he cried.

They moved about, stripping the fallen sailors, shaking weapons they had taken,

chattering in a dozen tongues. Several edged close to Hwicca. "Hear me!" roared Eodan. Tjorr took Demetrios' helmet and banged on it with his hammer till ears hurt from the noise. "Heed me now or I throw you overboard!" shouted Eodan.

When he had them standing, squatting or sitting beneath him, he began to talk. There was little art of oratory among the Northern folk, but he knew coldly that he must learn it for himself this day if he wanted to live.

"I am Eodan who freed you," he said. "I am a Cimbrian. Last year, having destroyed many Roman armies, we entered Italy. There our luck turned, we were beaten and I was taken for a slave. But my luck has turned again, for you see that I captured this ship and struck the irons off you. And I shall give you your own freedom back!" He played for a while on the thought of no more manacles or whips, sailing to a land where they could find homes and wives or start out for their own countries. When he had them shouting for him—he was astonished how easy that was—he grew stern.

"A ship without a captain is a ship for the sea to eat. Now I am the captain. For the good of all, I must be obeyed. For the good of all, those who do not obey must suffer death or the lash. Hear me! It may well be needful for you to row again, but you will row as free men. He who will not pull his oar is not chained; he is welcome to leave us over the side. He whose gluttony takes more than his ration shall be cut into fish bait to make up for it. Hear me! I show you two women. They are mine. I know you have been long without women, but he who touches them, he who so much as makes a lewd remark to them, will be nailed to the yardarm. For I am your captain. I am he who will lead you to freedom and safety. I am the captain!"

A moment's stillness, then Tjorr whooped. And then they all shouted themselves raw, clapped, danced and held their weapons aloft. "*Captain, captain!*" Eodan leaned on the ladder while the cheering beat in his face. Now, he thought drunkenly, now I can forgive Marius that he made a triumph!

But the ship was bucking, drifting before the wind. While Tjorr went among the men, binding hurts and learning what skills they might have, Eodan conferred. Beside him were Hwicca, who held his arm and looked gravely at him, and Phryne, who stood with feet braced wide against the roll and fists defiantly on her hips. Demetrios, red with throttled anger, faced Eodan; Flavius sat on a coil of rope, his chiseled features gone blank.

"First we must know where to betake us," said Eodan. "I do not think we could sail unquestioned into Massilia harbor as we are! Could we put in elsewhere on

the shore of Gaul, unseen?"

"It's a tricky coast for a lubber crew," said Demetrios.

"Narbonensis is thickly settled," added Phryne. "Even if we landed in some cove, I doubt we would get far on foot before some prefect tracked us down." Her gaze went west, toward the sun. "Indeed, nearly all the Midworld seacoasts of Europe are Roman."

"There is Africa," said Flavius.

Phryne nodded thoughtfully. It struck Eodan (why had he never noticed it before, with her hair so short?) that the shape of her head was beautiful.

"Mauretania," she murmured. "No, that is well west of us. A long way to go across open sea, with so tiny and awkward a crew. Numidia must be nearly south ... but so is Carthage, where Romans dwell. Then I hear Tripolis and Cyrenaica are desert in many places, down to the very sea—"

Eodan said, "By the Bull, we could sail around Gaul to Jutland!"

Flavius laughed noiselessly. Demetrios rumbled like some fire mountain before he achieved words: "Would you not rather bore a hole in the ship? That would be an easier way to drown!"

Phryne smiled at the Cimbrian. "I should have awaited such a plan from you," she said. "But he is right. It is too long a voyage, and the Ocean is too rough for the likes of us."

"Well, then," he snapped, "where can we go?"

"I would say toward Egypt." Eodan started; he had not often seen Phryne redden. She lowered her eyes but went on, hurriedly: "Oh, we could not sail into Alexandria like any mariners. The King of Egypt has no more desire to encourage slave revolt than the Roman Senate. But there should be smaller harbors, or we could run into the Nile delta after dark, or—It is a world-city, Alexandria, even more than Rome. Let us once enter it afoot, a few at a time, with just a little money, and surely we can be better hidden than in the wildest desert. And those who would go further can find berths with eastbound ships or caravans. You could go as far as the Cimmerian Bosporus, Eodan, Hwicca, and thence make your own way north through the barbarian lands to your home!"

Eodan looked at Demetrios. The captain grunted. "I suppose it might be done, this time of year," he said. "You'll let me off unhurt, won't you now? The gods will hate you if you break your word to me."

Flavius said calmly: "Chance abets your scheme, Phryne. This wind is right for doubling around Sicily."

Eodan whipped his sword up, threw it so it stuck in the bulkhead, toning, and laughed. "Then we sail!"

He found much to do in the next few hours. He had to organize the crew, giving duties to all the men; he had to visit the whole ship; he had to count the stores and guess what ration of moldy hardtack, wormy meat, sour wine and scummed water could be handed out each day. His crew elected to sleep below, in the pit; most of them feared sea monsters would snatch an unconscious man off the deck, a yarn often spun galley slaves to keep them docile. A cleared space in the forecastle peak was turned over to Tjorr, Flavius and Demetrios, who must always be on call. The prisoner-officers would stand watch and watch the whole journey, supervised by captain or mate. Not trusting himself, Eodan said Tjorr would guard Flavius.

Having cleaned the decks and gotten rid of the dead—they promised Neptune a bull when they came ashore, to pay for polluting his waters—the crew made some shambling attempt to become human. It was almost a merry scene. Tjorr dragged a forge out on deck; iron roared as his hammer and chisel struck off men's fetters. Beyond him stood a black Ethiopian, who hacked off as much hair and beard as shears would take; a tub of sea water and a sponge waited; and they could put on the tunics or loincloths of the fallen sailors—shabby indeed, but more than a benched slave had. And a stewpot bubbled on the hearth forward of the mast, and an extra dole of wine was there to pour for the gods or drink oneself. Overhead strained the single square sail, patched and mildewed but carrying them south from Rome.

A thought reached Eodan. He said, dismayed, "But Phryne, I have not found any quarters for you!"

She looked at the cabin, then back at him and Hwicca. Sunset burned yellow behind her slight form. "I can use that canvas shelter up on the forecastle deck," she said.

"It seems wrong," he muttered. "Without you, I would be dead a hundred times over ... or still a slave. You should have the cabin, and we—"

"You could not be alone enough in a tent on deck," she said.

He heard Hwicca's breath stumble, but she uttered no word.

The sun went down, somewhere beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The moon,

approaching the full, rose out of Asia. The men yawned their way to sleep; Eodan overheard one young fellow say it had been a trying day. Presently only the watch was above decks—a lookout in the bows and one in the crow's-nest, a steersman and Demetrios on the poop, two standbys dozing under the taffrail.

Phryne said to Eodan, "Will you not sleep, too?"

"Not till Tjorr relieves me," he said. "Would you trust that captain man?"

"I can oversee him, and call for help if—"

Eodan's mouth lifted wryly. "Thank you, Phryne. But it is not needful. Later, perhaps. Now I think we shall watch the moon for a bit."

"Oh." The Greek girl was a whiteness in the night; she seemed very small within the great ring of the sea. Her head bent. "Oh, I understand. Good night, Eodan."

"Good night." He watched her go to her tent.

Hwicca stood by the larboard rail. Her hair, loosened, rippled a little in the wind. He thought he could still see a tinge of its golden hue. Otherwise the moon turned her to silver and mist; she was not wholly real. But shadows drew the deep curves of her, where the torn dress fluttered and streamed. Eodan's temples beat, slow and heavy.

He walked to her, and they stood looking east. The moon dazzled their eyes and flung a shaken bridge across darkly gleaming waters. There were not many stars to be seen against its brightness, up in the violet-blue night. The sea rolled and whispered, the wind thrummed low, the ship's forefoot hissed and its timbers talked aloud.

"I had not awaited this," said Eodan at last, because she was not going to speak and he could find no better words. "To gain our own vessel!"

"It seems more of a risk this way," she answered, staring straight before her. The hands he remembered—how fair was a woman's hand, laid beside the rough hairy paw of a man!—were clenched on the rail. "It is my fault. Had I not failed you this noontime—"

"How did the Roman get to the door?" he asked. "You could have called me, or at least put your sword in him, when he neared it ... could you not?"

"I tried," she said. "But when he began to move that way, slowly, as if by mere chance, talking to me all the while—he was so merry, and he was saying me a verse—I did not want to—" She took her head, her lips pulled back from her

teeth and she said harshly: "Once I attacked him, were not all our lives forfeit? Was it not to be done only if death stood certain before us? I waited too long, that is all—I misjudged and waited too long!"

"You could have warned him not to move further."

"He talked all the time—his verse—I had no chance to—"

"You had no *wish* to interrupt him!" flared Eodan. "Is that not the way of it? He was singing you some pretty little lay about your eyes or your lips, and smiling at you. You would not break the mood with anything so rude as a warning. Is that not how he used you?"

Her head bent. She slung to the rail and arched her back with the effort not to scream.

Eodan paced up and down for a time. Somewhere out in the water a dolphin broached, playing with the moonlight. There was strangely little wind to feel when you sailed before it, as though the hollow, murmurous canvas above him had gathered it all in. When he turned his face aft, he caught only the lightest of warm, wandering airs. It was a fair night, he thought, a night when the Powers were gentle.

It was a night to lie out with your beloved, as you carried her home.

Eodan said finally, with more weariness than he had thought a man's bones could bear:

"Oh, yes. I too have learned somewhat of these Southlanders. They are more skilled and gracious folk than we. They can speak of wisdom, opening the very heavens as they talk; and their wit is like sunshine skipping over a swift brook; and their verses sing a heart from its body; and their hands shape wood and stone so it seems alive; and love is also a craft to be learned, with a thousand small delights we heavy-footed Northfolk had not dreamed us. Yes, all this I have seen for myself, and it was foolish of me to suppose you were blind." He came back behind her and laid his hands on her waist. "Is it Flavius then that you care for?"

"I do not know," she whispered.

"But you were never more than a few months' pleasure to him!" cried Eodan. His voice split across.

"He swore it was otherwise." Her fingers twisted together, her head wove back and forth as if seeking flight. "I do not know, Eodan—there is a trolldom laid on me, perhaps—though he said he would raise me from all darkness of witches and

gods, into a sunlight air where only men dwelt—I do not know!" She tore herself free, whirled about and faced him. "Can you not understand, Eodan? You are dear to me, but I care for him, too! And that is why I am dishonored. It is not that I, a prisoner, lay with him. But I was *his*!"

Eodan let his arms fall. "And you still are?" he asked.

"I told you I do not know." She stared blindly out to sea. "Now you have heard. Do what you think best."

"You can have the cabin for yourself," he said. He wanted to make it a gentle tone, but his words clashed flatly.

She fled from him, and he heard the door bang shut upon her.

After a long while he looked skyward, found the North Star and measured its position against the moonlit wake. As nearly as he could tell, they were still on course.

XI

The wind held strong, blowing them toward western Sicily with little work on their own part. Now and again they spoke other ships; this was a well-trafficked sea. Eodan, whose height and accent could never be taken for Italian, followed Phryne's advice and told them he was a Gaul out of Massilia for Apollonia; and then they dipped under the marching horizon.

That first day passed somehow. Eodan busied himself with Tjorr, learning what seamanship a surly Demetrios could pass on. He dared hardly speak to Flavius, but the Roman stayed in the forecastle most of the time the Cimbrian was on deck. Hwicca kept her cabin, whelmed by sickness from the roughening sea. It had never before occurred to Eodan that the ills of the body could be merciful.

"Do you stay with her the voyage," he told Phryne. "I will take the tent."

She stared at him. He barked, as though to a slave: "Do what I say!" Her eyes grew blurred, but she nodded.

The crew came on deck, idled in the sun till Tjorr went roaring among them with instruction in the deckhand arts. He had to knock down a couple before he got some obedience.

"It were best you keep all the weapons," he said to Eodan.

The Cimbrian nodded. With a dim try at a jest: "Even yours?"

"If you wish," said Tjorr, surprised. He wore a sword at his thick waist. "But spare me my hammer." Hanging by a thong around one shoulder, it was an iron-headed mallet, a foot and a half long and some fifteen pounds in weight.

"Oh, keep your sword," said Eodan. "But what would you with that tool?"

"I found it a good weapon yesterday, though a little too short in the haft. It needs more strength to wield than a battle-ax—but I am strong, and it will not warp or break when needed most." Tjorr's red-furred hand caressed the thing. "And then, we of the Rukh-Ansa are a horse-loving folk, who honor the smith's trade above all others. It feels homelike to carry a sledge again. And last, but foremost, Captain, this hammer broke the chains off me. For that it shall have a high place in my house on the Don, and I shall offer it sacrifices."

Eodan found himself warming to the Sarmatian. He asked further. The Alans were only barbarians in the sense of doing without cities and books: they were a widespread race, many tribes between the Dnieper and the Volga, who farmed and herded for a living. They bred galloping warriors, word-crafty bards, skillful artisans; they traded with the Greeks on the Black Sea and had not only meat and fish and hides to sell, but cloth and metal shaped by their own hands.

"Times are not what they have been in the lands of Azov," rumbled Tjorr. "We are getting to be too many for our pastures; a dry year means a hungry winter. And the Greeks press upon us. It was in a raid on them that I was captured. Nonetheless, I am of high blood among the Ansa, and now you are my chief. You shall have a good welcome. I hope you will remain, but, if not, you shall go where you wish, with gifts and warriors."

"Let us first get to your Don River," said Eodan. He turned from the Alan, knowing he hurt him by such curtness. But he could not speak of hope when Hwicca lay farther from him than Rome from Cimberland.

Could it but be judged by the sword, between him and Flavius! But death was no remedy, thought Eodan; and that knowledge, which he had not had before, was bitter within him.

The day and the night passed. He noticed that the crew were beginning to talk in small groups, on the deck or down in the south. The former captain jerked a thumb at the sight, as he neared. He thought little of it.

When he came from his tent next morning to take his watch with Demetrios, there were cloud banks piled white in the south. The former captain jerked a thumb at the sight. "There you are," he said. "That marks Sicily. We'll round Lilybaeum today. Then we'll have to come about on an east-southeast course. Don't like cutting over open sea myself, but we can't get lost very bad. Daresay we'll raise Africa around Cyrenaica, then follow the coast to Egypt."

"And abandon the ship on some unpeopled beach," nodded Eodan.

He saw, of a sudden, that his crew was gathering under the poop. Some had been on deck already, now others emerged in answer to low-voiced hails. Only Flavius and the helmsman remained apart. Tjorr unshipped his hammer, walked to the poop's edge and looked down. The wind tossed his hair and beard like flame. "What's this?" he said. "What are you muck-toads up to?"

A very young man, dark and aquiline, not all the eagerness whipped out of him, waved his hands at the others. "Come, follow me," he said. "This way. Stick

close. We've all decided, now we've all got to stick together." They shuffled their feet, sheepish under Eodan's chilling green gaze. A burly man in the rear began to herd them along, slapping at stragglers. They drifted toward the Cimbrian.

"Well?" said Eodan.

The youth ducked his head. "Master Captain," he began. "I am called Quintus. I'm from Saguntum in Spain. The men have chosen me, fair and open, by free vote, to speak for us all."

"And?" Eodan dropped a hand to his sword.

The black eyes were uneasy beneath his, but there was a mongrel courage in them. "Master Captain," said Quintus, "we're not unmindful of being freed. Though none of us was asked, and some would not have voted to desert their posts, if it had been put to the fair democratic test. For mark you, Master, it wasn't a very merry life, but you got your bread, and you rested ashore between voyages. Now we can look for nothing but slow death, the innocent with the guilty, if we're caught."

"I do not intend to be caught," said Eodan.

"Oh, of course not, Master!" The boy washed his hands together, servilely, and cringed. But he did not leave the spot where he stood. And behind the silent, shuffling mass, his big confederate held a piece of broken oar to prod the reluctant into place.

"There is money aboard," said Eodan. "When we come to Egypt and beach this hulk, we shall divide the coins and go our separate ways. Would you not rather become a free Alexandrian worker than sit chained to a bench all your life?"

"Well, now, sir, the free man is often only free to starve. An owner keeps his slaves fed, at least. Some of us is right unhappy about that. We don't know how to go about finding work in a strange land. We don't know the talk nor customs nor anything. The older of us are all too plainly slaves, with marks of shackle and whip, maybe a brand—and what have we got to prove we was lawfully freed, if anyone asks? Master Captain, we have talked about this a long time, and reached a fair democratic decision, and now we crave you listen to it."

Eodan thought grimly, It is another thing I had not understood, that a slave need not be pampered to embrace his own slavery.

He said aloud, forcing a grin, "Well, if you want to be chained again, I can oblige you."

A few men snickered nervously. Quintus shook his head. "You make a joke, Master. Now let me put it to you square, as man to man. For we are all free comrades now, thanks to you, Master Captain. But we are all outlaws, too. None dare go home, unless they come from a far barbarian land; none of us from civilized parts can ever return, now can we? But we've got this ship, and we've got arms. There are not so many of us yet, but with the first success we can have more like ourselves. And the eastern sea is full of trade; I know those waters myself. There is also many an island around Greece where nobody ever comes, to hide on—and many a lesser port we could sail into to spend our earnings, where no one asks how it was earned—"

"Get to the point, you dithering blubberhead!" said Tjorr. "You want to turn sea bandits, is that the way of it?"

The Spanish youth shrank back, swayed forward again and chattered: "Pirates, so, pirates, Master Captain. Free companions of the Midworld Sea. There's no other hope for us, not really there isn't. If caught—and many of us would surely be caught, wandering into Egypt by ourselves—we'll die anyhow. This way, if the gods are kind, we'll not die at all. Or if we do, we'll have had good times before!"

"Pirates," mumbled the crew. "Pirates. We'll be pirates."

Tjorr leaped down to the main deck so it thudded beneath him. He walked forward in a red bristle, his hammer aloft. "You fish-eyed slobberguts!" he roared. "Back to your duty!"

The burly man hefted his broken oar. "Now, Master Mate," he said. "Be calm. This was voted on—uh—"

"Democratic," supplied Quintus.

"So now a ship is to be a republic?" called Flavius from the poop. "I wish you joy of your captaincy, Eodan!"

The Cimbrian closed fingers about his sword. He could not feel the anger that snapped from Tjorr; it seemed of no great importance when Hwicca had cloven herself from him.

"I do not wish this," he said mildly.

Emboldened, the Spaniard stepped close to him. "Oh, Master Captain, there was no thought of mutiny," he exclaimed. "Why, we are your best friends! That was the first thing I said, when we met to talk this over, the captain is our captain, I

said, and—"

"I have better things to do than skulk about these waters."

"But Captain, sir, we'll be your men! We'll do anything you say." The boy grinned confidently, pressing his words in. "Just treat us like men, with some rights of our own, is all we ask."

"I'll treat you like an anvil first!" snorted Tjorr. His hammer lifted.

"No, wait." Eodan caught the mate's arm as Quintus scuttled back squealing. "Let them have their way."

"*Disa!*" said Tjorr with horror. "You'd turn into a louse-bitten pirate, who could be a king of the Rukh-Ansa?"

"Oh, no. We shall still leave the ship in Egypt, as we planned. But if they want to take it afterward and go roving, it is no concern of ours." Eodan bent close, muttering, "Until we do get there, we'll need a willing crew."

"We'll have one, if you'll let me bang loose a few teeth," said Tjorr. "I know this breed. Yellow dogs! They'll lick your feet or pull out your throat, but naught in between."

"It is not my pleasure to fight our own men," said Eodan coldly.

"But—but—Well, so be it, my chief."

Eodan turned back to the others. "I agree thus far. You may have the vessel after I have disembarked at my goal. Meanwhile, I advise you to learn better seamanship!"

"But, Master Captain," said Quintus, "we know you and the honored mate are the best fighters aboard. We want you to lead us."

Eodan shook his head.

"Well—will you lead us against any ships we may happen to find before you depart?"

Eodan shrugged. "As you like, provided I think it is safe."

"Oh, indeed, Master, indeed!" The boy spun around to face the men, raising his arms. "Give thanks to the captain!"

"Hoy!" cried Demetrios in dismay. "What about me?"

"You'll do as you're told," said Tjorr.

Demetrios gulped and looked appealingly at Flavius. The Roman smiled, winked and came down the poop ladder. "Your watch," he said.

After a while Eodan began to regret not following Tjorr's counsel. His crew had become still more slatternly. Now they would do nothing but sit about boasting of their future, until he finally kicked them into sullen labor. Quintus sidled up in the afternoon and proposed that the weapons be handed out so the men could practice. Eodan told him they should first practice being sailors. Quintus argued. He would not stop arguing until Eodan finally knocked him to the deck; then he slouched off, muttering, to find his big friend.

Toward evening, Hwicca came on deck. She was supported by Phryne, and her face was pale. Eodan's heart turned over. He went to her and asked, "Do you feel well, my darling?"

"Better," she said dully. "But so tired."

Phryne, who had not followed their Cimbric, said angrily to Eodan: "She shivers with cold. *I* have no warmth to give her!"

He said in the Northern language, "Would you have me stay with you tonight, Hwicca?"

"As you wish," she said. "You are my husband."

Eodan left her, went to the hearth and struck the cook with his fist for a bad supper.

Presently Hwicca returned to the cabin. Phryne sought Eodan. Was it only the sunset that reddened her eyes? She said in a jagged tone, "I do not know what is wrong between you two. I can only guess. But I will sleep no more with her."

"You can have the tent back, then," said Eodan bitterly, "and I will roll a blanket on deck, since it appears we must all be sundered from each other."

"Before Hades, I wonder now if she may not be right!" yelled Phryne. She stamped her foot, whipped about and ran to the tent.

She was still wearing the boy's tunic, bare-legged, for there were no women's garments aboard save Hwicca's dresses, too large for her. Quintus, squatting by the rail with his friend, the big man called Narses, stared after the Greek girl and smacked his lips.

Eodan paced the deck in wrath, wondering what unlucky thing he had done. Well, the night wind take them all! Phryne, who would not help his wife when she needed help, and Hwicca, who had become a Roman's whore, and—by the Bull, no, he would not say that of her! If it were true, the only thing would be to cast her off, and he would not do that.

He raised his hands toward the early stars. "I would pull down the sky if I could," he said between his teeth. "I would make a balefire for the world of all the world's gods, and kindle it, and howl while it burned. And I would tread heaven under my feet, and call up the dead from their graves to hunt stars with me, till nothing was left but the night wind!"

No thunderbolt smote him. The ship ran onward, dropping the dark mass of

Sicily astern; the last red clouds in the west smoldered to ash and then to night; the moon stood forth, insolently cool and fair. Eodan had no wish to sleep, but he saw that Demetrios was dangerously worn, so he sent the man aft to rouse Flavius and Tjorr.

"We can hold this course all night, they tell me," he said to the Alan. "The wind is falling, so we won't go too far. Call me if anything seems to threaten."

"*Da.*" Tjorr's small bush-browed eyes went from Eodan to the closed cabin door. He shook his head, and the moonlight showed a bemused compassion on his battered face. "As you will, Captain."

Flavius hung back, well into the shadows. He did not follow Tjorr and the new watch aft until Eodan had departed.

The Cimbrian rolled himself into his blanket forward of the mast, so the sail's shadow would keep the moon from his eyes. He sought sleep, but it would not come. Now and again he heard bare feet slap the planks, a man on watch or one come from below for some air. It was warmer tonight than before; his skin prickled. He cursed wearily, forbade himself to toss about and lay still. If he acted sleep, perhaps he could draw sleep.

It seemed as though many hours went by. Surely the night was old. He opened one eye. The same stars, the same moon—it had only been his thoughts, treading the same barren circle. What use, he thought, was a kingdom, what use even was freedom, when—

There was scuffling, very faint, up in the bow. Eodan opened both eyes. Some noise, mice—no, it was heavier. He glanced aft. He could see Flavius and the helmsman, Tjorr blocky against the Milky Way. They had seen nothing, heard nothing; indeed it was very faint. Up in the crow's-nest, the lookout stood gazing into nowhere.

Well, no matter. The bow lookout would have cried any needful alarm.

Eodan sat up. But where was the man in the bow? He remembered dimly that, yes, the Narses man had traded for that watch about sundown. Narses' hulking shadow did not show above the forecastle. There was only Phryne's tent.

With a cold thought of long-necked monsters raiding ships' decks for their food, Eodan sprang to his feet. Sword out, he glided toward the forecastle. Up the ladder—The struggle was within the tent.

Eodan howled and lifted its flap. Moonlight splashed Quintus' grinning face. He

knelt on Phryne's arms, one hand over her mouth and the other on her breast. "No one has to know, my beautiful," he had been whispering. Narses' knees held her thighs apart; he was just lifting her tunic.

Eodan struck. He felt his blade grate along a rib. Narses' hands loosened. He straightened on his knees, plucking at the steel in his side. Eodan pulled it out, and Narses coughed up blood. Eodan struck him again, between the jaws, so that it crashed. The sword came out the back of his neck.

Quintus leaped from the upper deck. "Help!" he wailed. "Help, men, help!"

Phryne struggled from beneath Narses. Her tunic was drenched black under the moon with his blood. "Are you harmed?" croaked Eodan out of horror.

"No," she said in a blind, stunned fashion. "You came soon enough—" She looked at her dripping garment, and a shudder went through her. She undid her belt and flung the tunic over the side. "But I would have bled so much less!" she cried.

"What is it?" bawled Tjorr. "Stand fast!"

The crew boiled from the hatch. Eodan put his foot on Narses' face and tugged the sword free; it took all his strength. He sprang down to the main deck. "Where is Quintus from Saguntum?" he roared. "Bind me that offal before I kill the rest of you!"

They swirled and screamed on deck, blue shadows mingled in the white relentless moonlight. Tjorr went among the crew, striking with the butt of his hammer. Eodan saw Quintus huddled up against the poop, hands raised before his face. "There!" he shouted. "There!"

"Help!" shrieked the boy. "Help me! He has gone mad, shipmates! Hold off that barbarian!"

It was a while before some sort of calm had been restored. Then Eodan stood before Quintus and said, "This creature tried to violate a woman. You have heard the punishment. Nail him up!"

"No, no, no," chattered Quintus, "it isn't so, mates, it isn't so. She lured us herself, she did, she begged us to come to her—look at her there, flaunting herself—" Their eyes all went forward, where Phryne wept as she stood at a water bucket sponging Narses' blood off her skin—"it's just his jealousy!—this barbarian is a worse tyrant than overseer ever was. Are you going to stand for this, mates?"

Tjorr tossed his hammer in the air. "That you are," he said, "or feel my little kissing engine here. Bring us some rope. Up this dog goes!"

By now Flavius and Demetrios had joined the crowded, frightened band. The Roman stepped forth, raising an arm. Moonlight outlined him white and clean as some marble god. He said in easy tones:

"Of course I was taken prisoner, so perhaps I've no right to speak. But I do still think of myself as a shipmate, I'm a sailor, too, for pleasure, and we're all on this same keel together. So if you would hear my words—"

"Be still!" said Eodan. "This is nothing worth talking about."

Hwicca came from her cabin. "What is it?" she asked. "What has happened?"

She looked so young and alone that a Power seized upon Eodan. Willy-nilly, he must go to reassure her. And meanwhile Flavius waved an angry Tjorr aside, casually, and went on:

"I understand you turned pirate to escape Rome's crosses. But have you gained much, when your own captain begins to crucify you, one by one? Why, this youth was the spokesman of your liberty. Will you listen to him cry in his agony tomorrow? If so, you will deserve the cross yourselves. And you will get it! What does the captain care? He is only going to Egypt. It is nothing to him if he kills one of you outright and hangs up another to keep you awake with dying groans. So you, already undermanned, are overcome at your first battle. What of it, says your captain, safely ashore—"

"Now that's muck-bespattered enough!" growled Tjorr. "One more word from anybody and I'll spray his brains on deck."

"Hail, free companions of the sea," declaimed Flavius, and stepped aside.

Phryne left the pail, her body glistened wet as she ran, and when she caught Eodan's hands her own were like some river nymph's. He remembered again cool forest becks in the North, when he was small and the world a wonder. "Eodan," she cried. "You'll not do any such thing!"

"But he would have—"

"He did not succeed. And even if he had, would it restore what I lost? Eodan, I am the one wronged, and I should give judgment."

He felt himself suddenly exhausted—O great dark Bull, breathe sleep upon me! He said to her: "Well ... thus did we Cimbri set blood price. What would you

have me do to this animal?"

Phryne looked into the boy's liquid eyes and saw how his thin chest went up and down, up and down with terror. "Let him go," she said. "He will not harm me again."

Quintus fell to his knees. "I am your slave, bright goddess of mercy," he sobbed.

Eodan snapped, "Had you kept still, I would have let you go wholly free. You jabber too much. Ten lashes!"

Hwicca's lips thinned. "You are too soft, Eodan," she said. "I would have put him on the yardarm."

He checked a cruel retort and walked from her.

While the needful work was being done, he heard Flavius speak low by the rail with a crewman. "It is true—a violently rebelling slave may not live. However, this case is unusual. I have influence, and of course it is always possible in case of mutiny ... Hm, shall we say a few loyal souls had been manumitted beforehand and thus did not come under the law? Much would depend on the testimony of any Roman citizen."

Eodan thought that trouble was being cooked for him. But he could only stop such mumbles by cutting out every tongue on board. Fire burn them all! He would do what he could, and the rest lay with that weird he had called down upon himself.

XII

In the morning they turned east. The wind had shifted enough to give them some help, though it was necessary to break out the spare oars and put ten men back on them. Eodan thought of making Flavius go into the pit for a while. He glanced at Phryne, who sat pensively looking out toward Egypt, and decided she would think it an unworthy deed.

Hwicca came out some time close to noon. She had put on a fresh gown and a blue palla; it set off her sunlight-colored braids. She looked out over the sea, which glittered blue and green in a hundred hues, foamed, cried out and snorted under a sky of pale crystal. The wind whooped over the world's rim and drew blood to her cheeks. Eodan had not seen her so fair since they crossed the Alpine snows.

He went to her and said, striving to be calm, "I hope you feel yourself again."

"Oh, yes. I am used to the movement now." Hwicca smiled at him, shy as a child, and he remembered that she was after all no more than eighteen winters. "Indeed this is a lovely way of faring, as if we rode on a great bird."

Hope kindled him. He rubbed his chin weightily—let him not urge himself too fast—and answered: "Yes, I could become as much a shipwright as a horse tamer, I think. When we return to the North, we shall begin making some real ships. I only remember boats from my boyhood. Already I think I could teach their builders some new arts."

Her pleasure faded a little. "Are you indeed bound to return to Cimberland?" she asked.

"If not to the same place, somewhere near," he said. "I remember my father speaking of tribes not far eastward, Goths and Sueones, strong wealthy folk who speak a tongue we could understand. But I would at least be among my own folk again."

She lowered her face and murmured, "They have a saying here, that nothing human is alien to them."

"Would you liefer stay in Rome?" he asked, stabbed.

"Let us not talk of that," she begged. Her hand stole up to his chin, bristly after

the past few unshaven days. When she touched him, it seemed almost pain. "You look so funny," she smiled. "Black hair and yellow whiskers."

"Hm, thanks," he said, gripping his temper tight. "Since the dye will linger, Phryne told me, I'd best shave myself."

"How did it happen Phryne came with you?" asked Hwicca, a little too lightly.

"She attended a matron at the farm, Flavius' wife. We came to know each other."

"How well?" Hwicca arched her brows.

"She is my friend," he fumbled. "Nothing else."

"Cordelia is a bitch," said Hwicca, flushed, "but her maids have an easy enough life. What drove this Phryne to forsake it?"

Eodan bridled. "She wanted freedom for herself. She has a man's soul."

"Oh," purred Hwicca. "One of those."

He said in a rage, "You learned too much filth in Rome. I'll speak to you again when you have curbed your tongue."

He left her staring after him and went forward. "Heat me some water!" he barked. The cook, a deckhand told off to this task among all others, gave him a surly glance and obeyed. Eodan crouched by the hearth with a mirror and scraped the stubble off his face. He cut himself several times.

When he walked aft again, he saw that Flavius had come from the forecastle and stood where he himself had been, talking to Hwicca. Her face was bent from Eodan, but he saw woe in her twining hands. The Roman did not smile this time; he spoke gravely.

Eodan clapped a wild hand to his sword haft. By all the hounds on hellroad! No. It was beneath him. If she chose to betray him with a greasy Southlander, let her —and wolves eat them both.

When he looked again he saw that Hwicca had gone back inside. Flavius stood looking out to sea. The eagle face was unreadable; then it firmed and his fist struck the rail. Thereupon Flavius went quickly to the poop, where Quintus of Saguntum squatted on standby duty with a red-streaked back. Those two fell into talk.

The day passed. There were many ships. Now and again a man asked the captain if they should not take one. Eodan dismissed the question with scorn—this

galley was armed, that one in plain sight of two others.... The man would go off muttering. Tjorr said nothing, but took the carpenter's tools and worked on a boarding plank.

Toward sundown, Phryne, who had spent the day making herself a dress from some man-garments—no easy task with only a sail-maker's equipment—came to get her food. She found Eodan standing alone, chewing a heel of bread and watching two or three crewmen whisper beneath the mast. "We must be far from land now," she remarked.

He nodded. "Far enough so we might safely attack some lone ship."

"Would you indeed fall upon men who never harmed you, to steal their goods?" she asked. It was not deeply reproachful, but he felt he must justify himself to her and thought he was belike the first Cimbrian that ever saw robbery as anything but a simple fact of life.

"I would welcome a fight," he said. Then, feeling he had shown too much, he made his tones cool: "If nothing else, the money we could gain will help mightily in Egypt. And, if you dislike the idea, we need not slaughter any captives—and we would be setting the galley slaves free."

"Then I suppose it is no worse than any other war," she said. But she left him.

And the night passed.

In the morning, Eodan saw that Flavius was again talking to Hwicca. She showed more life than the last time—by all cruel gods, but she was fair!—and once mirth crossed her face. He stayed in the poop with Demetrios until his watch ended.

There had been nothing to see but water for many hours. The wind dropped till the sail hung half empty; the creaking oars rubbed men's nerves. As noon passed it grew hotter, until the crew shed their clothes. Eodan kept his tunic. Hwicca came from her cabin and sat in its shade, alone, but he did not go to her.

The sun was so brazen off the sea that the other galley had come well over the horizon before the lookout cried its presence. It was also eastbound. Eodan grew tense. "Stand by to come about!" he said.

"Row down there, you clotheads!" bellowed Tjorr. "You may be rowing to your fortunes!"

Eodan took the steering oar himself. It was maddeningly slow, the way they crept over miles. He thought, once, that if he built himself a galley in the North it

would not be so heavy and round as these—yes, open decks, so a man could pull his oar beneath the sky....

"She's a big one," said Demetrios. "Too big for the likes of you." Sweat glistened on his nose; his eyes rolled in unease.

Eodan felt the old captain was right. The ship he neared had half again the length of his, and its freeboard towered over his deck. Nonetheless, it had no ram, no war engines at all that he could see, though he only knew such by description. And he had eaten too much rage the last few days. It must out somehow.

"We will go nearer," he said. "We have decided nothing yet."

"We'll decide to slink off again, that's what we'll do," muttered Quintus, down on the main deck. "A coward as well as a tyrant, that's our skipper."

One or two nodded furtively.

Still they edged closer. The captain of the other galley hailed: "Ho, there! This is the *Bona Dea* of Puteoli, bound for Miletus with a cargo of wine! Who are you?"

Eodan repeated his old lie. "Well," replied the stranger, "give us some sea room, then."

"I sail where I please!" yelled Eodan.

"Come closer and I'll think you're a pirate."

"Think what you want!"

The ships converged. Eodan waited, coldly, until he heard the alarms and the running feet. Then he gave a crewman the steering oar, ran to the shrouds and swarmed to the crow's-nest. He was high enough and close enough now to look down upon the other deck. He counted the sailors as they scurried about getting their weapons from the captain. Fifteen. And, with himself, this one still carried sixteen!

Of course, that meant he would have to arm all his rowers, but—He threw a leg around the mast and slid down, shouting, "*Hau-hau-hau!* Break out the blades!"

The men on deck roared. Tjorr had to knock one over-eager rower back down the hatch before the oars would move again. Eodan called two men to him, pointing out Flavius and Demetrios. "Bind them," he said.

Flavius held out his wrists. "Are you afraid we two will attack your gang from the rear?" he asked mildly.

"I would not trust you with the women," said Eodan. He slipped Demetrios' helmet pad on his head. The helmet itself followed. O wild war-gods, he bore a helmet once more!

"Over here!" cried Tjorr. "This way, you moth-eaten monkeys!" The deck planks grated beneath the heavy, grapneled boarding plank he had fashioned.

Spears gleamed along the other ship's rail. Its captain stood in plumed helmet and polished breastplate, laughing down at the handful on Eodan's deck. "So you had a slave mutiny, did you?" he said. "Well, come on, come on! We'll put you to work here, on your way to the arena!"

Eodan looked bleakly over his few, and thought of the ten oarsmen beneath his feet. They were not the stuff of a good fighting force. See that skinny graybeard snivel over there—this pirating had never been any idea of his. Narses was the best of a bad lot, and Narses lay on the sea bottom. Well, Eodan and Tjorr had to do what they could, for it was too late now. Even if they turned tail, the other galley would pursue, and it had more rowers.

He saw Hwicca and Phryne by the cabin. They held each other's hands, unspeaking, in that mystery of woe whose initiates are all womankind. He strode to them, buckling on his helmet. "Stay behind that door," he said. "If the fight goes against us, you must do what seems best."

He looked into Hwicca's eyes, and a smile he had not known was within his strength crossed face and soul. "But it will be well," he said in their own tongue. "You were ever my luck."

She lifted a fist and bit her knuckles, and Phryne led her into the cabin.

Eodan went below with an armful of weapons. He cried into the grunting, clashing, sweating gloom: "Here is what you asked me for. If you would stay alive, do not disobey me. Remain at your oars until I blow my trumpet. Then pull them in, lest they break your ribs when we strike! And come up and fight!"

No use to wonder if his scummy followers had even understood. He sped back up the ladder, shield on arm and sword in hand. The *Bona Dea* loomed like a cliff above him. He saw sunlight blink on shields and blades up on her deck.

Tjorr had spiked the boarding plank to the deck. It was elevated by two men with ropes, its claws poised to grab. Tjorr held his hammer up as he gauged the distance. "Now!" he shouted, and swung the mallet down. The two men let go, and Eodan sounded Demetrios' trumpet. The plank fell as their bow slashed across the other galley's oars. Wood crackled; a pirate looked at a foot-long

splinter hurled into his thigh and wailed. The grapple struck. Its sharpened iron bit deep. The two ships shuddered to a halt.

"*Hau!*" yelled Eodan, and went up the plank.

Two shields glided into place before him and locked. From behind the men, two pikes reached after his guts. Eodan shoved one spear aside with his own shield. The other withdrew, poised and probed in again. He battered at it with his sword. For one black instant he knew there was no way for him to get past.

"Beware, *disa*!"

Eodan heard the angry bee-buzz and ducked his head. Tjorr's whirling hammer was released. It struck a face behind one of the shields. The shield went down, its man upon it.

Eodan sprang between the two spears, into the gap. Over the rail! He stood upon the fallen man and thrust at a pike wielder. The sailor, with no metal to ward his belly, fell backward to escape. Eodan stabbed his mate. The other shield-bearer turned and attacked from the right. Tjorr reached around Eodan and put a sword in the man's neck.

Then Eodan and Tjorr were back to back upon the high deck, holding off the crew. A tall blond man, a German of some kind, ran at Eodan with a longsword uplifted. "I want that blade!" said the Cimbrian. He fell to one knee, holding the shield over his head. The German's glaive smashed down on it. Eodan cut at the German's legs, and the man staggered back. Eodan got up again and battered loose. It was no way to use a shortsword. The German limped out of reach and swung his great weapon up for a cleaving. Eodan raised his own, faster, and threw it. The German sat down, holding death in himself. Eodan darted forward, snatched up the longsword and came back to Tjorr.

The Alan, shieldless, had picked up his hammer again. He smote right-handed with it, a ringing and belling and sundering, while his left wielded his Roman blade. "Ha!" he bellowed down the boarding plank. "Are you never coming? Must I do all the work here?"

His crew hung back, seeing how whetted steel flashed around those two and blood dripped into the sea. Eodan shrieked at them over the din: "If we lose this fight, you will all go to Rome!"

A man down there hefted an ax, set his teeth and ran up the plank. The others poured after him. Quintus alone remained, with a spear. When two of the former slaves turned back, he grinned and prodded them. Only when all his shipmates

were caught up in the battle did he himself come.

Eodan, looking over a wall of helmets, considered the youth's face. By the Bull, he had just made himself second mate!

Their line split, the galley's crew surged away in clumps of men. The pirates yelped about, rushed in and out, broke past the defenders here or were hurled back there. Eodan struck down a man with a disabling blow—it was good to have a sword he really understood—and looked over the combat. It was fiercest near the mast. "There we must go, Tjorr," he said.

"Aye." The Alan trotted after him. They faced shields and edges. A few near-naked pirates yammered and waved their weapons, careful to stay beyond reach. "Follow me, you dogs!" cried Eodan. His sword whined and thundered. An Italian sailor thrust at him from behind a shield. Eodan slewed his iron around and cut the man's wrist. The metal was too blunted already to cut deep, but the bones cracked. The Italian bayed his anguish and dropped from the line. Eodan slashed at the legs of the man beside him. That one stumbled, fell and rolled from the pursuing sword. Tjorr stepped into the widening gap and struck with his hammer. The pirates, heartened, moved in. The defensive force broke up into single men.

Panting, Eodan swung himself into the shrouds. There were more wounded and slain among the ill-equipped pirates than among the merchant crew; nonetheless, fighting stayed brisk, since neither side knew how matters stood. Eodan put the trumpet to his lips and blew. Again and again he blew, until much of the battle died. An arrow grazed his arm, another thunked in his shield, but he stayed where he was and shouted:

"Hear me! Lay down your arms and your lives shall be spared. You will be set free without ransom. May Jupiter or someone strike me dead if I lie! Hear me!"

After he had harangued them a while, a shaken voice called: "How do we know you will do this, if we yield?"

"You know it will be to the death if you don't!" said Eodan. "Lay down your arms and live!"

As he returned to the deck, he heard the fight resume uncertainly. Neither side pressed too hard, now that a truce might be close. Eodan saw the graybearded pirate cutting the throat of a wounded man, in the shelter of a bollard. The oldster shrank back from him, afraid. Eodan said: "Throw that knife against my shield, as noisily as you can, and cry that you surrender to the freebooter

captain."

The fellow obeyed, given a kick to add urgency to his recital. A moment afterward, Eodan heard from across the deck: "Stop, I yield me!"

It spread like a plague. Within minutes, a disarmed crew huddled gloomily under the pikes of a few crowing pirates.

Eodan took off his helmet and wiped reddened hands on a fallen man's cloak. His tunic was plastered to him with sweat. It came as a dull surprise that the blood painting him was not his own. Just a few scratches and bruises. Well, the Powers which took all else from him gave him victory in war, a miser's payment.... He looked at the sun above the yardarm. The battle had lasted perhaps an hour. And now he held two ships.

He walked over planks grisly with the dead and the hurt. There were more of the latter, there always were, but many of them would die, too, from bleeding or inflammation. The still air quivered with their groans. He counted up. Besides himself and Tjorr, eight pirates were hale. Eleven merchant crewmen stood on their feet; but their captain had quit the world bravely. "This should cool our lads off," said the Cimbrian. "I scarcely think they will want to try piracy again."

"They can raise their numbers, *disa*," Tjorr reminded him. "There must be forty slaves below decks, at least."

"True—indeed—Well, so be it. If we can come to Egypt, I care not." Eodan looked glumly down the boarding plank to the smaller craft. "I am sick of blood. Can you set matters to rights here?"

"*Da.* I'll try not to bother you." The redbeard's look was so gentle that Eodan wondered how much he understood—surely not a great deal; it was growing upon Eodan what a reach of darkness each human soul holds for all others.

He returned to the lesser galley and cut the bonds of Flavius and Demetrios. "You can go look about," he said listlessly.

Flavius stood up. He searched Eodan's face for a long while. "It was badly done of the fates not to make you a Roman," he said at last, and left. Demetrios followed him.

Eodan sighed and went to the cabin. Hwicca and Phryne stood there. The Cimbrian girl was flushed; her breast rose and fell and she ran forward to take his hands. "I thought I saw all our folk come back in you!" she cried.

Eodan looked across her shoulder at Phryne, who stood white in the doorway. "I

begin to grasp your meaning," he said with a crooked smile. "This was no more unjust than any other war."

"Would you wash yourself?" asked the Greek girl.

He nodded. "That, and sleep."

Hwicca stepped back, her face hurt and bewildered. Eodan went past her into the cabin. Phryne brought him a sponge and a bucket of salt water. He cleansed himself and lay down on one of the mattresses. Sleep came like a blow....

He woke suddenly. Lamplight met his eyes. The air had cooled, and the ship was rocking. He heard singing and the stamp of feet, but remotely. He sat up.

Hwicca sat beside him. Her hair was loose, rushing over her shoulders so he did not at first see she wore her best gown. She hugged her knees and regarded him with troubled eyes.

"Is it night?" he asked in the Cimbric.

"Yes," she answered, very quietly. "Tjorr said not to waken you. He said he had brought order on the new ship. They released the slaves and locked up the crewmen and such of the rowers as did not want to join us. He got the wounded below decks over there—and everything—" She held out a leather bottle. "He said to give you this."

Eodan ignored it. He stepped to the door and glanced out. The grappling plank was taken down, and only ropes and a single lashed gangway joined the two vessels; the hulls rocked enough to break any stiff bridge. It was dark and empty on this ship. Torches flared on the other, bobbing in a crazy dance, hoarse voices chanted and laughter went raw under a sky of reborn wind and hurried clouds.

"What is that foolishness?" he snapped.

Hwicca came to stand at his side and look, almost frightened, at the Tartarus-view. A naked black outline, hair and beard one mane, capered against fire-glow. You could just glimpse a circle of others, leaping and kicking with hands joined around the ship's hearth.

"There was wine on board," said Hwicca.

"Oh ... oh, yes. I remember now. And Tjorr let them have the cargo?"

"He told me he could not stop them. It seemed best to grant them this night's drinking. Then tomorrow we could all take the big galley—"

"And let the crew of that one have this. Hm. It is not such a bad thought."

"You would let them go?" asked Hwicca, astonished.

"I gave them my word," he said. "And what good would it do to kill them?"

He closed the door again, muffling the racket. He picked up the leather bottle and drank thirstily. "Ah! But did they also have some food fit to eat on that ship?"

"I do not know. I prepared what I could from the stores here." Hwicca pointed to a bowl of stew. "I fear it got cold while you slept."

Eodan lowered the bottle. The roof was so low his head had to bow down to hers. "Why are you here?" he asked.

"You should not sleep unguarded." She touched the knife in her girdle. His longsword lay drawn by the wall. He realized that he was unclothed.

"Phryne could have guarded me," he said.

Hwicca reddened. "Is Phryne your wife?"

"Are you?"

She gasped and turned her back. "Well, I will go!" she cried. "If you do not wish me here, I will go!"

"Halt!" he said as she caught at the door's bolt. She stopped as though speared and turned about until she stood against the door facing him. Tears whipped down her face, and the breath rattled in her throat.

Eodan felt inwardly gouged, but he stalked to her and took her by the shoulders. "I have had enough of this," he said. "Tonight you shall decide who your man is."

"I told you I do not know!" she screamed.

Eodan slipped his hands down over her arms until he had her wrists. "You shall decide," he repeated. "And you are going to choose me."

She tried to pull free, but he dragged her to him and laid his mouth upon hers. She writhed her face away. He held her, one-handed about the waist, while his free hand drew her knife and stabbed it into the wall. Then he grasped her hair and forced her lips back where he wanted them.

Suddenly she shivered. He let her go, and she sank to her knees, holding his. He sat down and laid an arm about her waist. She came to him, weeping and

laughing. "It is you," she said. "It is you, Eodan."

Long afterward, when the lamp had gone out of itself, she whispered, "I think it must always, really, have been you."

XIII

When Phryne saw Hwicca go in to her husband and close the door behind, she felt this ship would be no place for anyone else tonight. Let her board the other one, then. She made sure that the dagger was safe in her girdle, then climbed the grappling plank.

It surged and chattered on the newly won decks. Tjorr stood huge, bawling out his orders. They had begun to release the slaves; one after another shambled into the sunlight and blinked with dull eyes. Phryne went to the Sarmatian. "Can I be of help?" she asked.

"Ha? Oh, it's you, little one. Best you keep out of harm's way. We've much to do before sunset."

"I told you I want to help, you oaf," she snapped.

Tjorr scratched in his ruddy beard. "I don't know what with. I'll not let you scrub the planks nor cook a meal. Sets a bad example, you know, we have to be officer class now. And otherwise—"

"*Aqua, aqua.*" Croaking came from the pitch-bubbling deck as though men had become frogs.

Phryne looked at one who was trying feebly to stanch blood from a half severed arm. She felt more than a little ill, but she wetted her lips and said, "I know something about the care of hurts. Let me see to the wounded."

"Waste of time," said Tjorr. "If they're not too badly cut, a swathe of rags and maybe a few stitches will save 'em. The rest it would be kinder to throw overboard."

Phryne answered slowly: "Some woman bore each of these beneath her heart once. Let me do what I can."

"As you wish. Find a place down below. I'll tell off a couple of men to bear them thither for you."

In the time that followed, Phryne had horror to do. Twice she stopped—once to cast up at a certain sight and once to change her blood-stiffened gown for a tunic. It was hot and foul in the 'tween-decks space; the groaning and gasping

seemed to fill her cosmos. Her temper began to slip—having held the hand of one youth and smiled on him, as the only lullaby she could give while he died, she heard a man screaming as though in childbirth, and, seeing he had a mere broken finger, she chased him out at dagger point. Otherwise it was to wash and bandage, cut and sew and swaddle, set and splint and fetch water, with no more help than a ship's carpenter from Galilee or some such dusty place.

She came out at last, unable to do more—now Aesculapius and Hermes Psychopompos must divide the souls as they would—and saw the sun low above a sea growing choppy. Its rays touched ragged mare's-tails that flew from the west; wind piped on the rigging. She shivered as that air flowed across her bare legs and arms, but made her way over a deck strange in its orderliness. Tjorr was looking down into an open cargo hatch.

He turned and grinned at her through tossing fiery whiskers. "We found our way into the hold," he said, "and you'd not believe this hulk could carry so much wine and stay afloat. The lads will mutiny if we don't feast tonight, and I can't say I blame 'em!"

Phryne gave the sky an unsure look. "Is that wise?"

"Oh—the weather, you mean? It'll blow a bit, but nothing that need worry us. Riding to sea anchors we'll not go far, and Demetrios says there are no places to run aground hereabouts. You look wearied enough. Go call Eodan, and we'll all have a stoup."

"He is with his wife," she said.

"Hm? Oh. Oh, I see. Well, I'll just go knock at their door with a bottle, and then they can do as they please." Tjorr's small eyes went up and down the slender shape before him. He grinned. "I don't suppose you'd be pleased to do likewise?"

She shook her head, unoffended.

"Well, I only thought I'd ask. Best stay in earshot of me tonight, though. Not all the men are so honorable as me."

"I would wash now, and have fresh raiment," said Phryne.

"Aye. Go in the cabin there. I'll have someone draw a tubful for you."

Phryne entered the captain's room, finding it better furnished than that of the smaller galley. Man's dress again, she sighed to herself, opening a clothes chest. Well, here was an outsize cloak; with the help of a brooch and belt it could almost reach her ankles, as a sort of gown.

"Hail," said a voice in the door.

Phryne stepped back with a stab of terror. Master Flavius looked at her. He carried a bucket in either hand.

"I think it amused the redbeard to have me wait on you," he said. His mouth quirked. "He has not heard that Rome has festivals every year wherein the Roman serves his own household slaves."

"But I am no more a slave!" said Phryne, as much to herself as to him. She had seen little of this man; she was bought in his absence and served his wife, whom he avoided. But he was a master, and no decent person would—But I have gone beyond decency, she thought; beyond civilization, at least. I am outlaw not only in Rome but in Rome's mother Hellas.

The knowledge was a desolation.

Flavius poured the water into a tub screwed to the floor. It slapped about with the rocking of the ship. He glanced at her, sideways. Finally he said, with a tone of smothered merriment, in flawless Greek: "My dear, you will always be a slave. Do you think because that white skin was never branded your soul escaped?"

"My fathers were free men in their own city when yours were Etruscan vassals!" she cried, stamping her foot in anger.

Flavius shrugged. "Indeed. But we are neither of us our fathers." His voice became deep, and he regarded her levelly. "I say to you, though, the slave-brand is on you. It was burned in with ... fair words on fine parchment; white columns against a summer sky; a bronze-beaked ship seen over blue waters; grave men with clean bodies and Plato on their tongues; a marching legion, where a thousand boots smite the earth as one; a lyre and a song, a jest and a kiss, among blowing roses. Oh, if the gods I do not believe in are cruel enough to grant your wish, you could give your body to some North-dweller—you could learn his hog-language and pick the lice from his hair and bear him another squalling brat every year, till they bury you toothless at forty years of age in a peat bog where it always rains. That could happen. But your soul would forever be chained by the Midworld Sea."

She said, shaking, "If you twist words about thus, then you, too, are a slave."

"Of course," he said quietly. "There are no free and unfree; we are all whirled on our way like dead leaves, from an unlikely beginning to a ludicrous end. I do not speak to you now, the sounds that come from my mouth are made by chance, flickering within the bounds of causation and natural law. Truly, we are all

slaves. The sole difference lies between the noble and the ignoble."

He folded his arms and leaned back against the jamb. "What you have done proves you are of the noble," he said. "I would manumit you if we came back to Rome—give the Senate some perjured story, if need be, to save you from the law. I would give you money and a house of your own in Greece."

"Are you trying to bribe me?" she flared.

"Perhaps. But that comes later. What I have just offered is a free gift, whether you stand by the Cimbrian or not, provided only of course that we both get back to Rome somehow. It will be a thing I do of my own accord, because we are the same kind, you and I, and it is a cursedly lonely breed of animal."

His grin flashed. "Now, to be sure, if you would like to help assure—"

She drew her knife. "Get out!" she screamed.

Flavius raised his brows, but left. Phryne slammed the door after him. A while she smote her hands together. Then, viciously, she tore off her tunic and washed herself.

Wrapped in the mantle, she emerged again. She felt calmer—on the surface; underneath was a dark clamor in an unknown language. Sundown blazed among restless clouds; the mast swayed back and forth in heaven. Tjorr sat on a barrel under the forecastle, drumming his heels as he raised a stolen chalice. Elsewhere men crowded shrieking about lashed casks, and the deck that had been bloodied was now stained purple. Phryne shivered and drew the wool closer about her. This was going to be a night where Circe reigned.

She looked aft. A small cluster of men stood together around Flavius' tall form. She recognized Demetrios, the youth Quintus, two or three others. Briefly, she was afraid. But—a few unarmed malcontents? she asked herself scornfully.

She walked forward. A locked hatch cover muffled some weird noises—what was that? Oh, to be sure, the free crew and the more timid slaves of this galley had been chained to the rowers' benches down there.

Tjorr boomed at her, "Hoy, shield maiden! Come drink with me! You've earned it!"

Phryne joined him. One man snatched after her. Tjorr tossed his hammer, casually. The man screamed and hopped about, clutching his bare toes. "Next one insults my girl gets it in the brisket," said Tjorr without rancor. "Now bring me back that maul."

Phryne accepted the cup he sloshed into the barrel for her. She held it two-handed, bracing herself against the ship's long swinging. Barbarous to drink it undiluted, she thought; but fresh water was too begrudged at sea. She looked at the hairy, squatting shapes that ringed her in and asked, "Will there not be fights that disable men we need?"

Tjorr pointed to a chest behind the barrel. "All arms save our own are in there," he said. "And here I'll sit all night. I'm not unaware of that Flavius cockroach, little one. Were I the chief, he'd have been fish food long ago."

"Is your life so much more to you than your honor?" she bridled.

"Well, I suppose not. But I've three small sons at home. The youngest was just starting to walk on his little bandy legs when I went off. And then there's my woman, too, if she's not wed another by now, and—Well, anyhow, it would be bitter to die without drinking of the Don again." Tjorr tossed off his cup and dipped it in once more.

"Where would you yourself go?" he asked.

Phryne stared eastward, where night came striding into the wind. "I do not know," she said.

"Hm? But surely—you spoke of Egypt—"

"It may be. Perhaps in Alexandria.... Leave me alone!" Phryne went from him, up the ladder and into the bow.

She huddled there a long time. No one ventured past Tjorr; she could be by herself. Down on the main deck the scene grew more wild and noisy each hour; by torch and hearth-light she glimpsed revels as though Pan the terrible had put to sea. One small corner of civilization remained, far aft below the poop, where Flavius and his comrades warmed their hands over a brazier and drank so slowly she was not certain they drank at all.

The moon seemed to fly through heaven, pale among great driving clouds. It showed fleetingly how the waters surged from the west—not very high as yet, but with foam on black waves. And the wind droned louder than before.

Phryne sat under the bulwarks and nursed her beaker, letting the wine warm her only a little. This was no time to flee her trouble. She must choose a road.

And what was there for her?

Briefly, when they had planned where to go on their newly won ship, it had

flamed up—perhaps Antinous was in Alexandria, perhaps she could find him again! Too long had he kissed her only in dreams. She hearkened back to the last time when she awoke crying his name.... She knew, then, suddenly, that she had not really seen his face in the dream. She had not done so for months. She could not even call it to mind now—it was a blur; he had had a straight nose and gray eyes and so on, but she only remembered the *words*.

Well, Time devoured all things at last, but it might have spared the ghost she bore of Antinous.

Nevertheless, she thought, she could stay in Alexandria.... No, what hope had a woman without friends? There were only the brothels; better to seek the sea's decency this very night. She could follow Eodan toward his barbarian goal, most likely to his death along the way, but suppose they did get back to this Cimberland, what then? Eodan would house her, but she would not be a useless leech on any man. And so she would merely exist, alone on the marches of the world, until finally in her need she let some brainless red youth tumble her in his hut.

She wondered drearily if Flavius had meant his offer. It was the best of an evil bargain. And if he lied—well, then she would die, and the shades did not remember this earth.

When Eodan released Flavius, she would go with him to Rome.

The decision brought peace, after so many hours of treading the same round like a blinded ox grinding wheat. Perhaps now she could sleep. It was very late. The revelry had ended. By the light of a sinking moon, glimpsed through clouds, she saw men sprawled across the deck, their cups and their bodies rolling with the ship. A few feeble voices hiccoughed some last song, but, mostly, they were all snoring to match the wind. Phryne stood up, stiff-limbed, to seek her tent on the smaller galley.

The brazier under the poop was still aglow. A dark figure crossed in front of it, and another and another. Flavius' party was retiring, too. Being sober, they would have the sense to go below to sleep. One of them had just entered the poop....

No, what was it he came back with? Torchlight shimmered on iron. A crowbar from the carpenter's kit? And there were hammers, a drawknife, even a saw. O father Zeus, weapons!

Flavius led them across the deck. The last half-dozen celebrants, seated in a ring

about a wine cask, looked up. "Well," Phryne heard, "who 'at? c'mere, old frien', c'mere f' little drink—"

Flavius struck coldly with his bar. Two hammers beat as one, *thock, thock*—like butchers, the three men stunned those who sat. Quintus cackled gleefully and began to saw a throat across. "No need!" snapped Flavius. "This way!"

Phryne threw herself to the planks. What if they had seen her? Her heart beat so wildly she feared it would burst. As though from immensely far off, she heard Flavius break the lock on the hatch and go below.

Phryne caught her lip in her teeth to hold it steady. She could just see one man standing guard on deck while the others were breaking off chains in the rowers' pit. Could he see her in turn, if she—but if she lay still, he would find her at sunrise!

Phryne inched to the ladder. Down, now. Moonlight fell on Tjorr, sprawled back against the weapon chest. His mouth was open and he was making private thunder in his nose. Phryne crouched beside him. He was too massive; her hands would not shake him enough. "Tjorr! Tjorr, it is mutiny!" she whispered. "Tjorr, wake up!"

"What's that?" A ragged, half-frightened cry from the guard. Phryne saw him against the sky, peering about.

"Uh," mumbled Tjorr. He swatted at her and rolled over.

Phryne drew her knife. The guard shaded his eyes, staring forward. "Is somebody awake there?" he called.

She put her mouth to the Alan's ear. "Wake, wake," she whispered. "You sleep yourself into Hades."

A man's head rose over the hatch coaming. "Somebody's astir up there," chattered the sentry.

"We'll go see," said the man. His burst-off chains swung from his wrists; it was the last mutiny all over again. How the gods must be laughing! Another followed him. Phryne recognized Quintus' ferret body.

"Ummmm," said Tjorr and resumed his snoring.

Phryne put her dagger point on a buttock and pushed.

"*Draush-ni-tchaka-belog!*" The Sarmatian came to his feet with a howl. "What muck-swilling misbegotten son of—Oh!" His gaze wobbled to rest on the man

running toward him. The hammer seemed to leap into his hand.

"Up!" he bawled. "Up and fight!"

Phryne dashed past him. Eodan still slept, she thought wildly; they could fall upon him unawares and kill him in his wife's arms. Behind her she heard a sound like a melon splitting open. "*Yuk-hai-saa-saa!*" chanted Tjorr. "You're next, Quintus!"

The youth ran back, almost parallel to Phryne. Men were coming from the hatch, one after the other. He saw her and shrilled: "Get that one too! It's—" He broke off, swerved and plunged toward her in silence.

Phryne put her foot on the gangway between the ships. It jerked back and forth as they rolled, and she heard ropes rubbing together. She must go all-fours over it or risk being thrown into the water between the hulls. She crouched.

A hand closed on her ankle. She felt herself being yanked back on deck. Moonlight speared through darkness as she sat up. Quintus stood over her, grasping his saw. "Lie there," he said. "Lie there or I'll take your head off!"

Phryne whipped to her knees and stabbed at his foot. He danced aside, laughing. The saw blade reached across her arm. It was no deep cut, but she cried out and dropped her knife. He kicked it away, grabbed her shoulder and hurled her onto her back. Kneeling beside her, he laid the saw teeth across her throat. "Be still, now, if you would live," he said. "I've business to finish with you."

Phryne looked into the downy face. She lifted her arms. "Oh," she said. "I am conquered."

Quintus' chin dropped. Moving carefully, so he could see what she did, she unfastened her belt. "I have never known a man like you," she breathed. "Let me get this mantle off—" She slid her hands toward the brooch at her throat. The fabric wrinkled up ahead of her arm.

"Quickly!" gasped the boy. He lifted the saw a little, it was shaking so much, and fumbled at his loincloth.

Phryne got the bundled cloak between her throat and the teeth. She stabbed him in the hand with her brooch pin. He yelled, the saw skittered from his grasp. She leaped up and onto the gangway.

Quintus yammered by the rail. A fury lifted in Phryne; she stood up in the moonlight on the bobbing, twisting plank and opened her arms. "Well," she cried, "are you man enough to follow?"

He stumbled onto the gangway. She kicked, and he fell down between the hulls. They were protected by rope bumpers from grinding together, but one lurching wall struck him as he went past. He rebounded, splashed and did not rise again.

Phryne crawled over the plank. Great Mother of Mercy, she thought, what had she done? But now it was to rouse Eodan. Up on the other ship, Tjorr stabbed and hammered, crying to his drunken followers to waken. Twenty men pressed in upon the Sarmatian, driving him back by sheer weight from the weapon chest.

Phryne beat on the cabin door. "Eodan, Hwicca, come out!" she called. "Come out before they kill you!"

It opened. The Cimbrian stood tall against blackness, armed only with a yard-long sword. Behind him Hwicca still blinked sleep from her eyes. Even in that moment, Phryne saw how fulfillment had made her beautiful.

Iron clanged in the windy moonlight. Phryne's breath choked. So they had the weapons now! Flavius was already worming over the gangplank, bearing sword and shield. Behind him came two more—the rest still raged among the befuddled pirates, it was a bestial battle—one with an ax and one with a spear. Phryne and the Cimbrians were naked.

Eodan sprang forward to meet Flavius before he crossed. The Roman stood up and pounced the last few feet. He could have been thrown into the sea, like Quintus, but the watery gods let him pass. He struck the deck, danced away from Eodan's slash and smiled.

"Come," he said, "let us end this Iliad."

Eodan snarled and moved in. He had more reach, which his blade immensely lengthened. But Flavius' shield seemed always to be where the Cimbrian blows landed—over his head, in front of his breast, even down to his knees. The battle banged and roared between those two.

Phryne and Hwicca faced the Roman's companions. The men grinned and walked in at their leisure. Phryne tried to dart aside, but the spearman thrust his shaft between her legs. She fell, and her mind seemed to burst. When she regained herself, she was prodded erect. "Over there," said the man. "Stand against the cabin wall. That's the way." He held his pike close to her breasts, ready to drive it home.

Hwicca, a long knife in her hand, circled about with the axman. She spat at him, wildcatlike. Once she tried to rush in with a stab, but his weapon yelled down and she saved herself by falling. He tried to strike again, but she got away too

swiftly.

And Eodan and Flavius fought across the deck and back, sword on shield, the Roman boring in behind his shelter and the Cimbrian holding him off with sheer battering force.

A bloody, tattered giant loomed over the rail of the other galley. Tjorr sheathed his sword in one final man, who tumbled down between the hulls. The Alan jumped onto the gangway.

The man who was guarding Phryne saw him coming. "I must deal with him," he said, not unkindly. "Farewell, girl. We'll meet beyond the Styx." He drew back his pike. Phryne had no more will or strength to dodge. She waited.

Tjorr stopped on the middle of the gangplank, braced his legs and whirled the hammer. Phryne did not see it fly; she only saw the pikeman's eyes bulge out, and when he toppled she saw his head broken open. Her knees deserted her; she sank to the deck and stared emptily at all else.

Tjorr bounded down, fell upon the axman from behind and wrenched the weapon loose. The axman kicked with a shod foot. Tjorr bellowed wrath and pain, dropped the ax and was caught in a wrestler's grip. He and the sailor went down on the deck like a pair of dogs.

Hwicca sped toward Eodan. She called out something—Phryne did not know the rough word, but surely no voice had ever held more love. As Eodan's gaze shifted toward her, Flavius stepped in close and brought the upper edge of his shield beneath Eodan's jaw. The Cimbrian lurched back, and his sword clattered from his hand. He leaned his back against the rail and shook his head like a stunned bull.

Flavius poised his blade. Hwicca flung herself across Eodan's body—and the sword struck home.

Flavius stared stupidly as she went to her knees. Eodan caught her and eased her to the deck. He did not seem aware of the Roman any longer.

Tjorr broke his opponent's neck, picked up the fallen ax and thundered toward Flavius. The Roman bounded away, up onto the gangplank. He reached the other ship and faced back; but he was masked by shadow.

Tjorr paused at the plank's foot, saw spears bristle and stayed where he was. His ax chopped and the plank's ropes parted. Now it dangled free from the higher bulwark. Tjorr ran along the rail, cleaving lines. A few arrows fell near him as he

cranked the anchor windlass. The gale caught the two ships and drove them apart.

Tjorr came back to Phryne. "If we set our canvas we can run away from 'em while they kill the last pirates," he croaked. "I see no other chance. Do you think you and I can unfurl the sail alone?"

XIV

Arpad of Trapezus, who had served ably on the warships of the King, was rewarded with a pleasant commission—to carry an ambassador and certain dispatches to Egypt. He took a lean black penteconter and a picked crew, not only to impress on his master's behalf but to return with men not hopelessly slack after a few weeks in the subtle stews of Alexandria. They passed the Bosporus with no trouble, Byzantium having recently become subject to the Kingdom of Pontus. There was a halt at the Hellespont to show diplomatic passports, for that strait was controlled by the Bithynians, who favored Rome. But since Rome was still uneasily at peace with the Pontines, who dominated the Black Sea, Arpad was obsequiously sent on his way.

Thereafter he bore south between the Aegean islands, pausing here and there to admire some temple crowning a high ridge, until he saw pirate-haunted Crete. Beyond lay open sea, but it was not excessively far to the Nile's mouths.

The Pharaoh of Egypt, who was a Macedonian by ancestry, received the captain from Pontus, who was half Persian and half Anatolian, graciously. Like all cultivated people, they spoke together in Attic Greek. During his stay Arpad found himself much in demand among the learned class; this city swarmed with as many philosophers and geographers as it did with gods and prostitutes. Pontus itself was exotic enough for several evenings' discussion—Graeco-Persian-Asiatic on the Black Sea coast, a source of timber, minerals and the fantastically lovely murrhine glass. And one had heard of its king, the great Mithradates, enthroned in his twelfth year, forced to flee the usurping schemes of mother and brother, living for years a hunter in the mountains, until he returned to wrest back his heritage. But this Mithradates Eupator had not been satisfied with one throne—no, it seemed he must have all the Orient. He skirmished and intrigued among the Cappadocians, Galatians, Armenians, until no neighbor king sat easy. He fought his way up the eastern coast and took Colchis of the Golden Fleece for his own. He hurled back the wild Scythians in the north so that the Greeks of the Cimmerian Bosporus acknowledged their rescuer as their overlord. That kingdom lay near the dark edge of the world, on a peninsula thrusting past Lake Maeotis or the Azov Sea or whatever it was called. Northward was only barbarism till you reached the night and glaciers of Ultima Thule! What could the excellent Captain Arpad tell us of his lord's Tauric provinces? Did Colchis

hold any relics of Jason's visit? Did he think war with Rome, which now held much of Asia's Aegean coast and looked greedily east, would be to the death; or would it be a civilized war where boundaries were adjusted and prisoners taken for the slave market?

Thus Arpad's stay became delightful, and he left with regret. But it was now early summer, and soon the etesian winds would make eastward sea traffic all but impossible.

By some quirk—by the ill wind of Ahriman, mumbled his sailors—they encountered a powerful west wind, a veritable gale. It blew steadily, hour upon hour and day upon day; as they wallowed north on bare poles and oars, striving to hold course and not be blown clear to Syria, the skies turned to an unseasonable overcast with chill gusts of rain. When at last he recognized the island of Rhodes, smoky blue through the squalls, Arpad decided to put in and wait out this weather.

Beating through rain and spindrift, he saw another galley. It had a sail up, recklessly, no oars out at all, the ports shuttered.... Arpad steered closer. That fool of a captain would smash himself on the beach!

Something about the stranger's unruly course told him it was badly undermanned. It had an Italian look, not much of a galley, an old trading scow but even so—Arpad sent a man up to speak with the lookout in the crow's-nest. Only three crewfolk were seen on the other deck. Two of them fought their yardarm, trying to pull it about so they would not be blown so directly toward the island. The third stood by a lashed steering oar. The ship was sluggish, low in the water, now and then a wave breaking over the side; it was slowly foundering.

Arpad considered various matters, such as the rescue of distressed mariners and the salvage rights on their vessel. "Stand by to board!" he called.

Even in these high seas, a naval crew had small trouble laying alongside and grappling fast. An armed party surrounded the three and conducted them aboard the Pontine galley. Arpad had them led to his cabin, where they stood dripping on a carpet while he removed his own wet cloak. Only then did he regard them closely.

They stood with a sort of exhausted defiance between four drawn swords. The lamp, swinging from its chains, revealed them clad in rags. But they were no ordinary sailors. There was a burly redbearded fellow, his broad battered face speaking of Sarmatian plains. There was a young woman whose figure would have been good, in the skinny Greek manner, had she not lost so much weight;

her hair was cut like a boy's and her hands were bloodied from ropes and levers. The strangest was a barbarian with yellow hair dyed a fading black and a sun symbol etched on his brow. He looked like a wild king, and yet he stood gloomily withdrawn as any desert eremite, showing no interest in who had taken him or what his fate would be.

The backs of both men had been whipped; the red one bore permanent manacle scars. Slaves, then. And doubtless the woman was, too. Their captured weapons had been laid at Arpad's feet—a rusty longsword, an ax and an iron-headed maul.

"Do you speak Greek?" asked Arpad. His Latin was limited.

"I do," said the girl. Her eyes—you didn't see violet eyes very often, and especially not with such long sooty lashes; really, it was her best feature—were hollow from weariness and wide from anxiety, but she looked on him without wavering. "What ship is this, and who are you?"

"What a way for fugitive slaves to address a Pontine noble!" exclaimed Arpad lightly. "Down on your knees and beg for your lives; that would be more in keeping."

"These men are not slaves," she said. "They are chieftains returning home."

"And you? Come, now, do not anger me. When a ship is found with only three slaves aboard, I can guess the tale for myself. Tell me your names and how it all came to be."

She said with a pride at which her exhaustion dragged: "I am merely Phryne, but I stand between Eodan of Cimberland and Tjorr of the Rukh-Ansa."

"I know *them*!" said Arpad.

"It is a long story. They were war prisoners, who regained their freedom by conquering the Roman crew—and even I have heard the King of Pontus is no friend to Rome, so is he not a friend to Rome's enemies? But the upshot was that we three alone remained on this vessel. We could do little more than set sail and run before the wind, hoping to strike a land, Crete or Cyprus or wherever the gods willed, whence we might make our way to Cimmeria. But we found two men and one woman cannot even keep a ship bailed out in such weather." She smiled tiredly. "We were debating whether to try and make landfall on that island ahead, risking shipwreck and capture if it is Roman-held, or steer past—if we could. Now you have changed the situation, Master Captain, and we throw ourselves upon your hospitality."

"What slave may claim hospitality?" asked Arpad. "And when he has mutinied, probably murdered, as well.... Would you feel bound to consider a wolf your guest?" He stroked his chin. The ship, he calculated, would surely be considered salvaged by him; the Rhodesian authorities had to have their share, but he would get something. If he did not dispute possession of the two men—the port governor could put them to work, or kill them, or give them to the Romans, whatever the law said—then the governor in turn would doubtless ignore the girl. There was a good mind under that tip-tilted face, and a hot spirit in that small thin body; she would make the rest of this voyage most interesting to Captain Arpad, and he could get a fair price at home after he had fattened her up enough for the Oriental taste.

Her pale, wet cheeks had darkened as he spoke, more with anger than fear. She rattled off a few harsh Latin words. The Alan growled and looked about. A guard's sword pricked his hairy flank; he would never cross the two yards to Arpad's throat. He said something to the tall blank-faced man, who shrugged. Mithras! Didn't that one care at all? Well, men did go crazy sometimes when the fetters were clinched.

Arpad listened more closely, interested. He heard the redbeard: "But Eodan, *disa*, they'll flay us!"

"Then thus the Powers will it," said the tall one in a dead voice.

The girl, Phryne, stamped her foot and shouted:

"I thought I followed a man! I see now it is a child! You sit like a wooden toad and will not stir a hand, even for your comrades—"

A wan wrath flickered in the cold green eyes. The one called Eodan said: "You lie. I worked my share during these past few days, to keep the ship afloat. If I did not care whether we sank or not, that is my concern."

She put her fists on her hips, glared up at him and said: "But you make it the world's concern! I understood you had suffered loss when Hwicca fell. Do you think I cannot imagine it, how it would be for me, too, did the one I cared for die in my arms? I said nothing when you made a raft for her, though we needed your help even that first day; when you laid her on it with the Roman sword and her dagger, though we needed both; when you drenched it with oil that might have nourished us; when you risked your own life to launch it and set the torch to it; and when you howled while it fell burning behind. A man must obey his own inward law, or be no man at all. But since then? I tell you, it has ceased to be your private mourning. Now you call upon the world and all the gods, by your

silence and your indifference, to witness how *you* are suffering!

"You overgrown brat! If you want to sacrifice your comrades to her ghost, do it with your hands like a man!"

Arpad signaled his guards. "Take them out and give them food and dry garments," he said. "Bind the men and bring the girl back to me."

A hand closed on Eodan's shoulder. He pushed it off, impatiently, and made a huge stride toward the captain. His lean face was taut with fury.

"Do you dare treat a Cimbrian like a slave?" he said.

"*Hoy!*" The guards closed in. Eodan's fist jumped out. One man lurched back with a smashed mouth. Another circled, unsure. Tjorr growled and reached for the hammer on the floor. The remaining two men forced him away, but had no help to spare with Eodan.

A hand gripped Arpad's tunic so he choked. The long head bent down toward his. "You little spitlicker," said Eodan, "I do not know whether to string you to the mast myself or ask your king to do it for me. But I think I shall let him have the pleasure."

Arpad shuddered and gestured his guards back, for he had seen monarchs enough, and there was no mistaking the royal manner. A king born did not act as if it were possible men could fail to knock their heads on the ground before his boots. Eodan stood unarmed, nearly naked, and shook him back and forth very slowly, in time with the words:

"Now hearken. I am Boierik's son of the Cimbri. I have a quarrel with the gods, who have treated me ill, but it does not change who I am. I have been searching for a king to hear a message I bear. Since your vessel chanced to pick me up, I will speak first to your ruler. Obey me well, and perhaps I shall forgive you for what you said in ignorance. So!"

He threw Arpad to the floor. The guardsmen stepped in, hemming him between shields and lifted blades. They glanced at their captain. Arpad stood up.

One could never be sure.... If that big man was mad, then he might be the walking voice of—of anything ... or else, there were so many outlandish tribes, a prince of one might easily have been captured and—and truly great Mithradates would be interested to meet such a person, as he was interested in all the realms of earth. The king might even bestow favor on this Eodan, some of which might then reflect on Arpad. Or perhaps the king would have Eodan beheaded; but that annoyance would surely not be considered Arpad's fault, since Arpad had only brought this visitor in the hope of amusing the king. It was not too great a risk. And, if the tall one demanded treatment as a guest meanwhile, it was not unduly inconvenient, the ambassador's cabin stood empty....

"My master, the sublime one who knows all nations, must decide this," purred Arpad. His Latin was always equal to titles. "We shall seek his august presence."

XV

The south coast of the Black Sea was good to look upon, where red cliffs and green valleys and their many streams met wine-dark waters; high overhead went summer clouds, blinding white, and thunder spoke from the Caucasus. Sinope lay on a small peninsula about halfway between Byzantium and Colchis. It was an ancient Greek colony, now become the chief seat of the Pontine kings.

Eodan stood in the bow with Phryne and Tjorr, watching the city grow as they entered its harbor, until the first loveliness of marble colonnades and many-colored gardens yielded to a tarry workaday bustle where the surface was crowded with galleys from half the East. He was well clothed in white linen tunic, blue chlamys, leather belt and sandals, the German sword polished and whetted at his waist. They had even shaved him so he could look civilized and worked the dye from his hair so he could look foreign. He wondered how that would affect his price, if Mithradates judged against him.

"Tjorr," he said, "since your folk have clashed with these before now, are you not in danger of his wrath? I have been wondering if it would not be wiser for you to stay aboard here until—"

The Alan, clad like his chief but still doggedly shaggy-faced, answered with a boy's eagerness: "From what I've heard, he is not one of those sour Romans. Why, if he has any honor at all, he will send me home laden with gifts, just because our raids kept his soldiers amused." He laid a hand on the hammer slung at his side. "Nor do I think anything can go too badly wrong while I bear this. Did we not win a ship, strike off our fetters, thwart our enemies, get pulled from the sea god's mouth and have a well-fed passage here, while I bore the Smasher? There's luck in this iron."

Eodan thought of Hwicca and his lips tightened. "It may be," he said. "Though I am unsure what that word luck means."

She had ceased to haunt him. First had been all those days when her face on the balefire came between his eyes and the world, though it had not been her, that cold white face, it was *dead*—but where then had she wandered? He would sleep for a little and wake up; a few times he woke so happily and looked about for her before remembering she was dead. But since Phryne called him to anger, with the biting unjustness of her words, he had been more nearly himself. There was a

goal again, the beech forests of the North, with sunlight snared in their crowns and a lark far and far up overhead—yes, he wanted to go back and search for his childhood, but home-coming was not what it had been in his thoughts. Hwicca would not be with him.

Well, a man sometimes lived when they cut off a hand or a leg or a hope; he fumbled on as best he could, and what he had lost hurt him on rainy nights.

Eodan shut off the awareness and turned to Phryne. "Are you certain you will not speak for us?" he asked. "Our tale is so strange already that it will add small strangeness for a woman to argue on our behalf. And you have more knowledge of this realm, and a quicker wit."

The girl smiled faintly and shook her head. She wore a white dress Arpad had gotten her, and a palla with the hood drawn up. That covered her shortened hair and made a discreet shade across her face; here in the East a woman was regarded as being much less than a man, so this garb would please by its modesty.

"I have already told you the small amount I know, and you have been clever to draw much else from the captain," she said. "Nor does it matter greatly. The knowledge we shall need is how to deal with men, and there, Eodan, you are showing more inborn gifts than any other person I have met."

He shrugged, a little puzzled as to her meaning, and watched the harbor. Small boats crawled about the galley's oars, tub-shaped coracles whose paddlers screamed their wares of fruit, wine, sausage, cheese, guidance among the brothels and other delicacies. The people of Sinope were a mixed lot. Most were dark, stocky, curly-headed, big-nosed and hairy, but not all. On the wharfs Eodan could see Armenian mountaineers with shepherds' staffs and crooked knives, a sleek Byzantine merchant, a gaily-robed warrior of pure Gallic strain, a pair of hobnailed Macedonian mercenaries, a spear-bearing man, in fur cap and white blouse and baggy trousers tucked into his boots, whom Tjorr said delightedly was an Alanic tribesman, a graybearded Jew, a lean Arab—this was not Rome, this Sinope, but it pulled in its share of the earth's people!

They docked, and Arpad led his guests—or prisoners—ashore with an escort of soldiers. Since this was an official ship, they stopped for no formalities of bribing the customs agents. A messenger ran ahead of them, and they had not reached the palace when he came back to say the king would receive them at once.

Eodan went between the shields of marching men, through the city gates and a

cobbled street of flat-roofed buildings shrieking with bazaars, where the escort clubbed a way, and at last up a hill to the palace. Heavy-armored men, with helmet and cuirass, greaves and shield, sword and spear, tramped up and down upon its walls like a moving arsenal; here and there squatted lightly clad archers holding the short Asiatic hornbow. Beneath posed a guard of Persian cavalry, tall arrogant hook-faced men, their helmets and horses magnificent with plumes, blue cloaks fluttering about scaly coats of mail, trousered legs ending in boots of silver-inlaid leather, lance in hand, ax and bow and small round shield at the saddle—"By the thunder-snake itself," muttered Tjorr, "how I'd love to sack their barracks!"

A trumpeter preceded them through bronze gates. They went over a path beside which roses flared and Grecian nymphs leaped marble out of secret bowers; they saw a fountain shaped like Hercules and the hydra, so skillfully modeled and painted that Eodan grabbed for his sword; then the stairway opened before them, with sphinxes crouched at the foot, bulls at the head and two polished soldiers rigid on every step. There Arpad's escort was told to wait. The captain himself and his three guests surrendered their weapons to the watch.

"Not this," protested Tjorr, holding his hammer. "It is my luck."

"A god, did you say?" asked the Latin-speaking guard who wanted it. He looked at his officer, unsure; there were so many gods, and some of them were touchy.

The officer shook his head. "No lesser god enters the Presence of Mithras, who is always with the king. Leave it here, fellow, you'll get it back."

"But—"

"Do as he says," Eodan broke in.

Tjorr loosed the thong, his face miserable. "I tell you, my luck is in that hammer. Well, maybe your triskele will see us through."

"Would you keep the king waiting?" puffed Arpad.

He led the way, his best robe rippling about him, up the stairs and under the red and blue columns of the portico. Slaves prostrated themselves at the doors: once only, since the king received three such salutes. They were conducted down halls of lifelike murals; Eodan saw with a thrill how often the Bull recurred, sacrificed by a youth or shaking great horns beneath a golden sun-disc. Lamps in silver chains gave a clear unwavering light. But, when finally the carpeted ways opened on an audience chamber, the sun himself came through a great glazed window behind the throne.

It was so bright that Eodan could hardly see the man upon that carven seat, except as a robe of Tyrian purple and a golden chaplet. He and his companions were held back by the door. Arpad advanced alone, between grave men—long-haired, sometimes bearded—in brilliant garments. Among them stood a few outland envoys; a turban or a shaven pig-tailed skull betokened foreignness. Around the room, motionless between soaring porphyry columns, were a guard of spearmen.

A long time passed while King Mithradates read the dispatches handed him, questioned Arpad more closely and dictated to his secretary. Eodan could not hear what was said, the courtiers made so much noise as they circulated and chattered. It would be in Greek or Persian, anyhow.

But finally the chamberlain called out something. A hush fell bit by bit, and Eodan saw eyes turn his way. He walked forward. Tjorr and Phryne came behind him; it had been arranged thus at her advice. At the ritual distance from the throne, Eodan halted. Tjorr and Phryne made obeisance, thrice knocking their heads on the carpet and then remaining crouched. Eodan merely bowed his head once upon folded hands.

He heard a sigh go around the room, like the wind before a hailstorm.

Raising his eyes, he locked gaze with Mithradates Eupator. The King of Pontus was a giant, tall as Eodan and broad as Tjorr, his hands ropy with veins and sinew like any hunts-man's. Within a mane of curly dark hair and bearded jawline, his head was nearly Greek—a wide brow, gray eyes, straight nose, rounded shaven chin; it lifted straight from the pillar of his throat. He was only in his mid-thirties, Phryne said, but he owned half this eastern sea, and Rome itself feared he might take all Asia.

"Do you not bow to the throne?" he asked, almost mildly. His Latin came as easily as any Senator's.

"My Lord," said Eodan, "I beg forgiveness if I, a stranger, have unknowingly offended. I gave to you that sign of respect we have in the North, when one of royal blood meets a greater king."

He had made it up himself the day before, but no one had to know that. He hazarded a cruel death—far safer to proclaim himself dust beneath the royal feet—but as one more humble suppliant among thousands he could not have hoped for much.

Mithradates leaned back and rubbed his chin. Curious, thought Eodan in a far

part of his being, the king's nails are blue at the base.... "My captain told me what little you would say to him," murmured the Pontine. "I trust you will be more frank with me."

"Great King," said Eodan, "I have so little to bring you I am ashamed. May you live forever! All the world lays its wealth in your hands. I can but offer the salvage price of my ship, paid at Rhodes, which Arpad insists is his. I leave to your judgment, Wise One, whether the monies do indeed belong to him, or to me who would give them as an offering to Your Majesty. But one gift at least I bring, if you will accept it—my story, what I have done since leaving my own realm, and what I have seen from Thule to Rhodes and from Dacia to Spain. Since this tale is my gift to you, I did not think it fit that Arpad, your servant, should have its maidenhead."

Mithradates opened his mouth and bellowed with laughter.

"Well, your gift is accepted," he said at last, "and I shall not be miserly myself if the tale be rich. From what country are you?"

"Cimberland, Great King."

"I have heard somewhat of the Cimbri. Indeed, one of my neighbors sent them an embassy a few years ago. Surely this will be a night's entertainment, though you humble my pride by making me hear it in Latin. Chamberlain! See to it that these three are given a suite, changes of raiment and whatever else they require." Mithradates said it in the Roman tongue, doubtless for Eodan's benefit, since he must repeat it in Greek. "Go, I will see you at the evening meal. And now, Arpad, about those monies."

"Great King of All the World," wailed Arpad, flat on his belly, "may your children people the earth! It was but that I, your most unworthy subject, thought to offer you—"

As he went to the guest chambers, Eodan asked the slave who led him—an Italian, he saw with glee—what the king had meant, that he was ashamed to hear the tale in Latin. "Know, Master," said the boy, "that our puissant lord keeps no interpreters on his own staff, for he himself speaks no fewer than two and twenty languages. You must indeed have come from far away."

The suite was as luxurious as one might have expected. Phryne said doubtfully, "We build our hopes on Vesuvius. The soil there is surpassingly rich, but sometimes the mountain buries it in fire. I will be happy if we can get from here unscathed."

"Why," said Eodan, surprised, "I would have thought you could dwell here more gladly than any place else in the world. They are a mannered folk, it seems."

"They are more alien to me, a Greek, than the Romans—or the Sarmatians—or the Cimbri." She looked out the window, down to gardens where paths twisted so a man could lose his way. "If we stay long enough, you will understand."

"It may be. Nonetheless, I have a feeling no few arts could be learned here that might take root in the North." Eodan went over to her. "Though one of the greatest could be taught me by yourself."

She turned about with an eagerness that astonished him. "What do you mean?" Her face flushed, and she lifted her hands like a small girl.

"I mean this craft of writing. Not that we would have much use for it in the North ... and yet, who knows?"

"Oh." She looked away again. "Writing. Indeed. I will teach you when the chance comes. It is not hard."

Near sundown, an obsequious eunuch informed them they would soon dine. They left Phryne to a solitary meal—women did not eat before the king—and followed him to a lesser feasting hall.

Music sounded from a twilight peristyle—flute, lyre, drum, gong, sistrum, and other instruments Eodan had not heard, yowling like cats. The diners, arrayed in their silks and fine linens, gold and silver and jewels, lay about a long table on couches, in somewhat the Grecian manner. Mithradates came last, to trumpets, and all but Eodan prostrated themselves.

There was silence. A slave brought forth a cup and knelt to offer it to the king. Mithradates looked over his half-hundred guests. "Tonight I drink hemlock, in memory of Socrates." A kind of unvoiced whisper ran about the assembly as he drained the beaker.

"Now," he said, "let the feast begin!"

Eodan, who was hungry, paid little heed to the succession of artificed viands. Cordelia had offered him enough of that; let a man be nourished on rye and beef, with a horn of ale to wash it down. He took enough mutton to fill himself and barely tasted the rest. For the hour or so in which they ate—this was no elaborate banquet, only the king's evening meal—no person spoke. Eodan did not miss the talk, and the music he ignored. The dancers were another matter. He studied the acrobatic boys closely; this or that trick could be useful in combat. When the

supple women came out with dessert and dropped one filmy garment after the next as they swayed about, he knew his hurts were scarring over. He would have traded all these for Hwicca—yes, all women who lived—but since she was gone and they were here....

Finally, with some decorum restored, there was general conversation. Mithradates talked impatiently to various self-important persons, dismissed them at last with plain relief and roared the length of the table: "Cimbrian! Now let us hear that tale you promised!"

Eodan followed his beckoning arm, to lie beside the king himself. Envious eyes trailed him. Not everyone listened—the whole room buzzed with talk—but he was as glad of that. He had not wished to make the Cimbrian destiny a night's idle amusement; but to this gray-eyed man, himself a warrior, it was fitting to relate what Boierik had done.

Now and again Mithradates broke in with a question. "Is it true that sky and sea run into one up there, as Pytheas has written?... How high does the sun stand at midsummer?... Do they know of any poisons? This is a self-preserving interest of mine—too many kings have died of a subtle drink. I take a little each day, so that now they cannot harm me, neither hemlock nor arsenicum nor nightshade nor—But continue."

The lamps burned low; slaves stole about filling them with fresh oil. Eodan's throat hoarsened; he drank one cup of wine after another, until his head buzzed like all summer's bees in a clover meadow in Jutland.... Mithradates matched him, goblet for goblet, though the king's was larger, and showed no sign of it.

And at last Eodan said: "Then your ship found us and brought us hither. So it may be the gods have ended their feud with me."

"That Ahriman has," corrected Mithradates, "but he is the common enemy of all men and—Could it be, I wonder, that the Bull in whose sign you wandered the world was the same that bleeds upon the altars of the Mystery? But enough." His hand cracked down on Eodan's shoulder, and he raised his cup, clashing it against the Cimbrian's. "What a journey!" he cried. "What a journey!"

"I thank Your Majesty. But it has not ended yet."

"Are you certain?" Mithradates looked at him, with gravity falling like a veil. "I wonder if you are not too much a man to be flung back on any northward wind. Would you like to fight Rome?"

Eodan answered harshly, "There is blood of my blood on their hands. I count it

defeat that I shall not meet the man Flavius again. I will set up a horse skull in the North and curse him, but it is not enough."

"Your chance could come," said Mithradates. "There will be war between Rome and Pontus. Not yet, not for some years, but it is brewing, and it will be pitiless. I shall need good officers."

"I have not the skills, Great King," said Eodan.

"You could learn them, I think. See here. This very month I am leading an expedition against the Tectosages. Their tetrarch has been a thorn in my side since I took Galatian territory. We have had border skirmishes, and all the Gallic cantons lean toward Rome and intrigue against me. They must learn who is master. It will not be a great war—an outright conquest would alarm the Romans too much at this stage of things—only a punitive expedition. But the fighting will be brisk and the booty sufficient. I would like to have you and your Alanic friend in my following. I think you could serve me well, and you would gain in both wealth and knowledge."

"I should be honored, Great King," said Eodan. One did not refuse such an offer, and indeed it could be profitable. And to ride a war-horse again!

"So be it. We shall talk further. Now, hm, did you say your Grecian girl was a maiden and wishes to remain so? *I* would not stand for it! *I* took it for granted, till you related otherwise, that you two held her in common."

"She lifted me from slavery, Lord. It is a small thing to repay her."

"Well, as you wish. If she is indeed learned, she can tutor the younger children of palace officials." Mithradates grinned. "Meanwhile, you and the Alan have certain needs. I take it you both prefer women?" He beckoned his secretary and gave orders.

Morning was not far off when Eodan and Tjorr entered their room, none too steadily. A maidservant accompanying them woke Phryne, who came from her chamber wrapped in a mantle. Her eyes were dark in the lamp-glow. "What has happened?" she asked.

"Much," said Eodan. "It is well for us. But now you shall have a private room, and a servant of your own."

"Why—" Phryne's look turned forlorn. It fell on a couch in the corner and on the two who sat there. Long gowns and demure veils did not hide what they were.

She grew white. She stamped her foot and cried out, "You could have let your

wife grow cold in death before this!"

Eodan, weary, startled by her rage, snapped back: "What good would it be for her ghost if I remained less than a man, just because you are less than a woman?"

Phryne drew her mantle over her face and departed.

Eodan stared after her, tasting his own words poisonous on his tongue. But it was too late now—was it not? The slave girl came over to him, knelt and pressed his hand to her forehead. He saw through the thin silk that she was young and fair of shape.

He said in an ashen tone, "The King is kind."

"*Da*," muttered Tjorr. "But I know not, I know not. All this we gained when my hammer was elsewhere. I wonder how much luck is in such gifts."

XVI

Summer had burned hot on the Asiatic uplands, but winter would be very cold. The day after he left the city Ancyra, Eodan felt the wind search through clothes and flesh toward his bones. Overhead the sky was leaden, with a dirty wrack flying beneath it. Dust smoked off harvested fields. There were not many of these; the rest was wild brown pasture, cut by tiny streams and bare hills. He was on the edge of the Axylon, the vast treeless plateau running south to Lycaonia, with little more sign of man than some sheep and goat herds.

He wrapped his cloak more tightly about him and thought of autumn gold and scarlet in Jutland, where forests roared on long ridges. Why had three Gallic tribes left such a country, nearly two hundred years ago, and wandered hither?

But so they had, conquering Cappadocians and Phrygians until a new nation stood forth around the Halys. They let the natives farm and trade as ever, save for taxes and a share in the crop. The invaders rooted their three tribes in separate parts of the country, each divided into four cantons with a chief and a judge above it; a great council imagined it guided the entirety. Mithradates had remarked once it was no mean feat to combine so carefully the worst features of a monarchy and a republic. The Gauls shunned cities, holding to fortified villages clustered around the castles of chiefs. There they practiced the skills of war, heard their bards and Druids, remained in fact—under all the proud trumpets—a wistful fragment of the North.

"Maybe the Powers were not so unkind after all," said Eodan. "It might have been worse for the Cimbri had they overcome Rome."

Tjorr shook his head, puzzled. "You are a strange one, *disa*," he said. "Half of what you speak these days I do not understand at all."

They trotted on southward, into the wind off the high plains. Some miles ahead lay the Pontine army, where Mithradates was getting ready to march home. The lancers who jingled after Eodan and Tjorr were a detachment sent to fetch certain hostages, who would assure the behavior of Ancyra's Phrygians as well as of the Tectosagic overlords. Eodan had recognized the commission, small though it was, as a mark of royal favor. For himself, he was chiefly pleased that the Greek he had been studying as chance offered was now good enough to serve him. He could not live in Asia without learning its universal second language.

Tjorr glanced complacently at his own outfit. Like the Cimbrian, he wore the garb of a Persian cavalry officer, though he had added thereto a treasure of golden bracelets. "This has been a good war," he said. "We have seen new lands and new folk, done some lively fighting—ha, do you remember how we attacked them at the river, drove them into its waters and fought them there? And those castles we won were stuffed with plunder!"

"I saw them," replied Eodan shortly.

He did not know why his mood should be so gray. It had indeed been a fine campaign, and he had learned more about war and leadership than he could reckon up—much of it simply from watching Mithradates, who was a noble chief to follow and often a good mirthful restless-minded friend to converse with. The battles had gone well—one could forget the unforgotten during a few clangorous hours of charge and fight and pursuit—until the Tectosages yielded the terms and indemnities demanded. He, Eodan, had been granted enough booty to pay the expenses of Sinope's court; now his own star could follow that of Mithradates until both, perhaps, lit all the Orient sky.

Nevertheless, winter lay in his soul, and he rode to his King without gladness.

Tjorr went on, eagerly: "The best of it is, we've not to garrison here in winter. Back to Sinope! Or Trapezus? There's a city! Do you remember how we stopped there?" It had been politic to march eastward first, entering Galatia through the country of the Trocmi, who had already been subdued; for Rome watched jealously the stump of independent Paphlagonia that lay between Sinope and Ancyra.

Eodan smiled one-sidedly. "I remember how you hired a bawdyhouse just for yourself."

"Oh, I invited my friends, of course. A pity the King wished to talk geography or astronomy or whatever it was with you that night. Still, we've picked up some nice wenches here and there, not so?" Tjorr sighed in reminiscence. "Ah, Satalu! She was as sweet and bouncy as a stack of new-mown clover. Not that I say anything against my concubine in Sinope, though I may buy another one or two for variety." He rubbed the hammer at his side. "There's luck in this old maul, I tell you. Maybe even something of the lightning."

Eodan's thoughts drifted pastward. Perhaps his forebodings were no more than a recollection—now, when he was not too hurried to consider it—of how the captured Galatians had stumbled in clanking lines, north to the slave markets of Pontus.

Or it might be a certain aloneness. Phryne had not understood—maybe no woman could understand—how a man was driven to one after another, by the ruthless force of the Bull, merely so that he could sleep afterward ... when the only one he truly wanted had dwindled to a small burning star on a windy sea. Wherefore Phryne had coldly avoided him. In the bustle of an army that made ready to go, he had found no chance to seek her out and gain back a friendship he missed; there was little privacy in an Eastern palace. He contented himself with making certain she would have an honorable, paid position in the household.

Could I write, he thought, my words would have reached her during these months. But since I lack that great witchcraft, I was only able to make sacrifices, hoping the gods would bring her a dream of me.

He had offered to many powerful gods: Cimberland's Bull, who was also in some way Moon and Sun, and Hertha the Earth Mother, whom they called Cybele down here; even Jupiter and the fork-tongued thunder-snake that Tjorr invoked. He would have given Mithras precedence, that being the favored god of Pontus, but the king explained it was forbidden to call on him unless one had been initiated into his mysteries. And thereafter: "But you can be instructed this winter, when we have come home, and I myself will stand as your sponsor. For our hearts are much alike, Eodan."

The Cimbrian was ready enough to go under the banner of Mithras, who was not only strong but consoling. He had been born of a virgin through the grace of Ahura-Mazda the Good, that all his followers might live in heaven after death—which seemed a better fate than that granted the puzzled quiet shades of the Greeks. Perhaps Mithras could even call Hwicca back from the night wind, though Eodan dared not hope it. The god's midwinter birthday was a cheerful occasion, where men feasted and exchanged gifts. One day, when evil Ahriman rose up for a last onslaught, all those warriors whom Mithras had been guesting in heaven would ride with him to battle.

Eodan thought sometimes that the North might welcome such a god, more humanly brave than the dark, nearly formless wild Powers of earth and sky. But it seemed unsure that he would ever again see the North.

"There, now! Shall we enter in the horseman's manner?"

Eodan looked up, blinking to awareness. The camp was in view, not very far ahead. "Indeed," he said, wondering where the time had gone. It was mid-afternoon. He signaled his trumpeter, and the call rang out, cold and brassy in the

gray cold light; the wind made it ragged. But the troopers raised their lances and smote with their spurs. As one, they came a-gallop under streaming flags, through the tents and a burned village to the castle walls.

Eodan jumped to the ground and flung his reins at a groom. The captain of the watch saluted him before the gates. "Let it be known," said Eodan, "that the Cimbrian has returned from Ancyra as ordered and will see the king when the king pleases. May the king live forever!"

After quartering the hostages, he walked toward his own tent. There was much he did not like in Asia, he reflected, and this crawling before the high, in both words and flesh, was not the least. Mithradates deserved respect, yes, but a man was not a dog. Nor was a woman an animal, to be kept for breeding or pleasure alone. A few months of giggling Eastern wenches had shown Eodan how sheer tedium could drive so many men to catamites. He thought of Phryne, born a slave, less chained in her soul than the High Queen of Pontus. It is better in the North, he thought, overwhelmed by his earliest years. They are still free folk on Jutland's moors.

"Master!"

Eodan paused before his tent. Tjorr, who had just left him, returned quickly. A slave bent his knee to him. "Master, the great king would see the Cimbrian at once."

"What?" Eodan looked down at his mail, flowing trousers, spurred boots and flapping red cloak—all dulled with dust. Well, Mithradates was a soldier, too. "I come."

"What might it be?" asked Tjorr, pacing him as he hurried back under the grassy earth wall. "Has something happened?"

"Surely it has," said Eodan, "or the king would allow me a rest and a bite to eat first."

"Maybe a new war has begun somewhere?"

Eodan grinned with a sour humor. "We're not so important, you and I, that we're summoned in person to plan the royal strategy. I think this concerns us—me, at least—alone."

He paused at the castle gate to surrender his longsword. Tjorr scowled unhappily. "I shall wait here," he said. "Perhaps my hammer will fend off bad luck."

Eodan said, with the bleakness of wind and treeless uplands taking him, "I think our luck has already passed these doors and is waiting inside."

He crossed a flagged courtyard, where guardsmen drilled among the lesser buildings. The keep was a gloomy stone hall, sod-roofed and galleried. Beyond its entryroom was a long feasting chamber, where Mithradates had established his court. Fires burning in pits along the rush-strewn dirt floor gave some warmth, though not all their fumes went out the smokeholes. The king had added charcoal braziers and had hung his lamps from captured swords thrust into wooden pillars carved with gods. He sat in the canton chief's high seat, which was shaped like the lap of stag-horned Cernunnos. A robe of Sarmatian sable and African leopard warmed Mithradates' huge frame; his golden chaplet caught the unsure light like a looted halo. Around the room gleamed his unmoving hoplites; a few courtiers and some mustached Gauls huddled at one end, where a boy plucked an unheeded lyre.

Eodan put his helmet under his arm, strode to the king and bowed to one knee—a special favor, granted for his blood of Boierik. "What does My Lord wish from his servant?"

"Stand, Cimbrian." Eodan saw a troubled look on the heavy face. "Today there came an embassy." Mithradates leaned toward a runner who crouched under the secretary's feet. "Bring them in."

Eodan waited. The king said slowly: "You have been welcome at court and camp—not for your knowledge and tales of far places, though they delighted many hours of mine; not for your sword, though it has sung me a gallant song; but for something that is yourself. Whatsoever may happen, Eodan, remember what has been between us. The gods themselves cannot take away the past."

A door at the far end was flung wide. Two came through it.

One was a man in a toga; Eodan could not see his countenance by the dim unrestful light. But even through a long, hooded mantle he would know the shape and gait of the other. His blood pulsed with a quick unreasonable gladness; he forgot himself in the king's presence and ran toward her with his hands outstretched. "Phryne!" he cried. Reaching her, he grasped her by the elbows and looked down into the pale heart-shaped face and said in his lame Greek: "Now I can tell you with your homeland's speech how I have missed you."

"Eodan—" She shivered violently, as if winter had come with her all the way down from the north. "Eodan, my only gift to you is woe."

He raised his eyes, most carefully, and looked upon Gnaeus Valerius Flavius.

Eodan howled. He sprang back, snatching for his sword, but the empty belt mocked him. The Roman lifted an arm. "*Ave*," he said. His closed-mouth smile creased cheeks grown gaunt; Eodan could see how the bones stood forth in his face.

Eodan remembered the king, motionless on the knees of a conquered god. He choked back his breath; one by one easing muscles that had stiffened to leap at a certain throat, he wheeled and marched to the high seat and prostrated himself thrice.

"Great King whose glory lights the world," he said thickly, returning to the Latin he could best use, "forgive your slave. This Roman slew my wife. Give him to me, lord of all the earth, and I will afterward eat that fire for your amusement if you wish."

Mithradates leaned back. He considered Flavius, who saluted him with no more respect than a high-born Roman was allowed to show any foreign despot. Lastly his glance fell upon Phryne, kissing the floor beside Eodan.

"Who is that?" he asked. Then, with a sudden chuckle of pure pleasure—the laughter of a little boy shown some wholly unawaited novelty—"Why, it is the Greek girl who fled with the two men. This I was not told. Rise, both of you. Woman, explain your arrival here."

Eodan stood up. His jaws were clenched so they ached. He looked across a few feet at Flavius—no, he would not look—he shifted his eyes to Phryne. She stood before the king, her bowed head shielding her face, and said in Greek:

"Merciful Monarch, I am no one, only a slave girl named Phryne, who escaped from Rome with the Cimbrian and is now free by your grace. May the sun never set upon you. As the King has heard, this Roman came to Sinope with armed escort, saying he had a commission to bring back the Cimbrian. When he learned that Your Majesty was being served by the Cimbrian down here, he arranged for horses and rode with Pontine guides—for who would leave a Roman unwatched?—through Paphlagonia and Galatia to find you. It went as a diplomatic party, but its purpose is hostile, that the King may be deprived of the Cimbrian's services. All this I was told through the household. Some of Your Majesty's favor has come down to me; Your Majesty made rich gifts to all our party when we arrived, though I was not summoned to thank you. And then there were my earnings, and some gifts from the parents of children I instructed. With all this I was able to buy a strong eunuch to guard me. The captain of the Pontine

escort kindly allowed me, on my plea, to accompany them—"

"Did you have that much money, besides the slave's price?" asked Mithradates dryly.

"I was to give him my eunuch when we reached the King's camp," whispered Phryne.

"And be alone and penniless among soldiers?" Mithradates clicked his tongue. "Cimbrian, you have a loyal friend indeed. I did not believe any woman capable of it."

He leaned forward. "Come here, Phryne. Stand before me." His hand reached out, throwing back her hood, then reaching for her chin to tilt her face up to his. Eodan saw how the blue-back hair had grown in the summer—still too short but softly gathered above a slim neck—yes, she was surely a woman!

"Why was I not told about you before now?" murmured the king.

Flavius said with a tone that gibed at Eodan: "Your Majesty, she would not speak to me all the trip, but when she found herself—as Your Majesty phrased it—alone and penniless among soldiers, with no way into the royal presence, it entertained me, as I hoped it might entertain Your Majesty, to offer her help and protection which she must accept. It was at my expressed desire that she was allowed to wait outside with me." He raised his shoulders and his brows. "Of course, it might have been more amusing to see what she would have tried to gain admittance. A woman is never quite penniless; she has always one commodity—"

Mithradates held Phryne's head, watching the blood and the helpless anger rise in her. Finally he released the girl. "The Flavius misunderstood me," he said. "We shall let you speak your case, Phryne." He nodded toward Eodan. "However, that the Cimbrian may know your mission, Roman, state it first."

Flavius' head lifted, as though on a spear shaft. His tone rang out, with more depth and harshness than Eodan had yet heard from him:

"Your Majesty, this barbarian and his associates are more than runaway slaves. They have murdered free men, even citizens. There is a wise Roman law that orders that if a slave kills his owner, then all the slaves of that owner must die. How else shall free men, and their wives and daughters, be safe?"

"No writ runs here but mine," said Mithradates calmly.

"Your Majesty," pursued Flavius, "the Cimbrian and his allies did still worse.

They committed piracy. And that is an offense against the law of all nations."

"I have heard this tale," said Mithradates. "I feel it was more an act of war than of piracy." His teeth gleamed in the same child's delight as before. "But, if you are the very man whom the Cimbrian overcame, tell me your story. What happened on that other vessel?"

"We destroyed his mutineers, Great King, and rowed to Achaea, whence I returned overland as fast as horses would bear me. When the facts of this outrage were laid before the Senate, it was decided that the Cimbrian must be punished, did not Neptune strike him down first? But not until lately did intelligence reach me, who had been given charge of the hunt, that these outlaws had insinuated themselves into Your Majesty's grace. I came at once, to free your majesty of such odious creatures. Now—"

"Enough." Mithradates turned to Phryne. "Well, girl, what is it you wished so badly to say to me?"

She might have fallen at his feet; but she stood before him like a visiting queen. Her tones fell soft: "Great King, I would do no more than plead for the lives of two brave men. My own does not matter."

"For that," said Mithradates, "I shall surely never let you go."

Flavius said with a devouring bitterness: "Your Majesty, the Senate of Rome does not feel this female slave is of great importance, nor even the Alanic barbarian. It is not recommended to Your Majesty that you leave them alive, but I feel the King will soon discover that for himself. However, the Cimbrian, ringleader and evil genius of them all, must be done away with. We would prefer he die in Rome, but otherwise he must die here. I have already presented Your Majesty with the written consular decree of the Republic. May I say to the Great King, in the friendliest spirit, knowing that a word to the wise is sufficient—should I return with this decree unfulfilled, the Senate may be forced to reckon it a cause for war."

XVII

"You bid me surrender a guest, who has fought well for me to boot," Mithradates said gravely. And then, with an imp's grin: "Also, I doubt the reality of your threat. If the Cimbri were all like this one, Europe must still be too shaken to go adventuring in the East. Ten years hence, perhaps ... but no one would hazard so rich a province as Pergamum just to capture a man. I have read your official documents, Flavius, and they convey nothing but a strong request."

"Great King, it was never my intention to threaten," answered the Roman with a smooth quickness. "Forgive clumsy words. We are blunt folk in the Republic. But of course the King understands that the Senate and the people of Rome will welcome so vital a token of a most powerful and splendid monarch's good will toward them. I am authorized to make a small material symbol of the state's gratitude, to the amount of—"

"I have seen what the bribe would be," said Mithradates. "We shall discuss all this at leisure tonight." His gaze flickering between Eodan and Flavius, he chuckled deeply. "There will be a feast at which you two old friends may reminisce. In the meantime, I forbid violence between you. Now I have work to do. You may go."

Eodan backed out, taking Phryne's arm at the door. "Come to my tent," he said. "You should not have been so reckless as to travel hither."

"I would not hold back from you even the littlest help," she whispered. She caught at his cloak, and her tone became shrill. "Eodan, will he give you up to them?"

"I hardly think so," said the Cimbrian. Bitterness swelled in his throat. "But neither will he give Flavius up to me!"

They started across the courtyard, and the wind snatched at their mantles. Eodan looked back and saw Flavius emerging from the keep.

"Wait," he said to Phryne. "There are things I would talk about that no one else has a right to hear."

"You will disappoint the king," she said in an acrid voice. "He is looking forward to the subtlest gladiatorial contest."

Eodan strode from her. Flavius wrapped his toga more closely against the cold bluster of the air. He smiled, raising his brows, and stood waiting; his dark curly hair fluttered. But somehow no youth or merriment were left in him.

"Will you be kind enough to assault me?" he asked.

"I am not a fool," grunted Eodan.

"No, not in such respects.... Since your life hangs now on the king's pleasure, you will heel to his lightest whim like any well-trained dog." Flavius spoke quietly, choosing each word beforehand. "Thus it is seen—he who is born to be a slave will always be a slave."

Eodan held onto his soul with both hands. At last he got out: "I will meet you somewhere beyond the power of both Rome and Pontus."

Flavius skinned his teeth in a grin. "Your destruction is more important to me than the dubious pleasures of single combat."

"You are afraid, then," said Eodan. "You only fight women."

Flavius clenched his free hand. His whittled face congealed, he said in a flat voice: "I cannot help but smite those women whom you forever make your shields. Now it is a Greek slave girl. How many more have you crawled behind, even before you debauched my wife?"

"I went through a door that stood unbarred to all," fleered Eodan.

"Like unto like. Will it console you to know, Cimbrian, that she has divorced me? For she grows great with no child of mine, a brat I would surely drown were it dropped in my house."

Eodan felt a dull pleasure. This was no decent way to hurt an enemy, yet what other way did he have? "So now your hopes for the consulate are broken," he said. "That much service have I done Rome."

"Not so," Flavius told him. "For I allowed the divorce in an amicable way, not raising the charges of adultery I might. Thus her father is grateful to me." He nodded. "There are troublous years coming. The plebs riot and the patricians fall out with each other. I shall rise high enough in the confusion so that I will have power to proscribe your bastard."

It had never occurred to Eodan before, to think about the by-blow of his women. He had set Hwicca's Othrik upon his knee and named him heir, but otherwise—Now, far down under the seething in him, he knew a tenderness. He could find

no good reason for it; there was a Power here. He would have chanced Mithradates' wrath and broken the neck of Flavius, merely to save an unborn child, little and lonely in the dark, whom he would never see. But no, those guardsmen drilling beneath the walls would seize him before he finished the task.

He asked in a sort of wonder: "Is this why you pursue me?"

"I bear the commission of the Republic."

"The king spoke truly—they are not that interested in one man. This decree is a gesture to please you, belike through your father-in-law. You are the one who has made it his life's work to destroy me."

"Well, then, if you wish, I am revenging Cordelia," said Flavius. His eyes shifted with a curious unease.

"I spared you at Arausio. And what was Cordelia to you, ever?"

"So now you call up the past and whine for your life."

"Oh, no," said Eodan softly. "I thank all the high gods that we meet again. For you killed my Hwicca."

"*I* did?" cried Flavius. His skin was chalky. "Now the gods would shatter you, did they exist!"

"Your sword struck her down," said Eodan.

"After you flung her upon it!" shrieked Flavius. "You are her murderer and none but you! I have heard enough of your filth!"

He whirled and almost ran. Phryne, small and solitary at the gate, flinched aside from him. He vanished.

Eodan stood for a while staring after the Roman. It came to him finally, like a voice from elsewhere: So that is why he must hate me. He also loved Hwicca, in his own way. Indeed the soul of man is a forest at night.

He thought coldly, It is well. Now I can be certain that Flavius will never depart my track until one of us has died.

Phryne joined him as he left. As they went mutely from the castle, Tjorr rushed up to them. "There are Romans come!" he bawled. "A dozen Roman soldiers in camp.... I'd swear I saw Flavius himself go by.... Phryne! *You* are here!"

"Have you any further information?" asked the girl sweetly.

They walked toward Eodan's tent, and she explained to the Alan what had happened. Tjorr gripped his hammer. "By the thunder," he said, "it was well done of you! But what help did you think you could give us?"

"I did not know," she answered unsteadily, "nor am I certain yet. A word, perhaps ... one more voice to plead, with a flattering abasement impossible to Eodan ... or some scheme—I could not stay away."

Tjorr looked at the Cimbrian's unheeding back. "Be not angry with him if he shows you cold thanks," he said. "There has been a blackness in him of late, and this cannot have lightened it."

"He has already rewarded me beyond measure," she said, "by the way he greeted me."

They entered the tent. Eodan slumped on a heap of skins and wrapped solitude about himself. After some low-voiced talk with Phryne, it occurred to Tjorr to take her out and show her to his and Eodan's personal guards, grooms and other attendants. "She is not to be insulted. Obey her as you would obey me. Any who behaves otherwise, I'll break his head. D'you hear?"

When they came back it was approaching sunset. Eodan was sitting before a small pile of silks, linens and ornaments. "A slave brought these for you, Phryne," he said. "The king commands your presence at his feast."

"The king!" She stared bewildered. "What would the king with me?"

"Be not afraid," said Eodan. "He is only cruel to his enemies."

Tjorr's eyes glittered. "But this is wonderful!" he cried. "Girl, your fortune may be made! I'll get a female to help you dress—"

When she had gone he muttered, "She did not appear overly glad of the king's favor."

"She is too frightened on our behalf," said Eodan.

"Do you think she has good reason to fear?"

"I do not know—nor care, if I can only lay hands on Flavius."

As twilight fell, an escort of torchbearers came to bring them to the castle. Entering the feasting hall, Eodan saw it aglow with lamps. Some attempt to make it worthy of the king was shown by plundered robes strewn on the floor; musicians stood in the murk under the god-pillars and caterwauled. It was no large banquet Mithradates gave this night—couches for a score of his officers,

with Eodan on his right and Tjorr beyond him, Flavius on the left. Cimbrian and Alan wore Persian dress, to defy the plain white tunic of the Roman. The rest clad their Anatolian bodies in Greek style, save that the king had thrown a purple robe over his wide shoulders.

Eodan greeted Mithradates and the nobles as always, and reclined himself stiffly. The king helped himself to fruit from a crystal bowl. "Never before has this place known such an assembly of the great," he declared with sardonic sententiousness. "And yet our chief guest has not been summoned."

"Who might that be, Lord of the World?" asked a Pontine.

"It is not our custom that women dine with men," said Mithradates. "We feel it a corruption of older and manlier ways." That was a malicious dart at Flavius, thought Eodan. "Yet all you nobles would consider it no insult to guest a queen; and many philosophers assure us that royalty is a matter of the spirit rather than of birth."

"Though the Great King shows that when spirit and birth unite, royalty comes near godhood," said an officer with practiced readiness.

"I am therefore pleased to present to you all a veritable Atalanta—or an Amazon princess—or even an Athena, wise as well as valiant. Let Phryne of Hellas stand forth!"

She walked from the inner door, urged by a chamberlain. Her garb was dazzling—long lustrous gown and flowing silken mantle, her hair and throat and arms a barbaric blaze of finery. It came as a wrenching in Eodan that she should look so unhappy. She advanced with downcast eyes and prostrated herself.

"No—up, up!" boomed Mithradates. "The King would have you share his place."

Eodan heard a muffled snicker at the table's end. Blood beat thickly in his temples; what right had some Asiatic to laugh at a Greek? His eyes ranged in search of the man, to deal with him later. By the time he looked back, Phryne had reclined beside Mithradates on the royal couch.

"Know," said the ruler in his customary Greek, "she spent her last wealth and risked life, freedom and honor to journey here from Sinope that she might plead the case of her comrades. And before then she had shared the perils of flight from Rome and battle at sea—and she is learned enough to instruct the children of noblemen. Therefore I say a queen's heart lies behind those fair breasts, and it shall have a queen's honor. Drink, Phryne!"

He took up his huge silver chalice and gave it to her with his own hands. A low, envious gasp sighed down the length of the table.

Phryne lifted her decorous veil to put the cup at her lips. "Ha, ha!" shouted Mithradates. "See, she is beautiful as well! Let the feast begin!"

It was no banquet at all, compared to the least meal in Sinope—little more than a roast ox and several kinds of fowl, stuffed with rice and olives. No acrobats or trained women being available, some young Gauls offered a perilous sword dance, and a Phrygian wizard showed such tricks as releasing doves from an empty box. Thus Tjorr enjoyed it better than any he had attended before; his guffaws rang between the guardsmen's shields until even Flavius had to smile a little. Eodan hardly noticed what passed his eyes and teeth; he was too aware of the Roman.

When the meal was at last over, an expectant silence fell. Mithradates leaned toward Flavius. "Your account of your adventures was ungraciously curt today," he said smiling. "Now we would hear more fully. You can be no ordinary man, who so endangered the Cimbrian."

"Your Majesty flatters me," said Flavius. "I am a most ordinary Roman."

"Then you flatter your state. Though you belittled it earlier, in contending that one man might be so great a danger to it."

"Would not Your Majesty alone be the greatest danger to us, were we so unfortunate as to lose your good will?"

"Ha! Let it not be said your race makes poor courtiers. Your compliments are only less polished than the orations in which you describe your own bluffness." Mithradates drained his chalice and set it down; at once a slave refilled it. His gaze went from Flavius to Eodan and Tjorr, and back to Phryne. "Surely there is a purpose here," he mused. "Lives are not often so entangled. I must take care to reach a decision that will accord with the will of the Most High."

Eodan sat up. "My Lord," he said raggedly, "give weapons to us two, or our bare hands, and watch who heaven favors!"

Mithradates murmured thoughtfully: "I have heard you speak of yourself, Eodan, as a man whom the gods hate."

"For once he spoke truth, Your Majesty," said Flavius. "It would be an impiety if —if I, at least, suffered him to live."

"Would you meet him in single combat, then?" asked Mithradates.

"It is an uncouth German custom, Your Majesty," said Flavius. "It is not worthy of a civilized man."

"You have not answered my question."

"Well ... I would meet him, Great King, if there were no better way."

Eodan sprang to his feet. "At once!" he yelled.

"Give me my hammer, and I'll take care of his following!" said Tjorr.

Phryne sat up on the couch. "No!" she gasped.

"Back!" cried Mithradates. His face was flushed with the wine; he drained a second cup in three gulps. "Back, lie down—I cannot have this. You are both my guests!"

The room grew very quiet, until only the crackling fires and the heavy breathing of men had voice. And outside the wind prowled under the walls.

"This may not be," said the king finally. "I am a civilized man, too. Let the world be sure I am no barbarian. We shall settle this dispute by reason and principle. Hear me and obey!"

"The King has spoken," came whispers from around the long room.

"These people sought my roof," said Mithradates, "and it was granted them to stay. They are under my protection."

"The hospitality of Your Majesty is known throughout the world," said Flavius. "But no guest may remain forever. Dismiss them from your presence, Great Lord, and I will wait for them outside your borders."

"You have not yet given me a reason to send them away," Mithradates told him.

"Your Majesty," said Flavius, becoming grave, "I have charged them with revolt, murder, theft and piracy. They are foes of civilization itself, and the Roman state is certain that all civilized men will recognize that fact. Let me tell the King a tale.

"At their request, the Cimbri sent an embassy to Rome while they were still in Gaul. Their terms were refused, of course—should we allow wild men within our borders?—but they were shown about the city. Has the King heard what they thought most wonderful? The feed bags on dray-horses! It is truth I tell. They could not take their eyes off; they laughed like children. They were also shown that Grecian statue called the Shepherd, which the King has surely heard is one

of our greatest treasures, the image of an old man with all the tragedy and dignity of age upon him. The wondered why anyone had troubled to picture a slave so old and lame as to be worthless!"

Flavius leaned forward, gesturing, his orator's voice filling the hall with richness and warmth. "Great King, beyond our realms are the barbarians, the howling folk without law or knowledge. We have thrilled at your exploits when you broke the Scythians; there you served Rome, Your Majesty, even as Rome served Pontus on the Raudian plain. Our fore-fathers were not the same, Great King: yours were Persian shahs and mine were Latin freeholders. But the same mother bore us—Hellas—and we honor her alike." He pointed at Eodan. "There he sits—the enemy—who would stable his horses in the Parthenon and kindle a fire with Homer. It is more that I hunt than this one barbarian, O Protector of the Greeks. It is barbarism itself."

Stillness fell again. Mithradates drained another cup. Eodan crouched, waiting for he knew not what. The king looked at him. "What have you to say to that?" he asked.

Eodan thought dimly, I might play upon his honor, as Flavius did on his pride. I daresay he would allow me to remain in Pontus the rest of my life, did I show him a scar or two won in his service. But I am a Cimbrian.

He said heavily, in his rough Greek: "I ask no more than the rights of a man, My Lord."

"A barbarian is not a man!" snarled Flavius.

Mithradates shifted the weight on his elbow till he stared down at Phryne. "Well," he said, "we have one pure Hellene here. What does she think?"

"A Greekling slave!" exclaimed Flavius. "The King jests. He knows a slave is even less a person than a barbarian."

Phryne sat up and flung at him: "You were a better man's slave after Arausio. You needed the whole Roman army to make him yours in turn. Must we raise ancestors from Hades? Well, then, where were yours when mine fought at Salamis?"

Mithradates put on a frown. "*Mine* were in Persian ships," he said.

"Yet now you are called the protector of the Greeks," she answered promptly. He grinned. "Great King, who deserved better of you—the man who freed even one little Greek, or the man whose people laid Corinth waste?"

"I cannot believe you are at feud with all the gods, Eodan," said Mithradates. "At least one must love you, to send you so fair an advocate."

He sprawled lionlike, turning his maned head toward Flavius. "These people are still of my household," he said. "Let no man do them harm. The King has spoken."

Eodan's heart lifted, however somberly, as Flavius bent his stiff neck. "I hear and obey, Your Majesty," he mumbled.

"Well," said Mithradates, his solemnity leaping to become genial, "remain a while. Accompany us back to Sinope. There is much I would ask of you, and you shall not go home empty-handed. Now fill all flagons and drink with me!"

Phryne stared at Eodan a moment. Then her face sank into her hands.

"But what is the matter?" said the King. "You have won your cause, girl."

"Forgive me, Lord. That is why I weep."

"Come, drink of my cup. Those eyes are too beautiful to redden."

She accepted, shakily. Tjorr plucked at Eodan's sleeve. "We seem to've escaped that snare," he muttered. "Now we'll have to devise one for Flavius."

Eodan glanced across at the Roman, who was shaking in rage but somehow achieving mannered discourse with a Pontine officer. "Hm. Perhaps the King will let me pursue him when he departs.... No, I fear not, it would be an open act of war. It may be I shall have to wait until there is actual war with Rome." His fingers strained crooked upon the cushions. "Give it be otherwise!"

"Make not too free with such wishes," cautioned Tjorr. "They are often granted, in ways we mortals did not look for."

Eodan drank deep, as it was one means of easing the hate and the hurt within himself. He saw Flavius do likewise. Mithradates was in conversation with Phryne; none dared interrupt him. Eodan drifted about, playing some pachisi with one man—he played badly tonight—and talking of cavalry tactics with another. Time went.

He heard Mithradates at last, when the deep voice crashed through all the babble around: "Come with me now."

He swung about, suddenly cold. The king was standing up. Phryne had risen, too; her hands were lifted, and behind her thin veil he saw horror.

"What does My Lord mean?" she said, almost wildly.

Mithradates threw back his head and bellowed laughter. "You cannot be that much a maiden," he whooped. "They only raise them like that in Asia, for a novelty."

She sank to her knees, so that his bulk loomed up in shadow and she was only a little heap of gaily colored clothes before him. "Great King, I am not worthy," she stammered.

"What the skulls and bones is this?" muttered Tjorr at Eodan's ear. "Her luck has found her and she won't go with it!"

The Cimbrian's gaze swept the hall. Most of the court was too drunk to heed the byplay; a few watched with lickerish interest. Flavius stood under a pillar, grinning.

Truly, thought Eodan in the darkness of his head, some god had rewarded Phryne. A royal concubine was rich and honored; it was by no means impossible to become a royal wife; and Mithradates, they said, was man enough to satisfy all his harem. The Cimbrian took a step forward, feeling his skin prickle. He grew aware that his hand felt after a sword he did not have.

Phryne, huddled at the king's feet, looked sideways. Her look met Eodan's; it was black with ruin. He glided toward her, hardly knowing what he did. Phryne shook her head at him, and he jerked to a halt. O Bull of the Cimbri, what Power used his limbs tonight?

"You have shown yourself well worthy," said Mithradates on an impatient note. "Rise and come."

Perhaps only Eodan saw her lips tighten. She beat her head on the floor. "Lord, forgive your slave. The Moon forbids me."

"Oh. Oh, indeed." Mithradates stepped back, a primitive unease on his face. "You should have told me that earlier."

"I was too bedazzled by My Lord," she said. Her regained wit bespoke some resolution taken. Eodan wondered with a chill what it had been.

"Well ... rise." Mithradates stooped for her hand and pulled her up as if she were weightless. She stood trembling before him. "A week hence, my tent will be decked with kings' robes for you," he said. "In the meantime, you shall have a tent and servants of your own, and ride in the Tetrarch's litter."

"Great King," she whispered—had Eodan not been close, he would not have heard it—"if your handmaiden should in any way be displeasing to you ... should somehow wrong Her Lord ... you will not hold it the fault of her friends? They knew nothing of me save that I waited in Sinope to do the King's will, even as they wish only to do it."

"Indeed," said Mithradates roughly. "I am no fool. And have I not raised my shield above them?" He clapped his hands. "Let the chamberlain see to her well-being. Find me a couple of Gallic girls for tonight."

Phryne went past Eodan. She threw him only the quickest of glances, but never had he seen a look more lonely. The hurried whisper drifted to him: "Do not be troubled on my account. I do what is best. Make your own way in the world."

He stared after her. The Power drained from him, he felt tired and empty. He heard Tjorr rumble answer to Mithradates: "No, Lord, I'm sure she's not one of these women who hate the touch of men, even if she has stayed maiden uncommonly late. Haw! On the contrary, Lord, the man she likes will have enough to do!"

"I thought so myself," said Mithradates. "It is a good omen, that she was kept for me alone."

It went through Eodan like a sickness—they dared speak thus of his oath-sister! He would have challenged the king himself if—if—An exile ate bitter bread. He had only changed one slavery for another.

XVIII

In the morning, after a few dark hours of wakefulness or nightmare—he was unsure which—Eodan rose to take up his officer's duties. The Pontines would start home at dawn the next day; though the army itself could have struck camp in an hour, its train of plunder, captives and tribute was something else. Eodan was glad enough to lose himself in a whirl of horses. Now and then he glimpsed the Romans, fully armed before their little resting place—no more than a decury, and yet they had crossed half Asia to make a demand upon the king in his host. It came to him, even in his anger, that he was honored to have one child who would be Roman.

This day was also cold and blustering. Dust flew about his boots, up into his eyes and nose and gullet; the clash of iron and brass had a somehow wintry sound. Up over the Axylon bulked monstrous blue-black clouds with rain or snow in their bellies, but the earth remained mummy-dry. Tent canvas cracked in the wind.

About mid-morning Eodan saw a royal runner weave between the mules whose roundup he was overseeing. He thought nothing of it until the boy plucked at his foot. Then he looked down from the saddle and heard: "Master Captain, the king commands your instant attendance."

"I hear and obey," said Eodan's training. He snapped an order to a younger horseman to continue the task and trotted through the scurry of the camp. Inwardly he felt a tightening. What would the ruler want of him now?

When he yielded his sword he felt wholly alone. He had not even a mail-coat today, only dirt-streaked tunic and breeches in the Persian manner, a plumed helmet to mark his rank. The guards at the gate squinted against wind and dust, making their faces somehow inhuman. Eodan crossed the courtyard and entered the keep.

The hall was nearly empty; one never thought of the rigid troopers around the walls, of the secretary with tablet and stylus or the runners crouched at his feet. Mithradates paced before a fire-pit, where flame welled up. He himself was Persian clad; a ruby upon his brow gleamed like a red third eye. He wore a dagger at his hip; from time to time he half drew it and then snicked it back into the sheath as though into an enemy's heart.

Eodan advanced until he caught the royal glance and made his usual obeisance.

"Down on your face, barbarian!" roared Mithradates.

That was no moment to haggle about pride. Eodan threw himself flat. "How have I offended My Lord?" The upsurge of his own wrath came to him as a shock. He had thought this man was his friend.

"Where is the woman Phryne?" the voice thundered over his head.

Eodan leaped to his feet. "Is she gone?" he shouted.

"I gave you no command to rise," growled Mithradates.

"Is she gone?" yelled the Cimbrian again, out of a feeling that fire had touched him.

Mithradates stared at him for a long while. Slowly, the king's visage softened. "Then you do not know?" he asked quietly.

"By my father's ghost, Lord, I swear I do not."

"Hear, then. Her maids entered her tent this morning to help her arise. She was not there. The eunuch on guard says he knows nothing. I believe him, though he shall still drink poison for his stupidity, and be pardoned only if my new antidote saves him. There was a hole in the tent, at the rear; she must have slashed it with a knife among her possessions. When word of this finally came to me, I had inquiries made. An under-groom of your own, Cimbrian, says she came to him in the night, demanding horses, clothing, arms and food, and rode off. He says he had received orders to give her whatever she wished without question."

"That is true, Great King, but—I never thought—I never—Why would she have gone, whose destiny had just blossomed?"

"And into the Axylon! She was last seen riding south on the road into the Axylon!"

"Surely there is witchcraft here," said Eodan. "She never showed any sign of madness, Lord. An evil spirit must have seized her, or some spell—"

Inwardly, coldly, his mind raced and dodged, like a hare with wolves behind. He did not know what might haunt these dreary plains; perhaps she was indeed harried out by a troll. He was thinly surprised that he did not cower at the thought, as once he would have done, but wished only to find that creature and sink iron into it. Yet maybe she had done this of her own will, for some reason unknown to him. He found it hard to imagine his cool Phryne, who knew what

the stars were made of, seized by some misshapen Phrygian shadow; or was it just that he dared not imagine it?

Whatever the truth, he wanted to go after her himself. No yapping Asiatics would carry her back in ropes to the king's bed. It was not meet!

Eodan's green gaze narrowed upon Mithradates. He saw the terrors of a thousand generations, who had muttered in dark huts and brewed magic against a world they peopled with demons, flit over the lion-face. Let him dissect as many criminals and cast as many learned horoscopes as he wished; Mithradates remained only half a Greek.

"They deal in black arts here," said the king. His finger traced a sign against evil, the Cross of Light that stood on the banners of Mithras. "I'll hale the wizard we saw up onto a rack before this hour is out."

A scheme sprang into Eodan's head. His heart leaped with it.

"Or the Romans?" he said.

"What? No, their law forbids magic."

"I have seen much Roman law broken by Romans, Great Master. Also, this may not be sorcery after all; it may be some trick of theirs."

Mithradates whirled on a runner. "Bring me the Flavius," he rapped.

Thereafter he paced, up and down, up and down; the only noise being his boots thudding, the fire that hissed in the pits and the wind whining outside. There was much smoke in the hall today; it stung tears from Eodan's eyes.

He thought back to the night before ... how small she had been, under the tower which was the king ... and why had she been so afraid that his displeasure with her might be visited on her comrades? When the king tired of a concubine, even if she had only been with him one night, he did not rage about it. He always had enough women. He gave her to some noble, as a special mark of favor, and of course the noble would never be anything but gentle toward such a token. Usually he made her his chief wife. So Phryne's luck had come golden to roost on her shoulder, by the mere fact of a royal command to bed.

Yet she had looked upon Eodan with desolation. And she had thrown him a final furtive word, not to trouble himself about her, for she would do what was best.

He thought, stiffening: It was so little to her liking, to enter a harem, that she rode forth alone. Out there is a land of wolf, bear, lynx and herdsmen wilder than

they; south are Lycaonia and Parthia, where a woman is also only an animal. If she is not slain along the way, there will come a time when she must turn her dagger against herself.

Flavius entered. "Hail, King of the East," he said. He saw Eodan and stopped. The Cimbrian remained unmoving.

Flavius bit his lip. Then: "How may I serve Your Majesty?"

"You can tell me what you know of Phryne's vanishing," spat Mithradates.

"What?" Flavius took a step backward. His eyes flickered to Eodan, then returned—and suddenly a faint smile quivered upon his mouth.

"I know nothing, Lord," he murmured. "Yet I would venture that she fled in the night?"

"It is so told," Mithradates answered. "Is this any work of yours?"

"Of course not, Great King! I suggest—"

"He *says* it was not caused by him," snapped Eodan. "Yet My Master knows he was never a friend to me or mine. Nor is Rome itself a friend of Pontus. What better way to harm us all at one blow?"

Flavius looked at Mithradates, who rumbled like a beast in the arena. Then, slowly, the Roman's ruddy-brown eyes sought Eodan's, held them and would not let go. "This was your plan to strike at me, was it not?" he murmured.

"I know nothing of it!" shouted Eodan. "I only know—"

Flavius shook his head, smiling. "Cimbrian, Cimbrian, you have laid down your natural weapons and tried a womanish trick. You will gain no victory with it. There is never any luck in demeaning oneself."

Eodan sought for words, but he found only a black mist of his rage and fear. And of his shame—that he should have tried to use Phryne's plight as a dagger in a Roman back. Yes, he thought, shaken, I have called down evil upon myself and now I must somehow endure what comes.

Flavius turned back to Mithradates. He flung out speech as crisp as though to an army: "Great King, you are insulted by so clumsy an attempt at dividing me from your royal favor. Is it not likelier that this man, who knows the girl—we have only his word and hers that she is even a maiden—this man plotted with her to flee? Surely she had more chance to conspire with him and his friend than me; the caravan master who brought us here from Sinope will testify that she

shunned me the whole trip, whereas she was in Eodan's tent yesterday afternoon. And would she go out into that desert with no hope of succor? Would she not assure herself of an accomplice, a captain who could ride out from the army whenever and wherever he wished—to bring her food, protection, ultimately to smuggle her back?"

Mithradates hunched his thick frame. His knuckles stood forth white on the knife hilt; he glared with three red eyes at Eodan and hawked out: "What have you to say?"

"That I serve the King and this Roman does not," answered the Cimbrian frantically.

He felt himself driven back by Flavius' marching phrases: "Protector of the East, there is a simple explanation for what has occurred. Rather, there are two. First, the barbarian and the Greekling feared what would happen when you, their master, learned she had lied to you and was only the leavings of a runaway slave. Thus he sent her out and will try to lead her back in the wake of the army; she may live with him, disguised, in Sinope itself; or conceivably he lured her forth with some such promise, murdered and buried her. Second, it is possible that he himself speaks truth for once, and it was her decision alone to flee. Like unto like—she, a slave born, would rather lie with some Phrygian goatherd than with the King!"

Mithradates bellowed, as though he had been speared. He seized a lamp, broke its chains with a jerk and hurled it into the fire-pit. When his working face came under Eodan's eyes, the Cimbrian knew where he had seen such a look before—in small children, about to scream from uncontrollable rage.

"She will follow that lamp into the flames," said the Pontine. It was almost a groan.

"The Roman lies!" Eodan stalked toward Flavius, raising his hands. The worn eagle face waited for him with a smile of mastery. "I will tear out his throat!"

Remembering himself, he turned about and cried: "We do not know it was not witchcraft, Lord."

Mithradates swallowed hard. He beat a fist into his palm, walked back and forth under the twisted Celtic gods and, inch by inch, drew a cover across his wrath. Finally his giant striding halted. He searched Eodan's countenance somberly and asked, "Will you swear, by all which is holy to you, you have never known her body, and this is no work of yours?"

"I swear it, My King," said Eodan.

"A barbarian's word," jeered Flavius.

"Be still!" crashed the voice of Mithradates. "I know this man."

Then for a while longer he brooded. "Or does any man know another, or even himself?" he asked the wooden gods.

Decision hardened over the moltenness in him. "Well," he said heavily, "it seems that she went because of something in her own will, or an enchantment. In neither case is she a fit vessel for royal seed. Let the Axylon have her."

Eodan's muscles began to ease. He thought, in a remote part of himself: Flavius turned my own foolishness against me, but perhaps Phryne left her good genius here to watch. For now it has all become as she must have wished—herself riding off unpursued and no disfavor caused Tjorr or me.

"She is only another female, after all," said Mithradates. "I could send men to fetch her back and let her die an example, but it is unworthy of a civilized man."

"She would doubtless kill herself when your riders came in view, Your Majesty," said Flavius. "Unless, of course, the barbarian here were sent after her—"

"Would you truly split him from me?" croaked Mithradates. Sweat studded his face; Eodan knew suddenly what a combat the king was waging in himself. "Go, both of you!"

"At once, Your Majesty," said Flavius. "The Lord of the East is wise, knowing that if she fled in rebelliousness she will be most amply punished. A herdsman who spied her from afar would know how to stalk her and pounce unsuspected." He bowed a little toward Eodan. "If the King permits one more word from me, I should like to withdraw my hints as to treason by the barbarian. It is clear that he has abandoned the girl to the Axylon. So if ever he did conspire with her, he is now aware of his rightful duty toward his true benefactor."

The fires burned higher in the king's eyes. His tone cracked the barest trifle: "So. Let neither Cimbrian nor Alan leave the army, even for minutes, until we come home." His lips writhed upward. "It is not that I doubt your oath, Eodan—" But you do, mourned a thought through the Cimbrian's upsurging wrath, you do! Flavius knows well how to sow dragon's teeth—"merely to silence tongues."

Eodan saw Flavius waver; the hall and its grinning gods became unreal. He threw back his head to howl.

And then everything drained from him. He stood empty of anger, or hate, or even sorrow. There was only a road, with night at its end, and the knowledge that he must walk it or cease to be himself.

"Lord," he said, "let your servant depart."

Mithradates started. "What do you mean?"

"I was honored to serve the Great King, but it cannot be any more. Let me go out upon the Axylon."

Flavius caught a gasp between his teeth. Mithradates drew his knife in a hand that shook. The slaves at the room's end cowered back into shadow; some half-sensed ripple went along the lines of guardsmen, and all their eyes swung inward toward Eodan.

"I must thank the Roman," he went on. "I would have let her die out there, or worse than die. He showed me my shame. I am not certain why she is gone: it may be a spell cast on her or it may be of her own choosing, for some reason I do not understand. But she watched over me while I slept among foemen. I cannot offer her less now than my own help."

"You—would bring her back—here?" Mithradates said it with a stubbornness that dug in its heels. He would not believe anything else. "Well, perhaps so—"

"With the Alan kept hostage for his return, Your Majesty," put in Flavius.

Eodan shook his head. "Tjorr has nothing to do with this, My Lord. That is why I ask leave to depart the King's service. I do not think it likely Phryne wishes to return hither."

"And you would set her will above mine?" asked Mithradates in a stunned voice.

"What I would like," said Eodan, "is that you give her freely into my hands, so that I could bring her back here and let her do or not do whatever she wished. But I have no art of wheedling; I ask merely for a dismissal."

"You will get your head on a gatepost!" exclaimed Flavius in a blaze of victory.

Mithradates stood stooped, his breath rattling in his lungs. His head swung back and forth, as though he were a bull looking for a man to gore.

Suddenly he leaped forward, and his knife flashed. Eodan stepped aside. The knife struck a pillar, drove in and snapped off short. "Guards!" bellowed the king. "Seize this traitor!"

Eodan stood quietly. Hands fell upon him, spears touched his ribs. He glanced at Flavius. The Roman laughed aloud, bent close while Mithradates screamed and shredded his cloak, and whispered, "Did you think, you fool, he would let you go? You have all but said before his household, Phryne left because she would not be taken by him. You insulted more than the king's majesty, you insulted his manhood!"

"I knew what I said," Eodan answered.

Mithradates raged up, flung Flavius and a guardsman aside, and smote the Cimbrian's face with his hand.

Eodan shook a ringing head, licked the blood that ran from his mouth and said in Greek, "I did not know it was the custom of civilized men to strike a guest."

Mithradates fell back as though from a sword thrust.

Then for a while he paced, snarling and mewing. Flavius began to talk, but a lion roar silenced him. "Wine!" said the King at last. A slave hurried up with a flagon. Mithradates snatched it, kicked the kneeling man in the stomach, drained the cup and crumpled its heavy silver between his fingers.

"Another," he commanded.

It was brought him. He drank it with more care. He flung himself onto the high seat, slumped for a while, looked up into the darkness above the rafters and finally began to laugh. It was a raw, barking laugh, with little humor, but at the end he stood up and spoke calmly.

"Release him," he said. The guards fell back, and Eodan waited. Mithradates folded his arms. "After this," he continued, almost in a light tone, "you will not care to stay. It is a delicate question whether you are my guest, my soldier or my slave, but civilized people must be generous. Let the Cimbrian take the horse, the arms and the monies he got from me. Let him ride off wherever he wishes, so he come not back to this army." The wind piped around the hall; the fire-pits roared. "Well, begone!" cried Mithradates.

Eodan bent his knee and backed out, as though he were leaving on some royal errand. And would the Powers it were so, he thought dully, knowing a wound took hours to feel pain.

He heard Flavius say, in a voice that quivered: "Great King, will you also let this guest depart?"

As if from immensely far away, the voice of Mithradates came: "There is a

destiny here. I would stand in its way if I dared—but I am only a man, even I.... Tomorrow at dawn, when we march north, you may quit the camp." An animal scream: "Now leave my eyes! All of you! Every man in here, leave the King to himself!"

They streamed out, almost running, terror written beneath the bright helmets; for the king sat at a heathen god's feet and wept.

Eodan saw Flavius stalk toward his own tent. They exchanged no words. He went to his place, clapped for a groom and donned his Persian war-garb. A saddled gray stallion was led forth. Eodan sprang upon it and trotted quickly from camp.

He would follow the highway south, hoping for a sign.

An hour afterward, when the Pontine army was only smoke on a gray horizon, he saw the dust cloud behind. It neared, until he could see the black horse that raised it, and finally he heard the drumbeat of its hoofs—and Tjorr's red beard flaunted itself in the wind.

"Whoof!" said the Alan, pulling up alongside him. "You might have waited."

Eodan cried aloud, "It was not needful. You should have stayed where your luck was."

"No—now, what luck would come to a man that forsook his oaths?" said Tjorr. "I was weary of Pontus anyhow. Now we will surely drink of my Don again."

XIX

"Since gossip brought you the tale so swiftly," Eodan said, "you must also have heard the Romans will be after us at dawn tomorrow. They have money, and the Gauls here favor them; they'll hire guides, dogs and a string of remounts."

"I have hunted and been hunted on plains before now," replied Tjorr. "A flock of sheep to confuse the scent, a trackless waste as soon as we leave this road—Oh, we can race them all the way to Parthia with good hope of winning."

"But that is what we may not do, and why you had best return before the King learns of your absence. I left only on Phryne's account. I shall have to find her before undertaking such a trip, and it may consume all the time between me and the pursuit."

Tjorr cocked an eye at him knowingly. Eodan felt his wind-beaten face grow hot. He said angrily, "She is my oath-sister. Did she think I would forget what that means?"

"*Da*," nodded the Alan, "or she would have given herself to Mithradates with no fuss." He squinted down the rutted dirt road, which wound among boulders and sere grass until it lost itself in stormy black clouds. "Now our task is to trail her, and she would have made herself hard to trail. We can only follow this, I think, till we come on someone who's seen a boyish-looking horse archer go by ... for thus I take it she equipped herself."

"So my groom told me, and he was too frightened to make up a lie. Come, then!"

They jingled through unspeaking hours.

At day's end they passed a goatherd in a stinking wool tunic and knitted Phrygian cap. He gave them a sullen look and mumbled his own language, which they did not understand, through greasy whiskers. Eodan felt grimness. Bad enough to be entering wilds where few if any could speak with him; but this was also a land where the half-Persian warriors had made themselves hated. He thought, as darkly and coldly as the whistling twilight, that Flavius might well overhaul him tomorrow before he had any word of Phryne. He might be wholly doomed; the gods feared proud men.

Well, if such was his destiny, he would give no god the pleasure of seeing him

writhe under it.

"*Ho-ah!*" cried Tjorr.

Eodan looked up from his thoughts. The Alan pointed westward, where a single dirty-red streak beneath steel and smoke colors marked sunset. "A horse out there," he said. Eodan spied the beast; it was trotting wearily north over the plain.

Horror stood up in him and screamed. He clamped back an answer of his own, struck spurs into his mount and left the highway. The wind snapped his cloak and tried to pull him from his seat. Once his horse stumbled on a rock, unseen in the gloom, but he kept the saddle, swaying lightly to help the animal muscles that flowed between his knees. And so he drew up to the other horse.

It was a chestnut gelding with silvered harness; a light ax was sheathed at the saddlebow—thus did the riders of Pontus equip themselves. The beast shivered in the heartless wind; its tail streamed, but the mane was sweat-plastered to a sunken neck. Worn out, it groped a way back toward the king.

Eodan felt as if the heart had been cut from him, leaving only a hollowness that bled. "Hers," he said.

"None else," said Tjorr. "A lone alien, with arms and armor worth ten years of a shepherd's work ... a sling ... and the steed bolted—" He looked down upon his useless hands. "I am sorry, my sister."

Eodan let her horse go. He began to follow the way it had come, as nearly as he could judge. He would not leave Phryne's bones to whiten on this plain. Surely the gods cared for her, if not for him. They would lead him to her and grant him the time to make a pyre and a cairn and to howl over her.

Dusk thickened. After some part of an hour, he heard a furtive scuttering in the grass. He rode after it, and a naked man squeaked forlornly and dodged from him. It was a Phrygian, wholly bare; he had not even a staff, but he clutched something to his breast as he ran. Eodan drew rein and watched him go.

"What happened to him?" asked Tjorr, clasping his hammer; for this was an uncanny thing to meet on a treeless autumnal plain at nightfall.

"I do not know," said Eodan. "Robbers—the same who killed Phryne?—or some trolldom, perhaps, for we are in no good country. We cannot speak with that man, so best we leave him alone to his weird."

They trotted on. But it grew too dark to see, and Eodan would not risk passing

by his oath-sister. In the morning the kites would show him from afar where she lay. Then the Romans would come, and he would stand by her grave and fight till they slew him.

"I would like a fire," said Tjorr. He fumbled in the murk, caring for his horse. "The night-gangers would stay away."

"They will anyhow," Eodan told him. "It is not fated that we should be devoured by witch-beasts."

Tjorr said, with awe heavy in his tones: "I will believe that. You are something more than a man tonight."

"I am a man with a goal," said Eodan. "Nothing else."

"That is enough," said Tjorr. "It is more than I could bear to be. I dare not touch you before dawn."

Eodan rolled himself into the saddle blanket, put his head on his wadded cloak and lay in cold, streaming darkness. The earth felt sick, yearning for rain, and the rain was withheld. He wondered if some of the lightning Tjorr called on had indeed been locked up in the hammer. When they died tomorrow, the rain might come; or perhaps, thought Eodan, the first snow, for he is the rain but I am the winter.

I am the wind.

He lay listening to himself blow across the earth, in darkness, in darkness, with the unrestful slain Cimbri rushing through the sky behind him. He searched all these evil plains for Phryne; the whole night became his search for Phryne's ghost. There were many skulls strewn in the long dead grasses, for this land was very old. But none of them was hers, and none of them could tell him anything of her; they only gave him back his own empty whistling. He searched further, up over the Caucasus glaciers and then down to a sea that roared under his lash, until finally he came riding past a bloody-breasted hound, through sounding caves to the gates of hell; hoofs rang hollow as he circled hell, calling Phryne's name, but there was no answer. Though he shook his spear beneath black walls, no one stirred, no one spoke, even the echoes died. So he knew that hell was dead, it had long ago been deserted; and he rode back to the upper world feeling loneliness horrible within him. And centuries had passed while he was gone. It was spring again. He rode by the grave mound of a warrior named Eodan, which stood out on the edge of the world where the wind was forever blowing; and on the sheltered side he saw a little coltsfoot bloom, the first flower of spring.

Then he rested with gladness. The earth turned beneath him; he heard its cold creaking among a blaze of stars. Winter came again, and summer, and winter once more, unendingly. But he had seen a coltsfoot growing....

"There is light enough now."

Eodan opened his eyes. The gale had slackened, he saw. The air felt a little warmer, and the wind had a wet smell to it. Southward, the world was altogether murk. It must be snowing there, he thought dreamily. The wind would bring the snow here before evening. Strange that the first snow this year should come from the south. But then, perhaps the land climbed more slowly than the eye could see ... yes, surely it did, for he had heard that the Taurus Mountains lay in that direction.

"The Mountains of the Bull," he said. "It may be an omen."

"What do you mean?" Tjorr was a blocky shadow in the wan half-light, squatting with a loaf of bread in his hands.

"We must cross the Mountains of the Bull to reach Parthia."

"If we live that long," grunted the Alan. He ripped off a chunk of bread, touched it with his hammer and threw it out into the dark. Perhaps some god or sprite or whatever lived here would accept the sacrifice.

"That is uncertain," agreed Eodan. He shivered and rolled out of his blanket. "Best we be on our way. The enemy will start at sunrise."

Tjorr regarded him carefully. "You are a man again," he said. "A mortal, I mean. You are no more beyond hope, and thus not beyond the fear of losing that hope. What happened?"

"Phryne lives," said Eodan.

Tjorr reached for a leather wine bottle and poured out a sizable libation. "I would name the god this is for, if you will tell me who sent you that vision," he said.

"I do not know," said Eodan. "It might have been only myself. But I thought of Phryne, who is wise and has too much life in her to yield it up needlessly. She would have known that one Pontine soldier, on a single jaded horse, would invite a race between robbers and Romans. But who heeds a wandering Phrygian, some workless shepherd?" He laughed aloud, softly. "Do you understand? She stopped that man we saw—at arrow point, I would guess—and made him lay down all his garments. She could make her wish clear by gestures. Doubtless she flung him a coin; I remember how he held something near his heart. When he had fled,

she rode on until her horse was too tired to be of use. Then she buried her archer's outfit, taking merely the bow and a knife, I suppose, and went on afoot."

Tjorr whooped. "Do you think so? Aye, aye—it must be! Well, let's saddle our nags and catch her!" He ran after his own hobbled animal. When he had brought it back, he looked at Eodan for a moment in a very curious way.

"I am not so sure the witch-power I felt last night has left you, *disa*," he murmured. "Or that it ever will."

"I have no arts of the mage," snapped Eodan. "I only think."

"I have a feeling that to think is a witchcraft mightier than all others. Will you remember old Tjorr when they begin to sacrifice to you?"

"You prattle like a baby. To horse!"

They moved briskly through the quickening light, Eodan ripping wolfishly at a sausage as he rode. Now Flavius was going forth to hunt. The Cimbrian would need strength this day.

The brown grass whispered; here and there a leafless bush clawed in an agony of wind. Mile after mile the sun, hidden by low-flying gray, touched the Axylon, until finally Eodan and Tjorr rode in the full great circle of the horizon. A hunter could see far in this land.

They spied a sheep flock, larger than most, but spent no time on its watchers. Phryne would be able to see at a distance, too; the need was to come within eye-range of her. Close beyond, Eodan discerned what must be the home of the owner or tenant or whoever dwelt here. It was better than usual, being not of mud, but was still only a small stone house—windowless, surely with just one room, blowing smoke from a flat sod roof. There were a couple of rude little outbuildings, also of moss-chinked boulders, and some haystacks. Nothing else broke the emptiness, and nothing moved but a half-savage dog. The women and children must be huddled terrified behind their door as the gleaming mail-coats rode by. Eodan felt a sudden hurt; it was so strange to him he had to think a while before he recognized it—yes, pity. How many human lives, throughout the boundless earth and time, were merely such a squalid desolation?

A king, he thought, was rightfully more than power. He should be law. Yes, and a bringer of all goodly arts; a just man, who tamed wild folk more with his law than his spear—though he was also the one who taught them how to make war when war was needed—so far as the jealous gods allowed, a king should be freedom.

And afterward, he thought wryly, when the king was dead, the people would bring back all the reeking past in his now holy name. But no, not quite all of it. Doubtless men slid back two steps for every three they made; nevertheless, that third step endured, and it was the king's.

Phryne could show me how, he thought.

As if in answer, he saw the little figure rise from the bush where it had lain concealed. Dwarfed by hundreds of yards, she came running in her Phrygian goatskin and rags; but Eodan's gray horse hammered those yards away, and he leaped from the saddle and caught her to him.

She held him close, weeping on his cold steel coat. "It was not what I wanted, that you should come. It was not what I wanted."

"It was what I wanted," he said. He raised her chin until he could smile down into her violet eyes. "I will hear no reproaches. Enough that I found you."

"I shall never run from you again," she said. "Where you make your home, there shall Hellas be."

Hoofs clumped at their backs. Tjorr coughed. "Uh-hm! The enemy is on his way, with hounds and remounts. And we've only two beasts. Best we flee while we can."

Eodan straightened. "No," he said. "I, too, have run far enough."

XX

They rode up to the shepherd's house. Phryne struck the dog on the nose with her staff when it flew at her throat. It ran away, and she strung her bow and nocked an arrow. Eodan stayed mounted, the German sword in his hand. Tjorr went afoot to the door and beat on it with his hammer.

"Open!" he bawled. Nothing stirred. He hefted the maul, swung it high and sent it crashing against the latch. The flimsy bolt cracked in two. Voices piped with fear in the dark hut. A shaking graybeard barred the entrance, holding a rusty old ax. Tjorr grabbed him by the tunic and threw him to the ground, not unkindly. "Out!" he said, gesturing.

They shambled forth. There was only one woman, shapeless in a sacklike gown, and a dozen children. They looked so unlike that Eodan decided fatherhood was divided among the three herdsmen who had left their flock and were hovering timidly half a mile away.

"Must we turn bandit?" asked Phryne in a troubled voice.

Eodan considered her, clad in the same foul garments as the shepherds, but shining through it. He said bluntly, "This is no otherwise than smiting that whelp they kept." But because of her look he remembered certain thoughts about a king and fumbled in his purse. He tossed some coins to the ground. The grandsire sucked in his breath and crawled to shaky feet; the three men edged closer.

"Does anyone here speak Greek?" called Eodan. They stared. "Well, you shall understand my signs then, with a kick if your minds lag, for our time is short. I will give you ten times the worth of these hovels." He turned to Phryne. "Do you watch over Tjorr and me. Let them not talk much among themselves. Shoot the first who shows treachery. And now let us work!"

Dismounting, he peered into the house. Enough light came through the door and smokehole to show him a littered earth floor, piled sheepskins, a few stone tools and clay vessels, a dung fire. But the ceiling was what he looked at. Branches hauled from some remote forest many years ago were laid across the walls, and turf piled on them to make a roof. He nodded. "Thus I thought," he said.

Tjorr rounded up the family and made them watch him. A child whimpered as he climbed the rough wall to the roof and began throwing off its sod layers. He

flung the child a coin. At once the oldest boy grinned brashly, swarmed up and helped. Tjorr laughed, clambered down and went to the shed. Using Phryne's staff for a lever, he pried a few rocks out of its wall. The same child studied his face carefully and tried another whimper. Tjorr gave it another coin. The mother giggled. Tjorr urged her to the task.

Then for some hours he and Eodan made the shepherd folk demolish their roof and their outbuildings. Phryne paced the dusty grounds, watchfully, her bow always in her hand. The wind blew from the high country and the snow clouds moved closer.

There were stout wooden posts at the corners of the shed. Tjorr dug them out and dragged them to the roofless house. He set two of them upright on the floor—one close to the entrance and one a yard from the rear wall; across them he laid a third. Then he put the branch-rafters back, crossing his heavy timber piece, and heaped a layer of turf on as before. The shepherd people gaped, blinked, made signs against the evil eye, which these surely crazed men must have, but helped him after a few blows. He had them form a line and pass him stones from the wrecked outbuildings. These he laid on the turf, within a yard of the rear wall, layer upon layer. Finally the branches beneath sagged, and even the timber upbearing them started to groan. Quickly, then, he threw enough sod on his roof of boulders to hide what it was.

Meanwhile Eodan was digging inside the house, at its rear end. He sank a pit nearly eight feet deep and drove a shaft from that, several yards outward, so that it ended below the grounds; he left the wooden shovel there and came back out. Rather his crew of men and children did this, even as most of the roof work had Tjorr merely overseeing. They would need their whole strength later.

At the end, hours past the time they began, Phryne looked at the completed task. She saw merely a shepherd hut with a somewhat thicker roof than was common, and wreckage behind it. "Do our lives hang on no more than this?" she asked wonderingly. "Would it not have been better to flee across the plain?"

"Once they found our trail," said Tjorr grimly, "they could have changed horse and horse while our own ran themselves dead. No, our chances here are not good, but I think the *disa's* plan has made them better for us than if we played mouse to the Roman ferret"

"One more thing to do," said Eodan. He kindled a stick, went over and touched it to the haystacks. The shepherds moaned. Eodan grinned, with a certain pity, and tossed the grandsire his full purse. "There's the price of your flocks and home

and a winter's lodging. Go!" He waved his sword and pointed south. They stumbled from him, out onto the plain, looking back with frightened animal eyes. "Why those bonfires?" asked Tjorr. "Not that I don't like the warmth on this bitter day, but—"

"Hay could be stacked around the house and lit," said Eodan. "I do not wish to die in an oven."

Tjorr tugged his ruddy beard. "I had not thought of that. Is it a heavy burden to be forever thinking, *disa*?"

Eodan did not hear him. He took Phryne's hand in his. "Have I any hope of making you depart until the fight is over?" he asked.

Her dark head shook. "In all else will I obey you," she said, "but I have a right to stand with my man."

"I made you a promise once," he began, shaken.

"Oh, I hold you to it," she laughed. It was a very small and lonely laugh, torn by the wind. "You shall not kiss me against my will. But, Eodan, it is now my will."

He touched his lips to hers, with an unhurried tenderness; if they lived, there would be more than this. Tjorr said: "I make out a dust cloud to the north, *disa*. I think horsemen."

"Then let us go within," said Eodan.

It was dark in the hut; stones covered the smokehole, now, and the sagging door was closed behind them. They sat on the earth and waited, Phryne lying in the circle of Eodan's arm. Presently hoofs rang on the ground outside, and weapons clashed. They heard a dog bark.

"The place seems deserted," said a voice in Latin. "Maybe the fire in that hay drove its people off."

"And they left two hobbled war-horses?" snapped Flavius. "Look in and see if anyone lairs."

Tjorr planted himself by the doorway, raising his hammer. The door creaked open. Chill gray light outlined a Roman helmet and shimmered off a Roman cuirass. Tjorr struck down, and the helmet gonged. There was the noise of crunching bones. The man fell and did not move again.

"Here we are, Flavius!" cried the Alan.

Phryne loosed an arrow out the door. Someone cursed. Eodan, glimpsing horses and men, sprang to the entrance and peered out. Ten living Romans and a couple of Gauls in battle harness—a dozen men, then, against two men and a woman.... "I reckon, Eodan," said Tjorr, "you and I must each strike six blows."

Flavius rode into the Cimbrian's view. His ravaged face stiffened beneath the plumed helmet. He spoke almost wearily: "I still offer pardon, even liberty and reward, to your companions. It is only you I want, and only because you murdered Hwicca."

"I would most gladly meet you in single combat," said Eodan.

"We have been over this ground before," said Flavius. "Let me ask you instead—do you really wish the Sarmatian and the Greek girl to die on your account? Would it not be most honorable of you to release them from whatever vows they gave you—even command them to depart?"

"He is our king," said Phryne from the darkness. "There are some commands that no king may give."

Flavius sighed. "As you will, then. Decurion, seize them!"

It was a narrow doorway; only one person at a time could go through. The Roman decurion advanced with an infantryman's long shield to guard him. Eodan waited. The decurion charged in, behind him a pikeman. Eodan smote at the first Roman's knees as the pike thrust for his face. Tjorr's hammer struck from the right, knocked the pike aside and snapped its shaft against the doorway. The decurion stopped Eodan's sword-blow, and his own blade darted out. It hit the Persian mail-coat. Eodan chopped at the arm behind it. He lacked room for a real swing, but his edge hit. The decurion went to one knee. Eodan struck at his neck—a hiss and a butcher sound in the air.

Another man followed the decurion, stepped up on the dying officer's back and thrust mightily. Eodan slipped aside. Overbalanced, the Roman stumbled and fell into the hut. Tjorr's hammer crashed on his helmet. One of the Gauls sprang yelling through the undefended entrance. Phryne fired an arrow, and the Gaul staggered; it had caught him in the arm. Eodan attacked him from the side, and the German sword went home in his leg. He fell down, screaming. Tjorr finished him off while Eodan went back to the doorway.

"Nine men left," he panted.

The Romans stood away from him, where he stood dripping Roman blood. No one moved for a while, although Flavius dismounted and paced. The other Gaul

came into view. Eodan remembered now that he had heard thumpings overhead. "This roof is made of stones, Master," said the Gaul to Flavius. "We can tear it down, I suppose, but not easily. It would cost us men."

"Likewise to break through the walls," said the Roman. He spoke impersonally, as though this were no more than a school problem. Eodan wondered how much was left the man of joy and hope and even hate; the demons pacing Flavius had bitten him hollow.

"Arrows," he said at last.

Eodan watched them make ready. Four soldiers were shield to shield, a few yards away. If he made a dash, they would be on him, and even a Cimbrian could not hold off four good men in the open. Three more strung their bows and put arrows point down in the ground before them—slowly, carefully, grinning into Eodan's emotionless face. Flavius and the Gaul dragged a post from a torn-down shed into view.

When everything was ready, Flavius stepped forth. "Do you see what I plan?" he called. "You can stand where you are and be filled with arrows, or you can close that door, which is only leather hinges, and wait for us to break it down."

"I think we will wait," said Eodan.

He shut the door, and darkness clamped upon his eyes. He heard the Roman arrows smite and wondered what impulse of fury made Flavius order them fired. He trod on a dead man's hand and wondered what woman and child and horse would wait till time's end for its caress.

"Back," he said. "Into the pit, Phryne."

She kissed him, a stolen instant among shadows, and was gone.

Feet thudded outside. The door, which he had not barred, flew open. Two black blots staggered through, the timber in their arms.

Tjorr met them as they reeled. His hammer boomed on iron. "*Ho-ah!*" he cried so it rang. "*Yuk-hai-saa-saa!* Come in and be slain!"

He stood in the middle of the room with Eodan. Each had a Roman shield and his chosen weapon, maul or longsword. They waited.

Dimly seen, a man pushed close to Eodan. His sword cut low, feeling for the Cimbrian's legs. Eodan sprang back. His huge German blade whirled up so it touched the low ceiling. Down it came again, and the shield edge crumpled

under it. Eodan raised his weapon once more, struck home and felt blood spurt over his hand.

Another shape, another thrust. He caught that one on his own shield, and the metal glided aside. The Roman shield pushed against the Cimbrian's right arm, giving no room to use a sword. His hobnailed boot trampled down on Eodan's foot, and pain jagged in its path. Eodan drove the boss of his shield into the Roman's face and he heard a splintering. The Roman sank to the floor, dazed.

There were two more, now, in the belling, clanging gloom. They came in on either side, to catch him between them. He kicked out to the right, and his spur flayed open a thigh. As the shield dropped a little in the man's anguish, Eodan smote. He struck a helmet, but the sheer force of it snapped the Roman's head down. The man went to his hands and knees and crawled away.

Eodan had been holding the other off left-handed, keeping his shield as a barrier. Now, whipping about, he slid the rim aside and then back again, so that he locked shields with his enemy and held him fast. He reached over the top with his longsword and drove the point home.

"*Ho-yo-yo!*" chanted Tjorr, battering till it thundered. Eodan might have let out a Cimbrian howl, but he had no more wish for it. "Back!" he gasped to the Alan. "Back before they hem us in!"

Eyes were now used to the shifting twilight, the pale gray dazzle of the doorway. Eodan and Tjorr stood side by side, just in front of the rear support timber they had erected. Blood ran from their arms and painted their breasts; blood stained the sweat on them, and it was not all Roman this time. But men lay stricken before them; Eodan did not count how many. He looked across three slippery red yards of trampled earth and saw five men still on their feet. None were unwounded.

But weariness shuddered in him. His sword, nicked and blunted, had not bitten well; it was an iron bar in his hand, heavy as sorrow. He could barely hear the deep hoarse breathing of Tjorr, his own heartbeat and thirsty-throated breath were so loud.

Now that all the hunters were inside his den, it was time to destroy them.

Flavius crouched by the door. "Form a line!" he rapped. "Wall to wall! Drive them back and cut them down!"

Four Roman shields filled that narrow room, Flavius standing behind. Eodan raised his weapon and called, "Will you not try the edge of this even once,

murderer?"

Flavius screamed. For one blink of time, over the advancing shields and helmets, through the wintry gloom, Eodan looked upon madness. It came to him that he should not have taunted an unbearable grief. The gods are too just.

Flavius raised his sword and flung it above the soldiers.

Eodan felt it strike him in the head. He staggered back, suddenly blinded with his own blood. The pain seared through his skull until he stood in a world that was all great whirling flame. He thought as he toppled, This also must a king have known, what it is to be slain.

The Romans cried their victory and moved in on Tjorr. The Alan threw down his shield, picked Eodan up with one arm, and swung his hammer. Even as it hit the pillar he had raised, he leaped into the pit and the tunnel beyond.

The timber slipped sideways. The piece it had helped carry, running lengthwise, fell. The thin branches cracked, and the roof of stones came down.

Eodan heard it dimly, from far away. Now the sky has been shattered, he thought, and gods and demons die in the wreck of their war. A star whirled by me and hissed into the sea.

He lay in the tunnel, as though in a womb, while the stones buried his hunters. There followed a silence that tolled. He heard Tjorr and Phryne calling to each other in utter night. Her hands groped for him. He lay in her hands and let the pain reach full tide.

It ebbed again. Tjorr dug a few feet upward. Breaking out into the open, he reached down, hauled forth Eodan and Phryne and whistled at what he saw.

"Best I catch the horses," he said awkwardly. "You can see to him, can you not?"

She kissed her man for answer.

Eodan looked up at the sky. "Lie still," whispered Phryne. "Lie still. It is well. We are safe."

The wind blew softly, almost warm. The first snow fell on his face. "Have I been badly hurt?" he asked.

She told him plainly: "Your left eye is gone. Now I must love the right one twice as much."

"Is it no more than that?" he sighed. "I thought my debt was greater. The Powers

are kind."

XXI

North of the city Tanais the Don River wound like a shining snake, like the lightning itself in a godlike calm, through rolling plains where horses pastured. In early summer the land blazed blue with cornflowers.

On the west side of the Don, from the Azov Sea as far northward as their might would take them, dwelt the Rukh-Ansa. They were a proud folk—warriors, horse breeders, and weapon makers; their women walked with long fair locks garlanded and dresses of linen wind-blown around their tall bodies; their chiefs rewarded a bard's song with golden rings.

Nonetheless, these were ill times, and, when Tjorr the Red came home, folk sacrificed bullocks in the hope that he carried better luck. From wide about the chiefs came riding, until Beli's hall rang with their iron and the ale flowed merrily. They guested Beli not only to hear what his returned son could tell them of far farings, but because there had been tales of a king whom Tjorr had brought with him. Sorely did the Rukh-Ansa need a wise king.

His was a strange band when it rode to the river's east bank and was ferried across with gifts from awed tribesmen. Tjorr himself did not lead it, though the redbeard shone in Parthian mail and glittered with Grecian silver. He was captain of the warriors, several score Alanic horsemen guarding a rich baggage train; his own wagon was full of gold, armor and three lovely concubines. When he related how all this had come to him through the luck in his hammer, many folk went on their faces; surely that hammer held lightning.

And yet Tjorr acknowledged another man his *disa*—a very tall man with long wheat-colored hair, a lean withdrawn face, the sun written on his brow, and one green eye. This Eodan did not dress much like a king; his mail was serviceable but unadorned; he claimed no trolldom or god-power in his weapons. Moreover, he had only one wife—a slight girl with dark hair and violet eyes who rode like a man but nursed a son in her arms and had one a year older in a carrying-cradle at her saddlebow. Eodan would not even accept the overnight loan of another woman; he smiled in his distant way, thanked his host and then returned to his Phryne.

So the Rukh-Ansa wondered at Tjorr ... wondered even if the Phryne girl were not a witch who had ensnared both him and her husband ... and then they would

come to speak with Eodan, and after a while they would understand why Tjorr called him King.

Fires burned high in Beli's feasting hall. The chiefs of the Rukh-Ansa clans sat at table and raised ox horns heavy with silver and beer, to the honor of Tjorr and Tjorr's lord.

Gray Beli blinked dim eyes at his son. "Will you not tell us the whole tale of your wanderings?" he asked.

"Not in one day," said Tjorr. "There are many winter evenings' worth of telling. Let it only be said now that I was sold through Greece and Italy until I ended in a Roman galley. But then Eodan and Phryne freed me. We seized the ship and sailed eastward, until we found the court of King Mithradates."

"The same whose general hurled us back three summers ago from the Chersonese?" asked Beli.

Tjorr nodded. "Aye. I wish I had fought with you, but at that very time, as the gods willed it, I was fighting on Mithradates' behalf, down in Galatia. He was a good master to us. Why did you war on his realm?"

Beli shrugged. "It was a hungry year. We have had many hungry years of late; there are too many of us. But the raid failed, and now the Chersonese is barred to our horses."

"I will have somewhat to counsel you about that," said Eodan. He had already learned the Alanic tongue, as it was said he knew several others, besides reading and writing. Yes, a man of deep mind, with witch-powers he would not show to just anyone—yes, yes.

"Where then did you go?" asked Beli.

"We fell out with Mithradates," said Tjorr, "and for a while we were two men and a woman, alone on a cold plain. But we had killed some Romans, who had fat purses. So we bought huts and sheep from the Phrygians, to live that winter. In spring we continued through Lycaonia; it is too friendly with Rome these days, so we did not stay, simply bribed our way past. There are tribes in the Mountains of the Bull, hunters and warriors, who made us welcome. We aided them and lived there a year since my king's first son had to be born. Next spring we came to Parthia with a following of young men and offered the lord there our services, he being Rome's foe. There we had it well since the favor of nobles came to us, once they saw what a man they had in my king. We dwelt in a fine city and had only enough warlike missions on the border to keep us amused. Yet

we longed to be among our own sort of men again. So this spring we got leave to go, and came up through Armenia and behind the Caucasus until we found Alans —and thus your home, My Father."

"Much have you seen," said Beli. The war-chiefs of the Rukh-Ansa clashed their ale horns under his words.

"I have seen less with two eyes than my King has with one," said Tjorr humbly. "He has learned the arts of many nations. He would teach his own people whatever of it they can use."

"Where are your folk?" asked Beli of the stranger.

"North," said Eodan. "They were the Cimbri once. Now they are any who dwell where heather blooms and beech forests blow."

"We will go north, my king and I, to rule in his land," said Tjorr. "There are not many dwelling in it. No few of the Rukh-Ansa could follow us, find new homes in the North and become great."

"Some of the younger ones might," agreed Beli.

"Might?" cried Tjorr. "Why, if I know my clans, they will be at spearheads over the right to come!"

"Not all," said Beli. "Not even most. For if you fare north you will become something else than what you are."

"That is true," said Eodan. "Yet what is it to live, than to become something else?"

"Forgive me," said Beli, "but there are men who would not follow a one-eyed king."

"Let them stay home, then," snorted Tjorr. "I'll pasture my horses on the edge of the world if he leads me there."

"Yes," nodded Beli. "Yes. There are such kings. But how did it happen you lost your eye, Lord?"

Eodan smiled. It was a wry smile, not ungentle, but wholly without youth. He had known too much ever to be young again. He said, "I gave it for wisdom."

EPILOGUE

It was told from olden days, and written in the books of Snorri Sturlason, that the Asa or Ansa folk came from the land of Tanais to the North. They soon became overlords; from the high hall they raised at Upsala their power spread, until even the German tribes drew chieftains and learning from them. For they were good masters, who brought their new people not only wealth but knowledge. They gave to the North crafts of both peace and war, such as the building of longships and the breeding of fine horses, the writing of runes and the mustering of armies, foreign trade and foreign travel, much leechcraft and many wise laws. By all this the folk were strengthened and helped, so that they lifted themselves from rude forest dwellers to mighty nations who finally overthrew the Roman power and peopled Europe afresh, in the time of the Wanderings. Above all did they shape the country called England, and there they kept much of the old freedom-shielding law that the Asa men first brought.

Every king in the North reckoned descent from the Asa lords, who themselves came to be worshiped as gods after they died. The first Asa king was called Odin, and he was the chief of the gods.

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