

# **The Gate of the Flying Knives**

**Thieves' World, #4**

**by Poul Anderson, 1926-2001**

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AGAIN PENNILESS, HOUSELESS, and ladyless, Cappen Varra made a brave sight just the same as he wove his way amidst the bazaar throng. After all, until today he had for some weeks been in, if not quite of, the household of Molin Torchholder, as much as he could contrive. Besides the dear presence of ancilla Danlis, he had received generous reward from the priest-engineer whenever he sang a song or composed a poem. That situation had changed with suddenness and terror, but he still wore a bright green tunic, scarlet cloak, canary hose, soft half-boots trimmed in stiver, and plumed beret. Though naturally heartsick at what had happened, full of dread for his darling, he saw no reason to sell the garb

yet. He could raise enough money in various ways to live on while he searched for her. If need be, as often before, he could pawn the harp that a goldsmith was presently redecorating.

If his quest had not succeeded by the time he was reduced to rags, then he would have to suppose Danlis and the Lady Rosanda were forever lost. But he had never been one to grieve over future sorrows.

Beneath a westering sun, the bazaar surged and clamoured. Merchants, artisans, porters, servants, slaves, wives, nomads, courtesans, entertainers, beggars, thieves, gamblers, magicians, acolytes, soldiers, and who knew what else mingled, chattered, chaffered, quarrelled, plotted, sang, played games, drank, ate, and who knew what else. Horsemen, camel-drivers, waggoners pushed through, raising waves of curses. Music tinkled and tweedled from wine-shops. Vendors proclaimed the wonders of their wares from booths, neighbours shouted at each other, and devotees chanted from flat rooftops. Smells thickened the air, of flesh, sweat, roast meat and nuts, aromatic drinks, leather, wool, dung, smoke, oils, cheap perfume.

Ordinarily, Cappen Varra enjoyed this shabby-colourful spectacle. Now he single mindedly hunted through it. He kept full awareness, of course, as everybody must in Sanctuary. When light fingers brushed him, he knew. But whereas aforesaid he would have chuckled and told the pickpurse, "I'm sorry, friend; I was hoping I might lift somewhat off you," at this hour he clapped his sword in such forbidding wise that the fellow recoiled against a fat woman and made her drop a brass tray full of flowers. She screamed and started beating him over the head with it.

Cappen didn't stay to watch.

On the eastern edge of the market-place he found what he wanted. Once more Illyra was in the bad graces of her colleagues and had moved her trade to a stall available elsewhere. Black curtains framed it, against a mud-brick wall. Reek from a nearby tannery well-nigh drowned the incense she burned in a curious holder, and would surely overwhelm any of her herbs. She herself also lacked awesomeness, such as most seeresses, mages, conjurers, scryers, and the like affected. She was too young; she would have looked almost wistful in her flowing, gaudy S'danzo garments, had she not been so beautiful.

Cappen gave her a bow in the manner of Caronne. "Good-day, Illyra the lovely," he said.

She smiled from the cushion whereon she sat. "Good-day to you, Cappen Varra." They had had a number of talks, usually in jest, and he had sung for her entertainment. He had hankered to do more than that, but she seemed to keep all men at a certain distance, and a hulk of a blacksmith who evidently adored her saw to it that they respected her wish.

"Nobody in these parts has met you for a fair while," she remarked. "What fortune was great enough to make you forget old friends?"

"My fortune was mingled, inasmuch as it left me without time to come down here and behold you, my sweet," he answered out of habit.

Lightness departed from Illyra. In the olive countenance, under the chestnut mane, large eyes focused hard on her visitor. "You find time when you need help in disaster," she said.

He had not patronized her before, or indeed any fortune-teller of thaumaturge in Sanctuary. In Caronne, where he grew up, most folk had no use for magic. In his later wanderings he had encountered sufficient strangeness to temper his native scepticism. As shaken as he already was, he felt a chill go along his spine. "Do you read my fate without even casting a spell?"

She smiled afresh, but bleakly. "Oh, no. It's simple reason. Word did filter back to the Maze that you were residing in the Jewellers' Quarter and a frequent guest at the mansion of Molin Torchholder. When you appear on the heels of a new word—that last night his wife was reaved from him—plain to see is that you've been affected yourself."

He nodded. "Yes, and sore afflicted. I have lost—" He hesitated, unsure whether it would be quite wise to say *my love* to this girl whose charms he had rather extravagantly praised.

"—your position and income," Illyra snapped. "The high priest cannot be in any mood for minstrelsy. I'd guess his wife favoured you most, anyhow. I need not guess you spent your earnings as fast as they fell to you, or faster, were behind in your rent, and were accordingly kicked out of your choice apartment as soon as rumour reached the landlord. You've returned to the Maze because you've no place else to go, and to me in hopes you can wheedle me into giving you a clue—for if you're instrumental in recovering the lady, you'll likewise recover your fortune, and more."

"No, no, no," he protested. "You wrong me."

"The high priest will appeal only to his Rankan gods," Illyra said, her tone changing from exasperated to thoughtful. She stroked her chin. "He, kinsman of the Emperor, here to direct the building of a temple which will overtop that of Ils, can hardly beg aid from the old gods of Sanctuary, let alone from our wizards, witches, and seers. But you, who belong to no part of the empire, who drifted hither from a kingdom far in the West... you may seek anywhere. The idea is your own; else he would furtively have slipped you some gold, and you have engaged a diviner with more reputation than is mine."

Cappen spread his hands. "You reason eerily well, dear lass," he conceded. "Only about the motives are you mistaken. Oh, yes, I'd be glad to stand high in Molin's esteem, be richly rewarded, and so forth. Yet I feel for him; beneath that sternness of his, he's not a bad sort, and he bleeds. Still more do I feel for his lady, who was indeed kind to me and who's been snatched away to an unknown place. But before all else—" He grew quite earnest. "The Lady Rosanda was not seized by herself. Her ancilla has also vanished, Danlis. And—Danlis is she whom I love, Illyra, she whom I meant to wed."

The maiden's look probed him further. She saw a young man of medium height, slender but tough and agile. (That was due to the life he had had to lead; by nature he was indolent, except in bed.) His features were thin and regular on a long skull, cleanshaven, eyes bright blue, black hair banded and falling to the shoulders. His voice gave the language a melodious accent, as if to bespeak white cities, green fields and woods, quicksilver lakes, blue sea, of the homeland he left in search of his fortune.

"Well, you have charm, Cappen Varra," she murmured, "and how you do know it." Alert: "But coin you lack. How do you propose to pay me?"

"I fear you must work on speculation, as I do myself," he said. "If our joint efforts lead to a rescue, why, then we'll share whatever material reward may come. Your part might buy you a home on the Path of Money." She frowned. "True," he went on, "I'll get more than my share of the immediate bounty that Molin bestows. I will have my beloved back. I'll also regain the priest's favour, which is moderately lucrative. Yet consider. You need but practise your art. Thereafter any effort and risk will be mine."

"What makes you suppose a humble fortune-teller can learn more than the Prince Governor's investigator guardsmen?" she demanded.

"The matter does not seem to lie within their jurisdiction," he replied.

She leaned forward, tense beneath the layers of clothing. Cappen bent towards her. It was as if the babble of the market-place receded, leaving these two alone with their wariness.

"I was not there," he said low, "but I arrived early this morning after the thing had happened. What's gone through the city has been rumour, leakage that cannot be caulked, household servants blabbing to friends outside and they blabbing onward. Molin's locked away most of the facts till he can discover what they mean, if ever he can. I, however, I came on the scene while chaos still prevailed. Nobody kept me from talking to folk, before the lord himself saw me and told me to begone. Thus I know about as much as anyone, little though that be."

"And—?" she prompted.

"And it doesn't seem to have been a worldly sort of capture, for a worldly end like ransom. See you, the mansion's well guarded, and neither Molin nor his wife have ever gone from it without escort. His mission here is less than popular, you recall. Those troopers are from Ranke and not subornable. The house stands in a garden, inside a high wall whose top is patrolled. Three leopards run loose in the grounds after dark.

"Molin had business with his kinsman the Prince, and spent the night at the palace. His wife, the Lady Rosanda, stayed home, retired, later came out and complained she could not sleep. She therefore had Danlis wakened. Danlis is no chambermaid; there are plenty of those. She's amanuensis, adviser, confidante, collector of information, oftentimes guide or interpreter—oh, she earns her pay, does my Danlis. Despite she and I having a dawntide engagement, which is why I arrived then, she must now out of bed at Rosanda's whim, to hold milady's hand or take dictation of milady's letters or read to milady from a soothing book but I'm a spendthrift of words. Suffice to say that they two sought an upper chamber which is furnished as both solarium and office. A single staircase leads thither, and it is the single room at the top. There is a balcony, yes; and, the night being warm, the door to it stood open, as well as the windows. But I inspected the facade beneath. That's sheer marble, undecorated save for varying colours, devoid of ivy or of anything that any climber might cling to, save he were a fly.

"Nevertheless... just before the east grew pale, shrieks were heard, the watch pelted to the stair and up it. They must break down the inner door, which was bolted. I suppose that was merely against chance interruptions, for nobody had felt threatened. The solarium was in disarray; vases and things were broken; shreds torn off a robe and slight traces of blood lay about. Aye, Danlis, at least, would have resisted. But she and her mistress were gone.

“A couple of sentries on the garden wall reported hearing a loud sound as of wings. The night was cloudy-dark and they saw nothing for certain. Perhaps they imagined the noise. Suggestive is that the leopards were found cowering in a corner and welcomed their keeper when he would take them back to their cages.

“And this is the whole of anyone’s knowledge, Illyra,” Cappen ended. “Help me. I pray you, help me get back my love!”

She was long quiet. Finally she said, in a near whisper, “It could be a worse matter than I’d care to peer into, let alone enter.”

“Or it could not,” Cappen urged.

She gave him a quasi-defiant stare. “My mother’s people reckon it unlucky to do any service for a Shavakh—a person not of their tribe—without recompense. Pledges don’t count.”

Cappen scowled. “Well, I could go to a pawnshop and—But no, time may be worth more than rubies. From the depths of unhappiness, his grin broke forth. “Poems also are valuable, right? You S’danzo have your ballads and love ditties. Let me write a poem, Illyra, that shall be yours alone.” Her expression quickened. “Truly?”

“Truly. Let me think... Aye, we’ll begin thus.” And, venturing to take her hands in his, Cappen murmured:

*“My lady comes to me like break of day,  
I dream in darkness if it chance she tarries,  
Until the banner other brightness harries  
The hosts of Shadowland from off the way—”*

She jerked free and cried, “No! You scoundrel, that has to be something you did for Danlis—or for some earlier woman you wanted in your bed—”

“But it isn’t finished,” he argued. “I’ll complete it for you, Illyra.”

Anger left her. She shook her head, clicked her tongue, and sighed. “No matter. You’re incurably yourself. And I... am only half S’danzo. I’ll attempt your spell.”

“By every love goddess I ever heard of,” he promised unsteadily, “you shall indeed have your own poem after this is over.”

“Be still,” she ordered. “Fend off anybody who comes near.”

He faced about and drew his sword. The slim, straight blade was hardly needed, for no other enterprise had site within several yards of hers, and as wide a stretch of paving lay between him and the fringes of the crowd. Still, to grasp the hilt gave him a sense of finally making progress. He had felt helpless for the first hours, hopeless, as if his dear had actually died instead of—of what? Behind him he heard cards riffled, dice cast, words softly wailed.

All at once Illyra strangled a shriek. He whirled about and saw how the blood had left her olive countenance, turning it grey. She hugged herself and shuddered.

“What’s wrong?” he blurted in fresh terror.

She did not look at him. “Go away,” she said in a thin voice. “Forget you ever knew that woman.”

“But—but what—”

“Go away, I told you! Leave me alone!”

Then somehow she relented enough to let forth: "I don't know. I dare not know. I'm just a little half-breed girl who has a few cantrips and a tricky second sight, and—and I saw that this business goes outside of space and time, and a power beyond any magic is there—Enas Yorl could tell more, but he himself—" Her courage broke. "Go away!" she screamed. "Before I shout for Dubro and his hammer!"

"I beg your pardon," Cappen Varra said, and made haste to obey.

He retreated into the twisting streets of the Maze. They were narrow; most of the mean buildings around him were high; gloom already filled the quarter. It was as if he had stumbled into the same night where Danlis had gone... Danlis, creature of sun and horizons... If she lived, did she remember their last time together as he remembered it, a dream dreamed centuries ago?

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HAVING THE DAY free, she had wanted to explore the countryside north of town. Cappen had objected on three counts. The first he did not mention; that it would require a good deal of effort, and he would get dusty and sweaty and saddle sore. She despised men who were not at least as vigorous as she was, unless they compensated by being venerable and learned.

The second he hinted at. Sleazy though most of Sanctuary was, he knew places within it where a man and a woman could enjoy themselves, comfortably, privately—his apartment, for instance. She smiled her negation. Her family belonged to the old aristocracy of Ranke, not the newly rich, and she had been raised in its austere tradition. Albeit her father had fallen on evil times and she had been forced to take service, she kept her pride, and proudly would she yield her maidenhead to her bridegroom. Thus far she had answered Cappen's ardent declarations with the admission that she liked him and enjoyed his company and wished he would change the subject. (Buxom Lady Rosanda seemed as if she might be more approachable, but there he was careful to maintain a cheerful correctness.) He did believe she was getting beyond simple enjoyment, for her patrician reserve seemed less each time they saw each other. Yet she could not altogether have forgotten that he was merely the bastard of a minor nobleman in a remote country, himself disinherited and a footloose minstrel.

His third objection he dared say forth. While the hinterland was comparatively safe, Molin Torchholder would be furious did he learn that a woman of his household had gone escorted by a single armed man, and he no professional fighter. Molin would probably have been justified, too. Danlis smiled again and said, "I could ask a guardsman off duty to come along. But you have interesting friends, Cappen. Perhaps a warrior is among them?"

As a matter of fact, he knew any number, but doubted she would care to meet them—with a single exception. Luckily, Jamie the Red had no prior commitment, and agreed to join the party. Cappen told the kitchen staff to pack a picnic hamper for four.

Jamie's girls stayed behind; this was not their sort of outing, and sun might harm their complexions. Cappen thought it a bit ungracious of the Northerner never to share them. That put him, Cappen, to considerable expense in the Street of Red Lanterns, since he could scarcely keep a paramour of his own while wooing

Danlis. Otherwise he was fond of Jamie. They had met after Rosanda, chancing to hear the minstrel sing, had invited him to perform at the mansion, and then invited him back, and presently Cappen was living in the Jeweller's Quarter. Jamie had an apartment near by.

Three horses and a pack mule clopped out of Sanctuary in the new-born morning, to a jingle of harness bells. That merriment found no echo in Cappen's head; he had been drinking past midnight, and in no case enjoyed rising before noon. Passive, he listened to Jamie: "—Aye, milady, they're mountaineers where I hail from, poor folk but free folk. Some might call us barbarians, but that might be unwise in our hearing. For we've tales, songs, laws, ways, gods as old as any in the world, and as good. We lack much of your Southern lore, but how much of ours do you ken? Not that I boast, please understand. I've seen wonders in my wanderings. But I do say we've a few wonders of our own at home."

"I'd like to hear of them," Danlis responded. "We know almost nothing about your country in the Empire—hardly more than mentions in the chronicles of Venafer and Mattathan, or the Natural History of Kahayavesh. How do you happen to come here?"

"Oh—ah, I'm a younger son of our king, and I thought I'd see a bit of the world before settling down. Not that I packed any wealth along to speak of. But what with one thing and another, hiring out hither and yon for this or that, I get by." Jamie paused. "You, uh, you've far more to tell, milady. You're from the crown city of the Empire, and you've got book learning, and at the same time you come out to see for yourself what land and rocks and plants and animals are like."

Cappen decided he had better get into the conversation. Not that Jamie would undercut a friend, nor Danlis be unduly attracted by a wild highlander. Nevertheless—

Jamie wasn't bad-looking in his fashion. He was huge, topping Cappen by a head and disproportionately wide in the shoulders. His loose-jointed appearance was deceptive, as the bard had learned when they sported in a public gymnasium; those were heavy bones and oak-hard muscles. A spectacular red mane drew attention from boyish face, mild blue eyes, and slightly diffident manner. Today he was plainly clad, in tunic and cross-gaitered breeks; but the knife at his belt and the axe at his saddlebow stood out.

As for Danlis, well, what could a poet do but struggle for words which might embody a ghost of her glory? She was tall and slender, her features almost cold in their straight-lined perfection and alabaster hue—till you observed the big grey eyes, golden hair piled on high, curve of lips whence came that husky voice. (How often he had lain awake yearning for her lips! He would console himself by remembering the strong, delicately blue-veined hand that she did let him kiss.) Despite waxing warmth and dust puffed up from the horses' hoofs, her cowed riding habit remained immaculate and no least dew of sweat was on her skin.

By the time Cappen got his wits out of the blankets wherein they had still been snoring, talk had turned to gods. Danlis was curious about those of Jamie's country, as she was about most things. (She did shun a few subjects as being unwholesome.) Jamie in his turn was eager to have her explain what was going on in Sanctuary. "I've heard but the one side of the matter, and Cappen's indifferent to it," he said. "Folk grumble about your master—Molin, is that his name—?"

“He is not my master,” Danlis made clear. “I am a free woman who assists his wife. He himself is a high priest in Ranke, also an engineer.”

“Why is the Emperor angering Sanctuary? Most places I’ve been, colonial governments know better. They leave the local gods be.”

Danlis grew pensive. “Where shall I start? Doubtless you know that Sanctuary was originally a city of the kingdom of Ilsig. Hence it has built temples to the gods of Ilsig—notably Ils, Lord of Lords, and his queen Shipri the All-Mother, but likewise others—Anen of the Harvests, Thufir the tutelary of pilgrims—”

“But none to Shalpa, patron of thieves,” Cappen put in, “though these days he has the most devotees of any.”

Danlis ignored his jape. “Ranke was quite a different country, under quite different gods,” she continued. “Chief of these are Savankala the Thunderer, his consort Sabellia, Lady of Stars, their son Vashanka the Ten-Slayer, and his sister and consort Azyuna—gods of storm and war. According to Venafer, it was they who made Ranke supreme at last. Mattathan is more prosaic and opines that the martial spirit they inculcated was responsible for the Rankan Empire finally taking Ilsig into itself.”

“Yes, milady, yes, I’ve heard this,” Jamie said, while Cappen reflected that if his beloved had a fault, it was her tendency to lecture.

“Sanctuary has changed from of yore,” she proceeded. “It has become polyglot, turbulent, corrupt, a canker on the body politic. Among its most vicious elements are the proliferating alien cults, not to speak of necromancers, witches, charlatans, and similar predators on the people. The time is overpast to restore law here. Nothing less than the Imperium can do that. A necessary preliminary is the establishment of the Imperial deities, the gods of Ranke, for everyone to see: symbol, rallying point, and actual presence.”

“But they have their temples,” Jamie argued.

“Small, dingy, to accommodate Rankans, few of whom stay in the city for long,” Danlis retorted. “What reverence does that inspire, for the pantheon and the state? No, the Emperor has decided that Savankala and Sabellia must have the greatest fane, the most richly endowed, in this entire province. Molin Torchholder will build and consecrate it. Then can the degenerates and warlocks be scourged out of Sanctuary. Afterwards the Prince-Governor can handle common felons.”

Cappen didn’t expect matters would be that simple. He got no chance to say so, for Jamie asked at once, “Is this wise, milady? True, many a soul hereabouts worships foreign gods, or none. But many still adore the old gods of Ilsig. They look on your, uh, Savankala as an intruder. I intend no offence, but they do. They’re outraged that he’s to have a bigger and grander house than Ils of the Thousand Eyes. Some fear what Ils may do about it.”

“I know,” Danlis said. “I regret any distress caused, and I’m sure Lord Molin does too. Still, we must overcome the agents of darkness, before the disease that they are spreads throughout the Empire.”

“Oh, no,” Cappen managed to insert, “I’ve lived here awhile, mostly down in the Maze. I’ve had to do with a good many so-called magicians, of either sex or in between. They aren’t that bad. Most I’d call pitiful. They just use their little deceptions to scabble out what living they can, in this crumbly town where life has trapped them.”



Danlis gave him a sharp glance. "You've told me people think ill of sorcery in Caronne," she said.

"They do," he admitted. "But that's because we incline to be rationalists, who consider nearly all magic a bag of tricks. Which is true. Why, I've learned a few sleights myself."

"You have?" Jamie rumbled in surprise.

"For amusement," Cappen said hastily, before Danlis could disapprove. "Some are quite elegant, virtual exercises in three-dimensional geometry." Seeing interest kindle in her, he added, "I studied mathematics in boyhood; my father, before he died, wanted me to have a gentleman's education. The main part has rusted away in me, but I remember useful or picturesque details."

"Well, give us a show, come luncheon time," Jamie proposed.

Cappen did, when they halted. That was on a hillside above the White Foal-River. It wound gleaming through farmlands whose intense green denied that desert lurked on the rim of sight. The noonday sun baked strong odours out of the earth: humus, resin, juice of wild plants. A solitary plane tree graciously gave shade. Bees hummed.

After the meal, and after Danlis had scrambled off to get a closer look at a kind of lizard new to her, Cappen demonstrated his skill. She was especially taken—enchanted—by his geometric artifices. Like any Rankan lady, she carried a sewing kit in her gear; and being herself, she had writing materials along. Thus he could apply scissors and thread to paper. He showed how a single ring may be cut to produce two that are interlocked, and how a strip may be twisted to have but one surface and one edge, and whatever else he knew. Jamie watched with pleasure, if with less enthusiasm.

Observing how delight made her glow, Cappen was inspired to carry on the latest poem he was composing for her. It had been slower work than usual. He had the conceit, the motif, a comparison of her to the dawn, but hitherto only the first few lines had emerged, and no proper structure. In this moment—

*The banner of her brightness harries  
The hosts of Shadowland from off the way  
That she now wills to tread—for what can stay  
The triumph of that radiance she carries?*

Yes, it was clearly going to be a rondel. Therefore the next two lines were:

*My lady comes to me like break of day.  
I dream in darkness if it chance she tarries.*

He had gotten that far when abruptly she said: "Cappen, this is such a fine excursion, such splendid scenery. I'd like to watch sunrise over the river tomorrow. Will you escort me?"

Sunrise? But she was telling Jamie, "We need not trouble you about that. I had in mind a walk out of town to the bridge. If we choose the proper route, it's well guarded everywhere, perfectly safe."

And scant traffic moved at that hour; besides, the monumental statues along the bridge stood in front of bays which they screened from passers-by—"Oh, yes, indeed, Danlis, I'd love to," Cappen said. For such an opportunity, he could get up before cockcrow.

When he reached the mansion, she had not been there.

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EXHAUSTED AFTER HIS encounter with Illyra, Cappen hied him to the Vulgar Unicorn and related his woes to One-Thumb. The big man had come on shift at the inn early, for a fellow boniface had not yet recovered from the effects of a dispute with a patron. (Shortly thereafter, the patron was found floating face down under a pier. Nobody questioned One-Thumb about this; his regulars knew that he preferred the establishment safe, if not always orderly.) He offered taciturn sympathy and the loan of a bed upstairs. Cappen scarcely noticed the insects that shared it.

Waking about sunset, he found water and a washcloth, and felt much refreshed hungry and thirsty, too. He made his way to the taproom below. Dusk was blue in windows and open door, black under the rafters. Candles smeared weak light along counter and main board and on lesser tables at the walls. The air had grown cool, which allayed the stench of the Maze. Thus Cappen was acutely aware of the smells of beer—old in the rushes underfoot, fresh where a trio of men had settled down to guzzle—and of spitted meat, wafting from the kitchen.

One-Thumb approached, a shadowy hulk save for highlights on his bald pate. "Sit," he grunted. "Eat. Drink." He carried a great tankard and a plate bearing a slab of roast beef on bread. These he put on a corner table, and himself on a chair.

Cappen sat also and attacked the meal. "You're very kind," he said between bites and draughts.

"You'll pay when you get coin, or if you don't, then in songs and magic stunts. They're good for trade." One-Thumb fell silent and peered at his guest.

When Cappen was done, the innkeeper said, "While you slept, I sent out a couple of fellows to ask around. Maybe somebody saw something that might be helpful. Don't worry—I didn't mention you, and it's natural I'd be interested to know what really happened."

The minstrel stared. "You've gone to a deal of trouble on my account."

"I told you, I want to know for my own sake. If deviltry's afoot, where could it strike next?" One-Thumb rubbed a finger across the toothless part of his gums. "Of course, if you should luck out—I don't expect it, but in case you do remember who gave you a boost." A figure appeared in the door and he went to render service.

After a bit of muttered talk, he led the newcomer to Cappen's place. When the minstrel recognized the lean youth, his pulse leaped. One-Thumb would not have brought him and Hanse together without cause; bard and thief found each other insufferable. They nodded coldly but did not speak until the tapster returned with a round of ale.

When the three were seated, One-Thumb said, "Well spit it out, boy. You claim you've got news."

“For him?” Hanse flared, gesturing at Cappen.

“Never mind who. Just talk.”

Hanse scowled. “I don’t talk for a single lousy mugful.”

“You do if you want to keep on coming in here.”

Hanse bit his lip. The Vulgar Unicorn was a rendezvous virtually indispensable to one in his trade.

Cappen thought it best to sweeten the pill: “I’m known to Molin Torchholder. If I can serve him in this matter, he won’t be stingy. Nor will I. Shall we say hm—ten gold royals to you?”

The sum was not princely, but on that account plausible. “Awright, awright,” Hanse replied. “I’d been casing a job I might do in the Jewellers’ Quarter. A squad of the watch came by towards morning and I figured I’d better go home, not by the way I came, either. So I went along the Avenue of Temples, as I might be wanting to stop in and pay my respects to some god or other. It was a dark night, overcast, the reason I’d been out where I was. But you know how several of the temples keep lights going. There was enough to see by, even upwards a ways. Nobody else was in sight. Suddenly I heard a kind of whistling, flapping noise aloft. I looked and—”

He broke off.

“And what?” Cappen blurted. One-Thumb sat impassive.

Hanse swallowed. “I don’t swear to this,” he said. “It was still dim, you realize. I’ve wondered since if I didn’t see wrong.”

“What was it?” Cappen gripped the table edge till his fingernails whitened.

Hanse wet his throat and said in a rush: “What it seemed like was a huge black thing, almost like a snake, but bat-winged. It came streaking from, oh, more or less the direction of Molin’s, I’d guess now that I think back. And it was aimed more or less towards the temple of Ils. There was something that dangled below, as it might be a human body or two. I didn’t stay to watch, I ducked into the nearest alley and waited. When I came out, it was gone.”

He knocked back his ale and rose. “That’s all,” he snapped. “I don’t want to remember the sight any longer, and if anybody ever asks, I was never here tonight.”

“Your story’s worth a couple more drinks,” One-Thumb invited.

“Another evening,” Hanse demurred. “Right now I need a whore. Don’t forget those ten royals, singer.” He left, stiff-legged.

“Well,” said the innkeeper after a silence, “what do you make of this latest?”

Cappen suppressed a shiver. His palms were cold. “I don’t know, save that what we confront is not of our kind.”

“You told me once you’ve got a charm against magic.”

Cappen fingered the little silver amulet, in the form of a coiled snake, he wore around his neck. “I’m not sure. A wizard I’d done a favour for gave me this, years ago. He claimed it’d protect me against spells and supernatural beings of less than godly rank. But to make it work, I have to utter three truths about the spellcaster or the creature. I’ve done that in two or three scrapes, and come out of them intact, but I can’t prove the talisman was responsible.”

More customers entered, and One-Thumb must go to serve them. Cappen nursed his ale. He yearned to get drunk and belike the landlord would stand him

what was needful, but he didn't dare. He had already learned more than he thought the opposition would approve of—whoever or whatever the opposition was. They might have means of discovering this.

His candle flickered. He glanced up and saw a beardless fat man in an ornate formal robe, scarcely normal dress for a visit to the Vulgar Unicorn. "Greetings," the person said. His voice was like a child's.

Cappen squinted through the gloom. "I don't believe I know you," he replied.

"No, but you will come to believe it, oh, yes, you will." The fat man sat down. One-Thumb came over and took an order for red wine—"a decent wine, mine host, a Zhanuvend or Baladach." Coin gleamed forth.

Cappen's heart thumped. "Enas Yorl?" he breathed.

The other nodded. "In the flesh, the all too mutable flesh. I do hope my curse strikes again soon. Almost any shape would be better than this. I hate being overweight. I'm a eunuch, too. The times I've been a woman were better than this."

"I'm sorry, sir," Cappen took care to say. Though he could not rid himself of the spell laid on him, Enas Yorl was a powerful thaumaturge, no mere prestidigitator.

"At least I've not been arbitrarily displaced. You can't imagine how annoying it is, suddenly to find oneself elsewhere, perhaps miles away. I was able to come here in proper wise, in my litter. Faugh, how can anyone voluntarily set shoes to these open sewers they call streets in the Maze?" The wine arrived. "Best we speak fast and to the point, young man, that we may finish and I get home before the next contretemps."

Enas Yorl sipped and made a face. "I've been swindled," he whined. "This is barely drinkable, if that."

"Maybe your present palate is at fault, sir," Cappen suggested. He did not add that the tongue definitely had a bad case of logorrhea. It was an almost physical torture to sit stalled, but he had better humour the mage.

"Yes, quite probably. Nothing has tasted good since—Well. To business. On hearing that One-Thumb was inquiring about last night's incident, I sent forth certain investigators of my own. You will understand that I've been trying to find out as much as I can." Enas Yorl drew a sign in the air. "Purely precautionary. I have no desire whatsoever to cross the Powers concerned in this."

A wintry tingle went through Cappen. "You know who they are, what it's about?" His tone wavered.

Enas Yorl wagged a finger. "Not so hasty, boy, not so hasty. My latest information was of a seemingly unsuccessful interview you had with Illyra the seeress. I also learned you were now in this hostel and close to its landlord. Obviously you are involved. I must know why, how, how much—everything."

"Then you'll help—sir?"

A headshake made chin and jowls wobble. "Absolutely not. I told you I want no part of this. But in exchange for whatever data you possess, I am willing to explicate as far as I am able, and to advise you. Be warned: my advice will doubtless be that you drop the matter and perhaps leave town."

And doubtless he would be right, Cappen thought. It simply happened to be counsel that was impossible for a lover to follow... unless—O kindly gods of Caronne, no, no!—unless Danlis was dead.

The whole story spilled out of him, quickened and deepened by keen questions. At the end, he sat breathless while Enas Yorl nodded.

“Yes, that appears to confirm what I suspected,” the mage said most softly. He stared past the minstrel, into shadows that loomed and flickered. Buzz of talk, clink of drinking ware, occasional gust of laughter among customers seemed remoter than the moon.

“What was it?” broke from Cappen.

“A sikkintair, a Flying Knife. It can have been nothing else.”

“A—what?”

Enas focused on his companion. “The monster that took the women,” he explained. “Sikkintairs are an attribute of Ils. A pair of sculptures on the grand stairway of his temple represent them.”

“Oh, yes, I’ve seen those, but never thought—”

“No, you’re not a votary of any gods they have here. Myself, when I got word of the abduction, I sent my familiars scuttling about and cast spells of inquiry. I received indications... I can’t describe them to you, who lack arcane lore. I established that the very fabric of space had been troubled. Vibrations had not quite damped out as yet, and were centered on the temple of Ils. You may, if you wish a crude analogy, visualize a water surface and the waves, fading to ripples and finally to naught, when a diver has passed through.”

Enas Yorl drank more in a gulp than was his wont. “Civilization was old in Ilsig when Ranke was still a barbarian village,” he said, as though to himself; his gaze had drifted away again, towards darkness. “Its myths depicted the home of the gods as being outside the world—not above, not below, but outside. Philosophers of a later, more rationalistic era elaborated this into a theory of parallel universes. My own researches—you will understand that my condition has made me especially interested in the theory of dimensions, the subtler aspects of geometry—my own researches have demonstrated the possibility of transference between these different spaces.”

“As another analogy, consider a pack of cards. One is inhabited by a king, one by a knight, one by a deuce, et cetera. Ordinarily none of the figures can leave the plane on which it exists. If, however, a very thin piece of absorbent material soaked in a unique kind of solvent were laid between two cards, the dyes that form them could pass through: retaining their configuration, I trust. Actually, of course, this is a less than ideal comparison, for the transference is accomplished through a particular contortion of the continuum—”

Cappen could endure no more pedantry. He crashed his tankard down on the table and shouted, “By all the hells of all the cults, will you get to the point?”

Men stared from adjacent seats, decided no fight was about to erupt, and went back to their interests. These included negotiations with street-walkers who, lanterns in hand, had come in looking for trade.

Enas Yorl smiled. “I forgive your outburst, under the circumstances,” he said. “I too am occasionally young.”

“Very well. Given the foregoing data, including yours, the infrastructure of events seems reasonably evident. You are aware of the conflict over a proposed new temple, which is to outdo that of Ils and Shipri. I do not maintain that the god has taken a direct hand. I certainly hope he feels that would be beneath his

dignity; a theomachy would not be good for us, to understate the case a trifle. But he may have inspired a few of his more fanatical priests to action. He may have revealed to them, in dreams or vision, the means whereby they could cross to the next world and there make the sikkintairs do their bidding. I hypothesize that the Lady Rosanda—and, to be sure, her coadjutrix, your inamorata—are incarcerated in that world. The temple is too full of priests, deacons, acolytes, and lay people for hiding the wife of a magnate. However, the gate need not be recognizable as such.”

Cappen controlled himself with an inward shudder and made his trained voice casual: “What might it look like, sir?”

“Oh, probably a scroll, taken from a coffer where it had long lain forgotten, and now unrolled—yes, I should think in the sanctum, to draw power from the sacred objects and to be seen by as few persons as possible who are not in the conspiracy—” Enas Yorl came out of his abstraction. “Beware! I deduce your thought. Choke it before it kills you.”

Cappen ran sandy tongue over leathery lips. “What... should we... expect to happen, sir?”

“That is an interesting question,” Enas Yorl said. “I can but conjecture. Yet I am well acquainted with the temple hierarchy and—I don’t think the Archpriest is privy to the matter. He’s too aged and weak. On the other hand, this is quite in the style of Hazroah, the High Flamen. Moreover, of late he has in effect taken over the governance of the temple from his nominal superior. He’s bold, ruthless—should have been a soldier—Well, putting myself in his skin, I’ll predict that he’ll let Molin stew a while, then cautiously open negotiations—a hint at first, and always a claim that this is the will of Ils.”

“None but the Emperor can cancel an undertaking for the Imperial deities. Persuading him will take much time and pressure. Molin is a Rankan aristocrat of the old school; he will be torn between his duty to his gods, his state, and his wife. But I suspect that eventually he can be worn down to the point where he agrees that it is, in truth, bad policy to exalt Savankala and Sabellia in a city whose tutelaries they have never been. He in his turn can influence the Emperor as desired.”

“How long would this take, do you think?” Cappen whispered. “Till the women are released?”

Enas Yorl shrugged. “Years, possibly. Hazroah may try to hasten the process by demonstrating that the Lady Rosanda is subject to punishment. Yes, I should imagine that the remains of an ancilla who had been tortured to death, delivered on Molin’s doorstep, would be a rather strong argument.”

His look grew intense on the appalled countenance across from him. “I know,” he said. “You’re breeding fever-dreams of a heroic rescue. It cannot be done. Even supposing that somehow you won through the gate and brought her back, the gate would remain. I doubt Ils would personally seek revenge; besides being petty, that could provoke open strife with Savankala and his retinue, who’re formidable characters themselves. But Ils would not stay the hand of the Flamen Hazroah, who is a most vengeful sort. If you escaped his assassins, a sikkintair would come after you, and nowhere in the world could you and she hide. Your talisman would be of no avail. The sikkintair is not supernatural, unless you give that designation

to the force which enables so huge a mass to fly; and it is from no magician, but from the god.

“So forget the girl. The town is full of them.” He fished in his purse and spilled a handful of coins on the table. “Go to a good whorehouse, enjoy yourself, and raise one for poor old Enas Yorl.”

He got up and waddled off, Cappen sat staring at the coins. They made a generous sum, he realized vaguely: silver lunars, to the number of thirty.

One-Thumb came over. “What’d he say?” the taverner asked.

“I should abandon hope,” Cappen muttered. His eyes stung; his vision blurred. Angrily, he wiped them.

“I’ve a notion I might not be smart to hear more.” One-Thumb laid his mutilated hand on Cappen’s shoulder. “Care to get drunk? On the house. I’ll have to take your money or the rest will want free booze too, but I’ll return it tomorrow.”

“No, I—I thank you, but—but you’re busy, and I need someone I can talk to. Just lend me a lantern, if you will.”

“That might attract a robber, fellow, what with those fine clothes of yours.”

Cappen gripped swordhilt. “He’d be very welcome, the short while he lasted,” he said in bitterness.

He climbed to his feet. His fingers remembered to gather the coins.

\* \* \* \* \*

JAMIE LET HIM in. The Northerner had hastily thrown a robe over his massive frame; he carried the stone lamp that was a night light. “Sh,” he said. “The lassies are asleep.” He nodded towards a closed door at the far end of this main room. Bringing the lamp higher, he got a clear view of Cappen’s face. His own registered shock. “Hey-o, lad, what ails you? I’ve seen men pole-axed who looked happier.”

Cappen stumbled across the threshold and collapsed in an armchair. Jamie barred the outer door, touched a stick of punk to the lamp flame and lit candles, filled wine goblets. Drawing a seat opposite, he sat down, laid red-furred right shank across left knee, and said gently, “Tell me.”

When it had spilled from Cappen, he was a long span quiet. On the walls shimmered his weapons, among pretty pictures that his housemates had selected. At last he asked low, “Have you quit?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Cappen groaned.

“I think you can go on aways, whether or no things are as the witchmaster supposes. We hold where I come from that no man can flee his weird, so he may as well meet it in a way that’ll leave a good story. Besides, this may not be our death-day; and I doubt yon dragons are unkillable, but it could be fun finding out; and chiefly, I was much taken with your girl. Not many like her, my friend. They also say in my homeland, *Waste not, want not.*”

Cappen lifted his glance, astounded. “You mean I should try to free her?” he exclaimed.

“No, I mean we should.” Jamie chuckled. “Life’s gotten a wee bit dull for me of late—aside from Butterfly and Light-of-Pearl, of course. Besides, I could use a share of reward money.”

“I... I want to,” Cappen stammered. “How I want to! But the odds against us—”

“She’s your girl, and it’s your decision. I’ll not blame you if you hold back. Belike, then, in your country, they don’t believe a man’s first troth is to his woman and kids. Anyway, for you that was no more than a hope.”

A surge went through the minstrel. He sprang up and paced, back and forth, back and forth. “But what could we do?”

“Well, we could scout the temple and see what’s what,” Jamie proposed. “I’ve been there once in a while, reckoning ‘twould do no hurt to give those gods their honour. Maybe we’ll find that indeed naught can be done in aid. Or maybe we won’t, and go ahead and do it.”

Danlis—

Fire blossomed in Cappen Varra. He was young. He drew his sword and swung it whistling on high. “Yes! We will!”

A small grammarian part of him noted the confusion of tenses and moods in the conversation.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE SOLE TRAFFIC on the Avenue of Temples was a night breeze, cold and sibilant. Stars, as icy to behold, looked down on its broad emptiness, on darkened buildings and weather-worn idols and rustling gardens. Here and there flames cast restless light, from porticoes or gables or ledges, out of glass lanterns or iron pots or pierced stone jars. At the foot of the grand staircase leading to the fane of Ils and Shipri, fire formed haloes on the enormous figures, male and female in robes of antiquity, that flanked it.

Beyond, the god-house itself loomed, porticoed front, great bronze doors, granite walls rising sheer above to a gilt dome from which light also gleamed; the highest point in Sanctuary.

Cappen started up. “Halt” said Jamie, and plucked at his cloak. “We can’t walk straight in. They keep guards in the vestibule, you know.”

“I want a close view of those sikkintairs,” the bard explained.

“Um, well, maybe not a bad idea, but let’s be quick. If a squad of the watch comes by, we’re in trouble.” They could not claim they simply wished to perform their devotions, for a civilian was not allowed to bear more arms in this district than a knife. Cappen and Jamie each had that, but no illuminant like honest men. In addition, Cappen carried his rapier, Jamie a claymore, a visored conical helmet, and a knee-length byrnie. He had, moreover, furnished spears for both.

Cappen nodded and bounded aloft. Half-way, he stopped and gazed. The statue was a daunting sight. Of obsidian polished glassy smooth, it might have measured thirty feet were the tail not coiled under the narrow body. The two legs which supported the front ended in talons the length of Jamie’s dirk. An upreared, serpentine neck bore a wickedly lanceolate head, jaws parted to show fangs that the sculptor had rendered in diamond. From the back sprang wings, bat-like save for their sharp-pointed curvatures, which if unfolded might well have covered another ten yards.

“Aye,” Jamie murmured, “such a brute could bear off two women like an eagle a brace of leverets. Must take a lot of food to power it. I wonder what quarry they hunt at home.”

“We may find out,” Cappen said, and wished he hadn’t.



“Come.” Jamie led the way back, and around to the left side of the temple. It occupied almost its entire ground, leaving but a narrow strip of flagstones. Next to that, a wall enclosed the flower-fragrant sanctum of Eshi, the love goddess. Thus the space between was gratifyingly dark; the intruders could not now be spied from the avenue. Yet enough light filtered in that they saw what they were doing. Cappen wondered if this meant she smiled on their venture. After all, it was for love, mainly. Besides, he had always been an enthusiastic worshipper of hers, or at any rate of her counterparts in foreign pantheons; oftener than most men had he rendered her favourite sacrifice.

Jamie had pointed out that the building must have lesser doors for utilitarian purposes. He soon found one, bolted for the night and between windows that were hardly more than slits, impossible to crawl through. He could have hewn the wood panels asunder, but the noise might be heard. Cappen had a better idea. He got his partner down on hands and knees. Standing on the broad back, he poked his spear through a window and worked it along the inside of the door. After some fumbling and whispered obscenities, he caught the latch with the head and drew the bolt.

“Hoosh, you missed your trade, I’m thinking,” said the Northerner as he rose and opened the way.

“No, burglary’s too risky for my taste,” Cappen replied in feeble jest. The fact was that he had never stolen or cheated unless somebody deserved such treatment.

“Even burgling the house of a god?” Jamie’s grin was wider than necessary.

Cappen shivered. “Don’t remind me.”

They entered a storeroom, shut the door, and groped through murk to the exit. Beyond was a hall. Widely spaced lamps gave bare visibility. Otherwise the intruders saw emptiness and heard silence. The vestibule and nave of the temple were never closed; the guards watched over a priest always prepared to accept offerings. But elsewhere hierarchy and staff were asleep. Or so the two hoped.

Jamie had known that the holy of holies was in the dome, Ils being a sky god. Now he let Cappen take the lead, as having more familiarity with interiors and ability to reason out a route. The minstrel used half his mind for that and scarcely noticed the splendours through which he passed. The second half was busy recollecting legends of heroes who incurred the anger of a god, especially a major god, but won to happiness in the end because they had the blessing of another. He decided that future attempts to propitiate Ils would only draw the attention of that august personage; however, Savankala would be pleased, and, yes, as for native deities, he would by all means fervently cultivate Eshi.

A few times, which felt ghastly long, he took a wrong turning and must retrace his steps after he had discovered that. Presently, though, he found a staircase which seemed to zig-zag over the inside of an exterior wall. Landing after landing passed by—

The last was enclosed in a very small room, a booth, albeit richly ornamented—

He opened the door and stepped out—

Wind searched between the pillars that upheld the dome, through his clothes and in towards his bones. He saw stars. They were the brightest in heaven, for the entry booth was the pedestal of a gigantic lantern. Across a floor tiled in symbols

unknown to him, he observed something large at each cardinal point—an altar, two statues, and the famous Thunderstone, he guessed; they were shrouded in cloth of gold. Before the eastern object was stretched a band, the far side of which seemed to be aglow.

He gathered his courage and approached. The thing was a parchment, about eight feet long and four wide, hung by cords from the upper corners to a supporting member of the dome. The cords appeared to be glued fast, as if to avoid making holes in the surface. The lower edge of the scroll, two feet above the floor, was likewise secured; but to a pair of anvils surely brought here for the purpose. Nevertheless the parchment flapped and rattled a bit in the wind. It was covered with cabalistic signs.

Cappen stepped around to the other side, and whistled low. That held a picture, within a narrow border. Past the edge of what might be a pergola, the scene went to a meadowland made stately by oak trees standing at random intervals. About a mile away—the perspective was marvellously executed—stood a building of manorial size in a style he had never seen before, twistily colonaded, extravagantly sweeping of roof and eaves, blood-red. A formal garden surrounded it, whose paths and topiaries were of equally alien outline; fountains sprang in intricate patterns. Beyond the house, terrain rolled higher, and snow-peaks thrust above the horizon. The sky was deep blue.

“What the pox!” exploded from Jamie. “Sunshine’s coming out of that painting. I feel it.”

Cappen rallied his wits and paid heed. Yes, Warmth as well as light, and... and odours? And were those fountains not actually at play?

An eerie thrilling took him. “I... believe... we’ve... found the gate,” he said.

He poked his spear cautiously at the scroll. The point met no resistance; it simply moved on. Jamie went behind. “You’ve not pierced it,” he reported. “Nothing sticks out on this side—which, by the way, is quite solid.”

“No,” Cappen answered faintly, “the spear-head’s in the next world.”

He drew the weapon back. He and Jamie stared at each other.

“Well?” said the Northerner.

“We’ll never get a better chance,” Cappen’s throat responded for him. “It’d be blind foolishness to retreat now, unless we decide to give up the whole venture.”

“We, uh, we could go tell Molin, no, the Prince what we’ve found.”

“And be cast into a madhouse? If the Prince did send investigators anyway, the plotters need merely take this thing down and hide it till the squad has left. No.” Cappen squared his shoulders. “Do what you like, Jamie, but I am going through.”

Underneath, he heartily wished he had less self-respect, or at least that he weren’t in love with Danlis.

Jamie scowled and sighed. “Aye, right you are, I suppose. I’d not looked for matters to take so headlong a course. I awaited that we’d simply scout around. Had I foreseen this, I’d have roused the lassies to bid them, well, good night.” He hefted his spear and drew his sword. Abruptly he laughed. “Whatever comes, ‘twill not be dull!”

Stepping high over the threshold, Cappen went forward.

It felt like walking through any door, save that he entered a mild summer's day. After Jamie had followed, he saw that the vista in the parchment was that on which he had just turned his back: a veiled mass, a pillar, stars above a nighted city. He checked the opposite side of the strip, and met the same designs as had been painted on its mate.

No, he thought, not its mate. If he had understood Enas Yorl aright, and rightly remembered what his tutor in mathematics had told him about esoteric geometry, there could be but a single scroll. One side of it gave on this universe, the other side on his, and a spell had twisted dimensions until matter could pass straight between.

Here too the parchment was suspended by cords, though in a pergola of yellow marble, whose circular stairs led down to the meadow. He imagined a sikkintair would find the passage tricky, especially if it was burdened with two women in its claws. The monster had probably hugged them close to it, come in at high speed, folded its wings, and glided between the pillars of the dome and the margins of the gate. On the outbound trip, it must have crawled through into Sanctuary.

All this Cappen did and thought in half a dozen heartbeats. A shout yanked his attention back. Three men who had been idling on the stairs had noticed the advent and were on their way up. Large and hard-featured, they bore the shaven visages, high-crested morions, gilt cuirasses, black tunics and boots, short swords, and halberds of temple guards. "Who in the Unholy's name are you?" called the first. "What're you doing here?"

Jamie's qualms vanished under a tide of boyish glee. "I doubt they'll believe any words of ours," he said. "We'll have to convince them a different way. If you can handle him on our left, I'll take his feres." Cappen felt less confident. But he lacked time to be afraid; shuddering would have to be done in a more convenient hour. Besides, he was quite a good fencer. He dashed across the floor and down the stair.

The trouble was, he had no experience with spears. He jabbed. The halberdier held his weapon, both hands close together, near the middle of the shaft. He snapped it against Cappen's, deflected the thrust, and nearly tore the minstrel's out of his grasp. The watchman's return would have skewered his enemy, had the minstrel not flopped straight to the marble.

The guard guffawed, braced his legs wide, swung the halberd back for an axe-head blow. As it descended, his hands shifted towards the end of the helve. Chips flew. Cappen had rolled downstairs. He twirled the whole way to the ground and sprang erect. He still clutched his spear, which had bruised him whenever he crossed above it. The sentry bellowed and hopped in pursuit. Cappen ran.

Behind them, a second guard sprawled and flopped, diminuendo, in what seemed an impossibly copious and bright amount of blood. Jamie had hurled his own spear as he charged and taken the man in the neck. The third was giving the Northerner a brisk fight, halberd against claymore. He had longer reach, but the redhead had more brawn. Thump and clatter rang across the daisies.

Cappen's adversary was bigger than he was. This had the drawback that the former could not change speed or direction as readily. When the guard was pounding along at his best clip, ten or twelve feet in the rear, Cappen stopped within a coin's breadth, whirled about, and threw his shaft. He did not do that as

his comrade had done. He pitched it between the guard's legs. The man crashed to the grass. Cappen plunged in. He didn't risk trying for a stab. That would let the armoured combatant grapple him. He wrenched the halberd loose and skipped off.

The sentinel rose. Cappen reached an oak and tossed the halberd. It lodged among boughs. He drew blade. His foe did the same.

Shortsword versus rapier—much better, though Cappen must have a care. The torso opposing him was protected. Still, the human anatomy has more vulnerable points than that. "Shall we dance?" Cappen asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

AS HE AND Jamie approached the house, a shadow slid across them. They glanced aloft and saw the gaunt black form of a sikkintair. For an instant, they nerved themselves for the worst. However, the Flying Knife simply caught an updraught, planed high, and hovered in sinister magnificence. "Belike they don't hunt men unless commanded to," the Northerner speculated. "Bear and buffalo are meatier."

Cappen frowned at the scarlet walls before him. "The next question," he said, "is why nobody has come out against us."

"Um, I'd deem those wights we left scattered around were the only fighting men here. What task was theirs? Why, to keep the ladies from escaping, if those are allowed to walk outdoors by day. As for yon manse, while it's plenty big, I suspect it's on loan from its owner. Naught but a few servants need be on hand and the women, let's hope. I don't suppose anybody happened to see our little brawl."

The thought that they might effect the rescue—soon, safely, easily—went through Cappen in a wave of dizziness. Afterwards—he and Jamie had discussed that. If the temple hierophants, from Hazroah on down, were put under immediate arrest, that ought to dispose of the vengeance problem.

Gravel scrunched underfoot. Rose, jasmine, honeysuckle sweetened the air. Fountains leaped and chimed. The partners reached the main door. It was oaken, with many glass eyes inset; the knocker had the shape of a sikkintair.

Jamie leaned his spear, unsheathed his sword, turned the knob left-handed, and swung the door open. A maroon sumptuousness of carpet, hangings, upholstery brooded beyond. He and Cappen entered. Inside were quietness and an odour like that just before a thunderstorm.

A man in a deacon's black robe came through an archway, his tonsure a gleam in the dimness. "Did I hear—Oh!" he gasped, and scuttled backwards.

Jamie made a long arm and collared him. "Not so fast, friend," the warrior said genially. "We've a request, and if you oblige, we won't get stains on this pretty rug. Where are your guests?"

"What, what, what," the deacon gobbled.

Jamie shook him, in leisured wise lest he quite dislocate the shoulder. "Lady Rosanda, wife to Molin Torchholder, and her assistant Danlis. Take us to them. Oh, and we'd liefer not meet folk along the way. It might get messy if we did."

The deacon fainted.

“Ah, well,” Jamie said. “I hate the idea of cutting down unarmed men, but chances are they won’t be foolhardy.” He filled his lungs. “Rosanda!” he bawled. “Danlis! Jamie and Cappen Varra are here! Come on home!”

The volume almost bowled his companion over. “Are you mad?” the minstrel exclaimed. “You’ll warn the whole staff—” A flash lit his mind: if they had seen no further guards, surely there were none, and nothing corporeal remained to fear. Yet every minute’s delay heightened the danger of something else going wrong. Somebody might find signs of invasion back in the temple; the gods alone knew what lurked in this realm... Yes, Jamie’s judgement might prove mistaken, but it was the best he could have made.

Servitors appeared, and recoiled from naked steel. And then, and then—

Through a doorway strode Danlis. She led by the hand, or dragged, a half hysterical Rosanda. Both were decently attired and neither looked abused, but pallor in cheeks and smudges under eyes bespoke what they must have suffered.

Cappen came nigh dropping his spear. “Beloved!” he cried. “Are you hale?”

“We’ve not been ill-treated in the flesh, aside from the snatching itself,” she answered efficiently. “The threats, should Hazroah not get his way, have been cruel. Can we leave now?”

“Aye, the soonest, the best,” Jamie growled. “Lead them on ahead, Cappen.” His sword covered the rear. On his way out, he retrieved the spear he had left.

They started back over the garden paths. Danlis and Cappen between them must help Rosanda along. That woman’s plump prettiness was lost in tears, moans, whimpers, and occasional screams. He paid scant attention. His gaze kept seeking the clear profile of his darling. When her grey eyes turned towards him, his heart became a lyre.

She parted her lips. He waited for her to ask in dazzlement, “How did you ever do this, you unbelievable, wonderful men?”

“What have we ahead of us?” she wanted to know.

Well, it was an intelligent query. Cappen swallowed disappointment and sketched the immediate past. Now, he said, they’d return via the gate to the dome and make their stealthy way from the temple, thence to Molin’s dwelling for a joyous reunion. But then they must act promptly—yes, roust the Prince out of bed for authorization—and occupy the temple and arrest everybody in sight before new trouble got fetched from this world.

Rosanda gained some self-control as he talked. “Oh, my, oh, my,” she wheezed, “you unbelievable, wonderful men.”

An ear-piercing trill slashed across her voice. The escapers looked behind them. At the entrance to the house stood a thickset middle-aged person in the scarlet robe of a ranking priest of IIs. He held a pipe to his mouth and blew. “Hazroah!” Rosanda shrilled. “The ringleader!”

“The High Flamen—” Danlis began.

A rush in the air interrupted. Cappen flung his vision skyward and knew the nightmare was true. The sikkintair was descending. Hazroah had summoned it.

“Why, you son of a bitch!” Jamie roared. Still well behind the rest, he lifted his spear, brought it back, flung it with his whole strength and weight. The point went home in Hazroah’s breast. Ribs did not stop it. He spouted blood, crumpled, and spouted no more. The shaft quivered above his body.

But the sikkintair's vast wings eclipsed the sun. Jamie rejoined his band and plucked the second spear from Cappen's fingers. "Hurry on, lad, he ordered. "Get them to safety."

"Leave you? No!" protested his comrade. Jamie spat an oath. "Do you want the whole faring to've gone for naught? Hurry, I said!"

Danlis tugged at Cappen's sleeve. "He's right. The state requires our testimony."

Cappen stumbled onward. From time to time he glanced back. In the shadow of the wings, Jamie's hair blazed. He stood foursquare, spear grasped as a huntsman does. Agape, the Flying Knife rushed down upon him. Jamie thrust straight between those jaws, and twisted.

The monster let out a sawtoothed shriek. Its wings threshed, made thundercrack, it swooped by, a foot raked. Jamie had his claymore out. He parried the blow.

The sikkintair rose. The shaft waggled from its throat. It spread great ebon membranes, looped, and came back earthward. Its claws were before it. Air whirred behind.

Jamie stood his ground, sword in right hand, knife in left. As the talons smote, he fended them off with the dirk. Blood sprang from his thigh, but his byrnie took most of the edged sweep. And his sword hewed. The sikkintair ululated again. It tried to ascend, and couldn't.

Jamie had crippled its left wing. It landed—Cappen felt the impact through soles and bones—and hitched itself towards him. From around the spear came a geyser hiss.

Jamie held fast where he was. As fangs struck at him, he sidestepped, sprang back, and threw his shoulders against the shaft. Leverage swung jaws aside. He glided by the neck towards the forequarters. Both of his blades attacked the spine.

Cappen and the women hastened on.

They were almost at the pergola when footfalls drew his eyes rearwards. Jamie loped at an overtaking pace. Behind him, the sikkintair lay in a heap.

The redhead pulled alongside. "Hai, what a fight!" he panted. "Thanks for this journey, friend! A drinking bout's worth of thanks!"

They mounted the death-defiled stairs. Cappen peered across miles. Wings beat in heaven, from the direction of the mountains. Horror stabbed his guts. "Look!" He could barely croak.

Jamie squinted. "More of them," he said. "A score, maybe. We can't cope with so many. An army couldn't."

"That whistle was heard farther away than mortals would hear," Danlis added starkly.

"What do we linger for?" Rosanda wailed. "Come, take us home!"

"And the sikkintairs follow?" Jamie retorted. "No. I've my lassies, and kinfolk, and—" He moved to stand before the parchment. Edged metal dripped in his hands; red lay splashed across helm, ringmail, clothing, face. His grin broke forth, wry. A spaewife once told me I'd die on the far side of strangeness. I'll wager she didn't know her own strength."

"You assume that the mission of the beasts is to destroy us, and when that is done they will return to their lairs." The tone Danlis used might have served for a remark about the weather.

“Aye, what else? The harm they’d wreak would be in a hunt for us. But put to such trouble, they could grow furious and harry our whole world. That’s the more likely when Hazroah lies skewered. Who else can control them?”

“None that I know of, and he talked quite frankly to us.” She nodded. “Yes, it behoves us to die where we are.” Rosanda sank down and blubbered. Danlis showed irritation. “Up!” she commanded her mistress. “Up and meet your fate like a Rankan matron!”

Cappen goggled hopelessly at her. She gave him a smile. “Have no regrets, dear,” she said. “You did well. The conspiracy against the state has been checked.”

The far side of strangeness—check—chessboard—that version of chess where you pretend the right and left sides of the board are identical on a cylinder tumbled through Cappen. The Flying Knives drew closer fast. Curious aspects of geometry—

Lightning-smitten, he knew... or guessed he did... “No, Jamie, we go!” he yelled.

“To no avail save reaping of innocents?” The big man hunched his shoulders. “Never.”

“Jamie, let us by! I can close the gate. I swear I can—I swear by—by Eshi—”

The Northerner locked eyes with Cappen for a span that grew. At last: “You are my brother in arms.” He stood aside. “Go on.”

The sikkintairs were so near that the noise of their speed reached Cappen. He urged Danlis towards the scroll. She lifted her skirt a trifle, revealing a dainty ankle, and stepped through. He hauled on Rosanda’s wrist. The woman wavered to her feet but seemed unable to find her direction. Cappen took an arm and passed it into the next world for Danlis to pull. Himself, he gave a mighty shove on milady’s buttocks. She crossed over.

He did. And Jamie.

Beneath the temple dome, Cappen’s rapier reached high and slashed. Louder came the racket of cloven air. Cappen severed the upper cords. The parchment fell, wrinkling, crackling. He dropped his weapon, a-clang, squatted, and stretched his arms wide. The free corners he seized. He pulled them to the corners that were still secured, to make a closed band of the scroll.

From it sounded monstrous thumps and scrapes. The sikkintairs were crawling into the pergola. For them the portal must hang unchanged, open for their hunting.

Cappen gave that which he held a half-twist and brought the edges back together.

Thus he created a surface which had but a single side and a single edge. Thus he obliterated the gate.

He had not been sure what would follow. He had fleetingly supposed he would smuggle the scroll out, held in its paradoxical form, and eventually glue it unless he could burn it. But upon the instant that he completed the twist and juncture, the parchment was gone. Enas Yorl told him afterwards that he had made it impossible for the thing to exist.

Air rushed in where the gate had been, crack and hiss. Cappen heard that sound as it were an alien word of incantation: “Möbius-s-s.”

\* \* \* \* \*

HAVING STOLEN OUT of the temple and some distance thence, the party stopped for a few minutes of recovery before they proceeded to Molin's house.

This was in a blind alley off the avenue, a brick-paved recess where flowers grew in planters, shared by the fanes of two small and gentle gods. Wind had died away, stars glimmered bright, a half moon stood above easterly roofs and cast wan argence. Afar, a tomcat serenaded his intended.

Rosanda had gotten back a measure of equilibrium. She cast herself against Jamie's breast. "Oh, hero, hero," she crooned, "you shall have reward, yes, treasure, ennoblement, everything!" She snuggled. "But nothing greater than my unbounded thanks..."

The Northerner cocked an eyebrow at Cappen. The bard shook his head a little. Jamie nodded in understanding, and disengaged. "Uh, have a care, milady," he said. "Pressing against ringmail, all bloody and sweaty too, can't be good for a complexion."

Even if one rescues them, it is not wise to trifle with the wives of magnates.

Cappen had been busy himself. For the first time, he kissed Danlis on her lovely mouth; then for the second time; then for the third. She responded decorously.

Thereafter she likewise withdrew. Moonlight made a mystery out of her classic beauty. "Cappen," she said, "before we go on, we had better have a talk."

He gaped. "What?"

She bridged her fingers. "Urgent matters first," she continued crisply. "Once we get to the mansion and wake the high priest, it will be chaos at first, conference later, and I—as a woman—excluded from serious discussion. Therefore best I give my counsel now, for you to relay. Not that Molin or the Prince are fools; the measures to take are for the most part obvious. However, swift action is desirable, and they will have been caught by surprise."

She ticked her points off. "First, as you have indicated, the Hell Hounds"—her nostrils pinched in distaste at the nickname—"the Imperial elite guard should mount an immediate raid on the temple of Ils and arrest all personnel for interrogation, except the Arch-priest. He's probably innocent, and in any event it would be inept politics. Hazroah's death may have removed the danger, but this should not be taken for granted. Even if it has, his co-conspirators ought to be identified and made examples of.

"Yet, second, wisdom should temper justice. No lasting harm was done, unless we count those persons who are trapped in the parallel universe; and they doubtless deserve to be."

They seemed entirely males, Cappen recalled. He grimaced in compassion. Of course, the sikkintairs might eat them.

Danlis was talking on: "—humane governance and the art of compromise. A grand temple dedicated to the Rankan gods is certainly required, but it need be no larger than that of Ils. Your counsel will have much weight, dear. Give it wisely. I will advise you."

"Uh?" Cappen said.

Danlis smiled and laid her hands over his. "Why, you can have unlimited preferment, after what you did," she told him. "I'll show you how to apply for it."

"But—but I'm no blooming statesman!" Cappen stuttered.



She stepped back and considered him. “True,” she agreed. “You’re valiant, yes, but you’re also flighty and lazy and—Well, don’t despair. I will mould you.”

Cappen gulped and shuffled aside. “Jamie,” he said, “uh, Jamie, I feel wrung dry, dead on my feet. I’d be worse than no use—I’d be a drogue on things just when they have to move fast. Better I find me a doss, and you take the ladies home. Come over here and I’ll tell you how to convey the story in fewest words. Excuse us, ladies. Some of those words you oughtn’t to hear.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A WEEK THENCE, Cappen Varra sat drinking in the Vulgar Unicorn. It was mid afternoon and none else were present but the associate tapster, his wound knitted.

A man filled the doorway and came in, to Cappen’s table. “Been casting about everywhere for you,” the Northerner grumbled. “Where’ve you been?”

“Lying low,” Cappen replied. “I’ve taken a place here in the Maze which’ll do till I’ve dropped back into obscurity, or decide to drift elsewhere altogether.” He sipped his wine. Sunbeams slanted through windows; dust motes danced golden in their warmth; a cat lay on a sill and purred. “Trouble is, my purse is flat.”

“We’re free of such woes for a goodly while.” Jamie flung his length into a chair and signaled the attendant. “Beer!” he thundered.

“You collected a reward, then?” the minstrel asked eagerly.

Jamie nodded. “Aye. In the way you whispered I should, before you left us. I’m baffled why and it went sore against the grain. But I did give Molin the notion that the rescue was my idea and you naught but a hanger-on whom I’d slip a few royals. He filled a box with gold and silver money, and said he wished he could afford ten times that. He offered to get me Rankan citizenship and a title as well, and make a bureaucrat of me, but I said no, thanks. We share, you and I, half and half. But right this now, drinks are on me.”

“What about the plotters?” Cappen inquired.

“Ah, those. The matter’s been kept quiet, as you’d await. Still, while the temple of IIs can’t be abolished, seemingly it’s been tamed.” Jamie’s regard sought across the table and sharpened. “After you disappeared, Danlis agreed to let me claim the whole honour. She knew better—Rosanda never noticed—but Danlis wanted a man of the hour to carry her redes to the prince, and none remained save me. She supposed you were simply worn out. When last I saw her, though, she... um-m... she expressed disappointment.” He cocked his ruddy head. “Yon’s quite a girl. I thought you loved her.”

Cappen Varra took a fresh draught of wine. Old summers glowed along his tongue. “I did,” he confessed. “I do. My heart is broken, and in part I drink to numb the pain.”

Jamie raised his brows. “What? Makes no sense.”

“Oh, it makes very basic sense,” Cappen answered. “Broken hearts tend to heal rather soon. Meanwhile, if I may recite from a rondel I completed before you found me—”

*“Each sword of sorrow that would maim or slay,  
My lady of the morning deftly parries.”*

*Yet gods forbid I be the one she marries!  
I rise from bed the latest hour I may.  
My lady comes to me like break of day;  
I dream in darkness if it chance she tarries.”*

