

Out of Night

the sarn mother looked down at Grayth with unblinking, golden eyes. "You administer the laws under the Sarn," she clicked waspishly. "The Sarn makes the laws. Men obey them. That was settled once and for all time four thousand years ago. The Sarn Mother has determined that this thing is the way of progress that is most desirable. It is clear?"

. Grayth looked up at her, his slow-moving eyes following from the toe pads, up the strange, rope-flexible legs, up the rounded, golden body to the four twined arms, his lips silent. His steel-gray eyes alone conveyed his thought complete. The Sarn Mother, on her inlaid throne of state, clicked softly in annoyance.

"Aye, different races we are; the Sarn are the ruling race. The Sarn Mother will be obeyed by the slaves of her people no less than by her people. For many centuries the crazy patchwork has persisted—that the men have had freedoms that the masters have denied themselves. Henceforth men shall be ruled as the Sarn. The Sarn have been just masters; this is no more than justice. But be warned, you will see that this thing is administered at once—or the Sarn will administer it themselves."

Grayth spoke for the first time, his voice deep and powerful. "Four thousand years ago your people came to Earth and conquered our people, enslaved them, destroyed all our leaders, setting up a rabble of unintelligent slaves. Since your atomic en-ergy, your synthetic foods, your automatic production machinery, and the enormous decrease in human population you had brought about made more of goods for each man, it worked no great hardship.

"Before ever the Sarn came to this world, your race was ruled by a matriarchy, as it is today, and must always be. To your people it

is natural, for among you the females born in a generation out-number the males five to one. You stand near seven feet tall, while the Sarn Father—as the other males of your race—is but four feet tall, but a quarter as powerful physically. Matriarchy is the inevita-ble heritage of your race.

"You differ from us in this fundamental of sex distribution. By pure chance our two races resemble each other superficially—two eyes, two ears, rounded heads. Your race has two, wide-separated nostrils, four arms in place of two. But internally there is no resem-ble. No bone of your body is three inches long; your arms, your legs are made as a human spine, of many small bones. Your copper-bearing foods are deadly poison to us. Your *strath*, though it seems like human hair, is a sensory organ sensitive to radio waves, and a radiator of those waves. We are two races apart, fundamentally different.

"Now, like your own matriarchy, you wish to establish upon us a matriarchal government; for this reason alone, you state, the num-ber of males to be allowed in succeeding generations is to be re-duced.

"What is natural for your race is an unnatural crime upon ours. Would you insist that we should eat no better food than you eat, as we should obey no different laws? Would you legislate that we should eat your foods, as we should obey your laws? Equally, in ei-ther case you destroy us. It is to the advantage of neither race."

"Grayth, you seek to tell the Sarn Mother her mind? What is best for her good? Perhaps I have been foolish to allow such freedom to your kind, allowing this 'election' of human administrators. You, Grayth, will be replaced within this week, and not by election. The laws of the Sarn will be applied at once!"

Grayth looked at her steadily, deep-set iron-gray eyes unwaver-ing on jewel-flecked golden ones. He sighed softly. "Your race does not know of the ancient powers of man; you are a race of people knowing and recognising only the might of the atomic generator, the flare of the atomic-blast as power. The power of the mind is great. For ten thousand years before your coming men thought, and united in their thoughts of the unseen powers. In a hectic week your ancestors destroyed all of man's chaotic civilization, clamped on him suddenly a new world state. Before a union of thought could be attained, the thing was done, and as

slow crystallization of feeling came, the poor survivors found that the conditions were not impossible. Our very difference of race protected them, to an extent, against mistreatment.

"But a crystallization has taken place during these forty centuries, a slow uniformity has built up. The mighty, chaotic thought wills of five hundred million men during three thousand generations were striving, building toward a mighty reservoir of powers, but their very disordered strivings prevented ordered formation.

"During a hundred centuries of chaotic thought, turbulent desire, those vast reservoirs of eternal, indestructible thought energies have circled space, unable to unite. During these last four millenniums those age-old forces have slowly united on a single, common thought that men destroyed by your race during the conquest have sent out.

"We of our race have felt that thing in these last years, that slowly accreting oneness of age-old will and thought, developing reality and power by the gathering of forces generated by minds released by death during ten thousand years. He is growing, a one from many, the combined thought and wisdom and power of the fifteen hundred billions of men who have lived on Earth. Aesir, he is, black as the spaces in which he formed.

"We are a different race. As you have your *strath* sensitive to radio, we have yet a more subtle sense, a sense reacting to the very essence of thought. That, too, has grown with the passing years. Over there by the wall an electrotechnician follows conduits, and his thoughts are clear to my mind, as the communications of the Sarn are to each other."

The Sarn Mother's lips twitched. "He pays no attention to us," she said very low, so that, in the huge room, only those within a few feet of her could hear. "I doubt this power you claim. Make him come here and bow down before me—and say no word."

Across the room, the human electrotechnician, clad in the stout, ungraceful clothes of his trade, the lightning emblem emblazoned on his back, looked up with a start. "Before the Sarn Mother?" his voice echoed his surprise that he, an undistinguished workman, should be called thus before the ruler of Earth. "Aye, I—" He looked about him suddenly, his face blanking in surprise as he saw no one nearer him than the gathering two hundred feet away across the black basalt floor. A red flush of confusion spread over his face, and he turned back to his task with awkward nervousness, sure that the voice from empty air, issuing an impossible summons, had been a figment of his own imagination—

The Sarn Mother looked with unwinking golden eyes at Grayth. "You may go," she said at last. "But the Law of the Sarn, that there shall be five of females and one of males, is the law of the planet."

Grayth turned slowly, his head bowed momentarily in parting salute. His body erect, and his tread firm, he walked down the lane of the gathered Sarn. Behind him, the six humans who had accompanied him fell into step. Silently, the little procession passed between the gleaming bronze of the great entrance doors and down the broad steps to the parked lawns beyond.

Bartel hastened his steps and fell in beside Grayth. "Do you think she will enforce that law? What can we do? Will she believe in this mind force, this myth from the childhood of a race?"

Grayth's eyes darkened a little. He nodded slowly. "We will go to my house. The Sarn Mother is not given to idle gestures, and she cannot lay down laws and revoke them aimlessly. But—we can talk when we reach my house." Grayth strode on thoughtfully. Sunlight lay across the lawns—sunlight and green shadows under trees. They saw the occasional darting shadow of vague huge things, high in the air, smoothlined shapes that floated wingless and soundless far above them. Then down a long avenue paved with a gray cement that would glow with soft light when night fell, they went. The broad park lands, with their jewel-like palaces of the Sarn, fell behind them, then the low wall that divided the city of the Sarn from the city of men.

The broad avenue shrank abruptly, changed from the gray, night-glowing cement to a cobbled walk. The jewel-like palaces and the sprawling parks of the Sarn gave way to neat, small houses of white-washed cement, crusted with layer on ancient layer of soft-tinted wash. For these homes nearest the Sarn City had been built after the coming of the Sarn, when the ruins of man's cities still smoldered with destruction.

The very atomic bombs that had brought that ruin to man's cities were dead now. The last traces of the cities being succumbing to the returning thrust of green, burying life. The Sarn were old on Earth and this city they had caused to be about them was old, the hard granite cobbles of the walk worn smooth and polished with the soft tread of ages.

The Sarn Mother had sat on her golden throne and watched the rains of summers smooth them, and the tread of generations of men polish them. The Sarn Mother had been old when the Sarn landed; she was unchanged now, after the passage of more than a hundred generations of men, after ten generations of the rest of her people. She was eternal.

The neat, vine-clad houses of the city of men slipped back, and the easy bustle of the square came before them, the ancient shops

where a hundred and twenty generations had bought and sold and carried on their lives. He nodded absently, smiled to friends and well-wishers, noted unchanging the sullen looks of those who wore the small green shield emblem of Drunnel's faction.

Bartel's voice spoke again at his shoulder. "Drunnel's friend, Varthil, seems less sullen today. Did you notice?" Bartel nodded faintly toward the powerful figure clad in the balance-embled tunic of a legal administrator. "He went so far as to smile slightly. I am undecided between two meanings."

"There is only one possible." Grayth sighed. "He has more sense than to try to make me believe he begins to regard me as a friend; therefore, he smiles not at me but to himself. You sent Thera as I suggested—"

Bartel nodded in puzzlement. "I did, Grayth, but—I cannot see the need of that. The Sarn will—" "The Sarn Mother will do nothing. Wait till we reach the house." The square fell behind; the houses grew less ancient, subtly so, for the style of building remained unchanged, and the building had been good. There were no signs of decay in even the oldest. The lands around each house grew larger, too. There were more chil-dren in these cobbled lanes.

Grayth turned off, Bartel and three of the others with him; two, with a few words of parting, went on. Silently, they continued to the low, rambling house of faintly tinted cement that was Grayth's residence and office.

Here in this low, millennium-old building, the pyramided, loosely-knit government of the humans of Earth was concentrated. A struc-ture based on town delegates from every human settlement of Earth, men who reported to district speakers who carried their mes-sages to continental spokesmen and finally to the Spokesman of Mankind, and this was the spokesman's official residence. Six months ago old Tranmath, Spokesman of Mankind for twenty-two years, had died in this old building, and Grayth had been elected his successor, to "deal justly, and honorably and to the utmost of my ability so long as I may live, or until my body fails." Death or dishonesty alone could remove him from his position. Death, dis-honesty, or—now—Drunnel, who for the moment represented both. Responsible to the Sarn, responsible to the humans as well, Grayth's actual powers were limited purely to advisory capacities; he advised the Sarn, though they disregarded his suggestions as they liked. He advised the legion commanders, the police of the human towns, and they, likewise, could disregard his suggestions. The Sarn Mother knew as well as he did that he could not enforce those laws of the matriarchy, even had he desired to; the Sarn Mother did not like Grayth.

A dozen secretaries and clerks looked up as the small party en-tered, and looked back to their work. Enamel-and-silver disks on their headbands, the design worked into their sleeves, showed their status in society—the book and the lamp of administrators.

Grayth nodded briefly and continued across the rubberlike floor to the low door of his inner conference room. The feet of thirty generations of spokesmen had carved into that tough, rubbery stuff a channel that circled here to avoid a column, turned back to avoid a desk that had sat just so, it or its precursors, for one thousand years. Finally, it tunneled a bit under the door, and into the low-ceilinged office. It split, as the entering parties had split those thou-sand years, to the nine seats about the conference table, a great six-inch slab of time-stained mahogany.

Grayth seated himself at the end of the table, Bartel, the Ameri-can spokesman at his right, beside him Carron, commander of the legion of peace, Darak and Holmun, Grayth's subspokesmen. And on their heels the gray-clad electrotechnician came quietly into the room. Silently, the five men nodded greeting, while the technician placed his kit on the age-worn table. He lifted from it a shelf layer of jumbled tools, exposing tiny, banked instruments, and a thin, in-sulated metal rod that popped up as a spring extended it.

Skilled fingers made adjustments as tiny needles swayed deli-cately and came to rest. His fingers touched small controls and the flexible metal aerial nodded and bowed and danced, bowing to every side of the room, halting suddenly as needles lifted and quivered. The technician lined it carefully, then looked along its pointing finger toward the atom-flame projector, throwing dying stars of light that settled and vanished in twinkling illumination in the air. The tiny rod glowed with bluish light as he threw a tiny stud on his instrument panel.

"That makes twelve different listeners," he grunted. "I told you the Sarn had had time to install more than one."

"And the spokesmen wondered, in years gone by, that the Sarn seemed to know their very thoughts." Grayth smiled bitterly. "We may be able to advance. I am the first spokesman in ten centuries who can hold a conference without the invisible presence of the Sarn Mother."

Carron looked angrily toward the atom-flame projector. "It's in that thing? Why don't you rip it out?"

The technician grinned. "The Sarn can hear radio waves as you hear sound. To them, that listener—a tiny radio transmitter pow-ered probably by the atomic power of the projector—emits a clear, low hum. When we speak, the crystal modulates the radio hum with our voice frequencies. My little aerial there simply trans-mits a wave which, without stopping the transmitter's radio fre-quency carrier, strips off the modulation. If I tear out the transmit-ter—the hum would vanish, and the Sarn would become—curious, shall I say?"

"Furious," grunted Bartel. "Why won't they switch to another while we're in the room? They switch from one to another of those listeners irregularly."

"Ware's instrument would still work, whichever they used," Grayth explained. "He was merely curious

as to which and how many they were using. There was no need to locate the listener." The technician nodded in confirmation.

Darak turned to Grayth with a sigh. "That being settled, tell me, Grayth, why does the Sarn Mother ask you to do—command you to do something she knows you have no power to accomplish?"

"Because the Sarn Mother knows I will not do it," answered the spokesman sourly, "but that Drunnel would."

"Drunnel—could he influence the Sarn Mother? I never believed she would side in human quarrels unless she was directly affected—always felt she considered them beneath her notice." Carron looked to Grayth in surprise.

Grayth settled back slowly in his great, worn chair. He lighted his pipe and began to puff, looking lazily at the gushing, soundless stars of the atom flame. "Four thousand years ago the Sarn Mother landed, and only she herself knows how many ages she had lived before that. The Sarn are long lived—some live as long as a thousand years. But the Sarn Mother is the matriarch, immortal. Even her people have forgotten her age. The Sarn landed, and in the Battles of Conquest ninety-nine percent of mankind on Earth was destroyed. The remainder were made slaves, and they, our forefathers, were the meanest, sniveling scum of humanity."

Carron moved restlessly; his face flushed slowly and words growled in his throat. Grayth looked at him, his lean, rugged face smiling ironically. "Ifs true enough, Carron. Those noble forefathers of ours were no great men; the great died killing Sarn,

rebelling, fighting. The unconquerable spirits died because they could not be conquered—and could die.

"Four thousand years the Sarn Mother has sat on her throne and watched mankind—listened, it would seem"—Grayth nodded toward the glowing aerial of the demodulator apparatus—"to its most secret councils. She knows man with the knowledge of one hundred and twenty generations. Unfortunately, man evolves, and being a short-lived animal, evolves more rapidly than do the Sarn. The weakness that made him submit to slavery has died out in four thousand years. For a millennium the Mother has seen man rapidly becoming man again.

"Bartel—Carron—what is that you wear on your forehead, that medallion of silver and enamel? The thing they placed on your forehead when they said you were 'called to manhood.' The Mother believes, in her mind, that it is the badge of your slavery, and your rank in her hierarchy of slavery."

"But Ware has hollowed the solid silver of the Sarn Mother's slave badge to contain the telepathic instrument. That she does not guess. She does guess, though, that man's slavery is being hollowed, a shell that may break soon. My announcement of the telepathic power troubled her more than we had guessed. We did not know, but she did. The ancients, before the Conquest, had begun to discover telepathy. Where we hoped a myth might impress her, she knew the fact already! By my telepath I followed her mind as she listened.

"That she learned from forgotten records, but this she has learned from watching one hundred and twenty generations of us. Man will fight and die for what he has not; woman will fight and die for what she has. Man will sacrifice everything he has for something he hopes for, an ideal; but while woman will fight for an ideal, she will not give up the good she has to gain it.

"The Sarn Mother knows that man is thinking again, after four thousand years, of the freedom he has not."

"The Mother, then—means to enforce the matriarchy laws on humanity!" Bartel exclaimed. "But—that will merely inflame the revolution, not stamp it out."

Grayth shook his head. "The Mother is not so direct. She has lived four thousand years; to her a century is a passing year, and three generations of misery to humanity is a bad year in her life. She knows rebellion might flare, but she plans not for a century, but for a millennium. Her will will be done—and the survivors will

bleed the beneficent Mother and her justness. What things must she do that the matriarchy laws may be applied to humanity?"

"Kill four out of every five men! She can't! Better she would kill the last of humanity trying that, for every woman will fight for her man—and be killed with him!" Carron snorted. "Before she accomplished any such slaughter, half her Sarn would have been throttled, and all humans, man and woman alike. To bring to effect the law of one and five, so many women would die defending their men that none would survive. And surely they would never serve the butcher."

"Drunnel," said Grayth bitterly. "Drunnel is her cat's-paw. Women will hate the butcher, true enough, so Drunnel she's groomed for the role. No hatred of Sarn, no danger to Sarn. But civil war—and Drunnel.

Drunnel—and not rebellion, but rebellious energies diverted against themselves. Let men loll men, and fewer women die. Let men kill men, till the beneficent Mother steps in with her hallowed legion of Sarn and stops the slaughter—when the law of one and five is reached.

"Half the survivors will hate Drunnel for his destruction and half will love the leader of their lost men. But all will praise the Mother * who stopped the bloody war. The Sarn Mother plans with the wis-dom of four thousand years, and not the hot temper of forty."

Carron opened his mouth to growl something, stopped, and closed it with a snap. Til throttle Drunnel this afternoon," he finally vowed.

"Rendan is his lieutenant, and will take over. After Rendan is Grasun—and others follow." Bartel sighed.

"And I don't think you will throttle Drunnel this afternoon any-way," Ware said softly. "Unless he is late for his hour with the Mother, he is before her now, bargaining and discussing weapons."

"We haven't any weapons save those air guns Ware and others have made for us—and clubs," Carron groaned. "The Mother, I sup-pose, will give him some of the deadly weapons by which the Sarn destroyed the ancients."

Ware shook his head. "By no means; you forget her purpose. She does not want Drunnel to win. She wants him to bring about a decimating strife. If she gives him powerful weapons and easy con-quest, the war is done before it is begun. No, she will give him weak weapons, and few of them, so that he will win only after long, deadly struggle. Why, she would probably supply us with weapons, if Drunnel should get too easy a victory."

Carron threw his great body back in his chair so viciously the old wood creaked in protest. The room thundered to his curses. "I'll move my blistering legion of peace this very hour, by—by Aesirl I'll throttle Drunnel with my own hands, and I'll see that every sneak-ing, slinking Sarn-fathered maggot of his evil crew squirms beside him!"

"We can't. Drunnel has as many men as we—and it would not be done in an hour. We must wait till Ware's work is done, and Aesir is ready to aid us," Grayth said sharply. "If we can hold off this struggle till we are ready to help ourselves, the Aesir will be strong enough to help us."

"What does Drunnel hope to gain from this?" asked Holmun. "He is spreading his organization to Europe, to Asia, as I know. Everywhere you sent me these last two months, I have found him working, promising a firmer stand against the Sarn, more freedom for humanity. Those are campaign promises, to be rejected. But if he knows this is coming—what does he hope to gain by it, knowing, as he must, that the Sarn Mother is inciting this thing to cause slaughter, not to give him power."

Grayth's lean, tanned face hardened and the iron-gray eyes flashed. "Power, yes, but more than that; every move Drunnel has ever made, he has found me across his path. He sought the district delegateship; I won it. He had to content himself with that of city spokesman. He sought the American spokesmanship; I won it. He hated me. Six months ago we sought the spokesmanship; I won again, while Bartel here won the American spokesmanship over Rendan, his friend. That might be enough—but he wants Deya, and Deya chose me. To him it was the finishing blow. I think the man is mad. Power and the girl he wanted—and he has been blocked in every move.

"If he must, he is not averse to destroying all mankind to destroy me, and to destroy Bartel, too. If he wins, he does that—destroys us—and he believes he will then have Deya and Thera as well.

"If he wins, he destroys me, and Bartel, the men he hates. For a time at least, he will have the power he wants and the women he wants, not for themselves now, but because they refused him. He fights for those reasons. His followers—"

Grayth looked at none of them, his whole concentration turned on an inner consideration of the problem. His voice was almost a monotone, the voice of a man thinking out loud. "There will be civil war," he said softly, "because mankind is slowly growing aware of slavery and restriction. The whole race is stirring with a slow realization of confinement. But as yet, the mass of men have

not realized what it is they want. The rule of the Sarn is so deep in their minds that the idea of rebellion against the Sarn Mother can-not rise to conscious levels. Mankind needs, in its restlessness demands, as never before, a leader about whom it can crystallize to express this restlessness in action. Drunnel's followers that will rebel against us are rebelling, symbolically, one might say, against the Sarn, since we represent the government the Sarn allowed.

"Drunnel has found, ready to hand, a mass of men who will act as he wants, to place him in the place of the men he hates. This is a fight between leaders, solely that. Only the leaders know why they are fighting. The people who will follow Drunnel against us will fight only because of a vague discontent that Drunnel

has enlisted to aid him. Only Drunnel knows what it is he wants; power and Deya.

"Then he hopes to win the Mother to a new plan, not matriarchy, but a rule by men of a world of women. He knows the Mother's feelings, her realization of mankind's discontent, I believe. He hopes to compromise with her."

"He won't," said Ware softly. "I've spent hours near the Mother as the electrotechnician of the city of the Sarn. She has her plans, and they are as Grayth said. But she plans further. For a year or two Drunnel will have power and hatred, but she will protect him. He will have near him—his wives—the best minds of the women, and she knows them: Deya, Thera, Coson—you all know them. Then the Mother will withdraw her protection, and the hate he will have stirred will kill him. Some woman will avenge her man. Deya will be Spokeswoman of Human Women. For a day in her life, the Mother will suffer Drunnel and his annoyances, that the long-time plan may be carried out."

Carron stood up abruptly. The massive old chair crashed over backward as he strode the length of the room, trembling, his great arms knotted with angry muscles, his three hundred pounds of bone and sinew quivering with wordless anger.

Ware lingered a moment after the others had left Grayth. Slowly, he prepared to pack away his small kit of tools and apparatus. "Aesir, our black lord, seems no nearer." He sighed.

Grayth nodded silently. Then he said, "Can you give me one of those demodulators, Ware? You are the only hope of success man-kind can have, you and your discovery. You must not be seen visit-ing the spokesman too frequently, attending the executive confer-ences. As an electrotechnician you are part of the gray background

of the Sarn City; we want no spotlights turned on you. By the telepath you can follow every conference, and if you can teach me to operate that demodulator—"

Ware's usual slight stoop, the gray monotony of his work seemed to slip from him for a second as he stood erect, suddenly a powerful figure of a man, six feet tall, dark eyes set far under heavy brows, searching out with vibrant intelligence. The easy lines of his face straightened and deepened as he gazed steadily at Grayth for a long, silent moment. Slowly, he ran his lean-fingered hand across his head, taking the telepath band from his forehead.

"I think that we will both be busy tonight, Grayth. You with the men whom you can handle, I—I have an appointment with Aesir, whom I cannot handle." A slow smile spread across the lean, tanned cheeks. "If, in the morning, the problem is *still* pressing-come to my house. I will probably be behind the stone."

"There is tonight," Grayth acknowledged sadly. "Let's pray that tomorrow the problem will still be pressing. Thank—er—Aesir, you have never appeared, that even Drunnel does not see you when you walk by with that kit of tools. If things so come that we—Bartel, Carron and I—are not here to press the problem tomorrow, I have this hope: that neither Sarn nor Drunnel realize their true source of danger.

"But do not come here again, please, Ware."

"Maybe that would be best," the electrotechnician agreed. He bent over to pack his apparatus, his tools once more.

Drunnel looked up to the Mother's slitted, vertical-pupiled eyes. Behind his own keen, dark eyes a swift, agile brain was weighing-guessing—planning. "But they are not so helpless; they have a weapon designed by one of their own men—a hand weapon that projects small slugs of metal. An air gun."

The Mother's expressionless eyes continued to stare at him, un-winking, the smooth, coppery skin of her face unmoving, the deli-cate, barely unhuman face hiding the thoughts of more than four thousand years. "I do not mix with human quarrels, save when they affect my Sarn," she said softly. "If this quarrel of yours gets out of hand, I will send my legion to stop it. But Grayth does not please me, and he has no desire to enforce my laws. I will give you those things I mentioned, no more—the crown and the glow beam. You will have one thousand of each; the rest of your forces will have to fight on terms equal with theirs.

"Sthek Tharg, take them to the hall of arms and let them have

those things." The Sarn Mother's eyes closed behind opaque, cop-pery sheaths; she sat motionlessly as the Sarn she had called un-coiled his arms and rose slowly from his padded chair. On noiseless, padded feet he stalked off across the great hall of assembly. Behind him, Drunnel and his six companions followed.

"Call others," Sthek Tharg snapped.

"Rendan," Drunnel spoke softly, "tell Sarsun we will need severity-five men, preferably discreet men, at the gate just after dusk. That will be in two hours now. I will send someone else to lead them when we are ready."

Rendan dropped from the group and hurried through the laby-rinthine corridors to the outer park, down to the human city. Drun-nel followed his silent guide through unfamiliar passages, to an ele-vator that dropped them one thousand feet to a dank, cold corridor that led off to unfathomed reaches of dimness, a corridor lighted only sparsely

by far-scattered atom-flame projectors burning at an absolute minimum.

The Sarn started off firmly toward the left. Doors opened from the corridor at long intervals—doorways opening into dim-lighted halls burned by atomic-blasts in native, sparkling granite. Some-thing of the crystalline fury of the blasts lingered yet in their glit-tering, scintillating walls. Under dim lights, vague, vast structures of crystal and metal and plastic loomed in indeterminate dusk. The feeble, dying sparks of atom stars served only to make horrific out-lines discernible. Vast, many-legged things of metal, built with huge ropy things that dropped dejected near them—ropy things of glinting metal ending in things strangely like Sarn hands, with their many-boned flexibility.

Other rooms were filled, cabinet above cabinet, with boxed devices—things that might, of course, be no more than searchlights. The armory of the Sarn! Unused these four thousand years.

Drunnel looked at the shrouded things with keen, dark eyes. His lean, muscular body never slowed in its step; the thin, almost as-cetic face never turned. Only the dark eyes darted from dark door-way to huddled, half-glimpsed mass—the doorless doorways, with-out bar, or light-beam interceptor. The elevator answered to any being's control.

The Sarn turned his head, rotated it till his slitted eyes stared straight to Drunnel's, while he walked steadily forward. The line-thin gash of his mouth opened in what might have been a smile. "I will get the crown and the weapon. It is not—advisable that humans cross the threshold of these doors."

He paused a moment, and the body and head rotated in opposite directions till, alike, they faced a dark doorway. He walked toward it, and as he crossed, a spark of the atom flame in the dim room's ceiling floated down, living strangely long, to burst abruptly before him. It burned for perhaps ten seconds, dying with a shrill, clear, tinkling note during all those seconds, fading into dimness as the thin, keen note died with it.

Drunnel, twenty feet away, relaxed slowly, his knees bending under his weight, till he crouched on the floor, his powerful, six-foot body crumpled under its own weight till he was on hands and knees, his head dangling in limp agony, all his muscles quivering, jerking, dancing madly under his skin.

The thin, sweet note died. Drunnel raised his head slowly, white as chalk in the light of the corridor, streaked with sudden, clammy sweat. His dark eyes, bloodshot and wide now, stared into the slit-ted ruby eyes of the Sarn in the doorway. The Sam's thin mouth twitched slightly as he moved into the room. The atom flame in the roof leaped up with his moving, and the cabinets of the rooms stood out in clear relief.

Drunnel climbed slowly to his feet, dark, bloodshot eyes snap-ping with an inexpressible hatred that tugged at him like a living thing. One shaky, trembling step he made toward that doorway, in-sane anger flooding him. Then, slowly, his mind regained control as the agony washed from him, and he stood, trembling half from weakness, half from a mad desire to crush the thin-lipped mouth of Sthek Tharg. "Drunnel!"—he turned, to see Grasun, an unsteady hand stretched toward his leader, staring up into his face with tor-tured, worried eyes—"don't—stay here."

Drunnel snapped the hand from his sleeve. "Til stay," he said softly. He glanced at the others: Farnos, leaning dazed against the wall, blood trickling from his nostrils; Tomus working himself to his feet with the aid of the rough wall; Blysun swaying unsteadily on his feet. The others were still helpless on the floor. "He might have told us what was coming."

"He wanted to warn us—against entering the rooms—and didn't, perhaps, realize how strongly it affected us," Farnos said.

Drunnel looked at him silently. Farnos dropped his eyes uneasily and struggled to his feet, one hand steadying him. The effects were passing swiftly. Inside the room rumbling wheels echoed softly; the Sarn was pulling a little four-wheeled truck loaded with a hundred or more small gray cases, perhaps four by twelve .by three inches, and a dozen or so round cases four inches thick and a foot in diam-eter,

Sthek Tharg stopped, just inside the door, and eyed them. "Per-haps," he said ironically, "you would be more comfortable farther from that doorway as I pass through." He started forward. The hu-mans scrambled away from him. They were fifty feet away when the thin, sweet note of a dying star of light thrilled through them, jerking, straining, quivering. Drunnel stood his ground, leaning slightly against the wall. The Sarn moved toward them, the low rumble of the rubber-shod wheels changing its note as the cart rolled into the corridor.

"Come here and take the crowns. They will protect you against the crystals—if you are not too close." Drunnel came toward him, took one of the round boxes, and from it the curious crown. It was a band of metal that circled his head, padded with rubber on the inner side, eight erect, outward-slanting metal rods, ending in dull-golden globes, perhaps a quarter of an inch in diameter. Nested in the center, above the curve of his skull, a tiny mechanism was inclosed in golden metal.

"It will throw a sheath of energy about you which is proof against any material thing, and deadly to any being wielding a metal object against you. It holds in near stasis the molecules of the air, so that the sound of the crystals will not reach you—if you remain at a little distance. And it is defense against the glow-beam."

Drunnel mounted the thing on his head, slipping his headband of silver and enamel into his cloak pocket. He touched a tiny stud at his brow, and a slight shock of energy lanced him momentarily. The Sam's voice was softened, muffled by its action, and he snapped it off.

"The glow-beam"—Sthek Tharg opened one of the flat boxes to disclose an object fashioned of black plastic, dully lustrous metal, and one single crystal—"carries a charge sufficient to paralyze, for a day, five

hundred men, paralyze for a moment nearly one thousand, or paralyze forever two hundred. This slide controls the action—this stud the discharge."

He raised it in flexible, many-boned fingers, his almost ten-taclelike arm looping up with it. It pointed down the corridor, and as he touched the stud briefly, a clear, sweet note seemed to dart down the faintly luminous beam that shot forth, to vanish in unseen reaches of the corridor. "Its range is about a third of a mile."

Drunnel took another from its flat case, examined it, and put it

quietly in his cloak. The others were fitting the curious crowns to their heads, and, a moment later, unloading the little truck.

Sthek Tharg returned to the dim room. Again the dying star shot toward him, and the atom flame leaped up. Drunnel touched the stud at his brow, and heard very dimly, as though far off, the sweet, torturing note of the crystal. It made his teeth hurt, as though an unseen drill were working in their depths. He took five cautious steps toward the doorway, till sweat started from his face and his limbs began to tremble. He snapped off the stud and walked toward his men. They, too, were snapping off the energies—

"Grasun, turn yours on." Drunnel watched; there was an instant of wavering energy, as though a sheath of heat waves had risen suddenly about the man—then nothing—nothing save the slightest of distortions that only his expectant eye could detect; that, and the slightly duller appearance of the eight metal globes on the crown's eight points. "Can you understand me readily?" Drunnel spoke in an ordinary tone.

"Perfectly," Grasun replied, nodding in confirmation.

"Good. Turn it off. We will have to move these things to the ele-vator, then again to the gate of the Sarn City. And—there is some-thing I want to find out—"

The Sarn returned with the small truck. Drunnel stood alone, watching his men carrying the last of the boxed weapons to the ele-vator. He started in surprise at the first note of the dying crystal, snapped the little stud as he turned to watch Sthek Tharg. The Sarn stepped through expressionlessly, the little truck behind him. Drunnel walked toward him as the notes died in the air, his hands reaching toward the piled boxes—

"Stop!" snapped the Sarn. He fell back a hasty step, slitted ruby eyes blazing angrily. "You have a sheath of energy around you, fool. Turn off that crown."

Drunnel looked at him, mumbled a vague apology as he turned the stud. Rapidly, he lifted the boxes from the truck; he had learned what he sought to know. The Sarn were not immune to the sheath of the crown.

Deya opened the door at his knock, and Grayth stepped in with a backward glance at the dimly seen groups in the tree-shaded street. The last colors of sunset were fading from the sky, and the darkness slowly saturated the clear, cooling air. The spring nights were not yet hot as they would be in another two weeks. A near-full moon

hung halfway up the eastern sky, its light not yet appreciably affecting the dimness of the scene.

Deya looked over his shoulder, and motioned him in. "They look more restless than ever, Grayth. There came this afternoon—she is fixing supper now—and told me that Bartel believed the explosion would come soon."

Grayth nodded slowly and shut the door behind his back. He looked unhappily into the clear, calm blue eyes raised to his, eyes like bits of cobalt glass in a delicately molded, determined face. Six feet two Grayth stood, but Deya was a resurgence of a four-thousand-year-forgotten blood, a clear, Norse strain. Her eyes were not three inches below his, her red-gold hair, her clean-lined body the living remembrance of a race human minds had forgotten.

Grayth sighed, took her in his arms. "The explosion will come to-night, dear girl. In three weeks—or never—we will be able to end this indeterminacy."

Deya's hands rested lightly on his shoulders as she leaned back-ward slightly to see him more clearly. His lean, strong face was set and serious, the etched-iron eyes worried. "The Mother has helped • Drunnel as you feared?"

Grayth nodded. His finger touched the telepath disk at his brow. "Have you tried to follow any of his men's thoughts today?"

Deya smiled. "No, I tried to follow yours. I could not for some reason, only occasional snatches of ideas. You were very angry about four o'clock this afternoon."

Grayth nodded. "We had a conference. Drunnel has gotten weapons, and though I cannot follow his mind, as you know, I did follow that of Rendan. But Rendan was sent to gather men to carry away the

weapons the Mother gave, and did not follow everything that happened. By Aesir, I wish I could follow Drunnel. That he should be one of those rare, complete nontelepaths!"

"What are the weapons?" Deya asked.

Grayth shrugged. "Rendan did not know—nor, I believe, did Drunnel. But you know what I have said; the Mother will not give him either a hopelessly powerful, or hopelessly numerous stock of weapons. I suspect a weak weapon of attack, and a powerful weapon of defense for a few."

"Let's go out to the kitchen." Deya moved in his arms, and started away. "Thera hopes Bartel will be able to come." For a moment the cobalt-blue eyes clouded in inner concentration, as did Grayth's. They nodded together as Bartel's thoughts reached them, weak and unclear with distance. He was coming.

For a moment more Grayth caught the strong, lithe body in his arms, then they moved on to the kitchen. Thera had placed a table on the stone-flagged terrace behind the kitchen, under the trellis-work of dark-leaved climbing roses. A few first buds were opening in the cool night air. The last washing colors of sunset had faded from the sky and the shadows now were those cast by the moon, and by the silently flaring atom-flame projector.

The table was set and the food being brought when Bartel knocked. Thera went to admit him, and as she passed Grayth he suggested softly that she bolt the door when Bartel had entered.

A moment later the two returned. "They are standing around in groups," Bartel said, seating himself wearily. "I got a number of hate thoughts, and a number of friendly thoughts as I passed them. The groups seem about equally distributed as to sympathy, and I think that is one reason why I was not bothered at all on my way here. Perhaps we had best eat quickly. We may be—called out later."

Three-quarters of an hour later, Grayth and Bartel sat in the moon dusk, puffing slowly at their pipes. Deya and Thera moved quietly, stacking and washing utensils. Grayth pulled a small, flat jar from his cloak and put it on the table, looking questioningly toward Bartel. "Perhaps we might apply a little now."

Bartel grunted. "Moon cream. Does it work as well as Ware thought it might?"

Grayth smiled. "Better. I see you are wearing your official crim-son and blue. Mine are about the same. With this—" Grayth rubbed the paste over his hands and arms to the elbows, then over his face and neck. It vanished on his skin, colorless and invisible, in the light of the atomic flame. He rose and walked the length of the terrace, down into the garden, where only the pale moonlight reached him. As he stepped into the shadow of a gnarled, spreading apple tree—he vanished, a black shadow in blackness. As he stepped out into the moonlight again, crimson cloak, dark-blue jacket and trousers, face and hands alike were jet black. Slowly, he rejoined Bartel.

"It works," agreed Bartel, smearing the colorless stuff into his skin. "I hope it's harmless."

"It is. A harmless substance that will not reflect polarized light. You know the moonlight will not show colors—though the eye and the brain are tricked by it. Tonight it will serve both to make us invisible in shadow, and as a badge; Drunnel does not have it. All our men do."

"Carron was gathering the men and distributing these things

when I left him." Bartel looked out over the moon-lighted town. "He was still busy. Listen!"

A voice cried out somewhere in the direction of the square, the center of the human town—a dim, unrecognizable voice, crying out a blurred word time and again. Other voices joined. It grew and washed across the city, a many-times-repeated chant that grew with its moving, washing toward them in unrecognizable syllables, till a half-dozen voices two hundred feet away took it up with a gleeful howl: "Drunnel—Drunnel" Feet pounded with a muffled beat across lawns, hardening momentarily as they traversed stone-flagged walks, dying in the distance.

"He was busy, but the human town is annular, with the huge area of the Sarn City in the middle. Many men from the far sections had not been able to reach him yet. We were not able to use the vision instruments to spread our messages—Drunnel, since he has the Mother's help, did," Bartel finished hurriedly.

"He has another swift method of communication," Grayth pointed out. "It has rolled around the city in less than a minute and a half. They will be pouring into the square."

Somewhere outside a man shouted, screamed a curse as a muffled *thunk* cut it off abruptly. A bedlam was loosed, a score of cursing voices, a great bull-roaring voice giving orders, scurrying feet and the clang of metal on metal—and on flesh. It stopped with a long-drawn, thin scream that died away in gurgling bubbles of sound. The door of the cottage trembled to heavy blows.

Grayth was halfway through the house before the second blow sounded, moving in slow-seeming strides that propelled him as though half-floating through kitchen and hallway. In his hand a blue-lustrous bit of metal gleamed. "Who's there?" he demanded.

"Carron, you fool. Let me in. There's more coming down the street, and there's no need for arguing with them."

Carron burst in, an immense figure in torn greenish cloak of the legion of peace, a dozen men at his heels. In his immense hand a three-inch-thick table leg, nicked deeply in three places, and smeared with blood, seemed a thin wand. The door bellowed like a sail in the wind, as his huge hand cuffed it shut.

"Bars," he grunted. Two of his men slammed over the heavy metal, locking bolts.

"They've started, Grayth, and my men are gathering. They put their messages out faster, since they could use the vision—and we couldn't. Damn the Sarn! But we'll be evenly matched in the square, if the Mother didn't give Drunnel half her armory."

"She didn't," Grayth answered positively. "I told you she wants us matched—with Drunnel having a bit of an edge."

"Why couldn't we use the vision?" asked Thera, looking into the crowded room.

"Perhaps you had best lower those shutters," said Deya softly, "or turn out the lights. You are conspicuous and crowded in that window."

Carron smiled broadly at her, ducking his head to pass under the door beam six and a half feet from the floor. "I should have thought of that." He reached for the control rope, and the thin metal vanes of the shutter slipped almost noiselessly into place over the windows.

"The vision central offices are in Sam City," Deya explained to Thera. "The Sarn watch them; they offer no chance to send through messages we would want and the Sarn did not. Coded messages might work, if every man knew the code, but if every man knew, the Sarn would also know soon enough."

"The rest of the speakers are coming here later," Grayth said to Carron. "We must get them here safely—"

"I sent three strong detachments to gather them in," Carron grunted. "And I came here myself. I'm going to get the whole lot of you in here and throw one good guard ring about the place. That'll save me men and allow a better guard. I've got men in every house about here; not a man of Drunnel's could weave his way through without alarm being sent in. The moonlight is tricky, a crawling man seems a bit of a shrub, but these men are in their own houses. By Aesir, they know what shrubs they have—and Drunnel's men have no face-blackening moon cream."

"They have lamp black," said Deya. "They may use that."

"If they think of it. It makes them conspicuous then when they are in the light." Carron nodded. "What plans have you made, Grayth?"

"No detailed plans, for we are not ready. Had we had another month—even a week, perhaps—we might have learned then to sum-mon Aesir to our aid, and we had plans for that. But now—we must do as we can. Look; first the leaders, the speakers, must be concentrated and guarded here. Then, to stop this battle, we must somehow destroy three men: Drunnel, Rendan and Grasun. Beyond that succession the power of the leadership is not determined among them, and they'd fight among themselves. If that could be done this night, the month we need would be gained. The Mother would see

that one of the others took up the fight, but not immediately; time would elapse. Drunnel, Rendan and Grasun."

"Right." Carron nodded. "But they'll be at the square, in the center of their men. They'll be hard men to catch, and quick-footed men."

Grayth touched his headband fleetingly, his eyes intent on Carron. "We may be able to outguess them." Carron's eyes lighted with understanding.

"Aye—we might. We can try."

"The speakers with their escorts are almost here," Deya said, her eyes clearing from an effort of concentration. "Perhaps the door—"

A man sprang to draw the bolts as a knock sounded outside. A moment later ten men in the crimson cloaks of the speakers entered, crowding about in the tiny room. Fifty men in the dark green of the legion of peace, and a score in civilian motley waited outside. Carron stepped to the door. "A line of you—about the cottage and move outward till you surround the block. Make sure there's no man of Drunnel's within your line."

The men faded into nothingness under the shadowed trees, vanishing in silence and darkness under the deceptive moonlight, seeming so bright, yet actually colorless and dim. Carron closed and barred the door behind him.

"We'll take those men and join at the square. I haven't heard a sound since the call of Drunnel's men," Grayth said. "I'll go with you, Carron, and we'll start at once. Somehow we must get Drunnel, Rendan and Grasun."

"They won't agree with us," said Bartel sourly. "They no doubt have similar plans on you. It seems to me that you would be much better off staying here and letting us do that, for just as surely as Drunnel's forces collapse with his disappearance, ours collapse if you are taken. The battle would be over, right enough—with Drun-nel in power."

Grayth shook his head. "The speakers are here; they will be goal for many of Drunnel's men, but Drunnel will not want them," he said softly. "Drunnel wants me, and you. Therefore, we will go where he cannot find us. If we stay, he can lay plans to attack us. If we are somewhere in the city, our group can lay plans of defense, knowing where we are, while Drunnel, not knowing, cannot plan attack. And—we have work."

Bartel stepped through the door after him. As the three faded into the shadows, the dry grating of the bolts rattled the door behind them. In a moment their eyes became accustomed to the moonlight, the dimness seemed to roll back, and the silvery light grew stronger. Presently it seemed that it was illumination as effective, as strong as daylight. Then, abruptly, a shadowy being emerged from the darkness under a tree, appearing as though from thin air. "There's no one between the cottage here and the ring of watchers," he murmured.

Carron nodded. "Gather the men near Phalun's cottage. We'll make for the square." Carron hefted the table leg in his hand, and slipped into the shadow with the others. Grayth halted him, took the heavy weapon from him.

"Whatever the Mother has given them, it will more than likely be electric in nature," he said after a moment. "Discard metal and take wooden weapons. Warn your men against metal things."

At the corner of a tree-shadowed cottage they met the troop of men, and Carron passed the warning along. The soft clink and thud of metal followed slowly, reluctantly. The force dispersed quietly, groups of two and three wandering off to return moments later, silent, drifting shadows in the moonlight, carrying faintly lustrous table legs and chair legs of nonconducting, plastic material, one with a five-foot, pointed plastic rod ripped from an atom flame projector. And at the hip of each swung the blue-metal air guns.

Silent, drifting ghosts, they passed down the streets, scattered under clumps of moon shadow, following the lawns and dust-muffled roads. Slow accretions joined the party as the stragglers from outlying districts appeared. Three times there were brief scufflings and cries that were silenced under dull, muffled blows. White faces in the moonlight looked up sightlessly as they passed on—white faces, the badge of Drunnel's men.

There were lights in the square ahead, far down the street. Early arrivals stood about in tense idleness, awaiting the coming of reinforcements for both sides. Grayth turned down a side street, crossing at right angles toward the sound of a compact body of men advancing on a parallel street. A moment later they saw them, dark figures with white faces marching toward the square, a group of half a dozen in the lead, wearing curious gemmed crowns and carrying foot-long instruments in their hands.

The drifting shadows in the deeper shadow of trees dispersed, vanished save for little wraiths of blackness moving behind cottages, in absolute silence. The troop of Drunnel's men moved on alertly, eyes darting about, clubs and knives ready. A dense mass of three great trees darkened the road ahead, and they marched into it.

A dozen were down before they fully realized the assault. Carron's great voice boomed out in exaltation as he recognized the leader. "Grasun, by Aesir, Grasun!" A roar went up from the compact group of Grasun's companions.

And through it came the sweet, thrilling, killing note of the glow-beam Grasun carried in his hand. Its faint light shot out straight for the black shadow of a charging man bearing the mace of a bulky table leg in his upraised hands. The beam touched him, sang through him, and roared in sweet, chilling vibrations as though his twisting, tortured body were a sounding board. The men near him writhed and fell, twisting, helpless, their weapons dropping from numbed, paralyzed hands. Drunnel's men charged forward with a cry of triumph as the beam of the glow-tube swerved. Again the thin, shrill note stabbed out toward a darkened figure. For a moment he glowed, writhing, falling, his joints cracking suddenly as maddened muscles distorted him impossibly, his dying body a sounding resonator that paralyzed those near him.

Another glow-beam came into action as Carron's great figure lunged forward, the table leg upraised in huge arms. Leaping Drunnelians tumbled from the mighty, charging body; for a fraction of a second he loomed over Grasun.

Grasun stared up, his white face lifted to the moonlight, a smile of pure joy in it as he turned his weapon slowly toward the colossus towering six inches above him, three hundred pounds of bone and sinew. The table leg crashed down toward what Grasun knew was an impenetrable, invisible, shielding force. He

pressed the stud of his gun as the mace contacted his shield, with all the force and momentum Carron's shoulders could give it.

Grasun fell to the ground, while the pale beam of his ray shrieked its way through the treetops. Carron dropped his splintered club from numbed fingers. The sheer momentum of the blow, unable to crack the shield though it may have been, served to stun the man inside by the vicious jerking it imparted to him. Carron saw the strange, glowing rod wavering toward him again, felt the stunning impact of another attacker's club on his shoulder, and spun with a roar of rage. His immense hands closed on the attacker, the giant arms lifted him like a squalling child above Carron's shoulders, to crash him on the force shield of the fallen man. A high, thin wail of terror escaped him as the arcing energies of the field crashed through him. He fell, a smoldering, quivering thing, at the feet of Grasun.

"Rocks I" roared Carron, leaping from the scene of battle. "Rocks for those with the crowns! Bombard 'em!"

Others of Grayth's men had not leaped so hastily to close contact. The soft coughing air guns were bringing down many of the Drunnelians, groaning as heavy slugs broke bones, silent when they struck an instantly vital spot. The bullets fell away from those who wore the crowns, who stood unscathed, their whining weapons of the Sarn Mother stabbing at vague shadows retreated now into the greater shadows of the trees.

A cobble of granite the size of a man's head hurtled out of the darkness toward Grasun as he staggered uncertainly to his feet—a cobble hurled by an unseen giant. The shield deflected it, stopped it, but the meshed forces transmitted shattering momentum to the man who wore the crown. Grasun huddled on his knees, shaking his head, his weapon fallen to the ground beside him.

"Rocks!" Carron roared. "Rocks—big rocks, you blasted, wither-ing idiots! Not pebbles, you howling fools, rocks! They have a shield—a shield of force. But it shakes 'em when the rocks hit 'em—"

"Throw at Grasun." Grayth's voice snapped out of the night, low and tensely clear. "A dozen of you—heavy stuff."

A rain of granite cobbles, unearthed from a forgotten pile, stormed out of the night. Half a dozen struck the fallen man's shield with a blasting force. From barely within the protective shadow of the tree, Carron's huge arms heaved a boulder of eighty pounds weight. The deadly thing crashed down on the straining shield with a snapping of energies, held for a moment as though bouncing on unseen rubber, and fell to one side. Grasun rolled end over end under the impact, struggling dazedly to rise. His voice called out in muffled syllables to the milling men around him, but they dared not help him; the shield was death to touch.

"Carron—Carron—think!" Grayth's clear, sharp voice penetrated the roar of fighting men. Carron stopped bewildered for a moment, then strong in the telepath came his orders. Immediately his great hands swept a dozen others of his men into formation about him, each with a boulder in his hands. They burst from the shadows, and heavy rocks flew. The crowned men fell, staggered aside at the heavy burst of ammunition. The giant charged in at the head of his men, two great table legs flailing in his hands. The disorganized mob of Drunnelians parted as he charged toward the groggy Grasun. But before he came too near the invisible death of the

shield, he bent and picked up the glow-beam projector Grasun had dropped. Carron fled again to the protective trees.

Boulders were effective on crowned and unshielded alike. The steady rain of deadly ammunition was disrupting the aim of the glow-beam wielders. The apologetic little cough of the air guns in the hands of practiced men were making the Drunnelians fall like blighted grain.

The last of Drunnel's unshielded men were down, or gone. Half a dozen wearers of the crowns stood in a tight circle firing their strange death into the shadows. Grayth joined Carron beneath a great tree, and took from him the slim, warm tube of the weapon taken from the fallen Grasun. "A man you can trust," he snapped. "Send it to Ware; we must get others. Don't let those men escape; we must get Grasun."

"Tarnor—take this. You know the house of Ware. Take it to him. Run." The man was a crawling figure, sprinting across a lawn, then gone from sight. "Now"—Carron turned to Grayth—"we can keep their fire ineffective so long as the rocks hold out, but how can we crush those shields? It is death to touch them, it seems. I saw eight of their own men die when they stumbled into them."

A man materialized out of shadow beside Carron, a great wooden bucket in his hands, his invisible face split by a toothy grin. Carron took the thing in huge hands, and stepped forward; his huge arms creaked to the strain as it leaped into the air, to fall in a silver rain over the shielded men, running, trickling, wetting the ground at their feet. From another side another bucket leaped into the air, to drop over them, some few drops resting for a moment on the invisible sheath in darting, arcing energies. Another and another—

Grasun howled—a shrill scream of terror and agony. Water had short-circuited the thing on his head; it was smoking; as he tore it from him it grew red-hot—white; it exploded with a roar of sound a burst of incandescent energy

that limned attackers and attacked alike in glaring light. Grasun fell to the ground twitching, rolling—and suddenly stilled as he touched the hem of another's shield. A roar of triumph went up from every tree, every cottage corner.

The pistoled legion of peace had been driven into the buildings surrounding the square. In the center of the square, surrounded by two-score figures, Drunnel and Rendan directed the battle.

Grayth waited in the darkness just beyond, while Carron closed up his communications. Darting runners brought messages. Eyes dulled with an inner concentration, Grayth sat motionless, gathering information by telepath from a hundred hidden points, from men in the cottage they had left, from Deya, from Ware in his underground workshop. The secret of the glow-beam—

"The shield muffled voices," Grayth said to Carron. "They also stop the glow-beam then, for Ware says it projects a beam that carries an ultrasonic vibration that is death to man—and probably harmless to Sam."

Carron grunted. "The men in the buildings had already found the danger of metal, but they hadn't learned the trick of the rocks. I—"

Somewhere in a building, lightless and darkened, a sudden, terrific glare appeared. The windows were solid squares of thrusting radiance, spotlight beams that shot their brilliant knives through weak moonlight to limn for an instant the crouching figures in the center of the square. Drunnel stood up, badly outlined against a fierce beam of light, his face surprised, startled.

"Water." Grayth smiled. "I got the message through to Paultur. One of Drunnel's shielded men was trying to drive them out of the building. I wonder—" His eyes closed for a moment. "No, the weapon was destroyed, too."

Another virulent flash burned through the windows of a nearby house; in the first a duller, redder light was growing. Men were darting out of the place, smoke trailing behind them. The exploding crown had set fire to the age-dried woodwork.

Men were filtering out of the shadows, dim clots of a more solid black in the blackness under the tree. A fitful redness was growing in the moon-drenched square as the ancient woodwork of the ignited house yielded to the growing flame. The dimly seen messengers came near to Carron, speaking in low voices, Carron's deep bass growling in reply, till they vanished again on some mission of communication.

"Grayth," the giant's voice rumbled in its softest tones, "the men in the buildings can't get near enough to Drunnel's group to throw the heavy rocks. The glow-beams make it impossible, and until they get near they can't disturb the aim. Is there any way we can shield our men against the beams?"

Grayth was silent, but in his telepath Carron could feel the tenuous thread of mind energies reaching out to Ware, to others of their group. And dimly, he could feel Ware's answering thought. Screening—each man wrapped in sheet metal carefully grounded, worn over a thick padding of cotton, or quilting.

Carron muttered disgustedly. Grayth looked up at him, nodding. "Impossible, I know."

Shielded men were leaking away from the group in the center of the square, darting down narrow side streets before the rocks hurled from nearby buildings could knock them from their feet. Other shielded men were coming toward the square from every direction, men from more distant sections of the annular city. They were waiting in the back streets outside the square, moving in restless circles.

Carron touched Grayth's sleeve. "We can't do it in this try, Grayth," he growled. "The shielded ones with their weapons are surrounding the square. We'll be caught helplessly if we don't retreat. I've sent word to those others that—"

"If we don't reach Drunnel tonight, we'll never be able to," Grayth groaned. "The Sam Mother will give him better weapons, and waverers who had joined us will transfer to him when they see us in retreat"

"We must retreat at once," insisted Carron unhappily. "If we only had some means of swift communication—if we had only been able to map out a plan, and put it across to all our scattered people. We didn't have time; we didn't know what weapons Drunnel would have until too late. I know now what we should have done. Perhaps it is not too late, if we can once join our forces. Because all meetings have always been held in the square, all our men are rushing toward it. I'll call the men out of those buildings at—"

A wild rush of feet sounded down the great, radial artery. A hundred men with the darkened faces of Grayth's supporters swept down the street, half a dozen glow-tubes in their hands, and many empty water pails among them. The hidden men in the buildings of the square cheered them on, and a fusillade of air-gun pellets rattled on the stone flags. The mass of men broke up, scattering before they came in range of the pale beams of death. Long before Carron's messenger reached them their compact formation was gone; they were filtering through back streets into every building of the square.

But Carron's runner brought back a new interpretation of this reinforcement; they were not running to the charge, but falling back before more than fifty armed, shielded Drunnelians. Another band of Grayth's men rushed in from another artery, vanishing like smoke in shadows and shadowed buildings. The torch lighted by an exploding crown was growing; the red flare of a burning building

was rapidly making the moonlight unimportant, the moon cream useless. The fire was spreading.

Two score of Drunnel's fighters appeared down the street that had recently brought Carron's green-cloaked legionnaires. Carron settled back under the tree in helpless rage. "We won't retreat, Grayth. We can't now, for Drunnel has driven half our men into this square, between his central, unassailable group

and the ring of other men, and the buildings sheltering them are burning. I haven't seen a score of Drunnel's unshielded fighters; *they're* probably in the outskirts, keeping the rest of our men from relieving those in-side the ring."

Grayth looked at the spreading flames consuming the buildings. Stone for the most part, they were roofed with metal or slate, but the floors, walls and supporting beams were of wood. These were burning furiously. A burning house collapsed as he watched, the fierce heat of the internal furnace crumbling age-hardened mortar, loosening the aged stone.

Drunnel stood in the light of the fire, watching his circling fighters on the outskirts. His arms moved, giving orders, pointing out directions of movement. A messenger ran toward a broad ar-tery, down which a score of weaponed men were moving. A rain of half a hundred great stones crushed him to the ground and a stream of water drowned his screen into exploding fire as he passed too near a house. Another messenger started after him, dodging, running in irregular movements. A well-thrown rock knocked him from his feet, and a steady rain of them held him helpless till water drowned his screen in turn. A roar of angry triumph went up.

Drunnel's arm stayed another man who started toward a broader road. Drunnel shook his head, shrugged his shoulders as the man motioned violently, attempted to pull away.

"They can't enter the buildings," Carron growled. "The water and rocks stop that. But they don't have to. The fire is already there." He nodded toward a group of men working on a rooftop with a garden hose, their dark-green cloaks flapping in the faint wind. A glow-beam reached up from somewhere beyond the square, and a man crumpled in death. Three near him stiffened and jerked, one to slide from his position into the growing furnace.

A messenger panted up from the shadows, the glow of the flames giving color to his cloak, washing the blackness of the moonlight from his face. In his hand he held three of the crowns. His face split in a grin. "They don't have them turned on all the time."

Grayth stepped forward eagerly. "Three of them. How did you get them intact?"

"A dozen of us—we saw them coming down the road, and hid in the shadows. They did not have their shields turned on, and three fell in the first volley of the air guns. The others we washed out with water, but these we saved."

"Well," Carron pointed out bitterly, "that improves the odds. We now have three effective men who can stand up against their near thousand—maybe. Your technician friend may be able to duplicate them, though—in a month."

"Tarnsun," Grayth called softly to the figure half visible in the light of the flames, "take this to Ware. You can penetrate the lines Drunnel is drawing about us by wearing this, turned on full. If— Never mind, just go back and wait." Grayth had caught the weary denial Ware had sent. Grayth's thought had reached Ware at once, reached a tired, immensely busy technician, struggling with things of more immediate consequence.

Grayth turned the things in his hand, gave one to Carron. The giant spoke suddenly, pointing toward the square. One of the shielded men had stepped from the group, carrying a blazing ball ' of cotton on the end of a bit of wire. It sailed out from his arm to land on the roof of the building near the artery down which their messengers had attempted to go. It blazed feebly for a moment and went out. But a dozen more followed it, glazing, oil-soaked cotton wrapped around a stone. Light things that could be hurled a dis-tance the heavy rocks Carron's men had used could not cover. Three crashed through windows. The feeble blazes grew stronger. Water hissed viciously; for a moment the flame wavered, then grew swiftly brilliant.

Dark figures dropped from windows to dart toward nearby build-ings. Four stopped halfway, never to reach their goal, as glow-beams found them. The red flower of the flames spread slowly at first; then windows burst in the heat and they grew swiftly. The house on the opposite corner was burning now.

A messenger walked down the alley between the flames to a group of shielded men beyond. They moved away in planned unison when he reached them, the band splitting in two, marching in opposite directions about the square.

Carron stiffened suddenly; his eyes darted sideward toward Grayth's shadowed figure. Grayth, too, was stiffened, tense. A soft, unreal voice whispered in their minds, a voice and more than a voice, for with it whispered sights and sounds and odors: soft odors

of a garden under moonlight, the sounds of men crashing through ruined flower beds, and the thrilling, keening wail of the glow-beams. A garden in black and white, scattered with darting figures hurling water pails and rocks at an advancing troop of thirty shielded figures. Deya was watching through a window, with a score of the divisional speakers about her. The troop of Carron's le-gionnaires were falling back before the concerted assault of a mass of shielded, armed Drunnelians.

"They can't stop them," Grayth muttered.

Carron's voice rumbled unintelligibly. "We didn't."

"Another month—even a week, perhaps—and we might have learned to summon Aesir to aid us. Do you think the Mother knew—that she did this just early enough to prevent us—"

"What can we do now?" Carron demanded. "We might try a mass attack—all of the men swarming at once down on Drunnel and Rendan there——"

"Rendan isn't there." Grayth sighed. "It was he who went to the outer ring to order them. A mass attack would only

lead to a thousand deaths for everyone we have had tonight. There are nearly five thousand of our friends in those buildings. Somehow they must be released."

Slowly, Grayth got to his feet. Deya's thought pictures came so clear to his mind that it seemed almost that he must avoid the old oak which stood by the flagged terrace where he had eaten dinner, and the charging Drunnelians behind their shields. The last of Carron's green-cloaked legionnaires was down. They would not use their glow-beams on the speakers; Grayth knew with a terrible certainty that they would not use them on Deya and Thera.

Grayth reached to his forehead and touched the little stud of the crown he had donned. Carron watched him in surprise, started after him as he walked out of the shadow of the tree into the full light of the flames. "Stay there, Carron," Grayth called. Then he was striding across the last of the lawn onto the flagged pavement of the square. He stood still for a moment, as a half-dozen glowing beams lanced toward him, to die soundlessly against the invisible sheath of his crown. The beams stopped. Drunnel stepped toward him, till he stood in the forefront of his little force.

"What terms, Drunnel?" Grayth called. The sheath seemed to drink in his voice, but somehow Drunnel had heard.

Drunnel laughed softly. "And may I ask, why terms? Why should I want terms from you?"

"Because you have no real desire to destroy these men in the buildings." Grayth nodded to the silent watchers in the windows facing the square. "Because you only want to make sure that I do not escape—and because you cannot hold me. We have captured a score or so of these crowns the Mother gave you. With them I, a score or so of my men, Deya, Thera—and a few others—can leave you. We will have time and opportunity then to do something more, perhaps. But certainly I can find my way to safety on this world you cannot ever hope to search, though the Sarn Mother herself should aid you."

Grayth looked at Drunnel steadily, wondering if Drunnel had, of course, any way of knowing how many crowns had been captured intact. One, at least, he knew. And he had no way of knowing that Deya and Thera were even then arguing with a group of shielded men led by Barthun.

"What do you want?" Drunnel spoke after a moment's silence, broken only by the crackling lap of the flames, the restless creak of ancient houses crowded now with men.

"The men that fought for me go free, every man or woman or child you have surrounded, captured or blockaded. I will surrender to you."

"I do not like your terms." Drunnel laughed. "You cannot escape from this point now; the outer ring of my men would stop you."

Grayth shook his head. "You know better than that. What offer will you make?"

"I will release these men and women of no importance; but I will demand your surrender, and that of Bartel, Carron, and the spokes-men of *the* districts." Drunnel stood out before his men, his dark eyes flashing, a smile of sweeping satisfaction on his face. "And that is concession enough for what I hold in my hand this night. What fight have you, Grayth? Your men are bottled between my inner center here, and my outer ring. And the fire spreads in between."

"A clever trick your water was, and clever enough that hurling of rocks, but it gains you nothing. I have more sense of realities than you, Grayth. I don't lay humanity open to the anger of the Sarn Mother, and she is just. She appreciates and aids those who aid her."

"Your futile air guns have merely tempted your men into a closing trap. You, who have never seen a book on military strategy, never practiced warfare, hoping to defeat one tutored by the generals of the Sarn! You may be wise enough in working the minds of

cattle such as these in my burning pens—but for practical matters your knowledge is nothing.

"Well, what do you say, Grayth? I'll release these men, these stupid followers of a stupid leader—but the leaders must face the Mother."

Grayth shook his head. "We are not caught. We are quicksilver under your fingers, escaping as you try to hold us. Bartel you want for personal reasons, personal hatred, as you want me. I will surrender to you if you will swear by the name of the Mother, by Kathal Sargthan herself, that my people, including all others save only myself and Bartel, shall be free and undisturbed. Bartel, I except with his consent—and catch him if you may! You claim your ring tight—"

Drunnel stared at the tall figure of his enemy. Quicksilver under his fingers, to slip through the teeth of his closing trap. Bartel—

"Let Bartel join you, then," he called carelessly. "The sheep will fall apart in squabbles when the goats are gone."

"You swear by the name of the Mother, by Kathal Sargthan, that those who have fought for me shall be free and unmolested, on equal grounds with those who have fought with you and with those who have not fought?"

"By Kathal Sargthan, I swear that." Drunnel nodded.

"By Kathal Sargthan you swear that we shall have trial before the Mother, as the law of the Sarn

demands?"

Drunnel laughed, eyes flashing in the light of the flames. "Aye—if you want that so badly, Grayth, you and Bartel shall surrender to me, and together you shall appear before the Mother. And by the Mother's name, I'll have you there at the morning audience, too!"

Bartel's figure merged from the dark entranceway of a building, striding forward to join Grayth. Grayth snapped off the tiny stud of his crown as Drunnel came forward, took it from his head and re-stored the silver-and-enamel disk of the Mother's slaves. Drunnel took it from his hands, eyes bright, white teeth flashing in an almost friendly smile of triumph. The game was played out; Grayth and Bartel were no longer obstacles in his path to power.

The Sarn stood in solidly massed ranks leading up to the high, golden throne of the Sarn Mother. The great hall of audience was quiet, a hush so deep the faint rustle of the atom-flame projectors far above in the lofty dome trickled down to them like the rustle of autumn's falling leaves. Grayth and Bartel stood side by side before the Mother, their

official crimson cloaks stripped from them, draped instead over the tall forms of Drunnel and Rendan standing close behind. A long, slanting ray of morning sunlight stabbed through a window to wash on the crimson cloth, rebounding in reddening glare.

For long minutes the motionless, slitted eyes of the Mother looked into Grayth's calm face. Her line-thin mouth seemed scarcely to move as she spoke. "You told us that the law of the Sarn could not be enforced, and that you were unable to enforce it. Therefore, Grayth, it was my desire that you be removed.

"By the Law of the Sarn, the inefficient administrator is worthy of removal, and the rebellious administrator is worthy of death.

"By the common law of the humans, the inefficient are removed, and the treasonous are worthy of death.

"By the Law of the Sarn and the law of man, you have earned no appeal to me. Why then do you protest your ancient privilege of appeal to the Mother of laws and justice?"

"By the Law of Sarn and humans, the inefficient should be re-moved and the rebellious or treasonous destroyed," Grayth acknowledged. His voice was low and clear, its tones dying slowly in the vast hall. "If these things are proved against me, I am guilty. But no man has accused me of inefficiency, for I am not inefficient in failing to do that which the law forbids me to do. The Law of the Sarn forbids that the spokesman of man be also the commander of the legion, or that he raise a police power for his office. The law of the humans forbids the spokesman of men doing other than offer advice. I have given the Mother advice, as the laws require; the laws of the Sarn cannot be forced onto humanity without destruction. You ordered that I enforce them, yet the Law of Sarn and of man forbids my raising the power I must have to do this. Had I done so, I would have rebelled against the Law of the Sarn and been traitorous to human law. I did not do so; therein I am not traitorous, nor am I inefficient."

"The word of the Mother is the Law of the Sarn." The Sarn Mother's masking, translucent lids slid across her eyes for a moment. "There is no law above it. The decisions of the Mother are the law of the Earth; there is no law above them. You have acted inefficiently, or rebelliously. I find your actions rebellious. The law defines the manner of your death.

"So, also, I find Bartel rebellious. The law defines the manner of your death." The unwinking eyes swung slowly to Bartel and held him for a moment. Then, suddenly, they moved from his face, to look down the long hall of audiences to the great entranceway. The

expressionless face remained unchanged, the line-thin slit of her lips did not move. But in the silence the breath whistled softly into her nostrils. Grayth turned slowly to follow the unmoving stare of the Sarn Mother.

In the bright radiance of the atom flames, across lancing beams of early sunlight, a vague, amorphous thing moved, a thing of utter blackness. Shifting suggestions of blocky, heavy legs moved it forward. Slowly, in the sunlight and the radiance of the projectors, it seemed to solidify, condensing upon itself. A gigantic, manlike figure looming twelve feet—a figure not *in* black, but of blackness, a sheer absence of all vision, a solid shadow of utter night.

As it moved closer in ponderous, soundless strides, the condensation and solidification went on, more clearly the arms, the great legs became visible. A great, featureless head of jet surmounted the heroic figure, a face of eyeless, mouthless, noseless blackness, swirling, moving unsteadily.

And behind it on the great floor, where the formless feet touched, white sprang out, white flowers of frost. Slowly, the figure moved forward, an aura of cold, a faint, whispering wind from unguessed, icy spaces drawing about it, behind it. A stabbing beam of brilliant sunlight struck down from a high window, lanced into it like a great shaft—and vanished. It did not illuminate nor reflect from that figure of blackness.

"Aesir—" Grayth gasped the name, falling back a step.

Thirty feet from the Mother the figure halted, the mighty arms at rest by its sides. The paralyzed Sarn began to stir, a voice broke out in hissing syllables—and quieted. The blackness spoke, spoke not in words, but in thoughts, thoughts that danced and lanced through every mind, human and Sarn alike.

"There is neither justice nor right in your ruling, daughter of the Sarn. Your race and the race of my people are different. You must change that ruling, in the name of the justice you invoke."

The Sarn Mother's hand moved like a flashing serpent's tongue to a tiny stud set in her throne. A pencil of ravening, intolerable fury burst from the carven mouth of the crouching metal beast at her side, a pencil of

inconceivable energies that reft the air in its path in screaming, shattered atoms—and died soundless, lightless on the breast of the lord of blackness. From her massed guards a thousand tongues of death shrieked out, ravening rods of annihilation—that died unseen in his blackness. From the plaque above the throne of the Sarn Mother a roaring column of the atomic-blast, a force de-signed to wash down mountains, vomited forth, drowning in colos-

sal thunders the pricking bubbles of the lesser rays. No spark of light, no faintest sight of illumination appeared on the motionless giant.

The shouting voice of the rays died out, stopped, and their echoes wandered lonely in the vast silence of the hall. The blackness spoke again, in a soundless voice that seemed to echo like a vast organ's song, yet lacked all quality of sound.

"I am not matter, nor of forces such as your beams, your rays can touch, daughter of the Sarn. Your wisdom, the ancient powers of your race are useless. You are still but one; I am all of mankind that has ever been, the fifteen hundred billions who have died since the first man. I am the billions you slaughtered at the Conquest. Ten thousand generations of mankind have willed, dreamed and struggled for success and freedom. I am the crystallization of those wills, those dreams. I am mankind, an incarnate ideal half formed. No force, no ray, no thing of matter can influence my being.

"All space was saturated with the deathless energies of forgotten strivers, the eternal wills of all man's myriads since the lost begin-ning of time. In glacial epoch I died under rending tiger's claws, yet lived in the child protected by that sacrifice. I died while the world was young—and I died last night under the rays you gave these men, and with the leaden shot of the air guns in me.

"I am the wills of mankind, raised into substance by your own acts, daughter of the Sarn. Three billions died at the Conquest, and their wills released to eternal space carried one single thought: to save Earth from your slavery. They were the crystallizing point, on that heart and nucleus the space-ranging wills of unremembered generations have united into me. Four thousand years have passed, and slowly I have grown, till my powers made contact with Earth's space and time last night, when once again wills and minds went from Earth in striving for freedom.

"I am Aesir, the pantheon of mankind, and mankind itself. All that ever died, under blazing desert sun or in freezing arctic waste, when the first dim stirrings of mind arose and struggled with a tool, and through all time to the will that became of me while I spoke here—the will of one wounded last night and dying this morning.

"For whatever cause they strove and died, they are of me, daughter of the Sarn. Mankind must have justice, for each of those who died sought in his own way for what his mind believed was truth. Grayth and Bartel have striven that justice might be, and they shall go on with their works.

"Drunnel and Rendan have sought to sell mankind for their own ends. They, too, shall have justice."

The vast blackness of his arm reached out and a formless finger of jet touched once on Drunnel's forehead for a fraction of a second, before it passed to Rendan's terror-frozen countenance. Slowly, Drunnel swayed, his legs loosened and he fell to the floor as a soft, white blanket spread over his face. His head clicked like brittle metal on the black basalt of the floor. Like dropped ice it shattered in a dozen fragments. Kindly, swift-spreading, white frost crystals softened and concealed it, and the broken skull of Rendan.

Aesir turned. Before him a lane opened as the Sarn stumbled back, making a way that led him straight to the vast gold-flecked wall of the hall of audiences, polished slabs of jade-green stone. Silently, Aesir stepped into it; the solid matter misted and vanished at his touch, opening to the empty corridor beyond. For a moment it remained so, the vast, black figure striding soundless down the deserted corridor beyond the wall—then the wall closed in behind him. But it was black, black with the blackness of Aesir himself.

A guard turned on it a stabbing beam that crushed the atoms of a rising column into sparkling dust. But the blackness of the wall remained, untouched, unlighted. The beam died, and very slowly, before their eyes, the blackness faded from the wall, evaporating in little curling wisps of jet fog. For a moment, a distorted profile remained, a vast, black shadow of a man thrown on green stone.

Then only green polished stone glowed in the warm light of the rising sun.

The Mother's expressionless eyes looked into Grayth's for long, silent seconds. The Sarn shifted restlessly, little whisperings of a rising sound. "You shall both go, Grayth and Bartel, and see that order is restored in the human city. The Sarn Mother's voice halted for a moment, then continued, "At the hour of sunset of this day all the weapons and crowns I allowed to leave my arsenal will be re-turned to me.

"The law of the one and the five shall not apply to humans."

The Mother's eyes closed. Grayth and Bartel turned and walked silently down the long aisle between ranks of silent Sarn. Behind them followed the six, silent men who had come that morning with Drunnel and Rendan. Outside the great entranceway, the six went hastily away across the green lawn. For a moment

Grayth and Bar-tel stood alone.

An electrotechnician, a man so commonly seen working about the Sarn City that few noticed him, joined them there. In one hand he

carried a large, snap-locked bag, a somewhat large kit, containing, no doubt, the tools, the instruments and delicate bits of apparatus of his trade. In the other hand he carried a pair of stiltlike things of light metal tubing, things that ended with a curious webbing that resembled broad, splayed feet.

"I had the luck of the gods," said Ware softly. "It was perfectly impossible to complete the thing in the time that—"

"Yes," said Grayth with a chuckle that was half a sigh, "we had the luck of the gods, too."