

*Poul Anderson's first appearance in our pages was in April of 1951 - issue number 6 of this magazine, to be precise. In the intervening years, he has penned a book or thirty; the most recent of which is Mother of Kings. Now here we are at issue number 600 and the master is still spinning out lovely yarns for our entertainment. This new one gives us a bard by the name of Cappen Varra (whom some of you have met before, perhaps in the Thieves' World books edited by Robert Asprin and Lynn Abbey) and one pickle of a predicament.*

## The Lady of the Winds

By Poul Anderson

SOUTHWARD THE MOUNTAINS lifted to make a wall across a heaven still hard and blue. Snow whitened their peaks and dappled the slopes below. Even this far under the pass, patches of it lay on sere grass, among strewn boulders - too early in the season, fatally too early. Dry motes blew off in glittery streaks, borne on a wind that whittered and whirled, its chill searched deep. Westward, clouds were piling up higher than the heights they shrouded, full of darkness and further storm.

A snowdevil spun toward Cappen Varra thickening as it went. Never had he known of the like. Well, he had gone forth to find whatever Power was here. He clutched the little harp with numbed fingers as if it were his courage. The gyre stopped before him and congealed. It became the form of a woman taller than himself. She poised utterly beautiful, but hueless as the snow, save for faint blue shadows along the curves of her and eyes like upland lakes. The long, tossing hair and a thin vortex of ice dust half clothed her nakedness. Somehow she seemed to quiver, a wind that could not ever come altogether to rest.

"My lady!" broke from him in the tongue of his homeland.

He could have tried to stammer on with words heard in this country, but she answered him likewise, singing more than speaking, maybe whistling more than singing: "What fate do you seek, who dared so to call on me!"

"I - I don't know," he got out, truly enough. "That lies with my lady. Yet it seemed right to bring her what poor gift was mine to offer."

He could not tell whether he heard scorn or a slight, wicked mirth. "A free gift, with nothing to ask in return!"

Cappen drew breath. The keen air seemed to whip up his wits. He had dealt with the mighty often before now - none such as her, no, but whatever hope he had lay with supposing that power makes for a certain way of feeling, be it human or overhuman. He swept his headgear off, holding it against his breast while he bowed very deeply. "Who am I to petition my lady? I can merely join all other men in praising her largesse and mercy, exalting her name forever."

The faintest of smiles touched her lips, "Because of what you brought, I will hear you out." It ceased. Impatience edged her voice. The wind strengthened, the frosty tresses billowed more wildly. "I think I know your wish. I do not think I will grant it. However speak."

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He had meant to depart from Sanctuary, but not so hastily. After some three years in that famous, infamous city, he remembered how much more there was to the wide world. Besides, while he had made friends high in its life, as well as among the low and raffish - with whom he generally felt easier - he had also made enemies of either kind. Whether by arrest on some capital charge or, likelier by a knife in some nighted alley, one of them might well eventually make an end of him. He had survived three attempts, but the need to stay ever alert grew wearisome when hardly anything remained here that was new to him.

For a time after an adventure into which he fell, rescuing a noble lady from captivity in another universe and, perhaps, this world from the sikkintairs, he indulged in pleasures he could now afford. Sanctuary provided them in rich variety. But his tastes did not run to every conceivable kind and presently those he enjoyed took on a surprising sameness. "Could it be that the gods of vice, even the gods of luxury, have less imagination than the gods of virtue and wholesomeness?" he wondered. The thought appalled.

Yet it wakened a dream that surprised him when he recognized it for what it was. He had been supposing his inborn restlessness and curiosity would send him on toward fresh horizons. Instead, memories welled up, and longing sharpened until it felt like unrequited love. Westward his wish ran, across plains, over mountains, through great forests and tumultuous kingdoms, the whole way home to Caronne. He remembered not only gleaming wails, soaring spires, bustling marts and streets; not only broad estates, greensward and greenwood, flowerbeds ablaze, lively men and livelier women; he harked back to the common folk, his folk, their speech and songs and ways. A peasant girl or tavern wench could be as fair as any highborn maiden, and often more fun. He remembered seaports, odors of tar and fish and cargo bales, masts and spars raking the sky, and beyond them the water a-glimmer beneath a Southern sun, vast and blue where it reached outward and became Ocean.

Enough remained of his share of Molin Torchholder's reward for the exploit. He need not return as a footloose hand-to-mouth minstrel, showman, gambler, and whatever-else, the disinherited and rather disgraced younger son of a petty baron. No, if he could get shrewd advice about investments - he knew himself for a much better versifier than money manager - he would become a merchant prince in Croy or Seilles at the very least. Or so he trusted.

Summer was dying away into autumn. The last trader caravans of the year would soon be gone. One was bound as far as Arinberg. That was a goodly distance, well beyond the western border of this Empire, and the town said to be an enjoyable place to spend a winter. Cappen bought two horses, camp gear, and supplies from the master. The traders were still trading here and did not plan to proceed for another week. Cappen had the interval idle on his hands.

And so it came about that he perforce left sanctuary earlier than intended.

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Candlelight glowed over velvet. Fragrances of incense, of Peridis's warmth and disheveled midnight locks, of lovemaking lately come to a pause, mingled with the sweet notes of a gold-and-diamond songbird crafted by some cunning artificer. No noise or chill or stench from the streets outside won through windows barred, glazed, and curtained. Nerigo, third priest of IIs housed his newest leman well.

Perhaps if he visited her oftener she would not have heeded the blandishments of a young man who encountered her in the gaudy chaos of Midyear Fair and made occasions to pursue the acquaintance. At least, they might have lacked opportunity. But although Nerigo was not without vigor, much of it went in the pursuit of arcane knowledge, which included practices both spiritually and physically demanding. Today he had indicated to Peridis, as often before, that he would be engaged with dark and dangerous powers until dawn and then must needs sleep in his own house; thereafter, duties at the temple would keep him busy for an indefinite span.

So she sent a note to Cappen Varra at the inn where he lodged. It went by public messenger. As she had made usual, her few servants retired to a dormitory shed behind the house when she had supped. If she needed any, she could ring a bell. Besides, like servants generally in Sanctuary, these cultivated a selective blindness and deafness.

After all, she must shortly bid her lover farewell. It would probably take a while to find another. The might never find another so satisfactory.

"You have asked about some things here," she murmured. "I never dared show you them. Not that you would have betrayed me, but what you didn't know couldn't be gotten out of you, were he to become suspicious. Now, though, when, alas, you are leaving for aye - " She sighed, fluttered her eyelashes, and cast him a wistful smile. "It will take my mind off that, while we rest before our next hour of delight."

"The wait will not be long, since it's you I'm waiting for," he purred.

"Ah, but, my dear, I am less accustomed than I . . . was . . . before that man persuaded me hither." With gold, Cappen knew, and the luxury everywhere around, and, he gathered, occasional tales and glimpses of marvels. "Let me rest an hour, to be the readier for you. Meanwhile, there are other more rare entertainments."

A long silken shift rippled and shimmered as she undulated over to a cabinet of ebony inlaid with ivory in enigmatic patterns. Her single curious modesty was not to be unclad unless in bath or bed, Having nothing else along, Cappen gratified it by resuming blouse and breeks, even his soft shoes. When she opened the cabinet, he saw shelves filled with objects. Most he couldn't at once identify, but books were among them, scrolls and codices. She paused, considering, then smiled again and took out a small slim volume bound in paper, one of perhaps a dozen. "These amuse me," she said. "Let me in turn beguile you. Come, sit beside me."

He was somewhat smugly aware of how her gaze followed him as he joined her on the sofa. Speech and manner counted most with the women, but good looks helped. He was of medium size, slim lithe and muscular because hitherto he had seldom been able to lead the indolent life he would have preferred. Black hair, banded over the brow and above the shoulders, framed straight-cut features and vividly blue eyes. It also helped to have quite a musical voice.

She handed him the book. He beheld letters totally unfamiliar, laid it on his lap and opened it. She reached to turn the pages, one by one.

Plain text mingled with lines that must be verse - songs, because it seemed the opening parts were under staves of what he guessed was a musical notation equally strange. There were pictures too, showing people outlandishly clad, drawn with an antic humor that tickled his fancy. "What is this?" he wondered.

"The script for a rollicking comedic performance," she answered.

"When done? Where? How do you know?"

"Well, now, that is a story of its own," she said savoring his attention. He knew she was not stupid and wanted to be more to him than simply another female body. Indeed, that was among her attractions. "See you, Nerigo's wizardly questings go into different worlds from ours, alike in some ways, alien in more. Different universes he says coexistent with this one on many planes, as the leaves of this tome lie side by side. But I can't really understand his meaning there. Can you?"

Cappen frowned, abruptly uneasy. "Much too well," he muttered.

"What's wrong? I feel you go taut."

"Oh, nothing, really." Cappen made himself relax. He didn't care to speak of the business, if only because that would spoil the mood here. It was, after all, safely behind him, the gate destroyed, the sikkintairs confined to their own skies.

And yet, raced through his minds that gate had been in the temple of IIs, where the high flamen made nefarious use of it. He had heard that, subsequently, the priests of the cult disavowed and severely discouraged such lore. They could have found themselves endangered. Yet search through the temple archives might well turn up further information. Yes, that would explain why Nerigo was secretive, and stored his gains in this house, where nobody would likely think to search.

"He only lusts for knowledge," Peridis reassured. Her tone implied she wished that were not his primary lust. "He does not venture into the Beyond. He simply opens windows for short whiles observes and when he can, reaches through to snatch small things for later study. Is that so terrible? But the hierarchy would make trouble for him if they knew, and . . . it might strike at me as well."

She brightened. "He shares with me, a little. I have looked with him into his mirror that is not a mirror, at things of glamor or mirth - I have seen this very work performed on a stage far elsewhere, and a few more akin to it. True, the language was foreign to both of us, but he could discern that the story for instance concerns a love intrigue. It was partly at my wish that he hunted about until he found a shop where the books are sold, and cast spells to draw copies into his arcanum. Since then I've often taken them out when I'm alone, to call back memories of the pleasure. Now let me explain and share it with you as well as I'm able." Heavy-lidded, her glance smoldered on him. "It does tell of lovers who at last come together."

He thrust his qualms aside. The thing was in fact fascinating. They began to go through it page by page,

her finger tracing out each illustration while she tried to convey what understanding she had of it. His free arm slid behind her.

A thud sounded from the vestibule. Hinges whined. A chill gust bore smells of the street in. Peridis screamed. Cappen knew stabbingly that the bolt on the main door had flung back at the command of its master. The book fell from their hands and they read no more that night.

A lean, grizzle-bearded, squinting man, clad in a silver robe, entered. At his back hulked another, red-skinned, seven feet tall, so broad and thick as to seem squat, armed with steel cap, leather cuirass, and unfairly large scimitar, Cappen did not need Peridis's gasp to inform him that they were Nerigo and a Makali bodyguard.

The woman sprang to her feet. As the bard did, the little volume slid off his lap. Almost without thinking, he snatched it and tucked it down his half-open blouse. A bargaining counter - ?

For an endless instant, silence held them all.

When Nerigo then spoke, it was quite softly, even impersonally. "I somewhat hoped I would prove mistaken. But you realize, Peridis, I cannot afford blind trust in anyone. A sortilege indicated you were receiving a visitor in my absences."

She stepped back, lifting her hands, helpless and imploring. Nerigo shook his head. Did ruefulness tinge his words? "Oh, fear not, my cuddly. From the beginning, I knew you for what you are. It's not rational to wax angry when a cat steals cream or a monkey disarrays documents. One simply makes provision against further untowardness. Why should I deny myself the pleasure that is you? No, you will merely be careful in future, very careful. If you are, then when I want novelty you shall go your way freely, unharmed, with only a minor spell on you to lock your lips against ever letting slip anything about me or my doings."

Cappen heard how she caught her breath and broke into sobs. At the back of his mind, he felt a burden drop off himself. He would have hated being the instrument of harm to her. Not that she had been much more to him than frolic; yet a man wishes well-being for his friends. Besides, killing beautiful young women was a terrible waste.

Hope flickered up amidst his dismay. He bowed low. "My lord, most reverend sir," he began, "your magnanimity surpasses belief. No, say rather that it demonstrates in actual incarnation the divine benevolence of those gods in whose service you so distinguish yourself. Unworthy though I be, my own humble but overwhelming gratitude - "

Nerigo cut him off. "You need not exercise that flattering tongue which has become notorious throughout Sanctuazy," the sorcerer-priest said, now coldly impersonal. "You are no wayward pet of mine, you are a brazen intruder. I cannot possibly let you go unpunished; my demons would lose all respect for me. Furthermore, this is an opportunity first to extract from you everything you know. I think especially about the eminent Molin Torchholder and his temple of Savankala, but doubtless other bits of information can prove useful too. Take him, Yamen."

"No, no, I beg you!" Peridis shrieked, but scrambled aside as the giant advanced.

If he was hustled off to a crypt, Cappen knew, he would welcome death when at last it came. He retreated, drawing the knife at his belt. Yaman grinned. The scimitar hissed forth. "Take him alive," Nerigo called, "but I've ways to stanch wounds once he's disabled."

Cappen was no bravo or brawler. Wits were always his weapon of choice. However, sometimes he had not been granted the choice. Thus he went prepared. His knife was not just the article of clothing and minor tool commonly carried by men. It was razor-honed, as balanced as a hawk on the wing. When in his wanderings he earned some coins by a show of prestidigitation, it had often figured in the act.

He poised, took aim, and threw.

A hoarse, gurgling bellow broke from Yaman. He lurched, dropped his weapon, and went to his knees. Blood spurted. The blade had gone into his throat below the chin. If Nerigo wanted to keep his henchman, he'd be busy for a while. Mainly, Cappen's way out was clear. He blew Peridis a kiss and darted off.

A yell pursued him. "You'll not escape, Varra! I'll have you hounded to the ends of the Empire. If they're Imperial troopers who find you, they'll have orders to cut you down on sight. But first demons will be on your trail - "

By then he was in the vestibule, retrieving his rapier and cloak whence he slipped forth into the street. Walls and roofs loomed black along its narrowness. A strip of stars between barely gave light to grope by.

Oh, lovely gloom! He kept to one side, where the dark was thickest and there was less muck to step in, and fled as deftly as a thief.

*What to do!* tumbled through his head. The inconspicuous silver amulet hanging on his breast ought to baffle Nerigo's afreets or whatever they were. It protected him against any supernatural forces of less than divine status. At least, so the wizard who gave it to him years ago had said, and so it had seemed to work on two or three occasions since. Of course that might have been happenstance and the wizard a liar, but he had plenty of worries without adding hypothetical ones.

Equally of course, if such a being did come upon him, it could seize him or tear him apart. Physical strength was a physical quality. Likewise, for human hunters.

Yes, Nerigo would have those out after him, while messengers sped north, south east, and west bearing his description to castles, cantonments, garrisons, and watchposts. Once he had aroused the indignation of his colleagues, Nerigo would have ample influence to get such an order issued. Cappen's connections to Molin were too slight - how he wished now that he hadn't thought it best to play down his role in that rescue - for the high priest of Savankala to give him asylum and safeguard across the border. Relations between the temples were strained enough already.

The westbound caravan wouldn't leave for days. Well before then, Nerigo would learn that Cappen had engaged a place in it. There were several others, readying to go in their various directions. He could find temporary refuge and get information in one of the disreputable inns he knew. With luck, he could slink to the master of whichever was departing first, give him a false name and a plausible story, and be off with it - maybe even tomorrow.

That would cost, especially if a bit of a bribe proved advisable. Cappen had deposited his money with a reliable usurer, making withdrawals as desired. Suddenly it might as well be on the Moon. He was back to what lay in his pouch. It might barely stretch to getting him away.

He suppressed a groan and shrugged. If his most recent memories were dearly bought, still they'd be something to enjoy on an otherwise dismay journey.

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IT WAS A LONG annual trek that Deghred im Dalagh and his followers made. Northward they fared from Temanhassa in Arechoum, laden with spices aromatics, intoxicant herbs, pearls, rich fabrics, cunningly wrought metal things, and the like, the merchants and hucksters among them trading as they went. The route zigzagged through desert and sown, village and town, across dunes and rivers by highroad and cairn-marked trail, over the Uryuk Ubur and thence the cultivated plains of the Empire Sanctuary its terminus. That city produced little other than crime and politics, often indistinguishable, but goods of every kind flowed to its marts and profitable exchanges could be made. The return journey was faster, as direct as possible, to get beyond the mountains before their early winter closed the passes.

Well, Cappen consoled himself, this was not the destination he had had in mind, but needs must, he had never yet seen yonder exotic lands, and maybe he could improve his luck there. It could stand improvement, his thoughts continued. Instead of the comforts he paid for and forfeited, he had a single scrawny mule, which he must frequently relieve by turning to shank's mare; a greasy third-hand bedroll; two similar changes of clothes and a towel; ill-fitting boots; a cheap knife, spoons and tin bowl; and leave to eat with the choreboys, not the drovers.

However, he remained alive and at large. That was ample cause for cheerfulness, most of the time. Making friends came naturally to him. Before long his tales, japes, and songs generated a liveliness that drew the attention of the merchants. Not long after that, they invited him into their mess. Deghred gave him a decent kaftan to wear while they ate, drank, and talked; everybody concerned was fluent in the Ilsig language, as well as others. "I think you have possibilities, lad," the caravan master said. "I'll lodge you for a while after we come to Temanhassa and introduce you to certain people." He waved his hand. "No, no, not alms. A modest venture which in the course of time may bring me a modest profit."

Cappen knew he had better not seem a daydreamer or a fool. "The tongue of Arechoum is foreign to me, sir. Your men can scarcely teach me along the way."

"You're quick to pick things up, I've seen. Until you do, belike I can help."

Cappen understood from the drawl and the bearded smile that Deghred meant also to profit from that help, perhaps considerably. Not that he was ever unnecessarily unkind or hostile. Cappen rather liked him. But business was business. At the moment, nothing better was in sight.

Beasts and men plodded on. The land rose in bleakening hills. Now and then, when by himself, Cappen took from his meager baggage the book he had borne from Peridis's house and paged through it, puzzling over the text and staves, smiling at the pictures, mainly recalling her and their nights. Thence he harked back to earlier recollections and forward to speculations about the future. It bore him away from the trek.

At a lonely fortress on a stony ridge, the commander routinely let them cross the frontier. Cappen drew a long breath. Yet, realized, that frontier was ill-defined, and Nerigo's agents might still find him. He would not feel altogether safe until he was on the far side of the Uryuk Ubur.

Those mountains reared like a horse. Mile by mile the trails grew more toilsome, the land more cold and stark. Unseasonably so, Deghred said, and burned some incense to his little private gods. Nevertheless the winds lashed, yelled, and bit, clouds raced ragged, snow flurried.

Thus they came to the hamlet Khangai and heard that if they went ahead, they would almost surely die.

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A storm roared about the huts. Sleet hissed on the blast. Moss-chinked stone walls and turf roof muffled the noise, a dung fire and crowded bodies kept the dwelling of headman Bulak odorously warm, but somehow that sharpened the feeling of being trapped.

"Aiala is angry," he said. "We have prayed, we have sacrificed a prime ewe - not in feast but casting it into a crevasse of Numurga Glacier - yet she rages ever worse."

"Nor has she sent me a dream to tell why, though I ate well-nigh all the sacred *ulaku* left us and lay swooned through two sunrises." His elder wife, who was by way of being the tribal priestess, shuddered. "Instead, nightmares full of furious screams."

Flames flickered low on the heartland guttered in clay lamps. Smoke dimmed what light they gave and blurred uneasy shadows. From the gloom beyond gleamed the frightened stares of Bulak's younger wife and children, huddled on the sheepskins that covered the sleeping dais. Three favoured dogs gnawed mutton bones tossed them after the company had eaten. Several men and the senior woman sat cross-legged around the fire, drinking fermented milk from cow horns refilled out of a jug. They were as many as could well have been crowded in, Deghred and such of the merchants as he picked. The rest of the travelers were housed elsewhere. Even in this bad time, hospitality was sacred. Cappen had persuaded the caravan master that he, come from afar, might conceivably have some new insight to offer.

He was beginning to regret the mix of cockiness and curiosity that led him to do so. He had more or less gotten to ignoring the stench, but his eyes stung and he kept choking back the coughs that would have been impolite. Not that things were likely any better in any other hut. Well, maybe he could have slept. It was a strain trying to follow the talk. Bulak knew some Ilsig, and some of the guests had a smattering of his language. Between stumbling pidgin and awkward translations, conversation didn't exactly flow.

At least, though, the slowness and the pauses gave him a chance to infer what he could not directly follow, correcting his mistakes when context revealed them to him. It became almost as if he listened to ordinary speech. He wasn't sure whether or not the drink helped if only by dulling his discomfort. Foul stuff but by now his palate was as stunned as his nose and he readily accepted recharges.

"Have you not gods to appeal to other than this - this Aiala?" asked the merchant Haran in Zeyin.

Deghred frowned at the brashness and shook his head. The wife caught her breath and drew a sign which smoke-swirls traced. Bulak took it stolidly. "She rules the air over the Uryuk Ubux," he answered. Light wavered across the broad, seamed face, almond eyes, and thin beard.

"What shall they of the Fire, the Earth, and the Water do?"

"It may be she is even at odds with them, somehow, and this is what keeps her wrathful," whispered the woman. "There is a song among the olden songs that tells of such a time, long ago, when most of the High Folk died before she grew mild again - but I must not sing any of those songs here."

"So it could worsen things to call on them," said Deghred with careful gravity. "Yet - may she and you bear with an ignorant outsider who wishes only to understand - why should she make you suffer? Surely you are blameless."

Bulak half shrugged. "How else shall she vent her anger than in tempest and chill?"

Irreverence grinned within Cappen. He remembered infuriated women who threw things. The grin died. Men were apt to do worse when beside themselves, and be harder to bring to reason. More to the point, he happened to be on the receiving end.

The headman's stoicism gave way to a moment. "I have had my day. Our tribe will live through the winter - enough of us - I think - and may hope that then she has calmed - "

"For she is not cruel," the priestess said as if chanting. "Her snows melt beneath her springtime breezes and fill the streams, while the pastures turn green and starry with tiny flowers and lambs frisk in the sunshine. She brings the fullness of summer, the garnered riches of autumn, and when her snows have returned we have been snug and gladsome."

*Isn't that the sort of thing a goddess or god is supposed to do?* Thought Cappen.

" - but how many of our young will freeze or starve, how many of our littlest ones?" croaked Bulak. He stiffened his lips. "We must wait and see."

*And, Cappen reflected, few gods are noted for tender solicitude. In fact, they often have nasty tempers.*

*If this is even a goddess, properly speaking. Maybe she ranks only as a sylph or something, though with considerable local power. That could make matters even worse. Minor functionaries are notoriously touchy.*

*Supposing, of course, there is anything in what I've been hearing.*

Deghred said it for him: "Again I pray pardon. No impertinence is meant. But is it not possible that what we have met is merely a freak, a flaw in the weather, nothing for the Lady Aiala to take heed of, and very soon, perhaps already tomorrow, it will go back to what it should be?"

Bulak shook his head. "Never in living memory have we suffered aught like this so early: as well you should know, who have passed through here, to and fro, for year after year. But there is the sacred song. . . Push on if you will. The higher you go, the harder it will be. Unless we get respite within the next three or four days, I tell you that you will find the passes choked with snow and yourselves in a blizzard unable even to go back. If afterward your bodies are found, we will make an offering for your souls." His smile held scant mirth. "Not that I'm at all sure 'we' means anyone here tonight."

"What, then, do you counsel we should do?"

"Why, retreat while still you are able. Tomorrow, I'd say. We cannot keep you through such a winter as is upon us. Barely will we be able to keep ourselves - some of ourselves. Go back north into the lowlands and wait. Could we High Folk do likewise, we might well, but if naught else, the Empire would seize on the chance to make us impoverished clients. We have had dealings with it ere now. Better that a remnant of us stay free. You, though, need but wait the evil out."

"At cutthroat cost," muttered Haran.

"Better to lose our gains than our lives," retorted Deghred. His tone gentled. "And yet, Bulak, we are old friends, you and I. A man should not turn his back on a friend. Might we, your guests, be able to do something? Maybe, even, as foreigners, give reverence and some unique sacrifice to the Lady, and thus please her - ?" His voice trailed off.

"How shall we speak to her? In our broken Uryuk?" wondered another merchant. "Would that not be an insult?"

"She is of the winds," said Bulak. "She and her kind ken every tongue in the world, for the winds hear and carry the knowledge to each other."

He turned to his elder wife. "Is that not so?" She nodded.

Deghred brightened. "Then she will understand us when we pray and make offerings."

The priestess pinched her lips together above the few teeth left her. "Why should she heed you, who are outlanders, lowlanders, have never before done her homage, and clearly are now appealing only to save - not even your lives, for you can still escape, but your mongers' profits?"

"Treasure? We have jewelry of gold, silver, and gemstones, we have garments fit for queens - "

"What are such things to Air?"

"To Earth, maybe," Bulak put in. "Aromatic woods might please Fire, spices and sweetmeats Water. Yet with them, too, I fear you would be unwise." Shrewdly: "For in no case will you offer your entire freight, when you can better withdraw and come back with most of it several months hence. It is. . . not well to try to bargain with the Powers."

That depended on which Powers, Cappen thought. He knew of some - but they were elsewhere, gods and tutelaries of lands less stark than this. The drink was buzzing in his head. Dismay shocked through. *Why am I jesting? It's my life on the table tonight!*

Slowly, Deghred nodded. The one sensible thing for his caravan to do was retreat, wait out the winter and cut its losses as much as might be. Wasn't it?

And absolute lunacy for Cappen Varra. Once he was back in the Empire, he himself would not bet a counterfeit lead bawbee on his chance of getting away again. The alert was out for him. If nobody else noticed first, one or another of his fellow travelers was bound soon to hear the description and betray him for the reward. Fleeing into the hinterlands or diving into some thieves' den would hardly buy enough time. Though his amulet might keep Nerigo's demons off his direct track, they could invisibly watch and listen to others, everywhere, and report everything suspicious to the sorcerer.

Stay here in Khangaii? Surely the villagers could feed one extra mouth. He'd pay them well with arts and shows, entertainments such as they'd never enjoyed before, keeping heart in them through the grim time ahead.

Maybe they'd agree. Then maybe he'd starve or freeze to death along with so many of them. Or maybe Nerigo would get word of a vagabond who'd joined the men of Azechoum and stayed behind when they returned. He was not yet too far beyond the Imperial marches for a squad to come after him as soon as the ways became at all passable.

Deghred barked a harsh laugh. "Yes, most certainly not to dicker and quibble with a female already incensed," he said. "That would be to throw oil on a fire." He sighed. "Very well, we'll load up again tomorrow and betake ourselves hence. May we find it well with the High Folk when we come back."

The younger wife moaned softly in the shadows and clutched two of the children to her.

*Let her live, Cappen thought wildly. She's beautiful. Several of them that I've spied here are, in their way. Though I don't suppose I can beguile any –*

His heart leaped. His legs followed. The others stared as he sprang to his feet. "No, wait!" he cried. "Wait only a little span. A few days more at most. I've an idea to save us!"

"What, you?" demanded Deghred, while his traders gaped and Bulak scowled. "Has a *yawanna* taken your wits? Or have you not understood what we were saying, how easily we can give the Lady offense and bring her fury straight against us?"

"I have, I have," Cappen answered frantically. "My thought is nothing like that. Any risk will be wholly my own, I swear. Only hearken to risk indeed. A notion born out of half-drunken desperation, maybe. But maybe, also, sired by experience.

He called up coolness, to be a wellspring for a spate of eager, cozening words such as a bard and showman had better always be able to produce.

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DAY CAME BLEAK and bright. Washed clean, newly smooth-shaven, wearing the finest warm raiment to be found in the caravan's goods - plumed cap of purple satin scarlet cloak green tunic embroidered with gold and trimmed with sables dark-blue hose, buskins of tooled leather - with a small harp in his hand from the same source, he left the village behind and made his way on up the path toward the heights. Wind whistled. Far overhead, a hawk rode it. The chill whipped his face. He hardly felt it nor any weariness alter sleepless hours. He was strung too taut.

But when he reached the cairn they had told him of, from which rose a pole and flew an often-renewed white banner, while a burrow trail wound off to the left, an abrupt sense of how alone he was hollowed him out. Though he seldom thought about it, his wish was to die, sometime in the distant future, with a comrade or two and a girl or three to appreciate his gallantry and his last quip.

He stiffened his sinews and summoned up his blood. He must not seem to be afraid, so best was to convince himself that he wasn't. Think rather of this as a unique challenge.

The trail went across the mountainside, near the edge of a cliff sheering down into dizzy depths. Elsewhere the land reached vast and tilted, here and there a meadow amidst the rock. A waterfall gleamed like a sword across the gorge. Its booming came faintly through the wind.

Before long he reached the altar where they prayed and sacrificed to Aiala, a great boulder squared off and graven with eroded symbols. Cappen saw few if any other traces of man. No sacred smoke, but thin gust-borne streamers of dry snow blew past. Here, though, if anywhere, she should quickly discern any worshipper.

He took stance before the block and turned his gaze aloft. Give her a short time to see, perhaps to wonder, perhaps even to admire.

The air shrilled.

Cappen tucked gloves into belt and positioned the harp. His fingers evoked the first chord. He began to sing.

It was a song he had used more than once over the years, usually to good effect. Of course, it must be adapted to each occasion, even rendered into a different language, and he had lain awake working on it. However, if she really did know all human tongues, he could simplify the task by staying with the original

Caronna, or if he was mistaken about her femaleness -He wouldn't weaken his delivery by fretting about that. He sang loud and clear:

*"Be merciful, I pray, and hear my cry  
Into the winds that you command. I know  
That I am overbold, but even so  
Adore the one whose queendom is the sky,  
In own of whom the moonlit night-clouds fly,  
Who dances in the sunlight and the snow,  
Who brings the springtime, when the freshets flow  
And all the world goes green beneath her eye.  
Yet worship is not that which makes me call  
Upon you here, and offer up my heart.  
Although I, mortal, surely cannot woo  
As man to maiden, still, I have seen all -  
No, just a little, but at least a part -  
Of that alive enchantment which is you."  
And she came to him.*

" - However, speak," she said.

He suppressed a shiver. Now he must be as glib as ever in his life. "First, will my lady permit that I resume my cap and gloves and pull my cloak around me? It's mortal cold for a mortal."

Again something like amusement flickered briefly. She nodded. "Then say what is your name, your home, and your errand."

"May it please my lady, the caravaneers I travel with know me as poor Jordan of Lorace." He was clearly from such parts. "But you of the high heavens surely recognize that this cannot be quite so." *Really? Well, anyhow, outright prevarication could be hazardous and should be unnessessary. She won't deign to give me away. If she chooses to destroy me, she'll do it herself. Battered to death by hailstones - ?* "My motherland is farther west and south, the kingdom of Caronne, and I Hight Cappen Varra, born to the noble house of Dordain. As for my errand, I have none fixed, being a wanderer - in spite of the birth I mentioned - who wishes to see something of the world and better his fortune before turning home. Rather, that was my only wish until this happy day."

"Yes, I've spied the pack train," said Aiala scornfully. "You hope I'll grant you better weather."

"Oh my lady! Forgive me, but no. Who am I to petition you? Nor am I in their enterprise. I simply took what appeared to be an opportunity to visit their country, of which go many fabulous accounts. Now I see this for the velleity it was." He made his look upon her half shy, half aglow. "Here I find the fulfillment of my true and lifelong desire."

Was she taken a bit aback? At any rate, her manner grew less forbidding. "What do you mean?"

Cappen gestured from beneath his cloak. "Why, my lady, what else than the praise of Woman? She, the flower of earthly creation, in her thousandfold dear incarnations, no wine so sweet or heady as her presence, she is the meaning of my existence and my poor verses in her honor are its justification. Yes, I have found her and sung to her in many a land, from the soft vales of Caronne to the stern fjords of Norren, from a fisher hut on Ocean shore to a palace in Sanctuary, and my thought was to seek her anew in yonder realm, perhaps some innocent maiden, perhaps some wise enchantress, how can I know before she has kindled my heart?"

"You are. . . a flighty one, then." She did not sound disapproving - what constancy has the wind? - but as though intrigued; even puzzled.

"Also, my very love drives me onward. For see you, my lady, it is Woman herself for whom I quest. While often wondrous, no one woman is more than mortal. She has, utmost, a few aspects of perfection, and they changeable as sun-sparkles on the river that is time. Otherwise the flaws of flesh, the infirmities of insight, the narrowness of dailiness belong to being human. And I, all too human, lack strength and patience to

endure such thwarting of the dream for long. The yearning overtakes me and I must be off again in search of that prize which common sense tells me is unattainable but the spirit will not ever quite let me despair of."

*Not bad*, Cappen thought. By now he half believed it.

"I told you to speak in few words." Aiala didn't say that quite firmly.

"Ah, would that I could give you obedience in this as I shall in all else whatsoever," Cappen sighed into the wind. "Dismiss me, and of course I will depart, grieving and yet gladsome over what has been vouchsafed me. But until then I can no more curb my tongue than I can quell my heart. For I have glimpsed the gates of my goal, loftier and more precious than any bright before me can have beheld, and I jubilate."

"And never before have I - " escaped from her. She recalled her savage dignity. "Clarify this. I'll not stand here the whole day."

"Certainly not. The heights and the heavens await your coming. But once you command me, I can relate quite plainly that, hitherbound, I heard tell of my lady. Beyond, perhaps over and above her majesty and mightiness, the tales were of visions, dazzlements, seen by an incredibly fortunate few through the centuries, beauty well-nigh too great to bear and, more than that, a spirit lordly and loving, terrible and tender, mysterious and merry, life-bearing and life-nourishing - in short, Woman."

"You. . . had not seen me. . . earlier," Aiala murmured.

"But I had, fleetingly, fragmentarily, in dreams and longings. Here, I thought, must be Truth. For although there are doubtless other goddesses of whom something similar can be said, and I imply no least disrespect for any, still, Truth is One, is it not? Thus I strove to infer a little of the immortally living miracle I heard of. I wove these inferences into a humble tribute. I brought it to your halidom as my offering.

"To do worship is an end and a reward in itself. I dared hope for no more. Now - my lady, I have seen that, however inadequate, my verse was not altogether wide of the mark. What better can an artist win than such a knowledge, for an hour of his few years on Earth? My lady, I can die content, and I thank you."

"You - need not die. Not soon. Go back to the plains."

"So we had decided, the caravaneers and I, for never would we defy our lady's righteous wrath. Thence I will seek to regain my faraway birthland, but my countrymen too may be enriched by a hint of your glory. If I fall by the wayside - " Cappen shrugged. "Well, as I said, today my life has had overflowing measure."

She raised her brows. "Your road is dangerous?"

"It is long, my lady, and at the outset - I left certain difficulties behind me in the Empire - trivial, but some people overreact. My plan had been to circumvent them by going roundabout through Arechoum. No matter. If the cosmic cycle requires that my lady decree an early winter throughout her mountains, I shall nevertheless praise her while blood beats within me."

"It's not that," Aiala bridled. The wind snarled. "No! I am not bound to a wheel! This is my will."

"Your wisdom."

"My anger!" she yelled. The storm in the west mounted swiftly higher. "I'll show them! They'll be sorry!"

"They?" asked Cappen low.

"Aye, they'll mourn for that they mocked me, when the waters of Vanis lie frozen past the turning of the springtime, and the earth of Orun remains barren, and the fires of Lua smolder out because no dwellers are left alive to tend them." Under his cloak, Cappen suppressed a shudder. Yes, he thought, *human rulers don't take their subjects much into account either*. "Then they'll come to me begging my mercy, and I will grant it to them for a song."

I'm on the track. "But is it not my lady of the winds who sings to the world?" Cappen pursued, carefully, carefully.

"So they'll discover, when I laugh at their effort."

"I am bewildered. How could any being, divine or not, possibly quarrel with my lady?"

Aiala paced to and fro. The wind strengthened, the dark clouds drew closer. After a stark minute she halted, looked straight at him, and said, "The gods fall out with each other now and then." He forebore to mention that he well knew that. His need was for her to unburden herself. His notion that she was lonelier than she realized seemed the more likely when her tone calmed somewhat. "This - " She actually hesitated. "You may understand. You are a maker of songs."

"I am when inspired, my lady, as I was today." Or whenever called for, but that was beside the immediate point.

"You did well. Not that *they* could have appreciated it."

"A song was wanted among the gods?"

Locks streamed and tumbled the more wildly as she nodded. "For a wedding, a divine marriage. Your country men must perceive it otherwise, but in these uplands it is Khaisntai who wakens at the winter solstice from her sleep, a virgin, to welcome Hurultan the Lightbearer, her bridegroom, and great is the rejoicing in Heaven and on Earth."

*On Earth in better years*, Cappen thought. *Yes, the mythic event, forever new and forever recurrent.* A chill passed up his spine. He concealed it as best he was able. "But. . . the occasion is not always the same?"

"No. IS one day the same as the last? Time would come to a stop."

"So - the feast and - " his mind leaped - "gifts to the happy pair?"

"Just so. Of us Four, Orun may bring fruits or gold, Vanis a fountain or a rainbow, Lua an undying lamp or a victorious sword - such things as certain to them - while I have given an eagle or a fragrance or - We go there together; for we are the Four."

"But now lately - ?"

Her reasonableness began to break. "I had in mind a hymeneal song, like none heard before in those halls but often to be again. They agreed this would be a splendid gift. I created it. And then - " Elemental rage screamed through an icy blast.

"And they did not comprehend it," Cappen proposed.

"They scoffed! They said it was so unworthy they would not come to the feast in my company if I brought it. They *dare!*"

Cappen waited out the ensuing whirlwind. When Aiala had quieted down a grim trifle, he ventured, "My lady, this is often the fate of artists. I have learned how eloquence is meaningless to the word-blind, music and meter to the tone-deaf, subtlety to the blunt-brained, and profundity to be unlearned."

"Good names for these, Cappen Varra."

"I refer to no gods Or other high Powers, my lady," he made haste to reply. One never knew who or what might be listening. "No irreverence, absolutely never! I speak merely of my small human experience and of people whom I actually pity more than despise - except, to be sure, when they set themselves up as critics. Yet even persons of unimpeachable taste and discernment can have differences of opinion. This is an unfortunate fact of life, to which I have become resigned."

"I will not be. Moreover, word has gotten about. If I come lamely in with something else than a song - No!" Aiala yowled. "They'll learn respect when I avenge my pride with disasters like none since Chaos rebelled in the beginning."

"Ah - may that perhaps conceivably be just a minim extreme, my lady? Not that I can judge. Indeed, I am baffled to grasp how your colleagues could reject your epithalamium. The music of the wind pervades the world, lulling breeze, sigh in forests, laughter-full rainsquall, trumpeting gale, oh, infinite is its variety, and its very hushes are a part of the composition," said Cappen with another sweeping gesture.

She nearly thawed. "You, though, you understand me - " she breathed. "For the first time ever, someone - "

He intended to go on in this vein until he had softened her mood enough for her to stop punishing the land. But she paused, then exclaimed, "Hear what I have made, and judge."

"Oh my lady I cannot!" gasped Cappen, aghast. "I'm totally unworthy, unfit, disqualified."

She smiled. "Be not afraid." she said quite gently. "Only tell me what you think. I won't take offense."

Too many others had insisted on declaiming their verses to him. "But my lady, I don't know, I cannot know the language of the gods, and surely your work would lose much in translation."

"Actually," she said, "it's in classical Xandran, as we're wont to use when elegance is the aim."

He remembered white temples and exquisite sculptures in the South and West, too often ruinous, yet still an ideal for all successor peoples.

Evidently the local deities felt that, while their worshippers might be barbarians, they themselves ought to display refinement. "But I also fear - I regret - my lady, I was not very dedicated to my schooling. My knowledge of Xandran was slight at best, and has largely rusted out of me."

True enough.

Impulsive as her winds, she smiled afresh. "You shall have it back, and more."

"That would -er, take a while."

"No. Hear me. All tongues spoken by men anywhere are open to me." Yes, so Bulak had said. How remote and unreal the Uryuk hut felt.

"For the sake of your courteous words, Cappen Varra, and your doubtless keen judgment, I will bestow this on you."

He gaped. "How - how - And how can this weak little head of mine hold so overwhelmingly much?"

"It need not. Whenever you hear or read a language, you will be able to use it like a native. Afterward and until next like, there will be only whatever you choose to keep and can, as with ordinary memories."

"My lady, I repeat, I'm wholly unworthy - "

"Hold still." Imperious, she trod over to him, laid hands on his cheeks, and kissed him.

He lunched, half stunned A forefinger slid into either ear. He noted vaguely amidst the tempest that this was a caress worth trying in future, if he had a future.

She released him and stepped back. His daze faded and he could pay close heed to what he said. "I, I never dreamed that Woman herself would - For that instant I was like unto a god."

Her hand chopped the air, impatient. "Now you are ready to hear me."

He braced for it.

Gaze expectant upon him, she cleared her throat and launched into her song. Fantastically the Xandran lyrics rang Caronnais - clear. He wished they didn't. As for the melody, she possessed a marvelous voice, but these notes took a drunkard's walk from key to key.

*"The universe has looked forward with breath bated,  
Not only Earth but the underworld and the starry sky,  
For this day so well-known, even celebrated,  
When all of us assembled see eye to eye  
About the union of our shiny Hurultan, whose ability  
It is the daylight forward to bring.  
And dear Khaiantai, who will respond walk agility,  
So that between them they become parents of the spring - "*

Cappen thanked the years that had taught him acting, in this case the role of a gravely attentive listener.

Aiala finished: "' - *And thus let us join together in chorusing my song!* There! What do you think of that?"

"It is remarkable, my lady," Cappen achieved.

"I didn't just dash it off, you know. I weighed and shaped every word. For instance, that line '*Birds also will warble as soon as they hatch from the egg.*' That did not come easily."

"An unusual concept, yes. In fact, I've never heard anything like it."

"Be frank. Tell me truly, could I make a few little improvements? Perhaps - I've considered - instead of '*as ardent as a prize bull,*' what about '*as vigorous as a stud horse?*'"

"Either simile is striking, my lady. I would be hard put to suggest any possible significant changes."

Aiala flared anew. "Then *why* do Orun, Vanis, and Lua sneer? How can they?"

"Sneering comes easily to some persons, my lady. It is not uncommonly an expression of envy. But to repeat myself, I do not propose that that applies in the resent case. Tastes do differ. Far be it from me to imagine how your distinguished kindred might perceive a piece like this.

Appropriateness to an occasion need have nothing to do with the quality of a work. It may merely happen to not quite fit in - like, say, a stately funeral dirge in a series of short-haul chanties. Or vice versa. Professionals like me," said Cappen forbearingly, "must needs learn to supply what may be demanded, and reserve our true art for connoisseurs."

He failed to mollify her. Instead, she stiffened and glared. "So! I'm unskilled am I? I suppose you can do better?"

Cappen lifted his palms with a defensiveness not entirely feigned. "Oh absolutely not. I simply meant - "

"I know. You make excuses for them on behalf of your own feelings."

"My lady, you urged me to be forthright. I hint at nothing but a conceivable, quite possibly hypothetical reconsideration of intent, in view of the context."

Indignation relieved him by yielding to haughtiness. "I told you how I would lose honor did I now give anything but a song. Rather will I stay home and make them sorry."

Cappen's mind leaped like a hungry cat at a mouse. "Ah, but perhaps there is a third and better way out of this deplorable situation. Could you bring a different paeon? I know many that have enjoyed great success at nuptial gatherings."

"And the gods will know, or in time they'll discover, that it is not new in the world. Shall I bring used goods to the sacred wedding - I?"

"Well no, my lady, of course not."

Aiala sniffed. "I daresay you can provide something original that will be good enough."

"Not to compare with my lady's. Much, much less exalted. Thereby, however, more readily blending into revelry, where the climate is really not conducive to concentrated attention. Grant me time, for indeed the standard to be met is heaven-high - "

She reached a decision. "Very well. A day and a night."

"Already tomorrow?" protested Cappen, appalled.

"*They* shall not think I waver weakly between creativity and vengeance. Tomorrow. In classical Xandran. Fresh and joyous. It had better be."

"But - but - "

"Then I will give you my opinion, freely and frankly."

"My lady, this is too sudden for imperfect flesh and feeble intelligence. I beg you - "

"Silence. It's more than I think I would grant anyone else, for the sake of your respectful words and song. I begin to have my suspicions about it, but will overlook them if you bring me one that is acceptable and that my winds can tell me has never been heard before on this earth or in its skies.

Fail me, and your caravan will not get back to the plains, nor you to anywhere. Go!"

In a whirl of white, she vanished. The wind shrieked louder and colder, the storm clouds drew nearer.

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VILLAGERS AND CARAVANEERS spied him trudging back down the path and, except for those out forlornly herding the sheep, swarmed together to meet him. Their babble surfed around his ears. He gestured vainly for silence. Bulak roared for it. As it fell, mumble by mumble, he and Deghred trod forward. "What did you do yonder? " he asked, less impassively than became a headsman.

Cappen had donned his sternest face. "These be mysteries not to be spoken of until their completion," he declared. "Tomorrow shall see my return to them."

He dared not spend hours relating and explaining, when he had so few. Nor did it seem wise to admit that thus far, in all likelihood he had made matters worse, especially for the travelers.

Bulak stood foursquare. Deghred gave the bard a searching and skeptical look. The rest murmured, fingered prayer beads or josses, and otherwise registered an awe that was useful at the moment but, if disappointed, could well turn murderously vengeful.

Cappen went on headlong. "I must meditate, commune with high Powers, and work my special magianisms," he said. "For this I require to be alone, well sheltered, with writing materials and, uh, whatever else I may require."

Bulak stared. "Suddenly you speak as if born amidst us."

"Take that as a token of how deep and powerful the mysteries are."

Cappen forgot to keep his voice slowly tolling. "But, but does anybody here know Xandran?"

Wind whistled, clouds swallowed the sun, three ravens flew by like forerunners of darkness.

"I have some command of the tongue," said Deghred, almost as if he suspected a trap.

"Classical Xandran?" cried Cappen.

"No. Who does but a few scholars? I mean what they use in those parts nowadays - that is, the traders and sailors I've had to do with. And, yes, once a crew of pirates; but I think that was a different dialect."

The foolish fire-on-ice hope died. Still - "I may want to call on what knowledge you have. That will depend on what my divinations reveal to me. Hold yourself prepared. Meanwhile, what of my immediate needs?"

"We have a place," Bulak said. "Lowly, but all we can offer."

"The spirits take small account of Earthly grandeur," his elder wife assured them, for whatever that was worth.

Thus Cappen found himself and his few possessions in the village storehouse. It was a single room, mainly underground, with just enough walls beneath the sod roof to allowed entryway. After the door was closed, a lamp gave the only light. While the space was fairly large, very little was available, for it was crammed with roots, dried meat, sheepskins, and other odorous goods. The air hung thick and dank. However, it was out of the wind, and private.

Too private, maybe, Cappen had nothing to take his mind off his thoughts.

He settled in, a pair of skins between him and the floor, one over his shoulders. Besides the lamp, he had been given food, a crock of wine, a goblet, a crock for somewhat different purposes, and his tools - a bottle of ink, several quill pens, and a sheaf of paper, articles such as merchants used in their own work. Now he began wondering, more and more frantically, what to do with them.

Ordinarily he could have dashed something off. But a article in classical Xandran, suitable for a marriage made in heaven? Especially when the cost of its proving unsatisfactory would be widespread death, including his? He did not feel inspired.

The language requirement was obstacle enough. His wits twisted to and fro, hunting for a way, any way, around it. Through Deghred, he could now get a doubtless very limited acquaintance with the present-day speech. He recalled hearing that it descended directly from the antique, so much of it must be similar. How would pronunciation have changed, though, and grammar, and even vocabulary? In his days at home he had read certain famous poems five or six hundred years old. It had been difficult; only a lexicon made it possible at all; and the archaicidiom of the Rojan hillmen suggested how alien the verses would have sounded.

He glugged a mouthful of wine. It hit an empty stomach and thence sent a faint glow to his head. He did have a bit more to go on. When he concentrated, he could drag scraps of the proper classical up from the forgetfulness in which they had lain. Maybe his newly acquired facility helped with that. But they were just scraps. He had yawned through a year of this as part of the education that even a bastard son of a minor nobleman was supposed to receive, but declensions, conjugations, moods, tenses, and the dismal rest set his attention adrift in the direction of girls, flowery forests, rowdy friends, composing a song of his own that might seduce a girl, or almost anything else. What stayed with him had done so randomly, like snatches of his aunt's moralizings when he was a child and couldn't escape.

And then he had Aiala's lyrics. That wasn't by design. Every word clung to him, like the memory of every bit of a certain meal years ago that he had had to eat and praise because the cook was a formidable witch. He feared he would never get rid of either. Still, the thing gave him a partial but presumably trustworthy model, a basis for comparison and thus for a guesswork sort of reconstruction.

He drank again. His blood started to buzz faintly, agreeably. Of course, he'd need his reason unimpaired when - if - he got to that task. But "if" was the doomful word. First he needed the poesy, the winged fancy, concepts evoking words that in turn made the concepts live. Anxiety, to give it a euphemistic name, held his

imagination in a swamp of glue. And wasn't that metaphor a repulsive symptom of his condition? Anything he might force out of himself would belong in yonder crock.

So he must lift his heart, free his spirit. Then he could hope his genius would soar. After which he could perhaps render the Caronnais into Xandran without mutilating it beyond recognition. The basic difficulty was that to create under these circumstances he must get drunk, no good condition for a translator. He suspected the necessary degree of drunkenness was such that when he awoke he wouldn't care whether he lived or died - until much too late. The lady of the winds didn't expect to be kept waiting.

Besides - he spat a string of expletives - she demanded not only words but music. The two must go together as naturally as breath and heartbeat, or the song was a botch and a mockery. This meant they must grow side by side, intertwining, shaping one another, as he worked. Oh, usually he could find an existing melody that fitted a poem he had in process, or vice versa. Neither was admissible in this case; both must never have been heard before in the world. He could attempt a double originality, but that, he knew, would only be possible with the Caronnais native to him. To force the subsequent translation into that mold - well, give him a week or two and maybe he might, but since he had only until tomorrow -

He glugged again. He would doubtless be wise to ballast the wine with food. It wasn't the worst imaginable food caravaneers' rations, smoked meat and fish, butter, cheese, hardtack, rice cold but lately boiled with leeks and garlic, dried figs and apricots and on the other hand, he lacked appetite. What use wisdom anyway? He glugged again.

If this was the end of his wanderings, he thought, it was not quite what he had visualized and certainly far too early. Not that he did well to pity himself. Think of his waymates, think of the poor innocent dwellers throughout these mountains. Surely he had enjoyed much more than them, much more colorful, it behooved a minstrel, a knight of the road, to hark back, as gladly as the wine enabled.

Most recently, yes, to Sanctuary. He had had his troubles there but the same was true of every place, and the multifarious pleasures much outnumbered them. Ending with delicious Peridis - may she fare always well - and their last, so unfortunately interrupted moment - He stirred on his sheepskins. By all the nymphs of joy, it happened he had brought away a souvenir of it! There he could for a while take refuge from his troubles, other than in drink. And perhaps, said practicality, this would liberate his genius.

Groping about, shivering in the chill, he found the book. Crosslegged, he opened it on his lap and peered through the dim, smoky, smelly lamplight.

The words leaped out at him. They were in no language he had ever heard of, nor was it anywhere named; but he read it as easily as he did his own, instantly understanding what everything he came upon referred to. Not that that brought full knowledge. The world he found was an abstraction, a bubble, floating cheerfully free in a space and a time beyond his ken. No matter. He guessed it was almost as airy there.

The musical notation stood equally clear to him, tunes lilting while he scanned them. Their scale was not too different from that common in the Westlands. He would need only a little practice before singing and strumming them in a way that everybody he met ought to like. What exoticism there was should lend piquancy. Yes, for his future career -

Future!

He sprang to his feet. His head banged against a rafter.

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HASTILY FETCHED through biting wind and gathering murk, Deghred im Dalagh hunkered down and peered at Cappen Varra. "Well, what do you crave of me?" he asked.

"In a minute, I pray you." Himself sitting tailor-fashion, the bard tried to arrange paper, inkpot, and open book for use. Bloody awkward. No help at all to the image of a knowing and confident rescuer.

"I've a feeling you're none too sure either," Deghred murmured.

"But I am! I simply need a bit of assistance. Who doesn't ever? The craftsman his apprentices, the priest his acolytes, and you a whole gang of underlings. I want no more than a brief. . . consultation."

"To what end?" Deghred paused, "They're growing dubious of you. What kindle Powers are you trying to deal with? What could come of it?"

"The good of everybody."

"Or the ruin?"

"I haven't time to argue." *If I did, I suspect you'd be utterly appalled and make me cease and desist. Then you'd offer an extravagant sacrifice to a being that no such thing will likely appease - for you haven't met her as I have.*

Deghred's voice harshened. "Be warned. If you don't do what you promised - "

"Well, I didn't exactly *promise* - "

"My men won't let you leave with us, and I suspect the villagers will cast you out. They fear you'll carry a curse."

Cappen was not much surprised. "Suppose, instead, I gain clemency, weather as it ought to be, and the passes open for you. Will they give me anything better than thanks? I'm taking a considerable personal risk, you know."

"Ah, should you succeed, that's different. Although these dwellers be poor folk, I don't doubt they'd heap skins and pelts at your feet. I'll show you how to sell the stuff at good prices in Temanhassa."

"You and your fellow traders are not poor men," said Cappen pointedly.

"Naturally, you'd find us, ah, not ungenerous."

"Shall we say a tenth share of the profit from your expedition?"

"A tenth? How can you jest like that in an hour like this?"

"Retreating to winter in the Empire would cost more. As you must well know, who've had to cope rear after year with its taxes, bribes and extortionate suppliers." Getting snowed in here would be still worse, but Cappen thought it imprudent to explain that that had become a distinct possibility.

"We are not misers or ingrates. Nor are we unreasonable. Three percent is, indeed, lavish."

"Let us not lose precious time in haggling. Seven and a half."

"Five, and my friendship, protection, and recommendations to influential persons in Temanhassa."

"Done!" said Cappen. He sensed the trader's surprise and a certain instinctive disappointment. But there'd to get on with the work was very real, and the bargain not a bad one.

Meanwhile he had arranged his things just barely well enough that he could begin. Dipping pen in ink, he said, "This is a strange work I must do, and potent forces are afoot. As yet I cannot tell of it, save to pledge that there is nothing of evil. As I write, I want you to talk to me in Xandran. Naught else."

Deghred gaped, remembered his dignity, and replied "May I wonder why! You do not know that tongue, and I have only some smatterings."

"You may wonder if you choose. What you must do is talk."

"But what about?"

"Anything. Merely keep the words flowing."

Deghred groped for a minute. Such an order is not as simple as one might think. Almost desperately, he began: "I have these fine seasonings.

They were shipped to me from distant lands at great expense. To you and you alone will I offer them at ridiculously low wholesale prices, because I hold you in such high esteem. Behold, for an ounce of pungent peppercorn, a mere ten zirgats. I look on this not as a loss to me, although it is, but a gift of goodwill."

Cappen scribbled. While he listened, the meanings came clear to him. He even mentally made up for the stumblings, hesitations and thick Accent. The language was his to the extent that it was the other man's, and he could have replied with flueacy. What slowed him was the search in his mind for words that weren't spoken. "Knot" and "insoluble," for instance. How would one say them? . . . Ah, yes. Assuming that what he pseudo-remembered was correct. Maybe the connotations were strictly of a rope and of minerals that didn't melt in water. He jotted them down provisionally, but he wanted more context.

Deghred stopped. "Go on," Cappen urged.

"Well, uh - O barefaced brazen robber! Ten zirgats? If this withered and moldy lot went for two in the bazaar, I would be astounded. Yet, since I too am prepared to take a loss for the sake of our relationship, I will offer three - "

"Uh, could you give me something else?" Cappen interrupted. "Speech not so, m-m, commercial?"

"What can it be? My dealings with Xandrans are all commercial."

"Oh surely not all. Doing business in itself involves sociability, the cultivation of friendly feelings, does it not? Tell me what might be said at a shared meal over a cup of wine."

Deghred pondered before he tried: "How did your sea voyage go? I hope you're not troubled by the heat. It is seldom so hot here at this time of year."

"Nothing more - more intimate? Don't men like these ever talk of their families? Of love and marriage?"

"Not much. I can't converse with them easily, you know. Women yes."

"Say on."

"Well, I remember telling one fellow, when he asked, that the best whorehouse in the city is the Purple Lotus. Especially if you can get Zerasa. By Kalat's cloven hoof, what a wench! Plump and sweet as a juicy plum, sizzling as a spitted rump roast, and the tricks she knows - "

Deghred reminisced in considerable detail.

It wasn't quite what Cappen had meant. Still, association evoked words also amorous, but apparently decorous. His pen flew, scrawling, scratching out, spattering the paper and his tunic. When Deghred ended with a gusty sigh, Cappen had enough.

"Good," he said. "My thanks - albeit this is toward the end of saving your own well-being and prosperity too. You may go now. Five percent, remember."

The merchant rose and stretched himself as well as the roof allowed.

"If naught else, that was a small respite from reality. Ah, well. You do have hopes? Are you coming along?"

"No," said Cappen. "My labors are just beginning."

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Day broke still and cloudless but cruelly cold. Breath smoked white, feet crunched ice. When he emerged at mid-morning, Cappen found very few folk outdoors. Those stared at him out of their own frozen silence. The rest were huddled inside, keeping warm while they waited to learn their fate. It was as if the whole gigantic land held its breath.

He felt no weariness, he could not. He seemed almost detached from himself, his head light but sky-clear. His left arm cradled the harp. Tucked into his belt was a folded sheet of paper, but he didn't expect any need to refer to it. The words thereon were graven into him together with their music. They certainly should be. The gods of minstrelsy knew - or would have known, if they weren't so remote from this wild highland - how he had toiled over the lyrics, searching about, throwing away effort after effort, inch by inch finding his way to a translation that fitted the notes and was not grossly false to the original, and at last, not satisfied but with time on his heels, had rehearsed over and over and over for his audience of turnips and sheepskins.

Now he must see how well it played for a more critical listener.

If it succeeded, if he survived, the first part of the reward he'd claim was to be let to sleep undisturbed until next sunrise. How remotely that bliss glimmered!

He trudged onward, scarcely thinking about anything, until he came to the altar. There he took stance, gazed across the abyss to peaks sword-sharp against heaven, and said, "My lady, here I am in obedience to your command."

It sounded unnaturally loud. No echo responded, no wings soared overhead, he stood alone in the middle of aloneness.

After a while, he said, "I repeat, begging my lady's pardon, that here I am with that which I promised you."

The least of breezes stirred. It went like liquid across his face and into his nostrils. In so vast a silence, he heard it whisper.

"I humbly hope my offering will please you and all the gods," he said. And there she was, awesome and beautiful before him. A phantom wind tossed her hair and whirled snow-sparkles around her whiteness.

"Well?" she snapped.

Could she too, even she, have been under strain? He doffed his cap and bowed low. "If my lady will deign to heed, I've created an epithalamium such as she desires, and have the incomparable honor of rendering it unto her, to be known forever after as her unique gift at the turning of the winter."

"That was quick after you protested you could not."

"The thought of you inspired me as never ere now have I been inspired."

"To make it out of nothing?"

"Oh, no, my lady. Out of experience, and whatever talent is mine, and, above all else, as I confessed, the shining vision of my lady. I swear, and take for granted you can immediately verify, that neither melody nor lyrics were ever heard in this world; Heaven or Earth or the Elsewhere, before I prepare them for you."

He doubted that she could in fact scan space and time at once, so thoroughly. But no matter. He did not doubt that Nerigo kept his half-illicit arcanum and whatever came to it through his mirror that was not a minor well sealed against observation human and nonhuman. Whatever, gods had the scope and power to spy on him must also have much better things to do.

Aiala's glance lingered more than it pierced. "I do not really wish to destroy you, Cappen Varra," she told him slowly. "You have a rather charming way about you. But - should you disappoint me - you will understand that one does have one's position to maintain."

"Oh, absolutely. And how better could a man perish than in striving to serve such a lady? Yet I dare suggest that you will find my ditty acceptable."

The glorious eyes widened. The slight mercurial shivers almost ceased. "Sing then," she said low.

"Allow me first to lay forth what the purpose is. Unless I am grievously mistaken it is to provide an ode to nuptial joy. Now, my thought was that this is best expressed in the voice of the bride. The groom is inevitably impatient for nightfall. She, though, however happy, may at the same time be a little fearful, certain of loving kindness yet, in her purity, unsure what to await and what she can do toward making the union rapturous. Khaiantai is otherwise. She is a goddess and here is an annual renewal. My song expresses her rapture in tones of unbounded gladness."

Aiala nodded. "That's not a bad theme," she said, perhaps a trifle wistfully.

"Therefore, my lady, pray bear with my conceit, in the poetic sense, that she sings with restrained abandon, in colloquial terms of revelry, not always classically correct. For we have nothing to go on about that save the writings of the learned, do we? There must have been more familiar speech among lesser folk, commoners, farmers, herders, artisans, lowly but still the majority, the backbone of the nation and the salt of the earth. To them too, to the Life Force that is in them should the paean appeal."

"You may be right," said Aiala with a tinge of exasperation. "Let me hear."

While he talked, Cappen Varra, in the presence of one who fully knew the language, mentally made revisions. Translating, he had chosen phrasings that lent themselves to it.

The moment was upon him. He took off his gloves, gripped the harp, strummed it, and cleared his throat.

"We begin with a chorus," he said. Therewith he launched into song.

*"Bridegroom and bride!  
Knot that's insoluble,  
Voices all voluble,  
Hail it with pride."*

She hearkened. Her bosom rose and fell.

"Now the bride herself sings.

*"When a merry maiden marries,  
Sorrow goes and pleasure tarries;  
Every sound becomes a song,  
All is right, and nothing's wrong! - "*

He saw he had captured her, and continued to the bacchanalian end.

*"Sullen night is laughing day -  
All the year is merry May!"*

The chords rang into stillness. Cappen waited. But he knew. A huge, warm easing rose in him like a tide.

"That is wonderful," Aiala breathed. "Nothing of the kind, ever before - "

"It is my lady's," he said with another bow, while he resumed his cap and gloves.

She straightened into majesty. "You have earned what you shall have. Henceforward until the propel winter, the weather shall smile, the dwellers shall prosper, and you and your comrades squall cross my mountains free of all hindrance."

"My lady overwhelms me," he thought it expedient to reply.

For a heartbeat, her grandeur gave way, ever so slightly. "I could almost wish that you - But no. Farewell, funny mortal."

She leaned over. Her lips brushed his. He felt as if struck by soft lightning. Then she was gone. It seemed to him that already the air grew more mild.

For a short while before starting back with his news he stood silent beneath the sky, suddenly dazed. His free hand strayed to the paper at his belt. Doubtless he would never know more about this than he now did. Yet he wished that someday, somehow, if only in another theatrical performance, he could see the gracefully gliding boats of the Venetian gondoliers.