

An impressionistic painting of a dog's face, likely a Golden Retriever, rendered in warm, textured brushstrokes of red, orange, and yellow. The background is dark and moody, with hints of blue and black. The overall style is expressive and painterly.

**Global Grey Ebooks**

**THE OMNIBUS COLLECTION**

**ANDRE NORTON**

# **THE OMNIBUS COLLECTION**

**ANDRE NORTON**



The Omnibus Collection by Andre Norton.

All the books in this collection are in the public domain because the U.S. copyrights on them were not renewed.

This ebook edition was created and published by Global Grey on the 14th January 2021, and updated on the 12th April 2022.

The artwork used for the cover is '*City Rises*' painted by Umberto Boccioni.

This book can be found on the site here:

[globalgreyebooks.com/andre-norton-omnibus-collection-ebook.html](http://globalgreyebooks.com/andre-norton-omnibus-collection-ebook.html)

©Global Grey 2022

[globalgreyebooks.com](http://globalgreyebooks.com)

# Contents

## All Cats Are Gray

### Plague Ship

1. Perfumed Planet
2. Rivals
3. Contact At Last
4. Gorp Hunt
5. The Perilous Seas
6. Duelist's Challenge
7. Barring Accident
8. Headaches
9. Plague!
10. E-Stat Landing
11. Desperate Measures
12. Strange Behavior Of A Hoobat
13. Off The Map
14. Special Mission
15. Medic Hovan Reports
16. The Battle Of The Video
17. In Custody
18. Bargain Concluded

### The Time Traders

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

### Storm Over Warlock

1. Disaster

2. Death Of A Ship

3. To Close Ranks

4. Sortie

5. Pursuit

6. The Hound

7. Unwelcome Guide

8. Utgard

9. One Alone

10. A Trap For A Trapper

11. The Witch

12. The Veil Of Illusion

13. He Who Dreams....

14. Escape

15. Dragon Slayer

16. Third Prisoner

17. Throg Justice

18. Storm's Ending

### Star Hunter

1.

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

### Star Born

1. Shooting Star

2. Planetfall

3. Snake-Devil's Trail

4. Civilization

5. Banded Devil

6. Treasure Hunt

7. Many Eyes, Many Ears

8. Airlift

9. Sea Gate

10. The Dead Guardians

11. Espionage

12. Alien Patrol

13. A Hound Is Loosed

14. The Prisoner

15. Arena

16. Surprise Attack

17. Destruction Unleashed

18. Not Yet—

### Key Out Of Time

1. Lotus World

2. Lair of Mano-Nui

3. The Ancient Mariners

4. Storm Menace

5. Time Wrecked

6. Loketh the Useless

7. Witches' Meat

8. The Free Rovers

9. Battle Test

10. Death at Kyn Add

11. Weapon from the Depths

12. Baldies

13. The Sea Gate of the Foanna

14. The Foanna

15. Return to the Battle

16. The Opening of the Great Door

17. Shades Against Shadow

18. World in Doubt?

The Defiant Agents

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

Voodoo Planet

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

The People Of The Crater

1. Through the Blue Haze
2. The Folk of Tav
3. Garin Hears of the Black Ones
4. The Defeat of the Ancient Ones
5. Into the Caves of Darkness
6. Kepta's Second Prisoner
7. Kepta's Trap
8. Escape from the Caves
9. Days of Preparation
10. Battle and Victory
11. Thrala's Mate

Rebel Spurs

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18

The Gifts of Asti

Ralestone Luck

1. The Ralestones Come Home



2. The Luck Of The Lords Of Lorne
3. The Ralestones Entertain An Unobtrusive Visitor
4. Pistols For Two—Coffee For One
5. Their Tenant Discovers The Ralestones
6. Satan Goes A-Hunting And Finds Work For Idle Hands
7. By Our Luck!
8. Great-Uncle Rick Walks The Hall
9. Portrait Of A Lady And A Gentleman
10. Into The Swamp
11. Ralestones To The Rescue!
12. The Ralestones Bring Home A Reluctant Guest
13. On Such A Night As This—
14. Pirate Ways Are Hidden Ways
15. Pieces Of Eight—Ralestones' Fate!
16. Ralestones Stand Together
17. The Return Of Rick Ralestone
18. Rupert Brings Home His Marchioness

Ride Proud, Rebel!

1. Ride with Morgan
2. Guns in the Night
3. On the Run——
4. The Eleventh Ohio Cavalry
5. Bardstown Surrenders
6. Horse Trade
7. A Mule for a River
8. Happy Birthday, Soldier!
9. One More River To Cross
10. “Dismount! Prepare To Fight Gunboats!”
11. The Road to Nashville
12. Guerrillas
13. Disaster
14. Hell in Tennessee
15. Independent Scout
16. Missing in Action
17. Poor Rebel Soldier....

## 18. Texas Spurs

# All Cats Are Gray

Under normal conditions a whole person has a decided advantage over a handicapped one. But out in deep space the normal may be reversed—for humans at any rate.

Steená of the spaceways—that sounds just like a corny title for one of the Stellar-Vedo spreads. I ought to know, I've tried my hand at writing enough of them. Only this Steena was no glamour babe. She was as colorless as a Lunar plant—even the hair netted down to her skull had a sort of grayish cast and I never saw her but once draped in anything but a shapeless and baggy gray space-all.

Steená was strictly background stuff and that is where she mostly spent her free hours—in the smelly smoky background corners of any stellar-port dive frequented by free spacers. If you really looked for her you could spot her—just sitting there listening to the talk—listening and remembering. She didn't open her own mouth often. But when she did spacers had learned to listen. And the lucky few who heard her rare spoken words—these will never forget Steena.

She drifted from port to port. Being an expert operator on the big calculators she found jobs wherever she cared to stay for a time. And she came to be something like the master-minded machines she tended—smooth, gray, without much personality of her own.

But it was Steena who told Bub Nelson about the Jovan moon-rites—and her warning saved Bub's life six months later. It was Steena who identified the piece of stone Keene Clark was passing around a table one night, rightly calling it unworked Slitite. That started a rush which made ten fortunes overnight for men who were down to their last jets. And, last of all, she cracked the case of the *Empress of Mars*.

All the boys who had profited by her queer store of knowledge and her photographic memory tried at one time or another to balance the scales. But she wouldn't take so much as a cup of Canal water at their expense, let alone the credits they tried to push on her. Bub Nelson was the only one who got around her refusal. It was he who brought her Bat.

About a year after the Jovan affair he walked into the Free Fall one night and dumped Bat down on her table. Bat looked at Steena and growled. She looked calmly back at him and nodded once. From then on they traveled together—the thin gray woman and the big gray tom-cat. Bat learned to know the inside of more stellar bars than even most spacers visit in their lifetimes. He developed a liking for Vernal juice, drank it neat and quick, right out of a glass. And he was always at home on any table where Steena elected to drop him.

This is really the story of Steena, Bat, Cliff Moran and the *Empress of Mars*, a story which is already a legend of the spaceways. And it's a damn good story too. I ought to know, having framed the first version of it myself.

For I was there, right in the Rigel Royal, when it all began on the night that Cliff Moran blew in, looking lower than an antman's belly and twice as nasty. He'd had a spell of luck foul enough to twist a man into a slug-snake and we all knew that there was an attachment out for his ship. Cliff had fought his way up from the back courts of Venaport. Lose his ship and he'd slip back there—to rot. He was at the snarling stage that night when he picked out a table for himself and set out to drink away his troubles.

However, just as the first bottle arrived, so did a visitor. Steena came out of her corner, Bat curled around her shoulders stole-wise, his favorite mode of travel. She crossed over and dropped down without invitation at Cliff's side. That shook him out of his sulks. Because

Steená never chose company when she could be alone. If one of the man-stones on Ganymede had come stumping in, it wouldn't have made more of us look out of the corners of our eyes.

She stretched out one long-fingered hand and set aside the bottle he had ordered and said only one thing, "It's about time for the *Empress of Mars* to appear again."

Cliff scowled and bit his lip. He was tough, tough as jet lining—you have to be granite inside and out to struggle up from Venaport to a ship command. But we could guess what was running through his mind at that moment. The *Empress of Mars* was just about the biggest prize a spacer could aim for. But in the fifty years she had been following her queer derelict orbit through space many men had tried to bring her in—and none had succeeded.

A pleasure-ship carrying untold wealth, she had been mysteriously abandoned in space by passengers and crew, none of whom had ever been seen or heard of again. At intervals thereafter she had been sighted, even boarded. Those who ventured into her either vanished or returned swiftly without any believable explanation of what they had seen—wanting only to get away from her as quickly as possible. But the man who could bring her in—or even strip her clean in space—that man would win the jackpot.

"All right!" Cliff slammed his fist down on the table. "I'll try even that!"

Steená looked at him, much as she must have looked at Bat the day Bub Nelson brought him to her, and nodded. That was all I saw. The rest of the story came to me in pieces, months later and in another port half the System away.

Cliff took off that night. He was afraid to risk waiting—with a writ out that could pull the ship from under him. And it wasn't until he was in space that he discovered his passengers—Steená and Bat. We'll never know what happened then. I'm betting that Steená made no explanation at all. She wouldn't.

It was the first time she had decided to cash in on her own tip and she was there—that was all. Maybe that point weighed with Cliff, maybe he just didn't care. Anyway the three were together when they sighted the *Empress* riding, her dead-lights gleaming, a ghost ship in night space.

She must have been an eerie sight because her other lights were on too, in addition to the red warnings at her nose. She seemed alive, a Flying Dutchman of space. Cliff worked his ship skillfully alongside and had no trouble in snapping magnetic lines to her lock. Some minutes later the three of them passed into her. There was still air in her cabins and corridors. Air that bore a faint corrupt taint which set Bat to sniffing greedily and could be picked up even by the less sensitive human nostrils.

Cliff headed straight for the control cabin but Steená and Bat went prowling. Closed doors were a challenge to both of them and Steená opened each as she passed, taking a quick look at what lay within. The fifth door opened on a room which no woman could leave without further investigation.

I don't know who had been housed there when the *Empress* left port on her last lengthy cruise. Anyone really curious can check back on the old photo-reg cards. But there was a lavish display of silks trailing out of two travel kits on the floor, a dressing table crowded with crystal and jeweled containers, along with other lures for the female which drew Steená in. She was standing in front of the dressing table when she glanced into the mirror—glanced into it and froze.

Over her right shoulder she could see the spider-silk cover on the bed. Right in the middle of that sheer, gossamer expanse was a sparkling heap of gems, the dumped contents of some jewel case. Bat had jumped to the foot of the bed and flattened out as cats will, watching those gems, watching them and—something else!

Stena put out her hand blindly and caught up the nearest bottle. As she unstopped it she watched the mirrored bed. A gemmed bracelet rose from the pile, rose in the air and tinkled its siren song. It was as if an idle hand played.... Bat spat almost noiselessly. But he did not retreat. Bat had not yet decided his course.

She put down the bottle. Then she did something which perhaps few of the men she had listened to through the years could have done. She moved without hurry or sign of disturbance on a tour about the room. And, although she approached the bed she did not touch the jewels. She could not force herself to that. It took her five minutes to play out her innocence and unconcern. Then it was Bat who decided the issue.

He leaped from the bed and escorted something to the door, remaining a careful distance behind. Then he mewed loudly twice. Steena followed him and opened the door wider.

Bat went straight on down the corridor, as intent as a hound on the warmest of scents. Steena strolled behind him, holding her pace to the unhurried gait of an explorer. What sped before them both was invisible to her but Bat was never baffled by it.

They must have gone into the control cabin almost on the heels of the unseen—if the unseen had heels, which there was good reason to doubt—for Bat crouched just within the doorway and refused to move on. Steena looked down the length of the instrument panels and officers' station-seats to where Cliff Moran worked. On the heavy carpet her boots made no sound and he did not glance up but sat humming through set teeth as he tested the tardy and reluctant responses to buttons which had not been pushed in years.

To human eyes they were alone in the cabin. But Bat still followed a moving something with his gaze. And it was something which he had at last made up his mind to distrust and dislike. For now he took a step or two forward and spat—his loathing made plain by every raised hair along his spine. And in that same moment Steena saw a flicker—a flicker of vague outline against Cliff's hunched shoulders as if the invisible one had crossed the space between them.

But why had it been revealed against Cliff and not against the back of one of the seats or against the panels, the walls of the corridor or the cover of the bed where it had reclined and played with its loot? What could Bat see?

The storehouse memory that had served Steena so well through the years clicked open a half-forgotten door. With one swift motion she tore loose her spaceall and flung the baggy garment across the back of the nearest seat.

Bat was snarling now, emitting the throaty rising cry that was his hunting song. But he was edging back, back toward Steena's feet, shrinking from something he could not fight but which he faced defiantly. If he could draw it after him, past that dangling spaceall.... He had to—it was their only chance.

"What the...." Cliff had come out of his seat and was staring at them.

What he saw must have been weird enough. Steena, bare-armed and shouldered, her usually stiffly-netted hair falling wildly down her back, Steena watching empty space with narrowed eyes and set mouth, calculating a single wild chance. Bat, crouched on his belly, retreating from thin air step by step and wailing like a demon.

“Toss me your blaster.” Steena gave the order calmly—as if they still sat at their table in the Rigel Royal.

And as quietly Cliff obeyed. She caught the small weapon out of the air with a steady hand—caught and leveled it.

“Stay just where you are!” she warned. “Back, Bat, bring it back!”

With a last throat-splitting screech of rage and hate, Bat twisted to safety between her boots. She pressed with thumb and forefinger, firing at the spacealls. The material turned to powdery flakes of ash—except for certain bits which still flapped from the scorched seat—as if something had protected them from the force of the blast. Bat sprang straight up in the air with a scream that tore their ears.

“What...?” began Cliff again.

Steena made a warning motion with her left hand. “*Wait!*”

She was still tense, still watching Bat. The cat dashed madly around the cabin twice, running crazily with white-ringed eyes and flecks of foam on his muzzle. Then he stopped abruptly in the doorway, stopped and looked back over his shoulder for a long silent moment. He sniffed delicately.

Steena and Cliff could smell it too now, a thick oily stench which was not the usual odor left by an exploding blaster-shell.

Bat came back, treading daintily across the carpet, almost on the tips of his paws. He raised his head as he passed Steena and then he went confidently beyond to sniff, to sniff and spit twice at the unburned strips of the spaceall. Having thus paid his respects to the late enemy he sat down calmly and set to washing his fur with deliberation. Steena sighed once and dropped into the navigator’s seat.

“Maybe now you’ll tell me what in the hell’s happened?” Cliff exploded as he took the blaster out of her hand.

“Gray,” she said dazedly, “it must have been gray—or I couldn’t have seen it like that. I’m colorblind, you see. I can see only shades of gray—my whole world is gray. Like Bat’s—his world is gray too—all gray. But he’s been compensated for he can see above and below our range of color vibrations and—apparently—so can I!”

Her voice quavered and she raised her chin with a new air Cliff had never seen before—a sort of proud acceptance. She pushed back her wandering hair, but she made no move to imprison it under the heavy net again.

“That is why I saw the thing when it crossed between us. Against your spaceall it was another shade of gray—an outline. So I put out mine and waited for it to show against that—it was our only chance, Cliff.

“It was curious at first, I think, and it knew we couldn’t see it—which is why it waited to attack. But when Bat’s actions gave it away it moved. So I waited to see that flicker against the spaceall and then I let him have it. It’s really very simple....”

Cliff laughed a bit shakily. “But what *was* this gray thing? I don’t get it.”

“I think it was what made the *Empress* a derelict. Something out of space, maybe, or from another world somewhere.” She waved her hands. “It’s invisible because it’s a color beyond our range of sight. It must have stayed in here all these years. And it kills—it must—when its curiosity is satisfied.” Swiftly she described the scene in the cabin and the strange behavior of the gem pile which had betrayed the creature to her.

Cliff did not return his blaster to its holder. “Any more of them on board, d’you think?” He didn’t look pleased at the prospect.

Steena turned to Bat. He was paying particular attention to the space between two front toes in the process of a complete bath. “I don’t think so. But Bat will tell us if there are. He can see them clearly, I believe.”

But there weren’t any more and two weeks later Cliff, Steena and Bat brought the *Empress* into the Lunar quarantine station. And that is the end of Steena’s story because, as we have been told, happy marriages need no chronicles. And Steena had found someone who knew of her gray world and did not find it too hard to share with her—someone besides Bat. It turned out to be a real love match.

The last time I saw her she was wrapped in a flame-red cloak from the looms of Rigel and wore a fortune in Jovan rubies blazing on her wrists. Cliff was flipping a three-figure credit bill to a waiter. And Bat had a row of Vernal juice glasses set up before him. Just a little family party out on the town.

# Plague Ship



# 1. Perfumed Planet

Dane Thorson, Cargo-master-apprentice of the Solar Queen, Galactic Free Trader spacer, Terra registry, stood in the middle of the ship's cramped bather while Rip Shannon, assistant Astrogator and his senior in the Service of Trade by some four years, applied gobs of highly scented paste to the skin between Dane's rather prominent shoulder blades. The small cabin was thickly redolent with spicy odors and Rip sniffed appreciatively.

"You're sure going to be about the best smelling Terran who ever set boot on Sargol's soil," his soft slur of speech ended in a rich chuckle.

Dane snorted and tried to estimate progress over one shoulder.

"The things we have to do for Trade!" his comment carried a hint of present embarrassment. "Get it well in—this stuff's supposed to hold for hours. It'd better. According to Van those Salariki can talk your ears right off your head and say nothing worth hearing. And we have to sit and listen until we get a straight answer out of them. Phew!" He shook his head. In such close quarters the scent, pleasing as it was, was also overpowering. "We would have to pick a world such as this—"

Rip's dark fingers halted their circular motion. "Dane," he warned, "don't you go talking against this venture. We got it soft and we're going to be credit-happy—if it works out—"

But, perversely, Dane held to a gloomier view of the immediate future. "*If*," he repeated. "There's a galaxy of 'ifs' in this Sargol proposition. All very well for you to rest easy on your fins—you don't have to run about smelling like a spice works before you can get the time of day from one of the natives!"

Rip put down the jar of cream. "Different worlds, different customs," he iterated the old tag of the Service. "Be glad this one is so easy to conform to. There are some I can think of—There," he ended his massage with a stinging slap. "You're all evenly greased. Good thing you don't have Van's bulk to cover. It takes him a good hour to get his cream on—even with Frank helping to spread. Your clothes ought to be steamed up and ready, too, by now—"

He opened a tight wall cabinet, originally intended to sterilize clothing which might be contaminated by contact with organisms inimical to Terrans. A cloud of steam fragrant with the same spicy scent poured out.

Dane gingerly tugged loose his Trade uniform, its brown silky fabric damp on his skin as he dressed. Luckily Sargol was warm. When he stepped out on its ruby tinted soil this morning no lingering taint of his off-world origin must remain to disgust the sensitive nostrils of the Salariki. He supposed he would get used to this process. After all this was the first time he had undergone the ritual. But he couldn't lose the secret conviction that it was all very silly. Only what Rip had pointed out was the truth—one adjusted to the customs of aliens or one didn't trade and there were other things he might have had to do on other worlds which would have been far more upsetting to that core of private fastidiousness which few would have suspected existed in his tall, lanky frame.

"Whew—out in the open with you—!" Ali Kamil apprentice Engineer, screwed his too regular features into an expression of extreme distaste and waved Dane by him in the corridor.

For the sake of his shipmates' olfactory nerves, Dane hurried on to the port which gave on the ramp now tying the Queen to Sargol's crust. But there he lingered, waiting for Van Rycke,

the Cargo-master of the spacer and his immediate superior. It was early morning and now that he was out of the confinement of the ship the fresh morning winds cut about him, rippling through the blue-green grass forest beyond, to take much of his momentary irritation with them.

There were no mountains in this section of Sargol—the highest elevations being rounded hills tightly clothed with the same ten-foot grass which covered the plains. From the Queen’s observation ports, one could watch the constant ripple of the grass so that the planet appeared to be largely clothed in a shimmering, flowing carpet. To the west were the seas—stretches of shallow water so cut up by strings of islands that they more resembled a series of salty lakes. And it was what was to be found in those seas which had lured the Solar Queen to Sargol.

Though, by rights, the discovery was that of another Trader—Traxt Cam—who had bid for trading rights to Sargol, hoping to make a comfortable fortune—or at least expenses with a slight profit—in the perfume trade, exporting from the scented planet some of its most fragrant products. But once on Sargol he had discovered the Koros stones—gems of a new type—a handful of which offered across the board in one of the inner planet trading marts had nearly caused a riot among bidding gem merchants. And Cam had been well on the way to becoming one of the princes of Trade when he had been drawn into the vicious net of the Limbian pirates and finished off.

Because they, too, had stumbled into the trap which was Limbo, and had had a very definite part in breaking up that devilish installation, the crew of the Solar Queen had claimed as their reward the trading rights of Traxt Cam in default of legal heirs. And so here they were on Sargol with the notes left by Cam as their guide, and as much lore concerning the Salariki as was known crammed into their minds.

Dane sat down on the end of the ramp, his feet on Sargolian soil, thin, red soil with glittering bits of gold flake in it. He did not doubt that he was under observation from hidden eyes, but he tried to show no sign that he guessed it. The adult Salariki maintained at all times an attitude of aloof and complete indifference toward the Traders, but the juvenile population were as curious as their elders were contemptuous. Perhaps there was a method of approach in that. Dane considered the idea.

Van Rycke and Captain Jellico had handled the first negotiations—and the process had taken most of a day—the result totaling exactly nothing. In their contacts with the off world men the feline anceder Salariki were ceremonious, wary, and completely detached. But Cam had gotten to them somehow—or he would not have returned from his first trip with that pouch of Koros stones. Only, among his records, salvaged on Limbo, he had left absolutely no clue as to how he had beaten down native sales resistance. It was baffling. But patience had to be the middle name of every Trader and Dane had complete faith in Van. Sooner or later the Cargo-master would find a key to unlock the Salariki.

As if the thought of Dane’s chief had summoned him, Van Rycke, his scented tunic sealed to his bull’s neck in unaccustomed trimness, his cap on his blond head, strode down the ramp, broadcasting waves of fragrance as he moved. He sniffed vigorously as he approached his assistant and then nodded in approval.

“So you’re all greased and ready—”

“Is the Captain coming too, sir?”

Van Rycke shook his head. “This is our headache. Patience, my boy, patience—” He led the way through a thin screen of the grass on the other side of the scorched landing field to a well-packed earth road.

Again Dane felt eyes, knew that they were being watched. But no Salarik stepped out of concealment. At least they had nothing to fear in the way of attack. Traders were immune, taboo, and the trading stations were set up under the white diamond shield of peace, a peace guaranteed on blood oath by every clan chieftain in the district. Even in the midst of interclan feuding deadly enemies met in amity under that shield and would not turn claw knife against each other within a two mile radius of its protection.

The grass forests rustled betrayingly, but the Terrans displayed no interest in those who spied upon them. An insect with wings of brilliant green gauze detached itself from the stalk of a grass tree and fluttered ahead of the Traders as if it were an official herald. From the red soil crushed by their boots arose a pungent odor which fought with the scent they carried with them. Dane swallowed three or four times and hoped that his superior officer had not noticed that sign of discomfort. Though Van Rycke, in spite of his general air of sleepy benevolence and careless goodwill, noticed everything, no matter how trivial, which might have a bearing on the delicate negotiations of Galactic Trade. He had not climbed to his present status of expert Cargo-master by overlooking anything at all. Now he gave an order:

“Take an equalizer—”

Dane reached for his belt pouch, flushing, fiercely determined inside himself, that no matter how smells warred about him that day, he was not going to let it bother him. He swallowed the tiny pellet Medic Tau had prepared for just such trials and tried to occupy his mind with the work to come. If there would be any work—or would another long day be wasted in futile speeches of mutual esteem which gave formal lip service to Trade and its manifest benefits?

“Houuuu—” The cry which was half wail, half arrogant warning, sounded along the road behind them.

Van Rycke’s stride did not vary. He did not turn his head, show any sign he had heard that heralding fanfare for a clan chieftain. And he continued to keep to the exact center of the road, Dane the regulation one pace to the rear and left as befitted his lower rank.

“Houuu—” that blast from the throat of a Salarik especially chosen for his lung power was accompanied now by the hollow drum of many feet. The Terrans neither looked around nor withdrew from the center, nor did their pace quicken.

That, too, was in order, Dane knew. To the rank conscious Salariki clansmen you did not yield precedence unless you wanted at once to acknowledge your inferiority—and if you did that by some slip of admission or omission, there was no use in trying to treat face to face with their chieftains again.

“Houuuu—!” The blast behind was a scream as the retinue it announced swept around the bend in the road to catch sight of the two Traders oblivious of it. Dane longed to be able to turn his head, just enough to see which one of the local lordlings they blocked.

“Houu—” there was a questioning note in the cry now and the heavy thud-thud of feet was slacking. The clan party had seen them, were hesitant about the wisdom of trying to shove them aside.

Van Rycke marched steadily onward and Dane matched his pace. They might not possess a leather-lunged herald to clear their road, but they gave every indication of having the right to occupy as much of it as they wished. And that unruffled poise had its affect upon those behind. The pound of feet slowed to a walk, a walk which would keep a careful distance behind the two Terrans. It had worked—the Salariki—or these Salariki—were accepting them at their own valuation—a good omen for the day’s business. Dane’s spirits rose, but he

schooled his features into a mask as wooden as his superior's. After all this was a very minor victory and they had ten or twelve hours of polite, and hidden, maneuvering before them.

The Solar Queen had set down as closely as possible to the trading center marked on Traxt Cam's private map and the Terrans now had another five minutes march, in the middle of the road, ahead of the chieftain who must be inwardly boiling at their presence, before they came out in the clearing containing the roofless, circular erection which served the Salariki of the district as a market place and a common meeting ground for truce talks and the mending of private clan alliances. Erect on a pole in the middle, towering well above the nodding fronds of the grass trees, was the pole bearing the trade shield which promised not only peace to those under it, but a three day sanctuary to any feuder or duelist who managed to win to it and lay hands upon its weathered standard.

They were not the first to arrive, which was also a good thing. Gathered in small groups about the walls of the council place were the personal attendants, liege warriors, and younger relatives of at least four or five clan chieftains. But, Dane noted at once, there was not a single curtained litter or riding orgel to be seen. None of the feminine part of the Salariki species had arrived. Nor would they until the final trade treaty was concluded and established by their fathers, husbands, or sons.

With the assurance of one who was master in his own clan, Van Rycke, displaying no interest at all in the shifting mass of lower rank Salariki, marched straight on to the door of the enclosure. Two or three of the younger warriors got to their feet, their brilliant cloaks flicking out like spreading wings. But when Van Rycke did not even lift an eyelid in their direction, they made no move to block his path.

As fighting men, Dane thought, trying to study the specimens before him with a totally impersonal stare, the Salariki were an impressive lot. Their average height was close to six feet, their distant feline ancestry apparent only in small vestiges. A Salarik's nails on both hands and feet were retractile, his skin was gray, his thick hair, close to the texture of plushy fur, extended down his backbone and along the outside of his well muscled arms and legs, and was tawny-yellow, blue-gray or white. To Terran eyes the broad faces, now all turned in their direction, lacked readable expression. The eyes were large and set slightly aslant in the skull, being startlingly orange-red or a brilliant turquoise green-blue. They wore loin cloths of brightly dyed fabrics with wide sashes forming corselets about their slender middles, from which gleamed the gem-set hilts of their claw knives, the possession of which proved their adulthood. Cloaks as flamboyant as their other garments hung in bat wing folds from their shoulders and each and every one moved in an invisible cloud of perfume.

Brilliant as the assemblage of liege men without had been, the gathering of clan leaders and their upper officers within the council place was a riot of color—and odor. The chieftains were installed on the wooden stools, each with a small table before him on which rested a goblet bearing his own clan sign, a folded strip of patterned cloth—his “trade shield”—and a gemmed box containing the scented paste he would use for refreshment during the ordeal of conference.

A breeze fluttered sash ends and tugged at cloaks, otherwise the assembly was motionless and awesomely quiet. Still making no overtures Van Rycke crossed to a stool and table which stood a little apart and seated himself. Dane went into the action required of him. Before his superior he set out a plastic pocket flask, its color as alive in the sunlight as the crudely cut gems which the Salariki sported, a fine silk handkerchief, and, last of all, a bottle of Terran smelling salts provided by Medic Tau as a necessary restorative after some hours combination of Salariki oratory and Salariki perfumes. Having thus done the duty of liege

man, Dane was at liberty to seat himself, cross-legged on the ground behind his chief, as the other sons, heirs, and advisors had gathered behind their lords.

The chieftain whose arrival they had in a manner delayed came in after them and Dane saw that it was Fashdor—another piece of luck—since that clan was a small one and the chieftain had little influence. Had they so slowed Halfer or Paft it might be a different matter altogether.

Fashdor was established at his seat, his belongings spread out, and Dane, counting unobtrusively, was certain that the council was now complete. Seven clans Traxt Cam had recorded divided the sea coast territory and there were seven chieftains here—indicative of the importance of this meeting since some of these clans beyond the radius of the shield peace, must be fighting a vicious blood feud at that very moment. Yes, seven were here. Yet there still remained a single stool, directly across the circle from Van Rycke. An empty stool—who was the late comer?

That question was answered almost as it flashed into Dane's mind. But no Salariki lordling came through the door. Dane's self-control kept him in his place, even after he caught the meaning of the insignia emblazoned across the newcomer's tunic. Trader—and not only a Trader but a Company man! But why—and how? The Companies only went after big game—this was a planet thrown open to Free Traders, the independents of the star lanes. By law and right no Company man had any place here. Unless—behind a face Dane strove to keep as impassive as Van's his thoughts raced. Traxt Cam as a Free Trader had bid for the right to exploit Sargol when its sole exportable product was deemed to be perfume—a small, unimportant trade as far as the Companies were concerned. And then the Koros stones had been found and the importance of Sargol must have boomed as far as the big boys could see. They probably knew of Traxt Cam's death as soon as the Patrol report on Limbo had been sent to Headquarters. The Companies all maintained their private information and espionage services. And, with Traxt Cam dead without an heir, they had seen their chance and moved in. Only, Dane's teeth set firmly, they didn't have the ghost of a chance now. Legally there was only one Trader on Sargol and that was the Solar Queen, Captain Jellico had his records signed by the Patrol to prove that. And all this Inter-Solar man would do now was to bow out and try poaching elsewhere.

But the I-S man appeared to be in no haste to follow that only possible course. He was seating himself with arrogant dignity on that unoccupied stool, and a younger man in I-S uniform was putting before him the same type of equipment Dane had produced for Van Rycke. The Cargo-master of the Solar Queen showed no surprise, if the Eysies' appearance had been such to him.

One of the younger warriors in Paft's train got to his feet and brought his hands together with a clap which echoed across the silent gathering with the force of an archaic solid projectal shot. A Salarik, wearing the rich dress of the upper ranks, but also the collar forced upon a captive taken in combat, came into the enclosure carrying a jug in both hands. Preceded by Paft's son he made the rounds of the assembly pouring a purple liquid from his jug into the goblet before each chieftain, a goblet which Paft's heirs tasted ceremoniously before it was presented to the visiting clan leader. When they paused before Van Rycke the Salarik nobleman touched the side of the plasta flask in token. It was recognized that off world men must be cautious over the sampling of local products and that when they joined in the Taking of the First Cup of Peace, they did so symbolically.

Paft raised his cup, his gesture copied by everyone around the circle. In the harsh tongue of his race he repeated a formula so archaic that few of the Salariki could now translate the sing-song words. They drank and the meeting was formally opened.

But it was an elderly Salarik seated to the right of Halfer, a man who wore no claw knife and whose dusky yellow cloak and sash made a subdued note amid the splendor of his fellows, who spoke first, using the click-clack of the Trade Lingo his nation had learned from Cam.

“Under the white,” he pointed to the shield aloft, “we assemble to hear many things. But now come two tongues to speak where once there was but one father of a clan. Tell us, outlanders, which of you must we now hark to in truth?” He looked from Van Rycke to the I-S representative.

The Cargo-master from the Queen did not reply. He stared across the circle at the Company man. Dane waited eagerly. What *was* the I-S going to say to that?

But the fellow did have an answer, ready and waiting. “It is true, fathers of clans, that here are two voices, where by right and custom there should only be one. But this is a matter which can be decided between us. Give us leave to withdraw from your sight and speak privately together. Then he who returns to you will be the true voice and there shall be no more division—”

It was Paft who broke in before Halfer’s spokesman could reply.

“It would have been better to have spoken together before you came to us. Go then until the shadow of the shield is not, then return hither and speak truly. We do not wait upon the pleasure of outlanders—”

A murmur approved that tart comment. “Until the shadow of the shield is not.” They had until noon. Van Rycke arose and Dane gathered up his chief’s possessions. With the same superiority to his surroundings he had shown upon entering, the Cargo-master left the enclosure, the Eysies following. But they were away from the clearing, out upon the road back to the Queen before the two from the Company caught up with them.

“Captain Grange will see you right away—” the Eysie Cargo-master was beginning when Van Rycke met him with a quelling stare.

“If you poachers have anything to say—you say it at the Queen and to Captain Jellico,” he stated flatly and started on.

Above his tight tunic collar the other’s face flushed, his teeth flashed as he caught his lower lip between them as if to forcibly restrain an answer he longed to make. For a second he hesitated and then he vanished down a side path with his assistant. Van Rycke had gone a quarter of the distance back to the ship before he spoke.

“I thought it was too easy,” he muttered. “Now we’re in for it—maybe right up the rockets! By the Spiked Tail of Exol, this is certainly *not* our lucky day!” He quickened pace until they were close to trotting.

## 2. Rivals

“That’s far enough, Eysie!”

Although Traders by law and tradition carried no more potent personal weapons—except in times of great crisis—than hand sleep rods, the resultant shot from the latter was just as unpleasant for temporary periods as a more forceful beam—and the threat of it was enough to halt the three men who had come to the foot of the Queen’s ramp and who could see the rod held rather negligently by Ali. Ali’s eyes were anything but negligent, however, and Free Traders had reputations to be respected by their rivals of the Companies. The very nature of their roving lives taught them savage lessons—which they either learned or died.

Dane, glancing down over the Engineer-apprentice’s shoulder, saw that Van Rycke’s assumption of confidence had indeed paid off. They had left the trade enclosure of the Salariki barely three-quarters of an hour ago. But below now stood the bebadged Captain of the I-S ship and his Cargo-master.

“I want to speak to your Captain—” snarled the Eysie officer.

Ali registered faint amusement, an expression which tended to rouse the worst in the spectator, as Dane knew of old when that same mocking appraisal had been turned on him as the rawest of the Queen’s crew.

“But does *he* wish to speak to you?” countered Kamil. “Just stay where you are, Eysie, until we are sure about that fact.”

That was his cue to act as messenger. Dane retreated into the ship and swung up the ladder to the command section. As he passed Captain Jellico’s private cabin he heard the muffled squall of the commander’s unpleasant pet—Queex, the Hoobat—a nightmare combination of crab, parrot and toad, wearing a blue feather coating and inclined to scream and spit at all comers. Since Queex would not be howling in that fashion if its master was present, Dane kept on to the control cabin where he blundered in upon an executive level conference of Captain, Cargo-master and Astrogator.

“Well?” Jellico’s blaster scarred left cheek twitched as he snapped that impatient inquiry at the messenger.

“Eysie Captain below, sir. With his Cargo-master. They want to see you—”

Jellico’s mouth was a straight line, his eyes very hard. By instinct Dane’s hand went to the grip of the sleep rod slung at his belt. When the Old Man put on his fighting face—look out! Here we go again, he told himself, speculating as to just what type of action lay before them now.

“Oh, they do, do they!” Jellico began and then throttled down the temper he could put under iron control when and if it were necessary. “Very well, tell them to stay where they are. Van, we’ll go down—”

For a moment the Cargo-master hesitated, his heavy-lidded eyes looked sleepy, he seemed almost disinterested in the suggestion. And when he nodded it was with the air of someone about to perform some boring duty.

“Right, sir.” He wriggled his heavy body from behind the small table, resealed his tunic, and settled his cap with as much precision as if he were about to represent the Queen before the assembled nobility of Sargol.

Dane hurried down the ladders, coming to a halt beside Ali. It was the turn of the man at the foot of the ramp to bark an impatient demand:

“Well?” (Was that the theme word of every Captain’s vocabulary?)

“You wait,” Dane replied with no inclination to give the Eysie officer any courtesy address. Close to a Terran year aboard the Solar Queen had inoculated him with pride in his own section of Service. A Free Trader was answerable to his own officers and to no one else on earth—or among the stars—no matter how much discipline and official etiquette the Companies used to enhance their power.

He half expected the I-S officers to leave after an answer such as that. For a Company Captain to be forced to wait upon the convenience of a Free Trader must be galling in the extreme. And the fact that this one was doing just that was an indication that the Queen’s crew did, perhaps, have the edge of advantage in any coming bargain. In the meantime the Eysie contingent fumed below while Ali lounged whistling against the exit port, playing with his sleep rod and Dane studied the grass forest. His boot nudged a packet just inside the port casing and he glanced inquiringly from it to Ali.

“Cat ransom,” the other answered his unspoken question.

So that was it—the fee for Sinbad’s return. “What is it today?”

“Sugar—about a tablespoon full,” the Engineer-assistant returned, “and two colored steelos. So far they haven’t run up the price on us. I think they’re sharing out the spoil evenly, a new cub brings him back every night.”

As did all Terran ships, the Solar Queen carried a cat as an important member of the regular crew. And the portly Sinbad, before their landing on Sargol, had never presented any problem. He had done his duty of ridding the ship of unusual and usual pests and cargo despoilers with dispatch, neatness and energy. And when in port on alien worlds had never shown any inclination to go a-roving.

But the scents of Sargol had apparently intoxicated him, shearing away his solid dignity and middle-aged dependability. Now Sinbad flashed out of the Queen at the opening of her port in the early morning and was brought back, protesting with both voice and claws, at the end of the day by that member of the juvenile population whose turn it was to collect the standing reward for his forceful delivery. Within three days it had become an accepted business transaction which satisfied everyone but Sinbad.

The scrape of metal boot soles on ladder rungs warned of the arrival of their officers. Ali and Dane withdrew down the corridor, leaving the entrance open for Jellico and Van Rycke. Then they drifted back to witness the meeting with the Eysies.

There were no prolonged greetings between the two parties, no offer of hospitality as might have been expected between Terrans on an alien planet a quarter of the Galaxy away from the earth which had given them a common heritage.

Jellico, with Van Rycke at his shoulder, halted before he stepped from the ramp so that the three Inter-Solar men, Captain, Cargo-master and escort, whether they wished or no, were put in the disadvantageous position of having to look up to a Captain whom they, as members of one of the powerful Companies, affected to despise. The lean, well muscled, trim figure of the Queen’s commander gave the impression of hard bitten force held in check by will control, just as his face under its thick layer of space burn was that of an adventurer accustomed to make split second decisions—an estimate underlined by that seam of blaster burn across one flat cheek.



Van Rycke, with a slight change of dress, could have been a Company man in the higher ranks—or so the casual observer would have placed him, until an observer marked the eyes behind those sleepy drooping lids, or caught a certain note in the calm, unhurried drawl of his voice. To look at the two senior officers of the Free Trading spacer were the antithesis of each other—in action they were each half of a powerful, steamroller whole—as a good many men in the Service—scattered over a half dozen or so planets—had discovered to their cost in the past.

Now Jellico brought the heels of his space boots together with an extravagant click and his hand flourished at the fore of his helmet in a gesture which was better suited to the Patrol hero of a slightly out-of-date Video serial.

“Jellico, Solar Queen, Free Trader,” he identified himself brusquely, and added, “this is Van Rycke, our Cargo-master.”

Not all the flush had faded from the face of the I-S Captain.

“Grange of the Dart,” he did not even sketch a salute. “Inter-Solar. Kallee, Cargo-master—” And he did not name the hovering third member of his party.

Jellico stood waiting and after a long moment of silence Grange was forced to state his business.

“We have until noon—”

Jellico, his fingers hooked in his belt, simply waited. And under his level gaze the Eysie Captain began to find the going hard.

“They have given us until noon,” he started once more, “to get together—”

Jellico’s voice came, coldly remote. “There is no reason for any ‘getting together,’ Grange. By rights I can have you up before the Trade Board for poaching. The Solar Queen has sole trading rights here. If you up-ship within a reasonable amount of time, I’ll be inclined to let it pass. After all I’ve no desire to run all the way to the nearest Patrol post to report you—”

“You can’t expect to buck Inter-Solar. We’ll make you an offer—” That was Kallee’s contribution, made probably because his commanding officer couldn’t find words explosive enough.

Jellico, whose forté was more direct action, took an excursion into heavy-handed sarcasm.

“You Eysies have certainly been given excellent briefing. I would advise a little closer study of the Code—and not the sections in small symbols at the end of the tape, either! *We’re* not bucking anyone. You’ll find our registration for Sargol down on tapes at the Center. And I suggest that the sooner you withdraw the better—before we cite you for illegal planeting.”

Grange had gained control of his emotions. “We’re pretty far from Center here,” he remarked. It was a statement of fact, but it carried over-tones which they were able to assess correctly. The Solar Queen was a Free Trader, alone on an alien world. But the I-S ship might be cruising in company, ready to summon aid, men and supplies. Dane drew a deep breath, the Eysies *must* be sure of themselves, not only that, but they must want what Sargol had to offer to the point of being willing to step outside the law to get it.

The I-S Captain took a step forward. “I think we understand each other now,” he said, his confidence restored.

Van Rycke answered him, his deep voice cutting across the sighing of the wind in the grass forest.

“Your proposition?”

Perhaps this return to their implied threat bolstered their belief in the infallibility of the Company, their conviction that no independent dared stand up against the might and power of Inter-Solar. Kallee replied:

“We’ll take up your contract, at a profit to you, and you up-ship before the Salariki are confused over whom they are to deal with—”

“And the amount of profit?” Van Rycke bored in.

“Oh,” Kallee shrugged, “say ten percent of Cam’s last shipment—”

Jellico laughed. “Generous, aren’t you, Eysie? Ten percent of a cargo which can’t be assessed—the gang on Limbo kept no records of what they plundered.”

“We don’t know what he was carrying when he crashed on Limbo,” countered Kallee swiftly. “We’ll base our offer on what he carried to Axal.”

Now Van Rycke chuckled. “I wonder who figured that one out?” he inquired of the scented winds. “He must save the Company a fair amount of credits one way or another. Interesting offer—”

By the bland satisfaction to be read on the three faces below the I-S men were assured of their victory. The Solar Queen would be paid off with a pittance, under the vague threat of Company retaliation she would up-ship from Sargol, and they would be left in possession of the rich Koros trade—to be commended and rewarded by their superiors. Had they, Dane speculated, ever had any dealings with Free Traders before—at least with the brand of independent adventurers such as manned the Solar Queen?

Van Rycke burrowed in his belt pouch and then held out his hand. On the broad palm lay a flat disc of metal. “Very interesting—” he repeated. “I shall treasure this recording—”

The sight of that disc wiped all satisfaction from the Eysie faces. Grange’s purplish flush spread up from his tight tunic collar, Kallee blinked, and the unknown third’s hand dropped to his sleep rod. An action which was not overlooked by either Dane or Ali.

“A smooth set down to you,” Jellico gave the conventional leave taking of the Service.

“You’d better—” the Eysie Captain began hotly, and then seeing the disc Van Rycke held—that sensitive bit of metal and plastic which was recording this interview for future reference, he shut his mouth tight.

“Yes?” the Queen’s Cargo-master prompted politely. But Kallee had taken his Captain’s arm and was urging Grange away from the spacer.

“You have until noon to lift,” was Jellico’s parting shot as the three in Company livery started toward the road.

“I don’t think that they will,” he added to Van Rycke.

The Cargo-master nodded. “You wouldn’t in their place,” he pointed out reasonably. “On the other hand they’ve had a bit of a blast they weren’t expecting. It’s been a long time since Grange heard anyone say ‘no.’”

“A shock which is going to wear off,” Jellico’s habitual distrust of the future gathered force.

“This,” Van Rycke tucked the disc back into his pouch, “sent them off vector a parsec or two. Grange is not one of the strong arm blaster boys. Suppose Tang Ya does a little listening in—and maybe we can rig another surprise if Grange does try to ask advice of someone off world. In the meantime I don’t think they are going to meddle with the Salariki. They don’t want to

have to answer awkward questions if *we* turn up a Patrol ship to ask them. So—” he stretched and beckoned to Dane, “we shall go to work once more.”

Again two paces behind Van Rycke Dane tramped to the trade circle of the Salariki clansmen. They might have walked out only five or six minutes of ship time before, and the natives betrayed no particular interest in their return. But, Dane noted, there was only one empty stool, one ceremonial table in evidence. The Salariki had expected only one Terran Trader to join them.

What followed was a dreary round of ceremony, an exchange of platitudes and empty good wishes and greetings. No one mentioned Koros stones—or even perfume bark—that he was willing to offer the off-world traders. None lifted so much as a corner of his trade cloth, under which, if he were ready to deal seriously, his hidden hand would meet that of the buyer, so that by finger pressure alone they could agree or disagree on price. But such boring sessions were part of Trade and Dane, keeping a fraction of attention on the speeches and “drinkings-together,” watched those around him with an eye which tried to assess and classify what he saw.

The keynote of the Salariki character was a wary independence. The only form of government they would tolerate was a family-clan organization. Feuds and deadly duels between individuals and clans were the accepted way of life and every male who reached adulthood went armed and ready for combat until he became a “Speaker for the past”—too old to bear arms in the field. Due to the nature of their battling lives, relatively few of the Salariki ever reached that retirement. Short-lived alliances between families sometimes occurred, usually when they were to face a common enemy greater than either. But a quarrel between chieftains, a fancied insult would rip that open in an instant. Only under the Trade Shield could seven clans sit this way without their warriors being at one another’s furred throats.

An hour before sunset Paft turned his goblet upside down on his table, a move followed speedily by every chieftain in the circle. The conference was at an end for that day. And as far as Dane could see it had accomplished exactly nothing—except to bring the Eysies into the open. What *had* Traxt Cam discovered which had given him the trading contract with these suspicious aliens? Unless the men from the Queen learned it, they could go on talking until the contract ran out and get no farther than they had today.

From his training Dane knew that oftentimes contact with an alien race did require long and patient handling. But between study and experiencing the situation himself there was a gulf, and he thought somewhat ruefully that he had much to learn before he could meet such a situation with Van Rycke’s unfailing patience and aplomb. The Cargo-master seemed in nowise tired by his wasted day and Dane knew that Van would probably sit up half the night, going over for the hundredth time Traxt Cam’s sketchy recordings in another painstaking attempt to discover why and how the other Free Trader had succeeded where the Queen’s men were up against a stone wall.

The harvesting of Koros stones was, as Dane and all those who had been briefed from Cam’s records knew, a perilous job. Though the rule of the Salariki was undisputed on the land masses of Sargol, it was another matter in the watery world of the shallow seas. There the Gorp were in command of the territory and one had to be constantly alert for attack from the sly, reptilian intelligence, so alien to the thinking processes of both Salariki and Terran that there was, or seemed to be, no point of possible contact. One went gathering Koros gems after balancing life against gain. And perhaps the Salariki did not see any profit in that

operation. Yet Traxt Cam had brought back his bag of gems—somehow he had managed to secure them in trade.

Van Rycke climbed the ramp, hurrying on into the Queen as if he would not get back to his records soon enough. But Dane paused and looked back at the grass jungle a little wistfully. To his mind these early morning hours were the best time on Sargol. The light was golden, the night winds had not yet arisen. He disliked exchanging the freedom of the open for the confinement of the spacer.

And, as he hesitated there, two of the juvenile population of Sargol came out of the forest. Between them they carried one of their hunting nets, a net which now enclosed a quiet but baneful eyed captive—Sinbad being delivered for nightly ransom. Dane was reaching for the pay to give the captors when, to his real astonishment, one of them advanced and pointed with an extended forefinger claw to the open port.

“Go in,” he formed the Trade Lingo words with care. And Dane’s surprise must have been plain to read for the cub followed his speech with a vigorous nod and set one foot on the ramp to underline his desire.

For one of the Salariki, who had continually manifested their belief that Terrans and their ship were an offence to the nostrils of all right living “men,” to wish to enter the spacer was an astonishing about-face. But any advantage no matter how small, which might bring about a closer understanding, must be seized at once.

Dane accepted the growling Sinbad and beckoned, knowing better than to touch the boy. “Come—”

Only one of the junior clansmen obeyed that invitation. The other watched, big-eyed, and then scuttled back to the forest when his fellow called out some suggestion. *He* was not going to be trapped.

Dane led the way up the ramp, paying no visible attention to the young Salarik, nor did he urge the other on when he lingered for a long moment or two at the port. In his mind the Cargo-master apprentice was feverishly running over the list of general trade goods. What *did* they carry which would make a suitable and intriguing gift for a small alien with such a promising bump of curiosity? If he had only time to get Van Rycke!

The Salarik was inside the corridor now, his nostrils spread, assaying each and every odor in this strange place. Suddenly his head jerked as if tugged by one of his own net ropes.

His interest had been riveted by some scent his sensitive senses had detected. His eyes met Dane’s in appeal. Swiftly the Terran nodded and then followed with a lengthened stride as the Salarik sped down into the lower reaches of the Queen, obviously in quest of something of great importance.

### 3. Contact At Last

“What in”—Frank Mura, steward, storekeeper, and cook of the Queen, retreated into the nearest cabin doorway as the young Salarik flashed down the ladder into his section.

Dane, with the now resigned Sinbad in the crook of his arm, had tailed his guest and arrived just in time to see the native come to an abrupt halt before one of the most important doors in the spacer—the portal of the hydro garden which renewed the ship’s oxygen and supplied them with fresh fruit and vegetables to vary their diet of concentrates.

The Salarik laid one hand on the smooth surface of the sealed compartment and looked back over his shoulder at Dane with an inquiry to which was added something of a plea. Guided by his instinct—that this was important to them all—Dane spoke to Mura:

“Can you let him in there, Frank?”

It was not sensible, it might even be dangerous. But every member of the crew knew the necessity for making some sort of contact with the natives. Mura did not even nod, but squeezed by the Salarik and pressed the lock. There was a sign of air, and the crisp smell of growing things, lacking the languorous perfumes of the world outside, puffed into the faces.

The cub remained where he was, his head up, his wide nostrils visibly drinking in that smell. Then he moved with the silent, uncanny speed which was the heritage of his race, darting down the narrow aisle toward a mass of greenery at the far end.

Sinbad kicked and growled. This was his private hunting ground—the preserve he kept free of invaders. Dane put the cat down. The Salarik had found what he was seeking. He stood on tiptoe to sniff at a plant, his yellow eyes half closed, his whole stance spelling ecstasy. Dane looked to the steward for enlightenment.

“What’s he so interested in, Frank?”

“Catnip.”

“Catnip?” Dane repeated. The word meant nothing to him, but Mura had a habit of picking up strange plants and cultivating them for study. “What is it?”

“One of the Terran mints—an herb,” Mura gave a short explanation as he moved down the aisle toward the alien. He broke off a leaf and crushed it between his fingers.

Dane, his sense of smell largely deadened by the pungency with which he had been surrounded by most of that day, could distinguish no new odor. But the young Salarik swung around to face the steward his eyes wide, his nose questing. And Sinbad gave a whining yowl and made a spring to push his head against the steward’s now aromatic hand.

So—now they had it—an opening wedge. Dane came up to the three.

“All right to take a leaf or two?” he asked Mura.

“Why not? I grow it for Sinbad. To a cat it is like heemel smoke or a tankard of lackibod.”

And by Sinbad’s actions Dane guessed that the plant did hold for the cat the same attraction those stimulants produced in human beings. He carefully broke off a small stem supporting three leaves and presented it to the Salarik, who stared at him and then, snatching the twig, raced from the hydro garden as if pursued by feuding clansmen.

Dane heard the pad of his feet on the ladder—apparently the cub was making sure of escape with his precious find. But the Cargo-master apprentice was frowning. As far as he could see there were only five of the plants.

“That’s all the catnip you have?”

Mura tucked Sinbad under his arm and shooed Dane before him out of the hydro. “There was no need to grow more. A small portion of the herb goes a long way with this one,” he put the cat down in the corridor. “The leaves may be preserved by drying. I believe that there is a small box of them in the galley.”

A strictly limited supply. Suppose this was the key which would unlock the Koros trade? And yet it was to be summed up in five plants and a few dried leaves! However, Van Rycke must know of this as soon as possible.

But to Dane’s growing discomfiture the Cargo-master showed no elation as his junior poured out the particulars of his discovery. Instead there were definite signs of displeasure to be read by those who knew Van Rycke well. He heard Dane out and then got to his feet. Tolling the younger man with him by a crooked finger, he went out of his combined office-living quarters to the domain of Medic Craig Tau.

“Problem for you, Craig.” Van Rycke seated his bulk on the wall jump seat Tau pulled down for him. Dane was left standing just within the door, very sure now that instead of being commended for his discovery of a few minutes before, he was about to suffer some reprimand. And the reason for it still eluded him.

“What do you know about that plant Mura grows in the hydro—the one called ‘catnip’?”

Tau did not appear surprised at that demand—the Medic of a Free Trading spacer was never surprised at anything. He had his surfeit of shocks during his first years of service and after that accepted any occurrence, no matter how weird, as matter-of-fact. In addition Tau’s hobby was “magic,” the hidden knowledge possessed and used by witch doctors and medicine men on alien worlds. He had a library of recordings, odd scraps of information, of certified results of certain very peculiar experiments. Now and then he wrote a report which was sent into Central Service, read with raised eyebrows by perhaps half a dozen incredulous desk warmers, and filed away to be safely forgotten. But even that had ceased to frustrate him.

“It’s an herb of the mint family from Terra,” he replied. “Mura grows it for Sinbad—has quite a marked influence on cats. Frank’s been trying to keep him anchored to the ship by allowing him to roll in fresh leaves. He does it—then continues to sneak out whenever he can—”

That explained something for Dane—why the Salariki cub wished to enter the Queen tonight. Some of the scent of the plant had clung to Sinbad’s fur, had been detected, and the Salarik had wanted to trace it to its source.

“Is it a drug?” Van Rycke prodded.

“In the way that all herbs are drugs. Human beings have dosed themselves in the past with a tea made of the dried leaves. It has no great medicinal properties. To felines it is a stimulation—and they get the same satisfaction from rolling in and eating the leaves as we do from drinking—”

“The Salariki are, in a manner of speaking, felines—” Van Rycke mused.

Tau straightened. “The Salariki have discovered catnip, I take it?”

Van Rycke nodded at Dane and for the second time the Cargo-master apprentice made his report. When he was done Van Rycke asked a direct question of the medical officer:

“What effect would catnip have on a Salarik?”

It was only then that Dane grasped the enormity of what he had done. They had no way of gauging the influence of an off-world plant on alien metabolism. What if he had introduced to the natives of Sargol a dangerous drug—started that cub on some path of addiction. He was cold inside. Why, he might even have poisoned the child!

Tau picked up his cap, and after a second’s hesitation, his emergency medical kit. He had only one question for Dane.

“Any idea of who the cub is—what clan he belongs to?”

And Dane, chill with real fear, was forced to answer in the negative. What *had* he done!

“Can you find him?” Van Rycke, ignoring Dane, spoke to Tau.

The Medic shrugged. “I can try. I was out scouting this morning—met one of the storm priests who handles their medical work. But I wasn’t welcomed. However, under the circumstances, we have to try something—”

In the corridor Van Rycke had an order for Dane. “I suggest that you keep to quarters, Thorson, until we know how matters stand.”

Dane saluted. That note in his superior’s voice was like a whip lash—much worse to take than the abuse of a lesser man. He swallowed as he shut himself into his own cramped cubby. This might be the end of their venture. And they would be lucky if their charter was not withdrawn. Let I-S get an inkling of his rash action and the Company would have them up before the Board to be stripped of all their rights in the Service. Just because of his own stupidity—his pride in being able to break through where Van Rycke and the Captain had faced a stone wall. And, worse than the future which could face the Queen, was the thought that he might have introduced some dangerous drug into Sargol with his gift of those few leaves. When would he learn? He threw himself face down on his bunk and despondently pictured the string of calamities which could and maybe would stem from his thoughtless and hasty action.

Within the Queen night and day were mechanical—the lighting in the cabins did not vary much. Dane did not know how long he lay there forcing his mind to consider his stupid action, making himself face that in the Service there were no short cuts which endangered others—not unless those taking the risks were Terrans.

“Dane—!” Rip Shannon’s voice cut through his self-imposed nightmare. But he refused to answer. “Dane—Van wants you on the double!”

Why? To bring him up before Jellico probably. Dane schooled his expression, got up, pulling his tunic straight, still unable to meet Rip’s eyes. Shannon was just one of those he had let down so badly. But the other did not notice his mood. “Wait ‘til you see them—! Half Sargol must be here yelling for trade!”

That comment was so far from what he had been expecting that Dane was startled out of his own gloomy thoughts. Rip’s brown face was one wide smile, his black eyes danced—it was plain he was honestly elated.

“Get a move on, fire rockets,” he urged, “or Van will blast you for fair!”

Dane did move, up the ladder to the next level and out on the port ramp. What he saw below brought him up short. Evening had come to Sargol but the scene immediately below was not

in darkness. Blazing torches advanced in lines from the grass forest and the portable flood light of the spacer added to the general glare, turning night into noonday.

Van Rycke and Jellico sat on stools facing at least five of the seven major chieftains with whom they had conferred to no purpose earlier. And behind these leaders milled a throng of lesser Salariki. Yes, there was at least one carrying chair—and also an orgel from the back of which a veiled noblewoman was being assisted to dismount by two retainers. The women of the clans were coming—which could mean only that trade was at last in progress. But trade for what?

Dane strode down the ramp. He saw Paft, his hand carefully covered by his trade cloth, advance to Van Rycke, whose own fingers were decently veiled by a handkerchief. Under the folds of fabric their hands touched. The bargaining was in the first stages. And it was important enough for the clan leaders to conduct themselves. Where, according to Cam's records, it had been usual to delegate that power to a favored liege man.

Catching the light from the ship's beam and from the softer flares of the Salariki torches was a small pile of stones resting on a stool to one side. Dane drew a deep breath. He had heard the Koros stones described, had seen the tri-dee print of one found among Cam's recordings but the reality was beyond his expectations. He knew the technical analysis of the gems—that they were, as the amber of Terra, the fossilized resin exuded by ancient plants (maybe the ancestors of the grass trees) long buried in the saline deposits of the shallow seas where chemical changes had taken place to produce the wonder jewels. In color they shaded from a rosy apricot to a rich mauve, but in their depths other colors, silver, fiery gold, spun sparks which seemed to move as the gem was turned. And—which was what first endeared them to the Salariki—when worn against the skin and warmed by body heat they gave off a perfume which enchanted not only the Sargolian natives but all in the Galaxy wealthy enough to own one.

On another stool placed at Van Rycke's right hand, as that bearing the Koros stones was at Paft's, was a transparent plastic box containing some wrinkled brownish leaves. Dane moved as unobtrusively as he could to his proper place at such a trading session, behind Van Rycke. More Salariki were tramping out of the forest, torch bearing retainers and cloaked warriors. A little to one side was a third party Dane had not seen before.

They were clustered about a staff which had been driven into the ground, a staff topped with a white streamer marking a temporary trading ground. These were Salariki right enough but they did not wear the colorful garb of those about them, instead they were all clad alike in muffling, sleeved robes of a drab green—the storm priests—their robes denoting the color of the Sargolian sky just before the onslaught of their worst tempests. Cam had not left many clues concerning the religion of the Salariki, but the storm priests had, in narrowly defined limits, power, and their recognition of the Terran Traders would add to good feeling.

In the knot of storm priests a Terran stood—Medic Tau—and he was talking earnestly with the leader of the religious party. Dane would have given much to have been free to cross and ask Tau a question or two. Was all this assembly the result of the discovery in the hydro? But even as he asked himself that, the trade cloths were shaken from the hands of the bargainers and Van Rycke gave an order over his shoulder.

“Measure out two spoonsful of the dried leaves into a box—” he pointed to a tiny plastic container.

With painstaking care Dane followed directions. At the same time a servant of the Salarik chief swept the handful of gems from the other stool and dropped them in a heap before Van Rycke, who transferred them to a strong box resting between his feet. Paft arose—but he had



hardly quitted the trading seat before one of the lesser clan leaders had taken his place, the bargaining cloth ready looped loosely about his wrist.

It was at that point that the proceedings were interrupted. A new party came into the open, their utilitarian Trade tunics made a drab blot as they threaded their way in a compact group through the throng of Salariki. I-S men! So they had not lifted from Sargol.

They showed no signs of uneasiness—it was as if *their* rights were being infringed by the Free Traders. And Kallee, their Cargo-master, swaggered straight to the bargaining point. The chatter of Salariki voices was stilled, the Sargolians withdrew a little, letting one party of Terrans face the other, sensing drama to come. Neither Van Rycke nor Jellico spoke, it was left to Kallee to state his case.

“You’ve crooked your orbit this time, bright boys,” his jeer was a paean of triumph. “Code Three—Article six—or can’t you absorb rules tapes with your thick heads?”

Code Three—Article six, Dane searched his memory for that law of the Service. The words flashed into his mind as the auto-learner had planted them during his first year of training back in the Pool.

“To no alien race shall any Trader introduce any drug, food, or drink from off world, until such a substance has been certified as nonharmful to the aliens.”

There it was! I-S had them and it was all his fault. But if he had been so wrong, why in the world did Van Rycke sit there trading, condoning the error and making it into a crime for which they could be summoned before the Board and struck off the rolls of the Service?

Van Rycke smiled gently. “Code Four—Article two,” he quoted with the genial air of one playing gift-giver at a Forkidan feasting.

Code Four, Article two: Any organic substance offered for trade must be examined by a committee of trained medical experts, an equal representation of Terrans and aliens.

Kallee’s sneering smile did not vanish. “Well,” he challenged, “where’s your board of experts?”

“Tau!” Van Rycke called to the Medic with the storm priests. “Will you ask your colleague to be so kind as to allow the Cargo-master Kallee to be presented?”

The tall, dark young Terran Medic spoke to the priest beside him and together they came across the clearing. Van Rycke and Jellico both arose and inclined their heads in honor to the priests, as did the chief with whom they had been about to deal.

“Reader of clouds and master of many winds,” Tau’s voice flowed with the many voweled titles of the Sargolian, “may I bring before your face Cargo-master Kallee, a servant of Inter-Solar in the realm of Trade?”

The storm priest’s shaven skull and body gleamed steel gray in the light. His eyes, of that startling blue-green, regarded the I-S party with cynical detachment.

“You wish of me?” Plainly he was one who believed in getting down to essentials at once.

Kallee could not be overawed. “These Free Traders have introduced among your people a powerful drug which will bring much evil,” he spoke slowly in simple words as if he were addressing a cub.

“You have evidence of such evil?” countered the storm priest. “In what manner is this new plant evil?”

For a moment Kallee was disconcerted. But he rallied quickly. “It has not been tested—you do not know how it will affect your people—”

The storm priest shook his head impatiently. “We are not lacking in intelligence, Trader. This plant *has* been tested, both by your master of life secrets and ours. There is no harm in it—rather it is a good thing, to be highly prized—so highly that we shall give thanks that it was brought unto us. This speech-together is finished.” He pulled the loose folds of his robe closer about him and walked away.

“Now,” Van Rycke addressed the I-S party, “I must ask you to withdraw. Under the rules of Trade your presence here can be actively resented—”

But Kallee had lost little of his assurance. “You haven’t heard the last of this. A tape of the whole proceedings goes to the Board—”

“As you wish. But in the meantime—” Van Rycke gestured to the waiting Salariki who were beginning to mutter impatiently. Kallee glanced around, heard those mutters, and made the only move possible, away from the Queen. He was not quite so cocky, but neither had he surrendered.

Dane caught at Tau’s sleeve and asked the question which had been burning in him since he had come upon the scene.

“What happened—about the catnip?”

There was lightening of the serious expression on Tau’s face.

“Fortunately for you that child took the leaves to the storm priest. They tested and approved it. And I can’t see that it has any ill effects. But you were just lucky, Thorson—it might have gone another way.”

Dane sighed. “I know that, sir,” he confessed. “I’m not trying to rocket out—”

Tau gave a half-smile. “We all off-fire our tubes at times,” he conceded. “Only next time—”

He did not need to complete that warning as Dane caught him up:

“There isn’t going to be a next time like this, sir—ever!”

## 4. Gorp Hunt

But the interruption had disturbed the tenor of trading. The small chief who had so eagerly taken Paft's place had only two Koros stones to offer and even to Dane's inexperienced eyes they were inferior in size and color to those the other clan leader had tendered. The Terrans were aware that Koros mining was a dangerous business but they had not known that the stock of available stones was so very small. Within ten minutes the last of the serious bargaining was concluded and the clansmen were drifting away from the burned over space about the Queen's standing fins.

Dane folded up the bargain cloth, glad for a task. He sensed that he was far from being back in Van Rycke's good graces. The fact that his superior did not discuss any of the aspects of the deals with him was a bad sign.

Captain Jellico stretched. Although his was not, or never, what might be termed a good-humored face, he was at peace with his world. "That would seem to be all. What's the haul, Van?"

"Ten first class stones, about fifty second grade, and twenty or so of third. The chiefs will go to the fisheries tomorrow. *Then* we'll be in to see the really good stuff."

"And how's the herbs holding out?" That interested Dane too. Surely the few plants in the hydro and the dried leaves could not be stretched too far.

"As well as we could expect." Van Rycke frowned. "But Craig thinks he's on the trail of something to help—"

The storm priests had uprooted the staff marking the trading station and were wrapping the white streamer about it. Their leader had already gone and now Tau came up to the group by the ramp.

"Van says you have an idea," the Captain hailed him.

"We haven't tried it yet. And we can't unless the priests give it a clear lane—"

"That goes without saying—" Jellico agreed.

The Captain had not addressed that remark to him personally, but Dane was sure it had been directed at him. Well, they needn't worry—never again was he going to make that mistake, they could be very sure of that.

He was part of the conference which followed in the mess cabin only because he was a member of the crew. How far the reason for his disgrace had spread he had no way of telling, but he made no overtures, even to Rip.

Tau had the floor with Mura as an efficient lieutenant. He discussed the properties of catnip and gave information on the limited supply the Queen carried. Then he launched into a new suggestion.

"Felines of Terra, in fact a great many other of our native mammals, have a similar affinity for this."

Mura produced a small flask and Tau opened it, passing it to Captain Jellico and so from hand to hand about the room. Each crewman sniffed at the strong aroma. It was a heavier scent than that given off by the crushed catnip—Dane was not sure he liked it. But a moment later Sinbad streaked in from the corridor and committed the unpardonable sin of leaping to

the table top just before Mura who had taken the flask from Dane. He miaowed plaintively and clawed at the steward's cuff. Mura stoppered the flask and put the cat down on the floor.

"What is it?" Jellico wanted to know.

"Anisette, a liquor made from the oil of anise—from seeds of the anise plant. It is a stimulant, but we use it mainly as a condiment. If it is harmless for the Salariki it ought to be a bigger bargaining point than any perfumes or spices, I-S can import. And remember, with their unlimited capital, they can flood the market with products we can't touch, selling at a loss if need be to cut us out. Because their ship is not going to lift from Sargol just because she has no legal right here."

"There's this point," Van Rycke added to the lecture. "The Eysies are trading or want to trade perfumes. But they stock only manufactured products, exotic stuff, but synthetic." He took from his belt pouch two tiny boxes.

Before he caught the rich scent of the paste inside them Dane had already identified each as luxury items from Casper—chemical products which sold well and at high prices in the civilized ports of the Galaxy. The Cargo-master turned the boxes over, exposing the symbol on their undersides—the mark of I-S.

"These were offered to me in trade by a Salarik. I took them, just to have proof that the Eysies are operating here. But—note—they were offered to me in trade, along with two top Koros for what? One spoonful of dried catnip leaves. Does that suggest anything?"

Mura answered first. "The Salariki prefer natural products to synthetic."

"I think so."

"D'you suppose that was Cam's secret?" speculated Astrogator Steen Wilcox.

"If it was," Jellico cut in, "he certainly kept it! If we had only known this earlier—"

They were all thinking of that, of their storage space carefully packed with useless trade goods. Where, if they had known, the same space could have carried herbs with five or twenty-five times as much buying power.

"Maybe now that their sales' resistance is broken, we *can* switch to some of the other stuff," Tang Ya, torn away from his beloved communicators for the conference, said wistfully. "They like color—how about breaking out some rolls of Harlinian moth silk?"

Van Rycke sighed wearily. "Oh, we'll try. We'll bring out everything and anything. But we could have done so much better—" he brooded over the tricks of fate which had landed them on a planet wild for trade with no proper trade goods in either of their holds.

There was a nervous little sound of a throat being apologetically cleared. Jasper Weeks, the small wiper from the engine room detail, the third generation Venusian colonist whom the more vocal members of the Queen's complement were apt to forget upon occasion, seeing all eyes upon him, spoke though his voice was hardly above a hoarse whisper.

"Cedar—lacquel bark—forsh weed—"

"Cinnamon," Mura added to the list. "Imported in small quantities—"

"Naturally! Only the problem now is—how much cedar, lacquel bark, forsh weed, cinnamon do we have on board?" demanded Van Rycke.

His sarcasm did not register with Weeks for the little man pushed by Dane and left the cabin to their surprise. In the quiet which followed they could hear the clatter of his boots on ladder

rungs as he descended to the quarters of the engine room staff. Tang turned to his neighbor, Johan Stotz, the Queen's Engineer.

"What's he going for?"

Stotz shrugged. Weeks was a self-effacing man—so much so that even in the cramped quarters of the spacer very little about him as an individual impressed his mates—a fact which was slowly dawning on them all now. Then they heard the scramble of feet hurrying back and Weeks burst in with energy which carried him across to the table behind which the Captain and Van Rycke now sat.

In the wiper's hands was a plasta-steel box—the treasure chest of a spaceman. Its tough exterior was guaranteed to protect the contents against everything but outright disintegration. Weeks put it down on the table and snapped up the lid.

A new aroma, or aromas, was added to the scents now at war in the cabin. Weeks pulled out a handful of fluffy white stuff which frothed up about his fingers like soap lather. Then with more care he lifted up a tray divided into many small compartments, each with a separate sealing lid of its own. The men of the Queen moved in, their curiosity aroused, until they were jostling one another.

Being tall Dane had an advantage, though Van Rycke's bulk and the wide shoulders of the Captain were between him and the object they were so intent upon. In each division of the tray, easily seen through the transparent lids, was a carved figure. The weird denizens of the Venusian polar swamps were there, along with lifelike effigies of Terran animals, a Martian sand-mouse in all its monstrous ferocity, and the native animal and reptile life of half a hundred different worlds. Weeks put down a second tray beside the first, again displaying a menagerie of strange life forms. But when he clicked open one of the compartments and handed the figurine it contained to the Captain, Dane understood the reason for now bringing forward the carvings.

The majority of them were fashioned from a dull blue-gray wood and Dane knew that if he picked one up he would discover that it weighed close to nothing in his hand. That was lacquel bark—the aromatic product of a Venusian vine. And each little animal or reptile lay encased in a soft dab of frothy white—frosh weed—the perfumed seed casing of the Martian canal plants. One or two figures on the second tray were of a red-brown wood and these Van Rycke sniffed at appreciatively.

"Cedar—Terran cedar," he murmured.

Weeks nodded eagerly, his eyes alight. "I am waiting now for sandalwood—it is also good for carving—"

Jellico stared at the array in puzzled wonder. "You have made these?"

Being an amateur xenobiologist of no small standing himself, the shapes of the carvings more than the material from which they fashioned held his attention.

All those on board the Queen had their own hobbies. The monotony of voyaging through hyper-space had long ago impressed upon men the need for occupying both hands and mind during the sterile days while they were forced into close companionship with few duties to keep them alert. Jellico's cabin was papered with tri-dee pictures of the rare animals and alien creatures he had studied in their native haunts or of which he kept careful and painstaking records. Tau had his magic, Mura not only his plants but the delicate miniature landscapes he fashioned, to be imprisoned forever in the hearts of protecting plasta balls. But Weeks had

never shown his work before and now he had an artist's supreme pleasure of completely confounding his shipmates.

The Cargo-master returned to the business on hand first. "You're willing to transfer these to 'cargo'?" he asked briskly. "How many do you have?"

Weeks, now lifting a third and then a fourth tray from the box, replied without looking up.

"Two hundred. Yes, I'll transfer, sir."

The Captain was turning about in his fingers the beautifully shaped figure of an Astran duocorn. "Pity to trade these here," he mused aloud. "Will Paft or Halfer appreciate more than just their scent?"

Weeks smiled shyly. "I've filled this case, sir. I was going to offer them to Mr. Van Rycke on a venture. I can always make another set. And right now—well, maybe they'll be worth more to the Queen, seeing as how they're made out of aromatic woods, then they'd be elsewhere. Leastwise the Eysies aren't going to have anything like them to show!" he ended in a burst of honest pride.

"Indeed they aren't!" Van Rycke gave honor where it was due.

So they made plans and then separated to sleep out the rest of the night. Dane knew that his lapse was not forgotten nor forgiven, but now he was honestly too tired to care and slept as well as if his conscience were clear.

But morning brought only a trickle of lower class clansmen for trading and none of them had much but news to offer. The storm priests, as neutral arbitrators, had divided up the Koros grounds. And the clansmen, under the personal supervision of their chieftains were busy hunting the stones. The Terrans gathered from scraps of information that gem seeking on such a large scale had never been attempted before.

Before night there came other news, and much more chilling. Paft, one of the two major chieftains of this section of Sargol—while supervising the efforts of his liege men on a newly discovered and richly strewn length of shoal water—had been attacked and killed by gorp. The unusual activity of the Salariki in the shallows had in turn drawn to the spot battalions of the intelligent, malignant reptiles who had struck in strength, slaying and escaping before the Salariki could form an adequate defense, having killed the land dwellers' sentries silently and effectively before advancing on the laboring main bodies of gem hunters.

A loss of a certain number of miners or fishers had been preseen as the price one paid for Koros in quantity. But the death of a chieftain was another thing altogether, having repercussions which carried far beyond the fact of his death. When the news reached the Salariki about the Queen they melted away into the grass forest and for the first time the Terrans felt free of spying eyes.

"What happens now?" Ali inquired. "Do they declare all deals off?"

"That might just be the unfortunate answer," agreed Van Rycke.

"Could be," Rip commented to Dane, "that they'd think we were in some way responsible—"

But Dane's conscience, sensitive over the whole matter of Salariki trade, had already reached that conclusion.

The Terran party, unsure of what were the best tactics, wisely decided to do nothing at all for the time being. But, when the Salariki seemed to have completely vanished on the morning of the second day, the men were restless. Had Paft's death resulted in some interclan quarrel over the heirship and the other clans withdrawn to let the various contentents for that honor

fight it out? Or—what was more probable and dangerous—had the aliens come to the point of view that the Queen was in the main responsible for the catastrophe and were engaged in preparing too warm a welcome for any Traders who dared to visit them?

With the latter idea in mind they did not stray far from the ship. And the limit to their traveling was the edge of the forest from which they could be covered and so they did not learn much.

It was well into the morning before they were dramatically appraised that, far from being considered in any way an enemy, they were about to be accepted in a tie as close as clan to clan during one of the temporary but binding truces.

The messenger came in state, a young Salarik warrior, his splendid cloak rent and hanging in tattered pieces from his shoulders as a sign of his official grief. He carried in one hand a burned out torch, and in the other an unsheathed claw knife, its blade reflecting the sunlight with a wicked glitter. Behind him trotted three couples of retainers, their cloaks also ragged fringes, their knives drawn.

Standing up on the ramp to receive what could only be a formal deputation were Captain, Astrogator, Cargo-master and Engineer, the senior officers of the spacer.

In the rolling periods of the Trade Lingo the torch bearer identified himself as Groft, son and heir of the late lamented Paft. Until his chieftain father was avenged in blood he could not assume the high seat of his clan nor the leadership of the family. And now, following custom, he was inviting the friends and sometimes allies of the dead Paft to a gorp hunt. Such a gorp hunt, Dane gathered from amidst the flowers of ceremonial Salariki speech, as had never been planned before on the face of Sargol. Salariki without number in the past had died beneath the ripping talons of the water reptiles, but it was seldom that a chieftain had so fallen and his clan were firm in their determination to take a full blood price from the killers.

“—and so, sky lords,” Groft brought his oration to a close, “we come to ask that you send your young men to this hunting so that they may know the joy of plunging knives into the scaled death and see the horned ones die bathed in their own vile blood!”

Dane needed no hint from the Queen’s officers that this invitation was a sharp departure from custom. By joining with the natives in such a foray the Terrans were being admitted to kinship of a sort, cementing relations by a tie which the I-S, or any other interloper from off-world, would find hard to break. It was a piece of such excellent good fortune as they would not have dreamed of three days earlier.

Van Rycke replied, his voice properly sonorous, sounding out the rounded periods of the rolling tongue which they had all been taught during the voyage, using Cam’s recording. Yes, the Terrans would join with pleasure in so good and great a cause. They would lend the force of their arms to the defeat of all gorp they had the good fortune to meet. Groft need only name the hour for them to join him—

It was not needful, the young Salariki chieftain-to-be hastened to tell the Cargo-master, that the senior sky lords concern themselves in this matter. In fact it would be against custom, for it was meet that such a hunt be left to warriors of few years, that they might earn glory and be able to stand before the fires at the Naming as men. Therefore—the thumb claw of Groft was extended to its greatest length as he used it to single out the Terrans he had been eyeing—let this one, and that, and that, and the fourth be ready to join with the Salariki party an hour after nooning on this very day and they would indeed teach the slimy, treacherous lurkers in the depths a well needed lesson.

The Salarik's choice with one exception had unerringly fallen upon the youngest members of the crew, Ali, Rip, and Dane in that order. But his fourth addition had been Jasper Weeks. Perhaps because of his native pallor of skin and slightness of body the oiler had seemed, to the alien, to be younger than his years. At any rate Groft had made it very plain that he chose these men and Dane knew that the Queen's officers would raise no objection which might upset the delicate balance of favorable relations.

Van Rycke did ask for one concession which was reluctantly granted. He received permission for the spacer's men to carry their sleep rods. Though the Salariki, apparently for some reason of binding and hoary custom, were totally opposed to hunting their age-old enemy with anything other than their duelists' weapons of net and claw knife.

"Go along with them," Captain Jellico gave his final orders to the four, "as long as it doesn't mean your own necks—understand? On the other hand dead heroes have never helped to lift a ship. And these gorp are tough from all accounts. You'll just have to use your own judgment about springing your rods on them—" He looked distinctly unhappy at that thought.

Ali was grinning and little Weeks tightened his weapon belt with a touch of swagger he had never shown before. Rip was his usual soft voiced self, dependable as a rock and a good base for the rest of them—taking command without question as they marched off to join Groft's company.



## 5. The Perilous Seas

The gorp hunters straggled through the grass forest in family groups, and the Terrans saw that the enterprise had forced another uneasy truce upon the district, for there were representatives from more than just Paft's own clan. All the Salariki were young and the parties babbled together in excitement. It was plain that this hunt, staged upon a large scale, was not only a means of revenge upon a hated enemy but, also, a sporting event of outstanding prestige.

Now the grass trees began to show ragged gaps, open spaces between their clumps, until the forest was only scattered groups and the party the Terrans had joined walked along a trail cloaked in knee-high, yellow-red fern growth. Most of the Salariki carried unlit torches, some having four or five bundled together, as if gorp hunting must be done after nightfall. And it *was* fairly late in the afternoon before they topped a rise of ground and looked out upon one of Sargol's seas.

The water was a dull-metallic gray, broken by great swaths of purple as if an artist had slapped a brush of color across it in a hit or miss fashion. Sand of the red grit, lightened by the golden flecks which glittered in the sun, stretched to the edge of the wavelets breaking with only languor on the curve of earth. The bulk of islands arose in serried ranks farther out—crowned with grass trees all rippling under the sea wind.

They came out upon the beach where one of the purple patches touched the shore and Dane noted that it left a scummy deposit there. The Terrans went on to the water's edge. Where it was clear of the purple stuff they could get a murky glimpse of the bottom, but the scum hid long stretches of shoreline and outer wave, and Dane wondered if the gorp used it as a protective covering.

For the moment the Salariki made no move toward the sea which was to be their hunting ground. Instead the youngest members of the party, some of whom were adolescents not yet entitled to wear the claw knife of manhood, spread out along the shore and set industriously to gathering driftwood, which they brought back to heap on the sand. Dane, watching that harvest, caught sight of a smoothly polished length. He called Weeks' attention to the water rounded cylinder.

The oiler's eyes lighted and he stooped to pick it up. Where the other sticks were from grass trees this was something else. And among the bleached pile it had the vividness of flame. For it was a strident scarlet. Weeks turned it over in his hands, running his fingers lovingly across its perfect grain. Even in this crude state it had beauty. He stopped the Salarik who had just brought in another armload of wood.

"This is what?" he spoke the Trade Lingo haltingly.

The native gazed somewhat indifferently at the branch. "Tansil," he answered. "It grows on the islands—" He made a vague gesture to include a good section of the western sea before he hurried away.

Weeks now went along the tide line on his own quest, Dane trailing him. At the end of a quarter hour when a hail summoned them back to the site of the now lighted fire, they had some ten pieces of the tansil wood between them. The finds ranged from a three foot section some four inches in diameter, to some slender twigs no larger than a writing steelo—but all with high polish, the warm flame coloring. Weeks lashed them together before he joined the group where Groft was outlining the technique of gorp hunting for the benefit of the Terrans.

Some two hundred feet away a reef, often awash and stained with the purple scum, angled out into the sea in a long curve which formed a natural breakwater. This was the point of attack. But first the purple film must be removed so that land and sea dwellers could meet on common terms.

The fire blazed up, eating hungrily into the driftwood. And from it ran the young Salariki with lighted brands, which at the water's edge they whirled about their heads and then hurled out onto the purple patches. Fire arose from the water and ran with frantic speed across the crests of the low waves, while the Salariki coughed and buried their noses in their perfume boxes, for the wind drove shoreward an overpowering stench.

Where the cleansing fire had run on the water there was now only the natural metallic gray of the liquid, the cover was gone. Older Salariki warriors were choosing torches from those they had brought, doing it with care. Groft approached the Terrans carrying four.

"These you use now—"

What for? Dane wondered. The sky was still sunlit. He held the torch watching to see how the Salariki made use of them.

Groft led the advance—running lightly out along the reef with agile and graceful leaps to cross the breaks where the sea hurled in over the rock. And after him followed the other natives, each with a lighted torch in hand—the torch they hunkered down to plant firmly in some crevice of the rock before taking a stand beside that beacon.

The Terrans, less surefooted in the space boots, picked their way along the same path, wet with spray, wrinkling their noses against the lingering puffs of the stench from the water.

Following the example of the Salariki they faced seaward—but Dane did not know what to watch for. Cam had left only the vaguest general descriptions of gorp and beyond the fact that they were reptilian, intelligent and dangerous, the Terrans had not been briefed.

Once the warriors had taken up their stand along the reef, the younger Salariki went into action once more. Lighting more torches at the fire, they ran out along the line of their elders and flung their torches as far as they could hurl them into the sea outside the reef.

The gray steel of the water was now yellow with the reflection of the sinking sun. But that ocher and gold became more brilliant yet as the torches of the Salariki set blazing up far floating patches of scum. Dane shielded his eyes against the glare and tried to watch the water, with some idea that this move must be provocation and what they hunted would so be driven into view.

He held his sleep rod ready, just as the Salarik on his right had claw knife in one hand and in the other, open and waiting, the net intended to entangle and hold fast a victim, binding him for the kill.

But it was at the far tip of the barrier—the post of greatest honor which Groft had jealously claimed as his, that the gorp struck first. At a wild shout of defiance Dane half turned to see the Salarik noble cast his net at sea level and then stab viciously with a well practiced blow. When he raised his arm for a second thrust, greenish ichor ran from the blade down his wrist.

"Dane!"

Thorson's head jerked around. He saw the vee of ripples headed straight for the rocks where he balanced.

But he'd have to wait for a better target than a moving wedge of water. Instinctively he half crouched in the stance of an embattled spaceman, wishing now that he did have a blaster.

Neither of the Salariki stationed on either side of him made any move and he guessed that was hunt etiquette. Each man was supposed to face and kill the monster that challenged him—without assistance. And upon his skill during the next few minutes might rest the reputation of all Terrans as far as the natives were concerned.

There was a shadow outline beneath the surface of the metallic water now, but he could not see well because of the distortion of the murky waves. He must wait until he was sure.

Then the thing gave a spurt and, only inches beyond the toes of his boots, a nightmare creature sprang halfway out of the water, pincher claws as long as his own arms snapping at him. Without being conscious of his act, he pressed the stud of the sleep rod, aiming in the general direction of that horror from the sea.

But to his utter amazement the creature did not fall supinely back into watery world from which it had emerged. Instead those claws snapped again, this time scrapping across the top of Dane's foot, leaving a furrow in material the keenest of knives could not have scored.

"Give it to him!" That was Rip shouting encouragement from his own place farther along the reef.

Dane pressed the firing stud again and again. The claws waved as the monstrosity slavered from a gaping frog's mouth, a mouth which was fanged with a shark's vicious teeth. It was almost wholly out of the water, creeping on a crab's many legs, with a clawed upper limb reaching for him, when suddenly it stopped, its huge head turning from side to side in the sheltering carapace of scaled natural armor. It settled back as if crouching for a final spring—a spring which would push Dane into the ocean.

But that attack never came. Instead the gorp drew in upon itself until it resembled an unwieldy ball of indestructible armor and there it remained.

The Salariki on either side of Dane let out cries of triumph and edged closer. One of them twirled his net suggestively, seeing that the Terran lacked what was to him an essential piece of hunting equipment. Dane nodded vigorously in agreement and the tough strands swung out in a skillful cast which engulfed the motionless creature on the reef. But it was so protected by its scales that there was no opening for the claw knife. They had made a capture but they could not make a kill.

However, the Salariki were highly delighted. And several abandoned their posts to help the boys drag the monster ashore where it was pinned down to the beach by stakes driven through the edges of the net.

But the hunting party was given little time to gloat over this stroke of fortune. The gorp killed by Groft and the one stunned by Dane were only the van of an army and within moments the hunters on the reef were confronted by trouble armed with slashing claws and diabolic fighting ability.

The battle was anything but one-sided. Dane whirled, as the air was rent by a shriek of agony, just in time to see one of the Salariki, already torn by the claws of a gorp, being drawn under the water. It was too late to save the hunter, though Dane, balanced on the very edge of the reef, aimed a beam into the bloody waves. If the gorp was affected by this attack he could not tell, for both attacker and victim could no longer be seen.

But Ali had better luck in rescuing the Salarik who shared his particular section of reef, and the native, gashed and spurting blood from a wound in his thigh, was hauled to safety. While the gorp, coiling too slowly under the Terran ray, was literally hewn to pieces by the revengeful knives of the hunter's kin.

The fight broke into a series of individual duels carried on now by the light of the torches as the evening closed in. The last of the purple patches had burned away to nothing. Dane crouched by his standard torch, his eyes fastened on the sea, watching for an ominous vee of ripples betraying another gorp on its way to launch against the rock barrier.

There was such wild confusion along that line of water sprayed rocks that he had no idea of how the engagement was going. But so far the gorp showed no signs of having had enough.

Dane was shaken out of his absorption by another scream. One, he was sure, which had not come from any Salariki throat. He got to his feet. Rip was stationed four men beyond him. Yes, the tall Astrogator-apprentice was there, outlined against torch flare. Ali? No—there was the assistant Engineer. Weeks? But Weeks was picking his way back along the reef toward the shore, haste expressed in every line of his figure. The scream sounded for a second time, freezing the Terrans.

“Come back—!” That was Weeks gesturing violently at the shore and something floundering in the protecting circle of the reef. The younger Salariki who had been feeding the fire were now clustered at the water’s edge.

Ali ran and with a leap covered the last few feet, landing reckless knee deep in the waves. Dane saw light strike on his rod as he swung it in a wide arc to center on the struggle churning the water into foam. A third scream died to a moan and then the Salariki dashed into the sea, their nets spread, drawing back with them through the surf a dark and now quiet mass.

The fact that at least one gorp had managed to get on the inner side of the reef made an impression on the rest of the native hunters. After an uncertain minute or two Groft gave the signal to withdraw—which they did with grisly trophies. Dane counted seven gorp bodies—which did not include the prisoner ashore. And more might have slid into the sea to die. On the other hand two Salariki were dead—one had been drawn into the sea before Dane’s eyes—and at least one was badly wounded. But who had been pulled down in the shallows—some one sent out from the Queen with a message?

Dane raced back along the reef, not waiting to pull up his torch, and before he reached the shore Rip was overtaking him. But the man who lay groaning on the sand was not from the Queen. The torn and bloodstained tunic covering his lacerated shoulders had the I-S badge. Ali was already at work on his wounds, giving temporary first aid from his belt kit. To all their questions he was stubbornly silent—either he couldn’t or wouldn’t answer.

In the end they helped the Salariki rig three stretchers. On one the largest, the captive gorp, still curled in a round carapace protected ball, was bound with the net. The second supported the wounded Salarik clansman and onto the third the Terrans lifted the I-S man.

“We’ll deliver him to his own ship,” Rip decided. “He must have tailed us here as a spy—” He asked a passing Salarik as to where they could find the Company spacer.

“They might just think we are responsible,” Ali pointed out. “But I see your point. If we pack him back to the Queen and he doesn’t make it, they might say that we fired his rockets for him. All right, boys, let’s up-ship—he doesn’t look too good to me.”

With a torch-bearing Salarik boy as a guide, they hurried along a path taking in turns the burden of the stretcher. Luckily the I-S ship was even closer to the sea than the Queen and as they crossed the slagged ground, congealed by the break fire, they were trotting.

Though the Company ship was probably one of the smallest Inter-Solar carried on her rosters, it was a third again as large as the Queen—with part of that third undoubtedly dedicated to

extra cargo space. Beside her their own spacer would seem not only smaller, but battered and worn. But no Free Trader would have willingly assumed the badges of a Company man, not even for the command of such a ship fresh from the cradles of a builder.

When a man went up from the training Pool for his first assignment, he was sent to the ship where his temperament, training and abilities best fitted. And those who were designated as Free Traders would never fit into the pattern of Company men. Of late years the breach between those who lived under the strict parental control of one of the five great galaxy wide organizations and those still too much of an individual to live any life but that of a half-explorer-half-pioneer which was the Free Trader's, had widened alarmingly. Antagonism flared, rivalry was strong. But as yet the great Companies themselves were at polite cold war with one another for the big plums of the scattered systems. The Free Traders took the crumbs and there was not much disputing—save in cases such as had arisen on Sargol, when suddenly crumbs assumed the guise of very rich cake, rich and large enough to attract a giant.

The party from the Queen was given a peremptory challenge as they reached the other ship's ramp. Rip demanded to see the officer of the watch and then told the story of the wounded man as far as they knew it. The Eysie was hurried aboard—nor did his shipmates give a word of thanks.

“That's that.” Rip shrugged. “Let's go before they slam the hatch so hard they'll rock their ship off her fins!”

“Polite, aren't they?” asked Weeks mildly.

“What do you expect of Eysies?” Ali wanted to know. “To them Free Traders are just rim planet trash. Let's report back where we are appreciated.”

They took a short cut which brought them back to the Queen and they filed up her ramp to make their report to the Captain.

But they were not yet satisfied with Groft and his gorp slayers. No Salarik appeared for trade in the morning—surprising the Terrans. Instead a second delegation, this time of older men and a storm priest, visited the spacer with an invitation to attend Paft's funeral feast, a rite which would be followed by the formal elevation of Groft to his father's position, now that he had revenged that parent. And from remarks dropped by members of the delegation it was plain that the bearing of the Terrans who had joined the hunting party was esteemed to have been in highest accord with Salariki tradition.

They drew lots to decide which two must remain with the ship and the rest perfumed themselves so as to give no offense which might upset their now cordial relations. Again it was mid-afternoon when the Salariki escort sent to do them honor waited at the edge of the wood and Mura and Tang saw them off. With a herald booming before them, they traveled the beaten earth road in the opposite direction from the trading center, off through the forest until they came to a wide section of several miles which had been rigorously cleared of any vegetation which might give cover to a lurking enemy. In the center of this was a twelve-foot-high stockade of the bright red, burnished wood which had attracted Weeks on the shore. Each paling was the trunk of a tree and it had been sharpened at the top to a wicked point. On the field side was a wide ditch, crossed at the gate by a bridge, the planking of which might be removed at will. And as Dane passed over he looked down into the moat that was dry. The Salariki did not depend upon water for a defense—but on something else which his experience of the previous night had taught him to respect. There was no mistaking that shade of purple. The highly inflammable scum the hunters had burnt from the top of the waves had been brought inland and lay a greasy blanket some eight feet below. It would only be necessary to toss a torch on that and the defenders of the stockade would create a wall of fire

to baffle any attackers. The Salariki knew how to make the most of their world's natural resources.

## 6. Duelist's Challenge

Inside the red stockade there was a crowded community. The Salariki demanded privacy of a kind, and even the unmarried warriors did not share barracks, but each had a small cubicle of his own. So that the mud brick and timber erections of one of their clan cities resembled nothing so much as the comb cells of a busy beehive. Although Paft's was considered a large clan, it numbered only about two hundred fighting men and their numerous wives, children and captive servants. Not all of them normally lived at this center, but for the funeral feasting they had assembled—which meant a lot of doubling up and tenting out under makeshift cover between the regular buildings of the town. So that the Terrans were glad to be guided through this crowded maze to the Great Hall which was its heart.

As the trading center had been, the hall was a circular enclosure open to the sky above but divided in wheel-spoke fashion with posts of the red wood, each supporting a metal basket filled with inflammable material. Here were no lowly stools or trading tables. One vast circular board, broken only by a gap at the foot, ran completely around the wall. At the end opposite the entrance was the high chair of the chieftain, set on a two step dais. Though the feast had not yet officially begun, the Terrans saw that the majority of the places were already occupied.

They were led around the perimeter of the enclosure to places not far from the high seat. Van Rycke settled down with a grunt of satisfaction. It was plain that the Free Traders were numbered among the nobility. They could be sure of good trade in the days to come.

Delegations from neighboring clans arrived in close companies of ten or twelve and were granted seats, as had been the Terrans, in groups. Dane noted that there was no intermingling of clan with clan. And, as they were to understand later that night, there was a very good reason for that precaution.

"Hope all our adaption shots work," Ali murmured, eyeing with no pleasure at all the succession of platters now being borne through the inner opening of the table.

While the Traders had learned long ago that the wisest part of valor was not to sample alien strong drinks, ceremony often required that they break bread (or its other world equivalent) on strange planets. And so science served expediency and now a Trader bound for any Galactic banquet was immunized, as far as was medically possible, against the evil consequences of consuming food not originally intended for Terran stomachs. One of the results being that Traders acquired a far flung reputation of possessing bird-like appetites—since it was always better to nibble and live, than to gorge and die.

Groft had not yet taken his place in the vacant chieftain's chair. For the present he stood in the center of the table circle, directing the captive slaves who circulated with the food. Until the magic moment when the clan themselves would proclaim their overlord, he remained merely the eldest son of the house, relatively without power.

As the endless rows of platters made their way about the table the basket lights on the tops of the pillars were ignited, dispelling the dusk of evening. And there was an attendant stationed by each to throw on handfuls of aromatic bark which burned with puffs of lavender smoke, adding to the many warring scents. The Terrans had recourse at intervals to their own pungent smelling bottles, merely to clear their heads of the drugging fumes.

Luckily, Dane thought as the feast proceeded, that smoke from the braziers went straight up. Had they been in a roofed space they might have been overcome. As it was—were they entirely conscious of all that was going on around them?

His reason for that speculation was the dance now being performed in the center of the hall—their fight with the gorp being enacted in a series of bounds and stabbings. He was sure that he could no longer trust his eyes when the claw knife of the victorious dancer-hunter apparently passed completely through the chest of another wearing a grotesque monster mask.

As a fitting climax to their horrific display, three of the men who had been with them on the reef entered, dragging behind them—still enmeshed in the hunting net—the gorp which Dane had stunned. It was uncurled now and very much alive, but the pincer claws which might have cut its way to safety were encased in balls of hard substance.

Freed from the net, suspended by its sealed claws, the gorp swung back and forth from a standard set up before the high seat. Its murderous jaws snapped futilely, and from it came an enraged snake's vicious hissing. Though totally in the power of its enemies it gave an impression of terrifying strength and menace.

The sight of their ancient foe aroused the Salariki, inflaming warriors who leaned across the table to hurl tongue-twisting invective at the captive monster. Dane gathered that seldom had a living gorp been delivered helpless into their hands and they proposed to make the most of this wonderful opportunity. And the Terran suddenly wished the monstrosity had fallen back into the sea. He had no soft thoughts for the gorp after what he had seen at the reef and the tales he had heard, but neither did he like what he saw now expressed in gestures, heard in the tones of voices about them.

A storm priest put an end to the outcries. His dun cloak making a spot of darkness amid all the flashing color, he came straight to the place where the gorp swung. As he took his stand before the wriggling creature the din gradually faded, the warriors settled back into their seats, a pool of quiet spread through the enclosure.

Groft came up to take his position beside the priest. With both hands he carried a two handled cup. It was not the ornamented goblet which stood before each diner, but a manifestly older artifact, fashioned of some dull black substance and having the appearance of being even older than the hall or town.

One of the warriors who had helped to bring in the gorp now made a quick and accurate cast with a looped rope, snaring the monster's head and pulling back almost at a right angle. With deliberation the storm priest produced a knife—the first straight bladed weapon Dane had seen on Sargol. He made a single thrust in the soft underpart of the gorp's throat, catching in the cup he took from Groft some of the ichor which spurted from the wound.

The gorp thrashed madly, splattering table and surrounding Salariki with its life fluid, but the attention of the crowd was riveted elsewhere. Into the old cup the priest poured another substance from a flask brought by an underling. He shook the cup back and forth, as if to mix its contents thoroughly and then handed it to Groft.

Holding it before him the young chieftain leaped to the table top and so to stand before the high seat. There was a hush throughout the enclosure. Now even the gorp had ceased its wild struggles and hung limp in its bonds.

Groft raised the cup above his head and gave a loud shout in the archaic language of his clan. He was answered by a chant from the warriors who would in battle follow his banner, chant punctuated with the clinking slap of knife blades brought down forcibly on the board.



Three times he recited some formula and was answered by the others. Then, in another period of sudden quiet, he raised the cup to his lips and drank off its contents in a single draught, turning the goblet upside down when he had done to prove that not a drop remained within. A shout tore through the great hall. The Salariki were all on their feet, waving their knives over their heads in honor to their new ruler. And Groft for the first time seated himself in the high seat. The clan was no longer without a chieftain. Groft held his father's place.

"Show over?" Dane heard Stotz murmur and Van Rycke's disappointing reply:

"Not yet. They'll probably make a night of it. Here comes another round of drinks—"

"And trouble with them,"—that was Captain Jellico being prophetic.

"By the Coalsack's Ripcord!" That exclamation had been jolted out of Rip and Dane turned to see what had so jarred the usually serene Astrogator-apprentice. He was just in time to witness an important piece of Sargolian social practice.

A young warrior, surely only within a year or so of receiving his knife, was facing an older Salarik, both on their feet. The head and shoulder fur of the older fighter was dripping wet and an empty goblet rolled across the table to bump to the floor. A hush had fallen on the immediate neighbors of the pair, and there was an air of expectancy about the company.

"Threw his drink all over the other fellow," Rip's soft whisper explained. "That means a duel—"

"Here and now?" Dane had heard of the personal combat proclivities of the Salariki.

"Should be to the death for an insult such as that," Ali remarked, as usual surveying the scene from his chosen role as bystander. As a child he had survived the unspeakable massacres of the Crater War, nothing had been able to crack his surface armor since.

"The young fool!" that was Steen Wilcox sizing up the situation from the angle of a naturally cautious nature and some fifteen years of experience on a great many different worlds. "He'll be mustered out for good before he knows what happened to him!"

The younger Salarik had barked a question at his elder and had been promptly answered by that dripping warrior. Now their neighbors came to life with an efficiency which suggested that they had been waiting for such a move, it had happened so many times that every man knew just the right procedure from that point on.

In order for a Sargolian feast to be a success, the Terrans gathered from overheard remarks, at least one duel must be staged sometime during the festivities. And those not actively engaged did a lot of brisk betting in the background.

"Look there—at that fellow in the violet cloak," Rip directed Dane. "See what he just laid down?"

The nobleman in the violet cloak was not one of Groft's liege men, but a member of the delegation from another clan. And what he had laid down on the table—indicating as he did so his choice as winner in the coming combat, the elder warrior—was a small piece of white material on which reposed a slightly withered but familiar leaf. The neighbor he wagered with, eyed the stake narrowly, bending over to sniff at it, before he piled up two gem set armlets, a personal scent box and a thumb ring to balance.

At this practical indication of just how much the Terran herb was esteemed Dane regretted anew their earlier ignorance. He glanced along the board and saw that Van Rycke had noted that stake and was calling their Captain's attention to it.

But such side issues were forgotten as the duelists vaulted into the circle rimmed by the table, a space now vacated for their action. They were stripped to their loin cloths, their cloaks thrown aside. Each carried his net in his right hand, his claw knife ready in his left. As yet the Traders had not seen Salarik against Salarik in action and in spite of themselves they edged forward in their seats, as intent as the natives upon what was to come. The finer points of the combat were lost on them, and they did not understand the drilled casts of the net, which had become as formalized through the centuries as the ancient and now almost forgotten sword play of their own world. The young Salarik had greater agility and speed, but the veteran who faced him had the experience.

To Terran eyes the duel had some of the weaving, sweeping movements of the earlier ritual dance. The swift evasions of the nets were graceful and so timed that many times the meshes grazed the skin of the fighter who fled entrapment.

Dane believed that the elder man was tiring, and the youngster must have shared that opinion. There was a leap to the right, a sudden flurry of dart and retreat, and then a net curled high and fell, enfolding flailing arms and kicking legs. When the clutch rope was jerked tight, the captured youth was thrown off balance. He rolled frenziedly, but there was no escaping the imprisoning strands.

A shout applauded the victor. He stood now above his captive who lay supine, his throat or breast ready for either stroke of the knife his captor wished to deliver. But it appeared that the winner was not minded to end the encounter with blood. Instead he reached out a long, befurred arm, took up a filled goblet from the table and with serious deliberation, poured its contents onto the upturned face of the loser.

For a moment there was a dead silence around the feast board and then a second roar, to which the honestly relieved Terrans added spurts of laughter. The sputtering youth was shaken free of the net and went down on his knees, tendering his opponent his knife, which the other thrust along with his own into his sash belt. Dane gathered from overheard remarks that the younger man was, for a period of time, to be determined by clan council, now the servant-slave of his overthrower and that since they were closely united by blood ties, this solution was considered eminently suitable—though had the elder killed his opponent, no one would have thought the worse of him for that deed.

It was the Queen's men who were to provide the next center of attraction. Groft climbed down from his high seat and came to face across the board those who had accompanied him on the hunt. This time there was no escaping the sipping of the potent drink which the new chieftain sipped from his own goblet into each of theirs.

The fiery mouthful almost gagged Dane, but he swallowed manfully and hoped for the best as it burned like acid down his throat into his middle, there to mix uncomfortably with the viands he had eaten. Weeks' thin face looked very white, and Dane noticed with malicious enjoyment, that Ali had an unobtrusive grip on the table which made his knuckles stand out in polished knobs—proving that there *were* things which could upset the imperturbable Kamil.

Fortunately they were *not* required to empty that flowing bowl in one gulp as Groft had done. The ceremonial mouthful was deemed enough and Dane sat down thankfully—but with uneasy fears for the future.

Groft had started back to his high seat when there was an interruption which had not been foreseen. A messenger threaded his way among the serving men and spoke to the chieftain, who glanced at the Terrans and then nodded.

Dane, his queasiness growing every second, was not attending until he heard a bitten off word from Rip's direction and looked up to see a party of I-S men coming into the open space before the high seat. The men from the Queen stiffened—there was something in the attitude of the newcomers which hinted at trouble.

“What do you wish, sky lords?” That was Groft using the Trade Lingo, his eyes half closed as he lolled in his chair of state, almost as if he were about to witness some entertainment provided for his pleasure.

“We wish to offer you the good fortune desires of our hearts—” That was Kallee, the flowery words rolling with the proper accent from his tongue. “And that you shall not forget us—we also offer gifts—”

At a gesture from their Cargo-master, the I-S men set down a small chest. Groft, his chin resting on a clenched fist, lost none of his lazy air.

“They are received,” he retorted with the formal acceptance. “And no one can have too much good fortune. The Howlers of the Black Winds know that.” But he tendered no invitation to join the feast.

Kallee did not appear to be disconcerted. His next move was one which took his rivals by surprise, in spite of their suspicions.

“Under the laws of the Fellowship, O, Groft,” he clung to the formal speech, “I claim redress—”

Ali's hand moved. Through his growing distress Dane saw Van Rycke's jaw tighten, the fighting mask snap back on Captain Jellico's face. Whatever came now was real trouble.

Groft's eyes flickered over the party from the Queen. Though he had just pledged cup friendship with four of them, he had the malicious humor of his race. He would make no move to head off what might be coming.

“By the right of the knife and the net,” he intoned, “you have the power to claim personal satisfaction. Where is your enemy?”

Kallee turned to face the Free Traders. “I hereby challenge a champion to be set out from these off-worlders to meet by the blood and by the water my champion—”

The Salariki were getting excited. This was superb entertainment, an engagement such as they had never hoped to see—alien against alien. The rising murmur of their voices was like the growl of a hunting beast.

Groft smiled and the pleasure that expression displayed was neither Terran—nor human. But then the clan leader was not either, Dane reminded himself.

“Four of these warriors are clan-bound,” he said. “But the others may produce a champion—”

Dane looked along the line of his comrades—Ali, Rip, Weeks and himself had just been ruled out. That left Jellico, Van Rycke, Karl Kosti, the giant jetman whose strength they had to rely upon before, Stotz the Engineer, Medic Tau and Steen Wilcox. If it were strength alone he would have chosen Kosti, but the big man was not too quick a thinker—

Jellico got to his feet, the embodiment of a star lane fighting man. In the flickering light the scar on his cheek seemed to ripple. “Who's your champion?” he asked Kallee.

The Eysie Cargo-master was grinning. He was confident he had pushed them into a position from which they could not extricate themselves.

“You accept challenge?” he countered.

Jellico merely repeated his question and Kallee beckoned forward one of his men.

The Eysie who stepped up was no match for Kosti. He was a slender, almost wand-slim young man, whose pleased smirk said that he, too, was about to put something over on the notorious Free Traders. Jellico studied him for a couple of long seconds during which the hum of Salariki voices was the threatening buzz of a disturbed wasps' nest. There was no way out of this—to refuse conflict was to lose all they had won with the clansmen. And they did not doubt that Kallee had, in some way, triggered the scales against them.

Jellico made the best of it. “We accept challenge,” his voice was level. “We, being guesting in Groft’s holding, will fight after the manner of the Salariki who are proven warriors—” He paused as roars of pleased acknowledgment arose around the board.

“Therefore let us follow the custom of warriors and take up the net and the knife—”

Was there a shade of dismay on Kallee’s face?

“And the time?” Groft leaned forward to ask—but his satisfaction at such a fine ending for his feast was apparent. This would be talked over by every Sargolian for many storm seasons to come!

Jellico glanced up at the sky. “Say an hour after dawn, chieftain. With your leave, we shall confer concerning a champion.”

“My council room is yours,” Groft signed for a liege man to guide them.

## 7. Barring Accident

The morning winds rustled through the grass forest and, closer to hand, it pulled at the cloaks of the Salariki. Clan nobles sat on stools, lesser folk squatted on the trampled stubble of the cleared ground outside the stockade. In their many colored splendor the drab tunics of the Terrans were a blot of darkness at either end of the makeshift arena which had been marked out for them.

At the conclusion of their conference the Queen's men had been forced into a course Jellico had urged from the first. He, and he alone, would represent the Free Traders in the coming duel. And now he stood there in the early morning, stripped down to shorts and boots, wearing nothing on which a net could catch and so trap him. The Free Traders were certain that the I-S men having any advantage would press it to the ultimate limit and the death of Captain Jellico would make a great impression on the Salariki.

Jellico was taller than the Eysie who faced him, but almost as lean. Hard muscles moved under his skin, pale where space tan had not burned in the years of his star voyaging. And his every movement was with the liquid grace of a man who, in his time, had been a master of the force blade. Now he gripped in his left hand the claw knife given him by Groft himself and in the other he looped the throwing rope of the net.

At the other end of the field, the Eysie man was industriously moving his bootsoles back and forth across the ground, intent upon coating them with as much of the gritty sand as would adhere. And he displayed the supreme confidence in himself which he had shown at the moment of challenge in the Great Hall.

None of the Free Trading party made the mistake of trying to give Jellico advice. The Captain had not risen to his command without learning his duties. And the duties of a Free Trader covered a wide range of knowledge and practice. One had to be equally expert with a blaster and a slingshot when the occasion demanded. Though Jellico had not fought a Salariki duel with net and knife before, he had a deep memory of other weapons, other tactics which could be drawn upon and adapted to his present need.

There was none of the casual atmosphere which had surrounded the affair between the Salariki clansmen in the hall. Here was ceremony. The storm priests invoked their own particular grim Providence, and there was an oath taken over the weapons of battle. When the actual engagement began the betting among the spectators had reached, Dane decided, epic proportions. Large sections of Sargolian personal property were due to change hands as a result of this encounter.

As the chief priest gave the order to engage both Terrans advanced from their respective ends of the fighting space with the half crouching, light footed tread of spacemen. Jellico had pulled his net into as close a resemblance to rope as its bulk would allow. The very type of weapon, so far removed from any the Traders knew, made it a disadvantage rather than an asset.

But it was when the Eysie moved out to meet the Captain that Rip's fingers closed about Dane's upper arm in an almost paralyzing grip.

"He knows—"

Dane had not needed that bad news to be made vocal. Having seen the exploits of the Salariki duelists earlier, he had already caught the significance of that glide, of the way the I-S

champion carried his net. The Eysie had not had any last minute instruction in the use of Sargolian weapons—he had practiced and, by his stance, knew enough to make him a formidable menace. The clamor about the Queen’s party rose as the battle-wise eyes of the clansmen noted that and the odds against Jellico reached fantastic heights while the hearts of his crew sank.

Only Van Rycke was not disturbed. Now and then he raised his smelling bottle to his nose with an elegant gesture which matched those of the befurred nobility around him, as if not a thought of care ruffled his mind.

The Eysie feinted in a opening which was a rather ragged copy of the young Salarik’s more fluid moves some hours before. But, when the net settled, Jellico was simply not there, his quick drop to one knee had sent the mesh flailing in an arc over his bowed shoulders with a good six inches to spare. And a cry of approval came not only from his comrades, but from those natives who had been gamblers enough to venture their wagers on his performance.

Dane watched the field and the fighters through a watery film. The discomfort he had experienced since downing that mouthful of the cup of friendship had tightened into a fist of pain clutching his middle in a torturing grip. But he knew he must stick it out until Jellico’s ordeal was over. Someone stumbled against him and he glanced up to see Ali’s face, a horrible gray-green under the tan, close to his own. For a moment the Engineer-apprentice caught at his arm for support and then with a visible effort straightened up. So he wasn’t the only one—He looked for Rip and Weeks and saw that they, too, were ill.

But for a moment all that mattered was the stretch of trampled earth and the two men facing each other. The Eysie made another cast and this time, although Jellico was not caught, the slap of the mesh raised a red welt on his forearm. So far the Captain had been content to play the defensive role of retreat, studying his enemy, planning ahead.

The Eysie plainly thought the game his, that he had only to wait for a favorable moment and cinch the victory. Dane began to think it had gone on for weary hours. And he was dimly aware that the Salariki were also restless. One or two shouted angrily at Jellico in their own tongue.

The end came suddenly. Jellico lost his footing, stumbled, and went down. But before his men could move, the Eysie champion bounded forward, his net whirling out. Only he never reached the Captain. In the very act of falling Jellico had pulled his legs under him so that he was not supine but crouched, and his net swept but at ground level, clipping the I-S man about the shins, entangling his feet so that he crashed heavily to the sod and lay still.

“The whip—that Lalox whip trick!” Wilcox’s voice rose triumphantly above the babble of the crowd. Using his net as if it had been a thong, Jellico had brought down the Eysie with a move the other had not foreseen.

Breathing hard, sweat running down his shoulders and making tracks through the powdery red dust which streaked him, Jellico got to his feet and walked over to the I-S champion who had not moved or made a sound since his fall. The Captain went down on one knee to examine him.

“Kill! Kill!” That was the Salariki, all their instinctive savagery aroused.

But Jellico spoke to Groft. “By our customs we do not kill the conquered. Let his friends bear him hence.” He took the claw knife the Eysie still clutched in his hand and thrust it into his own belt. Then he faced the I-S party and Kallee.

“Take your man and get out!” The rein he had kept on his temper these past days was growing very thin. “You’ve made your last play here.”

Kallee’s thick lips drew back in something close to a Salarik snarl. But neither he nor his men made any reply. They bundled up their unconscious fighter and disappeared.

Of their own return to the sanctuary of the Queen Dane had only the dimmest of memories afterwards. He had made the privacy of the forest road before he yielded to the demands of his outraged interior. And after that he had stumbled along with Van Rycke’s hand under his arm, knowing from other miserable sounds that he was not alone in his torment.

It was some time later, months he thought when he first roused, that he found himself lying in his bunk, feeling very weak and empty as if a large section of his middle had been removed, but also at peace with his world. As he levered himself up the cabin had a nasty tendency to move slowly to the right as if he were a pivot on which it swung, and he had all the sensations of being in free fall though the Queen was still firmly planeted. But that was only a minor discomfort compared to the disturbance he remembered.

Fed the semi-liquid diet prescribed by Tau and served up by Mura to him and his fellow sufferers, he speedily got back his strength. But it had been a close call, he did not need Tau’s explanation to underline that. Weeks had suffered the least of the four, he the most—though none of them had had an easy time. And they had been out of circulation three days.

“The Eysie blasted last night,” Rip informed him as they lounged in the sun on the ramp, sharing the blessed lazy hours of invalidism.

But somehow that news gave Dane no lift of spirit. “I didn’t think they’d give up—”

Rip shrugged. “They may be off to make a dust-off before the Board. Only, thanks to Van and the Old Man, we’re covered all along the line. There’s nothing they can use against us to break our contract. And now we’re in so solid they can’t cut us out with the Salariki. Groft asked the Captain to teach him that trick with the net. I didn’t know the Old Man knew Lalox whip fighting—it’s about one of the nastiest ways to get cut to pieces in this universe—”

“How’s trade going?”

Rip’s sunniness clouded. “Supplies have given out. Weeks had an idea—but it won’t bring in Koros. That red wood he’s so mad about, he’s persuaded Van to stow some in the cargo holds since we have enough Koros stones to cover the voyage. Luckily the clansmen will take ordinary trade goods in exchange for that and Weeks thinks it will sell on Terra. It’s tough enough to turn a steel knife blade and yet it is light and easy to handle when it’s cured. Queer stuff and the color’s interesting. That stockade of it planted around Groft’s town has been up close to a hundred years and not a sign of rot in a log of it!”

“Where is Van?”

“The storm priests sent for him. Some kind of a gabble-fest on the star-star level, I gather. Otherwise we’re almost ready to blast. And we know what kind of cargo to bring next time.”

They certainly did, Dane agreed. But he was not to idle away his morning. An hour later a caravan came out of the forest, a line of complaining, burdened orgels, their tiny heads hanging low as they moaned their woes, the hard life which sent them on their sluggish way with piles of red logs lashed to their broad toads’ backs. Weeks was in charge of the procession and Dane went to work with the cargo plan Van had left, seeing that the brilliant scarlet lengths were hoist into the lower cargo hatch and stacked according to the science of stowage. He discovered that Rip had been right, the wood for all its incredible hardness was light of weight. Weak as he still was he could lift and stow a full sized log with no great

difficulty. And he thought Weeks was correct in thinking that it would sell on their home world. The color was novel, the durability an asset—it would not make fortunes as the Koros stones might, but every bit of profit helped and this cargo might cover their fielding fees on Terra.

Sinbad was in the cargo space when the first of the logs came in. With his usual curiosity the striped tom cat prowled along the wood, sniffing industriously. Suddenly he stopped short, spat and backed away, his spine fur a roughened crest. Having backed as far as the inner door he turned and slunk out. Puzzled, Dane gave the wood a swift inspection. There were no cracks or crevices in the smooth surfaces, but as he stopped over the logs he became conscious of a sharp odor. So this was one scent of the perfumed planet Sinbad did not like. Dane laughed. Maybe they had better have Weeks make a gate of the stuff and slip it across the ramp, keeping Sinbad on ship board. Odd—it wasn't an unpleasant odor—at least to him it wasn't—just sharp and pungent. He sniffed again and was vaguely surprised to discover that it was less noticeable now. Perhaps the wood when taken out of the sunlight lost its scent.

They packed the lower hold solid in accordance with the rules of stowage and locked the hatch before Van Rycke returned from his meeting with the storm priests. When the Cargo-master came back he was followed by two servants bearing between them a chest.

But there was something in Van Rycke's attitude, apparent to those who knew him best, that proclaimed he was not too well pleased with his morning's work. Sparing the feelings of the accompanying storm priests about the offensiveness of the spacer Captain Jellico and Steen Wilcox went out to receive them in the open. Dane watched from the hatch, aware that in his present pariah-hood it would not be wise to venture closer.

The Terran Traders were protesting some course of action that the Salariki were firmly insistent upon. In the end the natives won and Kosti was summoned to carry on board the chest which the servants had brought. Having seen it carried safely inside the spacer, the aliens departed, but Van Rycke was frowning and Jellico's fingers were beating a tattoo on his belt as they came up the ramp.

"I don't like it," Jellico stated as he entered.

"It was none of my doing," Van Rycke snapped. "I'll take risks if I have to—but there's something about this one—" he broke off, two deep lines showing between his thick brows. "Well, you can't teach a sasseral to spit," he ended philosophically. "We'll have to do the best we can."

But Jellico did not look at all happy as he climbed to the control section. And before the hour was out the reason for the Captain's uneasiness was common property throughout the ship.

Having sampled the delights of off-world herbs, the Salariki were determined to not be cut off from their source of supply. Six Terran months from the present Sargolian date would come the great yearly feast of the Fifty Storms, and the priests were agreed that this year their influence and power would be doubled if they could offer the devout certain privileges in the form of Terran plants. Consequently they had produced and forced upon the reluctant Van Rycke the Koros collection of their order, with instructions that it be sold on Terra and the price returned to them in the precious seeds and plants. In vain the Cargo-master and Captain had pointed out that Galactic trade was a chancy thing at the best, that accident might prevent return of the Queen to Sargol. But the priests had remained adamant and saw in all such arguments only a devious attempt to raise prices. They quoted in their turn the information they had levered out of the Company men—that Traders had their code and that once pay had been given in advance the contract *must* be fulfilled. They, and they alone, wanted the full



cargo of the Queen on her next voyage, and they were taking the one way they were sure of achieving that result.

So a fortune in Koros stones which as yet did not rightfully belong to the Traders was now in the Queen's strong-room and her crew were pledged by the strongest possible tie known in their Service to set down on Sargol once more before the allotted time had passed. The Free Traders did not like it, there was even a vaguely superstitious feeling that such a bargain would inevitably draw ill luck to them. But they were left with no choice if they wanted to retain their influence with the Salariki.

"Cutting orbit pretty fine, aren't we?" Ali asked Rip across the mess table. "I saw your two star man sweating it out before he came down to shoot the breeze with us rocket monkeys—"

Rip nodded. "Steen's double checked every computation and some he's done four times." He ran his hands over his close cropped head with a weary gesture. As a semi-invalid he had been herded down with his fellows to swallow the builder Mura had concocted and Tau insisted that they take, but he had been doing a half a night's work on the plotter under his chief's exacting eye before he came. "The latest news is that, barring accident, we can make it with about three weeks' grace, give or take a day or two—"

"Barring accident—" the words rang in the air. Here on the frontiers of the star lanes there were so many accidents, so many delays which could put a ship behind schedule. Only on the main star trails did the huge liners or Company ships attempt to keep on regularly timed trips. A Free Trader did not really dare to have an inelastic contract.

"What does Stotz say?" Dane asked Ali.

"He says he can deliver. We don't have the headache about setting a course—you point the nose and we only give her the boost to send her along."

Rip sighed. "Yes—point her nose." He inspected his nails. "Goodbye," he added gravely. "These won't be here by the time we planet here again. I'll have my fingers gnawed off to the first knuckle. Well, we lift at six hours. Pleasant strap down." He drank the last of the stuff in his mug, made a face at the flavor, and got to his feet, due back at his post in control.

Dane, free of duty until the ship earthed, drifted back to his own cabin, sure of part of a night's undisturbed rest before they blasted off. Sinbad was curled on his bunk. For some reason the cat had not been prowling the ship before take-off as he usually did. First he had sat on Van's desk and now he was here, almost as if he wanted human company. Dane picked him up and Sinbad rumbled a purr, arching his head so that it rubbed against the young man's chin in an extremely uncharacteristic show of affection. Smoothing the fur along the cat's jaw line Dane carried him back to the Cargo-master's cabin.

With some hesitation he knocked at the panel and did not step in until he had Van Rycke's muffled invitation. The Cargo-master was stretched on the bunk, two of the take off straps already fastened across his bulk as if he intended to sleep through the blast-off.

"Sinbad, sir. Shall I stow him?"

Van Rycke grunted an assent and Dane dropped the cat in the small hammock which was his particular station, fastening the safety cords. For once Sinbad made no protest but rolled into a ball and was promptly fast asleep. For a moment or two Dane thought about this unnatural behavior and wondered if he should call it to the Cargo-master's attention. Perhaps on Sargol Sinbad had had *his* equivalent of a friendship cup and needed a check-up by Tau.

"Stowage correct?" the question, coming from Van Rycke, was also unusual. The seal would not have been put across the hold lock had its contents not been checked and rechecked.

“Yes, sir,” Dane replied woodenly, knowing he was still in the outer darkness. “There was just the wood—we stowed it according to chart.”

Van Rycke grunted once more. “Feeling top-layer again?”

“Yes, sir. Any orders, sir?”

“No. Blast-off’s at six.”

“Yes, sir.” Dane left the cabin, closing the panel carefully behind him. Would he—or could he—he thought drearily, get back in Van Rycke’s profit column again? Sargol had been unlucky as far as he was concerned. First he had made that stupid mistake and then he got sick and now—And now—what *was* the matter? Was it just the general attack of nerves over their voyage and the commitments which forced their haste, or was it something else? He could not rid himself of a vague sense that the Queen was about to take off into real trouble. And he did not like the sensation at all!

## 8. Headaches

They lifted from Sargol on schedule and went into Hyper also on schedule. From that point on there was nothing to do but wait out the usual dull time of flight between systems and hope that Steen Wilcox had plotted a course which would cut that flight time to a minimum. But this voyage there was little relaxation once they were in Hyper. No matter when Dane dropped into the mess cabin, which was the common meeting place of the spacer, he was apt to find others there before him, usually with a mug of one of Mura's special brews close at hand, speculating about their landing date.

Dane, himself, once he had thrown off the lingering effects of his Sargolian illness, applied time to his studies. When he had first joined the Queen as a recruit straight out of the training Pool, he had speedily learned that all the ten years of intensive study then behind him had only been an introduction to the amount he still had to absorb before he could take his place as an equal with such a trader as Van Rycke—if he had the stuff which would raise him in time to that exalted level. While he had still had his superior's favor he had dared to treat him as an instructor, going to him with perplexing problems of stowage or barter. But now he had no desire to intrude upon the Cargo-master, and doggedly wrestled with the microtapes of old records on his own, painfully working out the why and wherefor for any departure from the regular procedure. He had no inkling of his own future status—whether the return to Terra would find him permanently earthed. And he would ask no questions.

They had been four days of ship's time in Hyper when Dane walked into the mess cabin, tired after his work with old records, to discover no Mura busy in the galley beyond, no brew steaming on the heat coil. Rip sat at the table, his long legs stuck out, his usually happy face very sober.

“What's wrong?” Dane reached for a mug, then seeing no pot of drink, put it back in place.

“Frank's sick—”

“What!” Dane turned. Illness such as they had run into on Sargol had a logical base. But illness on board ship was something else.

“Tau has him isolated. He has a bad headache and he blacked out when he tried to sit up. Tau's running tests.”

Dane sat down. “Could be something he ate—”

Rip shook his head. “He wasn't at the feast—remember? And he didn't eat anything from outside, he swore that to Tau. In fact he didn't go dirt much while we were down—”

That was only too true as Dane could now recall. And the fact that the steward had not been at the feast, had not sampled native food products, wiped out the simplest and most comforting reasons for his present collapse.

“What's this about Frank?” Ali stood in the doorway. “He said yesterday that he had a headache. But now Tau has him shut off—”

“But he wasn't at that feast.” Ali stopped short as the implications of that struck him. “How's Tang feeling?”

“Fine—why?” The Com-tech had come up behind Kamil and was answering for himself.

“Why this interest in the state of my health?”

“Frank’s down with something—in isolation,” Rip replied bluntly. “Did he do anything out of the ordinary when we were off ship?”

For a long moment the other stared at Shannon and then he shook his head. “No. And he wasn’t dirt-side to any extent either. So Tau’s running tests—” He lapsed into silence. None of them wished to put their thoughts into words.

Dane picked up the microtape he had brought with him and went on down the corridor to return it. The panel of the cargo office was ajar and to his relief he found Van Rycke out. He shoved the tape back in its case and pulled out the next one. Sinbad was there, not in his own private hammock, but sprawled out on the Cargo-master’s bunk. He watched Dane lazily, mouthing a silent mew of welcome. For some reason since they had blasted from Sargol the cat had been lazy—as if his adventures afield there had sapped much of his vitality.

“Why aren’t you out working?” Dane asked as he leaned over to scratch under a furry chin raised for the benefit of such a caress. “You inspect the hold lately, boy?”

Sinbad merely blinked and after the manner of his species looked infinitely bored. As Dane turned to go the Cargo-master came in. He showed no surprise at Dane’s presence. Instead he reached out and fingered the label of the tape Dane had just chosen. After a glance at the identifying symbol he took it out of his assistant’s hand, plopped it back in its case, and stood for a moment eyeing the selection of past voyage records. With a tongue-click of satisfaction he pulled out another and tossed it across the desk to Dane.

“See what you can make out of this tangle,” he ordered. But Dane’s shoulders went back as if some weight had been lifted from them. The old easiness was still lacking, but he was no longer exiled to the outer darkness of Van Rycke’s displeasure.

Holding the microtape as if it were a first grade Koros stone Dane went back to his own cabin, snapped the tape into his reader, adjusted the ear buttons and lay back on his bunk to listen.

He was deep in the intricacy of a deal so complicated that he was lost after the first two moves, when he opened his eyes to see Ali at the door panel. The Engineer-apprentice made an emphatic beckoning wave and Dane slipped off the ear buttons.

“What is it?” His question lacked a cordial note.

“I’ve got to have help.” Ali was terse. “Kosti’s blacked out!”

“What!” Dane sat up and dropped his feet to the deck in almost one movement.

“I can’t shift him alone,” Ali stated the obvious. The giant jetman was almost double his size. “We must get him to his quarters. And I won’t ask Stotz—”

For a perfectly good reason Dane knew. An assistant—two of the apprentices—could go sick, but their officers’ continued good health meant the most to the Queen. If some infection were aboard it would be better for Ali and himself to be exposed, than to have Johan Stotz with all his encyclopedic knowledge of the ship’s engines contract any disease.

They found the jetman half sitting, half lying in the short foot or so of corridor which led to his own cubby. He had been making for his quarters when the seizure had taken him. And by the time the two reached his side, he was beginning to come around, moaning, his hands going to his head.

Together they got him on his feet and guided him to his bunk where he collapsed again, dead weight they had to push into place. Dane looked at Ali—

“Tau?”

“Haven’t had time to call him yet.” Ali was jerking at the thigh straps which fastened Kosti’s space boots.

“I’ll go.” Glad for the task Dane sped up the ladder to the next section and threaded the narrow side hall to the Medic’s cabin where he knocked on the panel.

There was a pause before Craig Tau looked out, deep lines of weariness bracketing his mouth, etched between his eyes.

“Kosti, sir,” Dane gave his bad news quickly. “He’s collapsed. We got him to his cabin—”

Tau showed no sign of surprise. His hand shot out for his kit.

“You touched him?” At the other’s nod he added an order. “Stay in your quarters until I have a chance to look you over—understand?”

Dane had no chance to answer, the Medic was already on his way. He went to his own cabin, understanding the reason for his imprisonment, but inwardly rebelling against it. Rather than sit idle he snapped on the reader—but, although facts and figures were dunned into his ears—he really heard very little. He couldn’t apply himself—not with a new specter leering at him from the bulkhead.

The dangers of the space lanes were not to be numbered, death walked among the stars a familiar companion of all spacemen. And to the Free Trader it was the extra and invisible crewman on every ship that raised. But there were deaths and deaths—And Dane could not forget the gruesome legends Van Rycke collected avidly as his hobby—had recorded in his private library of the folk lore of space.

Stories such as that of the ghostly “New Hope” carrying refugees from the first Martian Rebellion—the ship which had lifted for the stars but had never arrived, which wandered for a timeless eternity, a derelict in free fall, its port closed but the warning “dead” lights on at its nose—a ship which through five centuries had been sighted only by a spacer in similar distress. Such stories were numerous. There were other tales of “plague” ships wandering free with their dead crews, or discovered and shot into some sun by a patrol cruiser so that they might not carry their infection farther. Plague—the nebulous “worst” the Traders had to face. Dane screwed his eyes shut, tried to concentrate upon the droning voice in his ears, but he could not control his thoughts nor—his fears.

At a touch on his arm he started so wildly that he jerked the cord loose from the reader and sat up, somewhat shamefaced, to greet Tau. At the Medic’s orders he stripped for one of the most complete examinations he had ever undergone outside a quarantine port. It included an almost microscopic inspection of the skin on his neck and shoulders, but when Tau had done he gave a sigh of relief.

“Well, you haven’t got it—at least you don’t show any signs yet,” he amended his first statement almost before the words were out of his mouth.

“What were you looking for?”

Tau took time out to explain. “Here,” his fingers touched the small hollow at the base of Dane’s throat and then swung him around and indicated two places on the back of his neck and under his shoulder blades. “Kosti and Mura both have red eruptions here. It’s as if they have been given an injection of some narcotic.” Tau sat down on the jump seat while Dane dressed. “Kosti was dirt-side—he might have picked up something—”

“But Mura—”

“That’s it!” Tau brought his fist down on the edge of the bunk. “Frank hardly left the ship—yet he showed the first signs. On the other hand you are all right so far and you were off ship. And Ali’s clean and he was with you on the hunt. We’ll just have to wait and see.” He got up wearily. “If your head begins to ache,” he told Dane, “you get back here in a hurry and stay put—understand?”

As Dane learned all the other members of the crew were given the same type of inspection. But none of them showed the characteristic marks which meant trouble. They were on course for Terra—but—and that but must have loomed large in all their minds—once there would they be allowed to land? Could they even hope for a hearing? Plague ship—Tau must find the answer before they came into normal space about their own solar system or they were in for such trouble as made a broken contract seem the simplest of mishaps.

Kosti and Mura were in isolation. There were volunteers for nursing and Tau, unable to be in two places at once, finally picked Weeks to look after his crewmate in the engineering section.

There was doubling up of duties. Tau could no longer share with Mura the care of the hydro garden so Van Rycke took over. While Dane found himself in charge of the galley and, while he did not have Mura’s deft hand at disguising the monotonous concentrates to the point they resembled fresh food, after a day or two he began to experiment cautiously and produced a stew which brought some short words of appreciation from Captain Jellico.

They all breathed a sigh of relief when, after three days, no more signs of the mysterious illness showed on new members of the crew. It became routine to parade before Tau stripped to the waist each morning for the inspection of the danger points, and the Medic’s vigilance did not relax.

In the meantime neither Mura nor Kosti appeared to suffer. Once the initial stages of headaches and blackouts were passed, the patients lapsed into a semi-conscious state as if they were under sedation of some type. They would eat, if the food was placed in their mouths, but they did not seem to know what was going on about them, nor did they answer when spoken to.

Tau, between visits to them, worked feverishly in his tiny lab, analyzing blood samples, reading the records of obscure diseases, trying to find the reason for their attacks. But as yet his discoveries were exactly nothing. He had come out of his quarters and sat in limp exhaustion at the mess table while Dane placed before him a mug of stimulating caf-hag.

“I don’t get it!” The Medic addressed the table top rather than the amateur cook. “It’s a poison of some kind. Kosti went dirt-side—Mura didn’t. Yet Mura came down with it first. And we didn’t ship any food from Sargol. Neither did he eat any while we were there. Unless he did and we didn’t know about it. If I could just bring him to long enough to answer a couple of questions!” Sighing he dropped his weary head on his folded arms and within seconds was asleep.

Dane put the mug back on the heating unit and sat down at the other end of the table. He did not have the heart to shake Tau into wakefulness—let the poor devil get a slice of bunk time, he certainly needed it after the fatigues of the past four days.

Van Rycke passed along the corridor on his way to the hydro, Sinbad at his heels. But in a moment the cat was back, leaping up on Dane’s knee. He did not curl up, but rubbed against the young man’s arm, finally reaching up with a paw to touch Dane’s chin, uttering one of the soundless, mews which were his bid for attention.

“What’s the matter, boy?” Dane fondled the cat’s ears. “You haven’t got a headache—have you?” In that second a wild surmise came into his mind. Sinbad had been planet-side on Sargol as much as he could, and on ship board he was equally at home in all their cabins—could he be the carrier of the disease?

A good idea—only if it were true, then logically the second victim should have been Van, or Dane—whereas Sinbad lingered most of the time in their cabins—not Kosti. The cat, as far as he knew, had never shown any particular fondness for the jetman and certainly did not sleep in Karl’s quarters. No—that point did not fit. But he would mention it to Tau—no use overlooking anything—no matter how wild.

It was the sequence of victims which puzzled them all. As far as Tau had been able to discover Mura and Kosti had nothing much in common except that they were crewmates on the same spacer. They did not bunk in the same section, their fields of labor were totally different, they had no special food or drink tastes in common, they were not even of the same race. Frank Mura was one of the few descendants of a mysterious (or now mysterious) people who had had their home on a series of islands in one of Terra’s seas, islands which almost a hundred years before had been swallowed up in a series of world-rending quakes—Japan was the ancient name of that nation. While Karl Kosti had come from the once thickly populated land masses half the planet away which had borne the geographical name of “Europe.” No, all the way along the two victims had only very general meeting points—they both shipped on the Solar Queen and they were both of Terran birth.

Tau stirred and sat up, blinking bemusedly at Dane, then pushed back his wiry black hair and assumed a measure of alertness. Dane dropped the now purring cat in the Medic’s lap and in a few sentences outlined his suspicion. Tau’s hands closed about Sinbad.

“There’s a chance in that—” He looked a little less beat and he drank thirstily from the mug Dane gave him for the second time. Then he hurried out with Sinbad under one arm—bound for his lab.

Dane slicked up the galley, trying to put things away as neatly as Mura kept them. He didn’t have much faith in the Sinbad lead, but in this case everything must be checked out.

When the Medic did not appear during the rest of the ship’s day Dane was not greatly concerned. But he was alerted to trouble when Ali came in with an inquiry and a complaint.

“Seen anything of Craig?”

“He’s in the lab,” Dane answered.

“He didn’t answer my knock,” Ali protested. “And Weeks says he hasn’t been in to see Karl all day—”

That did catch Dane’s attention. Had his half hunch been right? Was Tau on the trail of a discovery which had kept him chained to the lab? But it wasn’t like the Medic not to look in on his patients.

“You’re sure he isn’t in the lab?”

“I told you that he didn’t answer my knock. I didn’t open the panel—” But now Ali was already in the corridor heading back the way he had come, with Dane on his heels, an unwelcome explanation for that silence in both their minds. And their fears were reinforced by what they heard as they approached the panel—a low moan wrung out of unbearable pain. Dane thrust the sliding door open.

Tau had slipped from his stool to the floor. His hands were at his head which rolled from side to side as if he were trying to quiet some agony. Dane stripped down the Medic's under tunic. There was no need to make a careful examination, in the hollow of Craig Tau's throat was the tell-tale red blotch.

"Sinbad!" Dane glanced about the cabin. "Did Sinbad get out past you?" he demanded of the puzzled Ali.

"No—I haven't seen him all day—"

Yet the cat was nowhere in the tiny cabin and it had no concealed hiding place. To make doubly sure Dane secured the panel before they carried Tau to his bunk. The Medic had blacked out again, passed into the lethargic second stage of the malady. At least he was out of the pain which appeared to be the worst symptom of the disease.

"It must be Sinbad!" Dane said as he made his report directly to Captain Jellico. "And yet—"

"Yes, he's been staying in Van's cabin," the Captain mused. "And you've handled him, he slept on your bunk. Yet you and Van are all right. I don't understand that. Anyway—to be on the safe side—we'd better find and isolate him before—"

He didn't have to underline any words for the grim-faced men who listened. With Tau—their one hope of fighting the disease gone—they had a black future facing them.

They did not have to search for Sinbad. Dane coming down to his own section found the cat crouched before the panel of Van Rycke's cabin, his eyes glued to the thin crack of the door.

Dane scooped him up and took him to the small cargo space intended for the safeguarding of choice items of commerce. To his vast surprise Sinbad began fighting wildly as he opened the hatch, kicking and then slashing with ready claws. The cat seemed to go mad and Dane had all he could do to shut him in. When he snapped the panel he heard Sinbad launch himself against the barrier as if to batter his way out. Dane, blood welling in several deep scratches, went in search of first aid. But some suspicion led him to pause as he passed Van Rycke's door. And when his knock brought no answer he pushed the panel open.

Van Rycke lay on his bunk, his eyes half closed in a way which had become only too familiar to the crew of the Solar Queen. And Dane knew that when he looked for it he would find the mark of the strange plague on the Cargo-master's body.



## 9. Plague!

Jellico and Steen Wilcox pored over the few notes Tau had made before he was stricken. But apparently the Medic had found nothing to indicate that Sinbad was the carrier of any disease. Meanwhile the Captain gave orders for the cat to be confined. A difficult task—since Sinbad crouched close to the door of the storage cabin and was ready to dart out when food was taken in for him. Once he got a good way down the corridor before Dane was able to corner and return him to keeping.

Dane, Ali and Weeks took on the full care of the four sick men, leaving the few regular duties of the ship to the senior officers, while Rip was installed in charge of the hydro garden.

Mura, the first to be taken ill, showed no change. He was semi-conscious, he swallowed food if it were put in his mouth, he responded to nothing around him. And Kostî, Tau, and Van Rycke followed the same pattern. They still held morning inspection of those on their feet for signs of a new outbreak, but when no one else went down during the next two days, they regained a faint spark of hope.

Hope which was snapped out when Ali brought the news that Stotz could not be roused and must have taken ill during a sleep period. One more inert patient was added to the list—and nothing learned about how he was infected. Except that they could eliminate Sinbad, since the cat had been in custody during the time Stotz had apparently contracted the disease.

Weeks, Ali and Dane, though they were in constant contact with the sick men, and though Dane had repeatedly handled Sinbad, continued to be immune. A fact, Dane thought more than once, which must have significance—if someone with Tau’s medical knowledge had been able to study it. By all rights they should be the most susceptible—but the opposite seemed true. And Wilcox duly noted that fact among the data they had recorded.

It became a matter of watching each other, waiting for another collapse. And they were not surprised when Tang Ya reeled into the mess, his face livid and drawn with pain. Rip and Dane got him to his cabin before he blacked out. But all they could learn from him during the interval before he lost consciousness was that his head was bursting and he couldn’t stand it. Over his limp body they stared at one another bleakly.

“Six down,” Ali observed, “and six to go. How do you feel?”

“Tired, that’s all. What I don’t understand is that once they go into this stupor they just stay. They don’t get any worse, they have no rise in temperature—it’s as if they are in a modified form of cold sleep!”

“How is Tang?” Rip asked from the corridor.

“Usual pattern,” Ali answered, “He’s sleeping. Got a pain, Fella?”

Rip shook his head. “Right as a Com-unit. I don’t get it. Why does it strike Tang who didn’t even hit dirt much—and yet you keep on—?”

Dane grimaced. “If we had an answer to that, maybe we’d know what caused the whole thing—”

Ali’s eyes narrowed. He was staring straight at the unconscious Com-tech as if he did not see that supine body at all. “I wonder if we’ve been salted—” he said slowly.

“We’ve been *what?*” Dane demanded.

“Look here, we three—with Weeks—drank that brew of the Salariki, didn’t we? And we—”

“Were as sick as Venusian gobblers afterwards,” agreed Rip.

Light dawned. “Do you mean—” began Dane.

“So that’s it!” flashed Rip.

“It might just be,” Ali said. “Do you remember how the settlers on Camblyne brought their Terran cattle through the first year? They fed them salt mixed with fansel grass. The result was that the herds didn’t take the fansel grass fever when they turned them out to pasture in the dry season. All right, maybe we had our ‘salt’ in that drink. The fansel-salt makes the cattle filthy sick when it’s forced down their throats, but after they recover they’re immune to the fever. And nobody on Camblyne buys unsalted cattle now.”

“It sounds logical,” admitted Rip. “But how are we going to prove it?”

Ali’s face was black once more. “Probably by elimination,” he said morosely. “If we keep our feet and all the rest go down—that’s our proof.”

“But we ought to be able to do something—” protested Shannon.

“Just how?” Ali’s slender brows arched. “Do you have a gallon of that Salariki brew on board you can serve out? We don’t know what was in it. Nor are we sure that this whole idea has any value.”

All of them had had first aid and basic preventive medicine as part of their training, but the more advanced laboratory experimentation was beyond their knowledge and skill. Had Tau still been on his feet perhaps he could have traced that lead and brought order out of the chaos which was closing in upon the Solar Queen. But, though they reported their suggestion to the Captain, Jellico was powerless to do anything about it. If the four who had shared that upsetting friendship cup were immune to the doom which now overhung the ship, there was no possible way for them to discover why or how.

Ship’s time came to have little meaning. And they were not surprised when Steen Wilcox slipped from his seat before the computer—to be stowed away with what had become a familiar procedure. Only Jellico withstood the contagion apart from the younger four, taking his turn at caring for the helpless men. There was no change in their condition. They neither roused nor grew worse as the hours and then the days sped by. But each of those units of time in passing brought them nearer to greater danger. Sooner or later they must make the transition out of Hyper into system space, and the jump out of warp was something not even a veteran took lightly. Rip’s round face thinned while they watched. Jellico was still functioning. But if the Captain collapsed the whole responsibility for the snap-out would fall directly on Shannon. An infinitesimal error would condemn them to almost hopeless wandering—perhaps for ever.

Dane and Ali relieved Rip of all duty but that which kept him chained in Wilcox’s chair before the computers. He went over and over the data of the course the Astrogator had set. And Captain Jellico, his eyes sunk in dark pits, checked and rechecked.

When the fatal moment came Ali manned the engine room with Weeks at his elbow to tend the controls the acting-Engineer could not reach. And Dane, having seen the sick all safely stowed in crash webbing, came up to the control cabin, riding out the transfer in Tang Ya’s place.

Rip's voice hoarsened into a croak, calling out the data. Dane, though he had had basic theory, was completely lost before Shannon had finished the first set of co-ordinates. But Jellico replied, hands playing across the pilot's board.

"Stand-by for snap-out—" the croak went down to the engines where Ali now held Stotz's post.

"Engines ready!" The voice came back, thinned by its journey from the Queen's interior.

"Ought-five-nine—" That was Jellico.

Dane found himself suddenly unable to watch. He shut his eyes and braced himself against the vertigo of snap-out. It came and he whirled sickeningly through unstable space. Then he was sitting in the laced Com-tech's seat looking at Rip.

Runnels of sweat streaked Shannon's brown face. There was a damp patch darkening his tunic between his shoulder blades, a patch which it would take both of Dane's hands to cover.

For a moment he did not raise his head to look at the vision plate which would tell him whether or not they had made it. But when he did familiar constellations made the patterns they knew. They were out—and they couldn't be too far off the course Wilcox had plotted. There was still the system run to make—but snap-out was behind them. Rip gave a deep sigh and buried his head in his hands.

With a throb of fear Dane unhooked his safety belt and hurried over to him. When he clutched at Shannon's shoulder the Astrogator-apprentice's head rolled limply. Was Rip down with the illness too? But the other muttered and opened his eyes.

"Does your head ache?" Dane shook him.

"Head? No—" Rip's words came drowsily. "Jus' sleepy—so sleepy—"

He did not seem to be in pain. But Dane's hands were shaking as he hoisted the other out of his seat and half carried-half led him to his cabin, praying as he went that it was only fatigue and not the disease. The ship was on auto now until Jellico as pilot set a course—

Dane got Rip down on the bunk and stripped off his tunic. The fine-drawn face of the sleeper looked wan against the foam rest, and he snuggled into the softness like a child as he turned over and curled up. But his skin was clear—it was real sleep and not the plague which had claimed him.

Impulse sent Dane back to the control cabin. He was not an experienced pilot officer, but there might be some assistance he could offer the Captain now that Rip was washed out, perhaps for hours.

Jellico hunched before the smaller computer, feeding pilot tape into its slot. His face was a skull under a thin coating of skin, the bones marking it sharply at jaw, nose and eye socket.

"Shannon down?" His voice was a mere whisper of its powerful self, he did not turn his head.

"He's just worn out, sir," Dane hastened to give reassurance. "The marks aren't on him."

"When he comes around tell him the co-ords are in," Jellico murmured. "See he checks course in ten hours—"

"But, sir—" Dane's protest failed as he watched the Captain struggle to his feet, pulling himself up with shaking hands. As Thorson reached forward to steady the other, one of those hands tore at tunic collar, ripping loose the sealing—

There was no need for explanation—the red splotch signaled from Jellico’s sweating throat. He kept his feet, holding out against the waves of pain by sheer will power. Then Dane had a grip on him, got him away from the computer, hoping he could keep him going until they reached Jellico’s cabin.

Somehow they made that journey, being greeted with raucous screams from the Hoobat. Furiously Dane slapped the cage, setting it to swinging and so silencing the creature which stared at him with round, malignant eyes as he got the Captain to bed.

Only four of them on their feet now, Dane thought bleakly as he left the cabin. If Rip came out of it in time they could land—Dane’s breath caught as he made himself face up to the fact that Shannon might be ill, that it might be up to him to bring the Queen in for a landing. And in where? The Terra quarantine was Luna City on the Moon. But let them signal for a set-down there—let them describe what had happened and they might face death as a plague ship.

Wearily he climbed down to the mess cabin to discover Weeks and Ali there before him. They did not look up as he entered.

“Old Man’s got it,” he reported.

“Rip?” was Ali’s crossing question.

“Asleep. He passed out—”

“What!” Weeks swung around.

“Worn out,” Dane amended. “Captain fed in a pilot tape before he gave up.”

“So—now we are three,” was Ali’s comment. “Where do we set down—Luna City?”

“If they let us,” Dane hinted at the worst.

“But they’ve got to let us!” Weeks exclaimed. “We can’t just wander around out here—”

“It’s been done,” Ali reminded them brutally and that silenced Weeks.

“Did the Old Man set Luna?” After a long pause Ali inquired.

“I didn’t check,” Dane confessed. “He was giving out and I had to get him to his bunk.”

“It might be well to know.” The Engineer-apprentice got up, his movements lacking much of the elastic spring which was normally his. When he climbed to control both the others followed him.

Ali’s slender fingers played across a set of keys and in the small screen mounting on the computer a set of figures appeared. Dane took up the master course book, read the connotation and blinked.

“Not Luna?” Ali asked.

“No. But I don’t understand. This must be for somewhere in the asteroid belt.”

Ali’s lips stretched into a pale caricature of a smile. “Good for the Old Man, he still had his wits about him, even after the bug bit him!”

“But why are we going to the asteroids?” Weeks asked reasonably enough. “There’re Medics at Luna City—they can help us—”

“They can handle known diseases,” Ali pointed out. “But what of the Code?”

Weeks dropped into the Com-tech's place as if some of the stiffening had vanished from his thin but sturdy legs. "They wouldn't do that—" he protested, but his eyes said that he knew that they might—they well might.

"Oh, no? Face the facts, man," Ali sounded almost savage. "We come from a frontier planet, we're a plague ship—"

He did not have to underline that. They all knew too well the danger in which they now stood.

"Nobody's died yet," Weeks tried to find an opening in the net being drawn about them.

"And nobody's recovered," Ali crushed that thread of hope. "We don't know what it is, how it is contracted—anything about it. Let us make a report saying that and you know what will happen—don't you?"

They weren't sure of the details, but they could guess.

"So I say," Ali continued, "the Old Man was right when he set us on an evasion course. If we can stay out until we really know what is the matter we'll have some chance of talking over the high brass at Luna when we do planet—"

In the end they decided not to interfere with the course the Captain had set. It would take them into the fringes of solar civilization, but give them a fighting chance at solving their problem before they had to report to the authorities. In the meantime they tended their charges, let Rip sleep, and watched each other with desperate but hidden intentness, ready for another to be stricken. However, they remained, although almost stupid with fatigue at times, reasonably healthy. Time was proving that their guess had been correct—they had been somehow inoculated against the germ or virus which had struck the ship.

Rip slept for twenty-four hours, ship time, and then came into the mess cabin ravenously hungry, to catch up on both food and news. And he refused to join with the prevailing pessimistic view of the future. Instead he was sure that their own immunity having been proven, they had a talking point to use with the medical officials at Luna and he was eager to alter course directly for the quarantine station. Only the combined arguments of the other three made him, unwillingly, agree to a short delay.

And how grateful they should be for Captain Jellico's foresight they learned within the next day. Ali was at the com-unit, trying to pick up Solarian news reports. When the red alert flashed on throughout the ship it brought the others hurrying to the control cabin. The code squeaks were magnified as Ali switched on the receiver full strength, to be translated as he pressed a second button.

"Repeat, repeat, repeat. Free Trader, Solar Queen, Terra Registry 65-724910-Jk, suspected plague ship—took off from infected planet. Warn off—warn off—report such ship to Luna Station. Solar Queen from infected planet—to be warned off and reported." The same message was repeated three times before going off ether.

The four in the control cabin looked at each other blankly.

"But," Dane broke the silence, "how did they know? We haven't reported in—"

"The Eysies!" Ali had the answer ready. "That I-S ship must be having the same sort of trouble and reported to her Company. They would include us in their report and believe that we were infected too—or it would be easy to convince the authorities that we were."

"I wonder," Rip's eyes were narrowed slits as he leaned back against the wall. "Look at the facts. The Survey ship which charted Sargol—they were dirt-side there about three-four

months. Yet they gave it a clean bill of health and put it up for trading rights auction. Then Cam bought those rights—he made at least two trips in and out before he was blasted on Limbo. No infection bothered him or Survey—”

“But you’ve got to admit it hit us,” Weeks protested.

“Yes, and the Eysie ship was able to foresee it—report us before we snapped out of Hyper. Sounds almost as if they expected us to carry plague, doesn’t it?” Shannon wanted to know.

“Planted?” Ali frowned at the banks of controls. “But how—no Eysie came on board—no Salarik either, except for the cub who showed us what they thought of catnip.”

Rip shrugged. “How would I know how they did—” he was beginning when Dane cut in:

“If they didn’t know about our immunity the Queen might stay in Hyper and never come out—there wouldn’t be anyone to set the snap-out.”

“Right enough. But on the chance that somebody did keep on his feet and bring her home, they were ready with a cover. If no one raises a howl Sargol will be written off the charts as infected, I-S sits on her tail fins a year or so and then she promotes an investigation before the Board. The Survey records are trotted out—no infection recorded. So they send in a Patrol Probe. Everything is all right—so it wasn’t the planet after all—it was that dirty old Free Trader. And she’s out of the way. I-S gets the Koros trade all square and legal and we’re no longer around to worry about! Neat as a Salariki net-cast—and right around our collective throats, my friends!”

“So what do we do now?” Weeks wanted to know.

“We keep on the Old Man’s course, get lost in the asteroids until we can do some heavy thinking and see a way out. But if I-S gave us this prize package, some trace of its origin is still aboard. And if we can find that—why, then we have something to start from.”

“Mura went down first—and then Karl. Nothing in common,” the old problem faced Dane for the hundredth time.

“No. But,” Ali arose from his place at the com-unit. “I’d suggest a real search of first Frank’s and then Karl’s quarters. A regular turn out down to the bare walls of their cabins. Are you with me?”

“Fly boy, we’re ahead of you!” Rip contributed, already at the door panel. “Down to the bare walls it is.”

## 10. E-Stat Landing

Since Mura was in the isolation of ship sick bay the stripping of his cabin was a relatively simple job. But, though Rip and Dane went over it literally by inches, they found nothing unusual—in fact nothing from Sargol except a small twig of the red wood which lay on the steward’s worktable where he had been fashioning something to incorporate in one of his miniature fairy landscapes, to be imprisoned for all time in a plasta-bubble. Dane turned this around in his fingers. Because it was the only link with the perfumed planet he couldn’t help but feel that it had some importance.

But Kosti had not shown any interest in the wood. And he, himself, and Weeks had handled it freely *before* they had tasted Graft’s friendship cup and had no ill effects—so it couldn’t be the wood. Dane put the twig back on the work table and snapped the protecting cover over the delicate tools—never realizing until days later how very close he had been in that moment to the solution of their problem.

After two hours of shifting every one of the steward’s belongings, of crawling on hands and knees about the deck and climbing to inspect perfectly bare walls, they had found exactly nothing. Rip sat down on the end of the denuded bunk.

“There’s the hydro—Frank spent a lot of time in there—and the storeroom,” he told the places off on his fingers. “The galley and the mess cabin.”

Those had been the extent of Mura’s world. They could search the storeroom, the galley and the mess cabin—but to interfere with the hydro would endanger their air supply. It was for that very reason that they now looked at each other in startled surmise.

“The perfect place to plant something!” Dane spoke first.

Rip’s teeth caught his underlip. The hydro—something planted there could not be routed out unless they made a landing on a port field and had the whole section stripped.

“Devilish—” Rip’s mobile lips drew tight. “But how could they do it?”

Dane didn’t see how it could have been done either. No one but the Queen’s own crew had been on board the ship during their entire stay on Sargol, except for the young Salarik. Could that cub have brought something? But he and Mura had been with the youngster every minute that he had been in the hydro. To the best of Dane’s memory the cub had touched nothing and had been there only for a few moments. That had been before the feast also—

Rip got to his feet. “We can’t strip the hydro in space,” he pointed out the obvious quietly.

Dane had the answer. “Then we’ve got to earth!”

“You heard that warn-off. If we try it—”

“What about an Emergency station?”

Rip stood very still, his big hands locked about the buckle of his arms belt. Then, without another word, he went out of the cabin and at a pounding pace up the ladder, bound for the Captain’s cabin and the records Jellico kept there. It was such a slim chance—but it was better than none at all.

Dane shouldered into the small space in his wake to find Rip making a selection from the astrogation tapes. There were E-Stats among the asteroids—points prospectors or small

traders in sudden difficulties might contact for supplies or repairs. The big Companies maintained their own—the Patrol had several for independents.

“No Patrol one—”

Rip managed a smile. “I haven’t gone space whirly yet,” was his comment. He was feeding a tape into the reader on the Captain’s desk. In the cage over his head the blue Hoobat squatted watching him intently—for the first time since Dane could remember showing no sign of resentment by weird screams or wild spitting.

“Patrol E-Stat A-54—” the reader squeaked. Rip hit a key and the wire clicked to the next entry. “Combine E-Stat—” Another punch and click. “Patrol E-Stat A-55—” punch-click. “Inter-Solar—” this time Rip’s hand did not hit the key and the squeak continued—“Co-ordinates—” Rip reached for a steelo and jotted down the list of figures.

“Got to compare this with our present course—”

“But that’s an I-S Stat,” began Dane and then he laughed as the justice of such a move struck him. They did not dare set the Queen down at any Patrol Station. But a Company one which would be manned by only two or three men and not expecting any but their own people—and I-S owed them help now!

“There may be trouble,” he said, not that he would have any regrets if there was. If the Eysies were responsible for the present plight of the Queen he would welcome trouble, the kind which would plant his fists on some sneering Eysie face.

“We’ll see about that when we come to it,” Rip went on to the control cabin with his figures. Carefully he punched the combination on the plotter and watched it be compared with the course Jellico had set before his collapse.

“Good enough,” he commented as the result flashed on. “We can make it without using too much fuel—”

“Make what?” That was Ali up from the search of Kosti’s quarters. “Nothing,” he gave his report of what he had found there and then returned to the earlier question. “Make what?”

Swiftly Dane outlined their suspicions—that the seat of the trouble lay in the hydro and that they should clean out that section, drawing upon emergency materials at the I-S E-Stat.

“Sounds all right. But you know what they do to pirates?” inquired the Engineer-apprentice.

Space law came into Dane’s field, he needed no prompting. “Any ship in emergency,” he recited automatically, “may claim supplies from the nearest E-Stat—paying for them when the voyage is completed.”

“That means any Patrol E-Stat. The Companies’ are private property.”

“But,” Dane pointed out triumphantly, “the law doesn’t say so—there is nothing about any difference between Company and Patrol E-Stat in the law—”

“He’s right,” Rip agreed. “That law was framed when only the Patrol had such stations. Companies put them in later to save tax—remember? Legally we’re all right.”

“Unless the agents on duty raise a howl,” Ali amended. “Oh, don’t give me that look, Rip. I’m not sounding any warn-off on this, but I just want you to be prepared to find a cruiser riding our fins and giving us the hot flash as bandits. If you want to spoil the Eysies, I’m all for it. Got a stat of theirs pinpointed?”

Rip pointed to the figures on the computer. “There she is. We can set down in about five hours’ ship time. How long will it take to strip the hydro and re-install?”



“How can I tell?” Ali sounded irritable. “I can give you oxy for quarters for about two hours. Depends upon how fast we can move. No telling until we make a start.”

He started for the corridor and then added over his shoulder: “You’ll have to answer a com challenge—thought about that?”

“Why?” Rip asked. “It might be com repairs bringing us in. They won’t be expecting trouble and we will—we’ll have the advantage.”

But Ali was not to be shaken out of his usual dim view of the future. “All right—so we land, blaster in hand, and take the place. And they get off one little squeak to the Patrol. Well, a short life but an interesting one. And we’ll make all the Video channels for sure when we go out with rockets blasting. Nothing like having a little excitement to break the dull routine of a voyage.”

“We aren’t going to, are we—” Dane protested, “land armed, I mean?”

Ali stared at him and Rip, to Dane’s surprise, did not immediately repudiate that thought.

“Sleep rods certainly,” the Astrogator-apprentice said after a pause. “We’ll have to be prepared for the moment when they find out who we are. And you can’t re-set a hydro in a few minutes, not when we have to keep oxy on for the others. If we were able to turn that off and work in suits it’d be a quicker job—we could dump before we set down and then pile it in at once. But this way it’s going to be piece work. And it all depends on the agents at the Stat whether we have trouble or not.”

“We had better break out the suits now,” Ali added to Rip’s estimate of the situation. “If we set down and pile out wearing suits at once it will build up our tale of being poor wrecked spacemen—”

Sleep rods or not, Dane thought to himself, the whole plan was one born of desperation. It would depend upon who manned the E-Stat and how fast the Free Traders could move once the Queen touched her fins to earth.

“Knock out their coms,” that was Ali continuing to plan. “Do that first and then we don’t have to worry about someone calling in the Patrol.”

Rip stretched. For the first time in hours he seemed to have returned to his usual placid self. “Good thing somebody in this spacer watches Video serials—Ali, you can brief us on all the latest tricks of space pirates. Nothing is so wildly improbable that you can’t make use of it sometime during a checkered career.”

He glanced over the board before he brought his hand down on a single key set a distance apart from the other controls. “Put some local color into it,” was his comment.

Dane understood. Rip had turned on the distress signal at the Queen’s nose. When she set down on the Stat field she would be flaming a banner of trouble. Next to the wan dead lights, set only when a ship had no hope of ever reaching port at all, that signal was one every spacer dreaded having to flash. But it was *not* the dead lights—not yet for the Queen.

Working together they brought out the space suits and readied them at the hatch. Then Weeks and Dane took up the task of tending their unconscious charges while Rip and Ali prepared for landing.

There was no change in the sleepers. And in Jellico’s cabin even Queex appeared to be influenced by the plight of its master, for instead of greeting Dane with its normal aspect of rage, the Hoobat stayed quiescent on the floor of its cage, its top claws hooked about two of the wires, its protruding eyes staring out into the room with what seemed closed to a

malignant intelligence. It did not even spit as Dane passed under its abode to pour thin soup into his patient.

As for Sinbad, the cat had retreated to Dane's cabin and steadily refused to leave the quarters he had chosen, resisting with tooth and claw the one time Dane had tried to take him back to Van Rycke's office and his own hammock there. Afterwards the Cargo-apprentice did not try to evict him—there was comfort in seeing that plump gray body curled on the bunk he had little chance to use.

His nursing duties performed for the moment, Dane ventured into the hydro. He was practiced in tending this vital heart of the ship's air supply. But outfitting a hydro was something else again. In his cadet years he had aided in such a program at least twice as a matter of learning the basic training of the Service. But then they had had unlimited supplies to draw on and the action had taken place under no more pressure than that exerted by the instructors. Now it was going to be a far more tricky job—

He went slowly down the aisle between the banks of green things. Plants from all over the Galaxy, grown for their contribution to the air renewal—as well as side products such as fresh fruit and vegetables, were banked there. The sweet odor of their verdant life was strong. But how could any of the four now on duty tell what was rightfully there and what might have been brought in? And could they be sure anything *had* been introduced?

Dane stood there, his eyes searching those lines of greens—such a mixture of greens from the familiar shade of Terra's fields to greens tinged with shades first bestowed by other suns on other worlds—looking for one which was alien enough to be noticeable. Only Mura, who knew this garden as he knew his own cabin, could have differentiated between them. They would just dump everything and trust to luck—

He was suddenly aware of a slight movement in the banks—a shivering of stem, quiver of leaf. The mere act of his passing had set some sensitive plant to register his presence. A lacy, fern-like thing was contracting its fronds into balls. He should not stay—disturbing the peace of the hydro. But it made little difference now—within a matter of hours all this luxuriance would be thrust out to die and they would have to depend upon canned oxy and algae tanks. Too bad—the hydro represented much time and labor on Mura's part and Tau had medical plants growing there he had been observing for a long time.

As Dane closed the door behind him, seeing the line of balled fern which had marked his passage, he heard a faint rustling, a sound as if a wind had swept across the green room within. The imagination which was a Trader's asset (when it was kept within bounds) suggested that the plants inside guessed—With a frown for his own sentimentality, Dane strode down the corridor and climbed to check with Rip in control.

The Astrogator-apprentice had his own problems. To bring the Queen down on the circumscribed field of an E-Stat—without a guide beam to ride in—since if they contacted the Stat they must reveal their *own* com was working and they would have to answer questions—was the sort of test even a seasoned pilot would tense over. Yet Rip was sitting now in the Captain's place, his broad hands spread out on the edge of the control board waiting. And below in the engine room Ali was in Stotz's place ready to fire and cut rockets at order. Of course they were both several years ahead of him in Service, Dane knew. But he wondered at their quick assumption of responsibility and whether he himself could ever reach that point of self-confidence—his memory turning to the bad mistake he had made on Sargol.

There was the sharp note of a warning gong, the flash of red light on the control board. They were off automatic, from here on in it was all Kip's work. Dane strapped down at the silent

com-unit and was startled a moment later when it spat words at him, translated from space code.

“Identify—identify—I-S E-Stat calling spacer—identify—”

So compelling was that demand that Dane’s fingers went to the answer key before he remembered and snatched them back, to fold his hands in his lap.

“Identify—” the expressionless voice of the translator droned over their heads.

Rip’s hands were on the control board, playing the buttons there with the precision of a musician creating some symphonic masterpiece. And the Queen was alive, now quivering through her stout plates, coming into a landing.

Dane watched the visa plate. The E-Stat asteroid was of a reasonable size, but in their eyes it was a bleak, torn mote of stuff swimming through vast emptiness.

“Identify—” the drone heightened in pitch.

Rip’s lips were compressed, he made quick calculations. And Dane saw that, though Jellico was the master, Rip was fully fit to follow in the Captain’s boot prints.

There was a sudden silence in the cabin—the demand had stopped. The agents below must now have realized that the ship with the distress signals blazing on her nose was not going to reply. Dane found he could not watch the visa plate now, Rip’s hands about their task filled his whole range of sight.

He knew that Shannon was using every bit of his skill and knowledge to jockey them into the position where they could ride their tail rockets down to the scorched rock of the E-Stat field. Perhaps it wasn’t as smooth a landing as Jellico could have made. But they did it. Rip’s hands were quiet, again that patch of darkness showed on the back of his tunic. He made no move from his seat.

“Secure—” Ali’s voice floated up to them.

Dane unbuckled his safety webbing and got up, looking to Shannon for orders. This was Rip’s plan they were to carry through. Then something moved him to give honor where it was due. He touched that bowed shoulder before him.

“Fin landing, brother! Four points and down!”

Rip glanced up, a grin made him look his old self. “Ought to have a recording of that for the Board when I go up for my pass-through.”

Dane matched his smile. “Too bad we didn’t have someone out there with a tri-dee machine.”

“More likely it’d be evidence at our trial for piracy—” their words must have reached Ali on the ship’s inter-com, for his deflating reply came back, to remind them of why they had made that particular landing. “Do we move now?”

“Check first,” Rip said into the mike.

Dane looked at the visa-plate. Against a background of jagged rock teeth was the bubble of the E-Stat housing—more than three-quarters of it being in the hollowed out sections below the surface of the miniature world which supported it, as Dane knew.

But a beam of light shown from the dome to center on the grounded Queen. They had not caught the Stat agents napping.

They made the rounds of the spacer, checking on each of the semi-conscious men. Ali had ready the artificial oxy tanks—they must move fast once they began the actual task of clearing and restocking the hydro.

“Hope you have a good story ready,” he commented as the other three joined him by the hatch to don the suits which would enable them to cross the airless, heatless surface of the asteroid.

“We have a poisoned hydro,” Dane said.

“One look at the plants we dump will give you the lie. They won’t accept our story without investigation.”

Dane was aroused. Did Ali think he was as stupid as all that? “If you’d take a look in there now you’d believe me,” he snapped.

“What did you do?” Ali sounded genuinely interested.

“Chucked a heated can of lacoil over a good section. It’s wilting down fast in big patches.”

Rip snorted. “Good old lacoil. You drink it, you wash in it, and now you kill off the Hydro with it. Maybe we can give the company an extra testimonial for the official jabber and collect when we hit Terra. All right—Weeks,” he spoke to the little man, “you listen in on the com—it’s tuned to our helmet units. We’ll climb into these pipe suits and see how many tears we can wring out of the Eysies with our sad, sad tale.”

They got into the awkward, bulky suits and squeezed into the hatch while Weeks slammed the lock door at their backs and operated the outer opening.

Then they were looking out across the ground, still showing signs of the heat of their landing, and lighted by the dome beam.

“Nobody hurrying out with an aid and comfort kit,” Rip’s voice sounded in Dane’s earphones. “A little slack aren’t they?”

Slack—or was it that the Eysies had recognized the Queen and was preparing the sort of welcome the remnant of her crew could not withstand?

Dane, wanting very much in his heart to be elsewhere, climbed down the ladder in Rip’s wake, both of them spotlighted by the immovable beam from the Stat dome.

## 11. Desperate Measures

Measured in distance and time that rough walk in the ponderous suits across the broken terrain of the asteroid was a short one, measured by the beating of his own heart, Dane thought it much too long. There was no sign of life by the air lock of the bubble—no move on the part of the men stationed there to come to their assistance.

“D’you suppose we’re invisible?” Ali’s disembodied voice clicked in the helmet earphones.

“Maybe we’ll wish we were,” Dane could not forego that return.

Rip was almost to the air lock door now. His massively suited arm was outstretched toward the control bar when the com-unit in all three helmets caught the same demand:

“Identify!” The crisp order had enough snap to warn them that an answer was the best policy.

“Shannon—A-A of the Polestar,” Rip gave the required information. “We claim E rights—”

But would they get them? Dane wondered. There was a click loud in his ears. The metal door was yielding to Rip’s hand. At least those on the inside had taken off the lock. Dane quickened pace to join his leader.

Together the three from the Queen crowded through the lock door, saw that swing shut and seal behind them, as they stood waiting for the moment they could discard the suits and enter the dome. The odds against them could not be too high, this was a small Stat. It would not house more than four agents at the most. And they were familiar enough with the basic architecture of such stations to know just what move to make. Ali was to go to the com room where he could take over if they did meet with trouble. Dane and Rip would have to handle any dissenters in the main section. But they still hoped that luck might ride their fins and they could put over a story which would keep them out of active conflict with the Eysies.

The gauge on the wall registered safety and they unfastened the protective clasps of the suits. Standing the cumbersome things against the wall as the inner door to the lock rolled back, they walked into Eysie territory.

As Free Traders they had the advantage of being uniformly tunicked—with no Company badge to betray their ship or status. So that could well *be* the “Polestar” standing needle slim behind them—and not the notorious “Solar Queen.” But each, as he passed through the inner lock, gave a hitch to his belt which brought the butt of his sleep rod closer to hand. Innocuous as that weapon was, in close quarters its effects, if only temporary, was to some purpose. And since they were prepared for trouble, they might have a slight edge over the Eysies in attack.

A Company man, his tunic shabby and open in a negligent fashion at his thick throat, stood waiting for them. His unhelmeted head was grizzled, his coarse, tanned face with heavy jowls bristly enough to suggest he had not bothered to use smooth-cream for some days. An under officer of some spacer, retired to finish out the few years before pension in this nominal duty—fast letting down the standards of personal regime he had had to maintain on ship board. But he wasn’t all fat and soft living, the glance with which he measured them was shrewdly appraising.

“What’s your trouble?” he demanded without greeting. “You didn’t I-dent coming in.”

“Coms are out,” Rip replied as shortly. “We need E-Hydro—”

“First time I ever heard it that the coms were wired in with the grass,” the Eysies’s hands were on his hips—in close proximity to something which made Dane’s eyes narrow. The fellow was wearing a flare-blaster! That might be regulation equipment for an E-Stat agent on a lonely asteroid—but he didn’t quite believe it. And probably the other was quick on the draw too.

“The coms are something else,” Rip answered readily. “Our tech is working on them. But the hydro’s bad all though. We’ll have to dump and restock. Give you a voucher on Terra for the stuff.”

The Eysie agent continued to block the doorway into the station. “This is private—I-S property. You should hit the Patrol post—they cater to you F-Ts.”

“We hit the nearest E-Stat when we discovered that we were contaminated,” Rip spoke with an assumption of patience. “That’s the law, and you know it. You have to supply us and take a voucher—”

“How do I know that your voucher is worth the film it’s recorded on?” asked the agent reasonably.

“All right,” Rip shrugged. “If we have to do it the hard way, we’ll cargo dump to cover your bill.”

“Not on this field.” The other shook his head. “I’ll flash in your voucher first.”

He had them, Dane thought bitterly. Their luck had run out. Because what he was going to do was a move they dared not protest. It was one any canny agent would make in the present situation. And if they were what they said they were, they must readily agree to let him flash their voucher of payment to I-S headquarters, to be checked and okayed before they took the hydro stock.

But Rip merely registered a mild resignation. “You the Com-tech? Where’s your unit? I’ll indit at once if you want it that way.”

Whether their readiness to co-operate allayed some of the agent’s suspicion or not, he relaxed some, giving them one more stare all around before he turned on his heel. “This way.”

They followed him down the narrow hall, Rip on his heels, the others behind.

“Lonely post,” Rip commented. “I’d think you boys’d get space-whirly out here.”

The other snorted. “We’re not star lovers. And the pay’s worth a three month stretch. They take us down for Terra leave before we start talking to the Whisperers.”

“How many of you here at a time?” Rip edged the question in casually.

But the other might have been expecting it by the way he avoided giving a direct answer. “Enough to run the place—and not enough to help you clean out your wagon,” he was short about it. “Any dumping you do is strictly on your own. You’ve enough hands on a spacer that size to manage—”

Rip laughed. “Far be it from me to ask an Eysie to do any real work,” was his counter. “We know all about you Company men—”

But the agent did not take fire at that jib. Instead he pushed back a panel and they were looking into com-unit room where another man in the tunic of the I-S lounged on what was by law twenty-four hour duty, divided into three watches.

“These F-Ts want to flash a voucher request through,” their guide informed the tech. The other, interested, gave them a searching once-over before he pushed a small scribe toward Rip.

“It’s all yours—clear ether,” he reported.

Ali stood with his back to the wall and Dane still lingered in the portal. Both of them fixed their attention on Rip’s left hand. If he gave the agreed upon signal! Their fingers were linked loosely in their belts only an inch or so from their sleep rods. With his right hand Rip scooped up the scribbler while the Com-tech half turned to make adjustments to the controls, picking up a speaker to call the I-S headquarters. Rip’s left index finger snapped across his thumb to form a circle. Ali’s rod did not even leave his belt, it tilted up and the invisible deadening stream from it centered upon the seated tech. At the same instant Dane shot at the agent who had guided them there. The latter had time for a surprised grunt and his hand was at his blaster as he sagged to his knees and then relaxed on the floor. The Tech slumped across the call board as if sleep had overtaken him at his post.

Rip crossed the room and snapped off the switch which opened the wire for broadcasting. While Ali, with Dane’s help, quietly and effectively immobilized the Eysies with their own belts.

“There should be at least three men here,” Rip waited by the door. “We have to get them all under control before we start work.”

However, the interior of the bubble, extending as it did on levels beneath the outer crust of the asteroid, was not an easy place to search. An enemy, warned of the invasion, could easily keep ahead of the party from the Queen, spying on them at his leisure or preparing traps for them. In the end, afraid of wasting time, they contented themselves with locking the doors of the corridor leading to the lower levels, making ready to raid the storeroom they had discovered during their search. Emergency hydro supplies consisted mainly of algae which could be stored in tanks and hastily put to use—as the plants now in the Queen took much longer to grow even under forcing methods. Dane volunteered to remain inside the E-Stat and assemble the necessary containers at the air lock while the other two, having had more experience, went back to the spacer to strip the hydro and prepare to switch contents. But, when Rip and Ali left, the younger Cargo-apprentice began to find the bubble a haunted place. He took the sealed containers out of their storage racks, stood them on a small hand truck, and pushed them to the foot of the stairs, up which he then climbed carrying two of the cylinders at a time.

The swish of the air current through the narrow corridors made a constant murmur of sound, but he found himself listening for something else, for a footfall other than his own, for the betraying rasp of clothing against a wall—for even a whisper of voice. And time and time again he paused suddenly to listen—sure that the faintest hint of such a sound had reached his ears. He had a dozen containers lined up when the welcome signal reached him by the com-unit of his field helmet. To transfer the cylinders to the lock, get out, and then open the outer door, did not take long. But as he waited he still listened for a sound which did not come—the notice, that someone besides himself was free to move about the Stat.

Not knowing just how many of the supply tins were needed, he worked on transferring all there were in the storage racks to the upper corridor and the lock. But he still had half a dozen left to pass through when Rip sent a message that he was coming in. Out of his pressure suit, the Astrogator-apprentice stepped lightly into the corridor, looked at the array of containers and shook his head.

“We don’t need all those. No, leave them—” he added as Dane, with a sigh, started to pick up two for a return trip. “There’s something more important just now—” He turned into the side hall which led to the com room.

Both the I-S men had awakened. The Com-tech appeared to accept his bonds philosophically. He was quiet and flat on his back, staring pensively at the ceiling. But the other agent had made a worm’s progress half across the room and Rip had to halt in haste to prevent stepping on him. Shannon stooped and, hooking his fingers in the other’s tunic, heaved him back while the helpless man favored them with some of the ripest speech—and NOT Trade Lingo—Dane had ever heard. Rip waited until the man began to run down and then he broke in with his pleasant soft drawl.

“Oh, sure, we’re all that. But time runs on, Eysie, and I’d like a couple of answers which may mean something to you. First—when do you expect your relief?”

That set the agent off again. And his remarks—edited—were that no something, something F-T was going to get any something, something information out of him!

But it was his companion in misfortune—the Com-tech—who guessed the reason behind Rip’s question.

“Cut jets!” he advised the other. “They’re just being soft-hearted. I take it,” he spoke over the other agent’s sputtering to Rip, “that you’re worried about leaving us fin down—That’s it, isn’t it?”

Rip nodded. “In spite of what you think about us,” he replied, “We’re not Patrol Posted outlaws—”

“No, you’re just from a plague ship,” the Com-tech remarked calmly. And his words struck his comrade dumb. “Solar Queen?”

“You got the warn-off then?”

“Who didn’t? You really have plague on board?” The thought did not appear to alarm the Com-tech unduly. But his fellow suddenly heaved his bound body some distance away from the Free Traders and his face displayed mixed emotions—most of them fearful.

“We have something—probably supplied,” Rip straightened. “Might pass along to your bosses that we know that. Now suppose you tell me about your relief. When is it due?”

“Not until after we take off on the long orbit if you leave us like this. On the other hand,” the other added coolly, “I don’t see how you can do otherwise. We’ve still got those—” with his chin he pointed to the com-unit.

“After a few alterations,” Rip amended. The bulk of the com was in a tightly sealed case which they would need a flamer to open. But he could and did wreak havoc with the exposed portions. The tech watching this destruction spouted at least two expressions his companion had not used. But when Rip finished he was his unruffled self again.

“Now,” Rip drew his sleep rod. “A little rest and when you wake it will all be a bad dream.” He carefully beamed each man into slumber and helped Dane strip off their bonds. But before he left the room he placed on the recorder the voucher for the supplies they had taken. The Queen was not stealing—under the law she still had some shadow of rights. Suited they crossed the rough rock to the ship. And there about the fins, already frozen into brittle spikes was a tangle of plants—the rich result of years of collecting.

“Did you find anything?” Dane asked as they rounded that mess on their way to the ladder.



Rip's voice came back through the helmet com. "Nothing we know how to interpret. I wish Frank or Craig had had a chance to check. We took tri-dees of everything before we dumped. Maybe they can learn something from these when—"

His voice trailed off leaving that "when" to ring in both their minds. It was such an important "when." When *would* either the steward or the Medic recover enough to view those tri-dee shots? Or was that "when" really an ominous "if?"

Back in the Queen, sealed once more for blast-off, they took their stations. Dane speculated as to the course Rip had set—were they just going to wander about the system hoping to escape notice until they had somehow solved their problem? Or did Shannon have some definite port in mind? He did not have time to ask before they lifted. But once they were space borne again he voiced his question.

Rip's face was serious. "Frankly—" he began and then hesitated for a long moment before he added, "I don't know. If we can only get the Captain or Craig on their feet again—"

"One thing," Ali materialized to join them, "Sinbad's back in the hydro. And this morning you couldn't get him inside the door. It's not a very good piece of evidence—"

No, it wasn't but they clung to it as backing for their actions of the past few hours. The cat that had shown such a marked distaste for the company of the stricken, and then for the hydro, was now content to visit the latter as if some evil he has sensed there had been cleansed with the dumping of the garden. They had not yet solved their mystery but another clue had come into their hands. But now the care of the sick occupied hours and Rip insisted that a watch be maintained by the com—listening in for news which might concern the Queen. They had done a good job at silencing the E-Stat, for they had been almost six hours in space before the news of their raid was beamed to the nearest Patrol post.

Ali laughed. "Told you we'd be pirates," he said when he listened to that account of their descent upon the I-S station. "Though I didn't see all that blaster work they're now raving about. You'd think we fought a major battle there!"

Weeks growled. "The Eysies are trying to make it look good. Make us into outlaws—"

But Rip did not share in the general amusement at the wild extravagation of the report from the ether. "I notice they didn't say anything about the voucher we left."

Ali's cynical smile curled. "Did you expect them to? The Eysies think they have us by the tail fins now—why should they give us any benefit of the doubt? We junked all our boosters behind us on this take-off, and don't forget that, my friends."

Weeks looked confused. "But I thought you said we could do this legal," he appealed to Rip. "If we're Patrol Posted as outlaws—"

"They can't do any more to us than they can for running in a plague ship," Ali pointed out. "Either will get us blasted if we happen into the wrong vector now. So—what do we do?"

"We find out what the plague really is," Dane said and meant every word of it.

"How?" Ali inquired. "Through some of Craig's magic?"

Dane was forced to answer with the truth. "I don't know yet—but it's our only chance."

Rip rubbed his eyes wearily. "Don't think I'm disagreeing—but just where do we start? We've already combed Frank's quarters and Kosti's—we cleaned out the hydro—"

"Those tri-dee shots of the hydro—have you checked them yet?" Dane countered.

Without a word Ali arose and left the cabin. He came back with a microfilm roll. Fitting it into the large projector he focused it on the wall and snapped the button. They were looking at the hydro—down the length of space so accurately recorded that it seemed they might walk straight into it. The greenery of the plants was so vivid and alive Dane felt that he could reach out and pluck a leaf. Inch by inch he examined those ranks, looking for something which was not in order, had no right to be there. The long shot of the hydro as it had been merged into a series of sectional groupings. In silence they studied it intently, using all their field lore in an attempt to spot what each one was certain must be there somewhere. But they were all handicapped by their lack of intimate knowledge of the garden.

“Wait!” Weeks’ voice scaled up. “Left hand corner—there!” His pointing hand broke and shadowed the portion he was calling to their attention. Ali jumped to the projector and made a quick adjustment.

Plants four and five times life size glowed green on the wall. What Weeks had caught they all saw now—ragged leaves, stripped stems.

“Chewed!” Dane supplied the answer.

It was only one species of plant which had been so mangled. Other varieties in the same bank showed no signs of disturbance. But all of that one type had at least one stripped branch and two were virtual skeletons.

“A pest!” said Rip.

“But Sinbad,” Dane began a protest before the memory of the cat’s peculiar actions of the past weeks stopped him. Sinbad had slipped up, the hunter who had kept the Queen free of the outré alien life which came aboard from time to time with cargo, had not attacked that which had ravaged the hydro plants. Or if he had done so, he had not, after his usual custom, presented the bodies of the slain to any crew member.

“It looks as if we have something at last,” Ali observed and someone echoed that with a sigh of heartdeep relief.

## 12. Strange Behavior Of A Hoobat

“All right, so we think we know a little more,” Ali added a moment later. “Just what are we going to do? We can’t stay in space forever—there’re the small items of fuel and supplies and—”

Rip had come to a decision. “We’re not going to remain space borne,” he stated with the confidence of one who now saw an open road before him.

“Luna—” Weeks was plainly doubtful.

“No. Not after that warn-off. Terra!”

For a second or two the other three stared at Rip agape. The audacity and danger of what he suggested was a little stunning. Since men had taken regularly to space no ship had made a direct landing on their home planet—all had passed through the quarantine on Luna. It was not only risky—it was so unheard of that for some minutes they did not understand him.

“We try to set down at Terraport,” Dane found his tongue first, “and they flame us out—”

Rip was smiling. “The trouble with you,” he addressed them all, “is that you think of earth only in terms of Terraport—”

“Well, there *is* the Patrol field at Stella,” Weeks agreed doubtfully. “But we’d be right in the middle of trouble there—”

“Did we have a regular port on Sargol—on Limbo—on fifty others I can name out of our log?” Rip wanted to know.

Ali voiced a new objection. “So—we have the luck of Jones and we set down somewhere out of sight. Then what do we do?”

“We seal ship until we find the pest—then we bring in a Medic and get to the bottom of the whole thing,” Rip’s confidence was contagious. Dane almost believed that it *could* be done that way.

“Did you ever think,” Ali cut in, “what would happen if we were wrong—if the Queen really is a plague carrier?”

“I said—we seal the ship—tight,” countered Shannon. “And when we earth it’ll be where we won’t have visitors to infect—”

“And that is where?” Ali, who knew the deserts of Mars better than he did the greener planet from which his stock had sprung, pursued the question.

“Right in the middle of the Big Burn!”

Dane, Terra born and bred, realized first what Rip was planning and what it meant. Sealed off was right—the Queen would be amply protected from investigation. Whether her crew would survive was another matter—whether she could even make a landing there was also to be considered.

The Big Burn was the horrible scar left by the last of the Atomic Wars—a section of radiation poisoned land comprising hundreds of square miles—land which generations had never dared to penetrate. Originally the survivors of that war had shunned the whole continent which it disfigured. It had been close to two centuries before men had gone into the still wholesome land laying to the far west and the south. And through the years, the avoidance of the Big

Burn had become part of their racial instinct as they shrank from it. It was a symbol of something no Terran wanted to remember.

But Ali now had only one question to ask. “Can we do it?”

“We’ll never know until we try,” was Rip’s reply.

“The Patrol’ll be watching—” that was Weeks. With his Venusian background he had less respect for the dangers of the Big Burn than he did for the forces of Law and order which ranged the star lanes.

“They’ll be watching the route lanes,” Rip pointed out. “They won’t expect a ship to come in on that vector, steering away from the ports. Why should they? As far as I know it’s never been tried since Terraport was laid out. It’ll be tricky—” And he himself would have to bear most of the responsibility for it. “But I believe that it can be done. And we can’t just roam around out here. With I-S out for our blood and a Patrol warn-off it won’t do us any good to head for Luna—”

None of his listeners could argue with that. And, Dane’s spirits began to rise, after all they knew so little about the Big Burn—it might afford them just the temporary sanctuary they needed. In the end they agreed to try it, mainly because none of them could see any alternative, except the too dangerous one of trying to contact the authorities and being summarily treated as a plague ship before they could defend themselves.

And their decision was ably endorsed not long afterwards by a sardonic warning on the com—a warning which Ali who had been tending the machine passed along to them.

“Greetings, pirates—”

“What do you mean?” Dane was heating broth to feed to Captain Jellico.

“The word has gone out—our raid on the E-Stat is now a matter of history and Patrol record—we’ve been Posted!”

Dane felt a cold finger drawn along his backbone. Now they were fair game for the whole system. Any Patrol ship that wanted could shoot them down with no questions asked. Of course that had always been a possibility from the first after their raid on the E-Stat. But to realize that it was now true was a different matter altogether. This was one occasion when realization was worse than anticipation. He tried to keep his voice level as he answered:

“Let us hope we can pull off Rip’s plan—”

“We’d better. What about the Big Burn anyway, Thorson? Is it as tough as the stories say?”

“We don’t know what it’s like. It’s never been explored—or at least those who tried to explore its interior never reported in afterwards. As far as I know it’s left strictly alone.”

“Is it still all ‘hot’?”

“Parts of it must be. But all—we don’t know.”

With the bottle of soup in his hand Dane climbed to Jellico’s cabin. And he was so occupied with the problem at hand that at first he did not see what was happening in the small room. He had braced the Captain up into a half-sitting position and was patiently ladling the liquid into his mouth a spoonful at a time when a thin squeak drew his attention to the top of Jellico’s desk.

From the half open lid of a microtape compartment something long and dark projected, beating the air feebly. Dane, easing the Captain back on the bunk, was going to investigate when the Hoobat broke its unnatural quiet of the past few days with an ear-splitting screech

of fury. Dane struck at the bottom of its cage—the move its master always used to silence it—But this time the results were spectacular.

The cage bounced up and down on the spring which secured it to the ceiling of the cabin and the blue feathered horror slammed against the wires. Either its clawing had weakened them, or some fault had developed, for they parted and the Hoobat came through them to land with a sullen plop on the desk. Its screams stopped as suddenly as they had begun and it scuttled on its spider-toad legs to the microtape compartment, acting with purposeful dispatch and paying no attention to Dane.

Its claws shot out and with ease it extracted from the compartment a creature as weird as itself—one which came fighting and of which Dane could not get a very clear idea. Struggling they battled across the surface of the desk and flopped to the floor. There the hunted broke loose from the hunter and fled with fantastic speed into the corridor. And before Dane could move the Hoobat was after it.

He gained the passage just in time to see Queex disappear down the ladder, clinging with the aid of its pincher claws, apparently grimly determined to catch up with the thing it pursued. And Dane went after them.

There was no sign of the creature who fled on the next level. But Dane made no move to recapture the blue hunter who squatted at the foot of the ladder staring unblinkingly into space. Dane waited, afraid to disturb the Hoobat. He had not had a good look at the thing which had run from Queex—but he knew it was something which had no business aboard the Queen. And it might be the disturbing factor they were searching for. If the Hoobat would only lead him to it—

The Hoobat moved, rearing up on the tips of its six legs, its neckless head slowly revolving on its puffy shoulders. Along the ridge of its backbone its blue feathers were rising into a crest much as Sinbad's fur rose when the cat was afraid or angry. Then, without any sign of haste, it crawled over and began descending the ladder once more, heading toward the lower section which housed the Hydro.

Dane remained where he was until it had almost reached the deck of the next level and then he followed, one step at a time. He was sure that the Hoobat's peculiar construction of body prevented it from looking up—unless it turned upon its back—but he did not want to do anything which would alarm it or deter Queex from what he was sure was a methodical chase.

Queex stopped again at the foot of the second descent and sat in its toad stance, apparently brooding, a round blue blot. Dane clung to the ladder and prayed that no one would happen along to frighten it. Then, just as he was beginning to wonder if it had lost contact with its prey, once more it arose and with the same speed it had displayed in the Captain's cabin it shot along the corridor to the hydro.

To Dane's knowledge the door of the garden was not only shut but sealed. And how either the stranger or Queex could get through it he did not see.

“What the—?” Ali clattered down the ladder to halt abruptly as Dane waved at him.

“Queex,” the Cargo-apprentice kept his voice to a half whisper, “it got loose and chased something out of the Old Man's cabin down here.”

“Queex—!” Ali began and then shut his mouth, moving noiselessly up to join Dane.

The short corridor ended at the hydro entrance. And Dane had been right, there they found the Hoobat, crouched at the closed panel, its claws clicking against the metal as it picked away useless at the portal which would not admit it.

“Whatever it’s after must be in there,” Dane said softly.

And the hydro, stripped of its luxuriance of plant life, occupied now by the tanks of green scum, would not afford too many hiding places. They had only to let Queex in and keep watch.

As they came up the Hoobat flattened to the floor and shrilled its war cry, spitting at their boots and then flashing claws against the stout metal enforced hide. However, though it was prepared to fight them, it showed no signs of wishing to retreat, and for that Dane was thankful. He quickly pressed the release and tugged open the panel.

At the first crack of its opening Queex turned with one of those bursts of astounding speed and clawed for admittance, its protest against the men forgotten. And it squeezed through a space Dane would have thought too narrow to accommodate its bloated body. Both men slipped around the door behind it and closed the panel tight.

The air was not as fresh as it had been when the plants were there. And the vats which had taken the places of the banked greenery were certainly nothing to look at. Queex humped itself into a clod of blue, immovable, halfway down the aisle.

Dane tried to subdue his breathing, to listen. The Hoobat’s actions certainly argued that the alien thing had taken refuge here, though how it had gotten through—? But if it were in the hydro it was well hidden.

He had just begun to wonder how long they must wait when Queex again went into action. Its clawed front legs upraised, it brought the pinchers deliberately together and sawed one across the other, producing a rasping sound which was almost a vibration in the air. Back and forth, back and forth, moved the claws. Watching them produced almost a hypnotic effect, and the reason for such a maneuver was totally beyond the human watchers.

But Queex knew what it was doing all right, Ali’s fingers closed on Dane’s arm in a pincher grip as painful as if he had been equipped with the horny armament of the Hoobat.

Something, a flitting shadow, had rounded one vat and was that much closer to the industrious fiddler on the floor. By some weird magic of its own the Hoobat was calling its prey to it.

Scrape, scrape—the unmusical performance continued with monotonous regularity. Again the shadow flashed—one vat closer. The Hoobat now presented the appearance of one charmed by its own art—sunk in a lethargy of weird music making.

At last the enchanted came into full view, though lingering at the round side of a container, very apparently longing to flee again, but under some compulsion to approach its enchanter. Dane blinked, not quite sure that his eyes were not playing tricks on him. He had seen the almost transparent globe “bogies” of Limbo, had been fascinated by the weird and ugly pictures in Captain Jellico’s collection of tri-dee prints. But this creature was as impossible in its way as the horrific blue thing dragging it out of concealment.

It walked erect on two threads of legs, with four knobby joints easily detected. A bulging abdomen sheathed in the horny substance of a beetle’s shell ended in a sharp point. Two pairs of small legs, folded close to the much smaller upper portion of its body, were equipped with thorn shack terminations. The head, which constantly turned back and forth on the armor plated shoulders, was long and narrow and split for half its length by a mouth above which

were deep pits which must harbor eyes, though actual organs were not visible to the watching men. It was a palish gray in color—which surprised Dane a little. His memory of the few seconds he had seen it on the Captain’s desk had suggested that it was much darker. And erect as it was, it stood about eighteen inches high.

With head turning rapidly, it still hesitated by the side of the vat, so nearly the color of the metal that unless it moved it was difficult to distinguish. As far as Dane could see the Hoobat was paying it no attention. Queex might be lost in a happy dream, the result of its own fiddling. Nor did the rhythm of that scraping vary.

The nightmare thing made the last foot in a rush of speed which reduced it to a blur, coming to a halt before the Hoobat. Its front legs whipped out to strike at its enemy. But Queex was no longer dreaming. This was the moment the Hoobat had been awaiting. One of the sawing claws opened and closed, separating the head of the lurker from its body. And before either of the men could interfere Queex had dismembered the prey with dispatch.

“Look there!” Dane pointed.

The Hoobat held close the body of the stranger and where the ashy corpse came into contact with Queex’s blue feathered skin it was slowly changing hue—as if some of the color of its hunter had rubbed off it.

“Chameleon!” Ali went down on one knee the better to view the grisly feast now in progress. “Watch out!” he added sharply as Dane came to join him.

One of the thin upper limbs lay where Queex had discarded it. And from the needle tip was oozing some colorless drops of fluid. Poison?

Dane looked around for something which he could use to pick up the still jerking appendage. But before he could find anything Queex had appropriated it. And in the end they had to allow the Hoobat its victim in its entirety. But once Queex had consumed its prey it lapsed into its usual hunched immobility. Dane went for the cage and working gingerly he and Ali got the creature back in captivity. But all the evidence now left were some smears on the floor of the hydro, smears which Ali blotted up for future research in the lab.

An hour later the four who now comprised the crew of the Queen gathered in the mess for a conference. Queex was in its cage on the table before them, asleep after all its untoward activity.

“There must be more than just one,” Weeks said. “But how are we going to hunt them down? With Sinbad?”

Dane shook his head. Once the Hoobat had been caged and the more prominent evidence of the battle scraped from the floor, he had brought the cat into the hydro and forced him to sniff at the site of the engagement. The result was that Sinbad had gone raving mad and Dane’s hands were now covered with claw tears which ran viciously deep. It was plain that the ship’s cat was having none of the intruders, alive or dead. He had fled to Dane’s cabin where he had taken refuge on the bunk and snarled wild eyed when anyone looked in from the corridor.

“Queex has to do it,” Rip said. “But will it hunt unless it is hungry?”

He surveyed the now comatose creature skeptically. They had never seen the Captain’s pet eat anything except some pellets which Jellico kept in his desk, and they were aware that the intervals between such feedings were quite lengthy. If they had to wait the usual time for Queex to feel hunger pangs once more, they might have to wait a long time.

“We should catch one alive,” Ali remarked thoughtfully. “If we could get Queex to fiddle it out to where we could net it—”

Weeks nodded eagerly. “A small net like those the Salariki use. Drop it over the thing—”

While Queex still drowsed in its cage, Weeks went to work with fine cord. Holding the color changing abilities of the enemy in mind they could not tell how many of the creatures might be roaming the ship. It could only be proved where they weren't by where Sinbad would consent to stay. So they made plans which included both the cat and the Hoobat.

Sinbad, much against his will, was buckled into an improvised harness by which he could be controlled without the handler losing too much valuable skin.

And then the hunt started at the top of the ship, proceeding downward section by section. Sinbad raised no protest in the control cabin, nor in the private cabins of the officers' thereabouts. If they could interpret his reactions the center section was free of the invaders. So with Dane in control of the cat and Ali carrying the caged Hoobat, they descended once more to the level which housed the hydro galley, steward's quarters and ship's sick bay.

Sinbad proceeded on his own four feet into the galley and the mess. He was not uneasy in the sick bay, nor in Mura's cabin, and this time he even paced the hydro without being dragged—much to their surprise as they had thought that the headquarters of the stowaways.

“Could there only have been one?” Weeks wanted to know as he stood by ready with the net in his hands.

“Either that—or else we're wrong about the hydro being their main hideout. If they're afraid of Queex now they may have withdrawn to the place they feel the safest,” Rip said.

It was when they were on the ladder leading to the cargo level that Sinbad balked. He planted himself firmly and yowled against further progress until Dane, with the harness, pulled him along.

“Look at Queex!”

They followed Weeks' order. The Hoobat was no longer lethargic. It was raising itself, leaning forward to clasp the bars of its cage, and now it uttered one of its screams of rage. And as Ali went on down the ladder it rattled the bars in a determined effort for freedom. Sinbad, spitting and yowling refused to walk. Rip nodded to Ali.

“Let it out.”

Tipped out of its cage the Hoobat scuttled forward, straight for the panel which opened on the large cargo space and there waited, as if for them to open the portal and admit the hunter to its hunting territory.



## 13. Off The Map

Across the lock of the panel was the seal set in place by Van Rycke before the spacer had lifted from Sargol. Under Dane's inspection it showed no crack. To all evidence the hatch had not been opened since they left the perfumed planet. And yet the hunting Hoobat was sure that the invading pests were within.

It took only a second for Dane to commit an act which, if he could not defend it later, would blacklist him out of space. He twisted off the official seal which should remain there while the freighter was space borne.

With Ali's help he shouldered aside the heavy sliding panel and they looked into the cargo space, now filled with the red wood from Sargol. The redwood! When he saw it Dane was struck with their stupidity. Aside from the Koros stones in the stone box, only the wood had come from the Salariki world. What if the pests had not been planted by I-S agents, but were natives of Sargol being brought in with the wood?

The men remained at the hatch to allow the Hoobat freedom in its hunt. And Sinbad crouched behind them, snarling and giving voice to a rumbling growl which was his negative opinion of the proceedings.

They were conscious of an odor—the sharp, unidentifiable scent Dane had noticed during the loading of the wood. It was not unpleasant—merely different. And it—or something—had an electrifying effect upon Queex. The blue hunter climbed with the aid of its claws to the top of the nearest pile of wood and there settled down. For a space it was apparently contemplating the area about it.

Then it raised its claws and began the scraping fiddle which once before had drawn its prey out of hiding. Oddly enough that dry rasp of sound had a quieting effect upon Sinbad and Dane felt the drag of the harness lessen as the cat moved, not toward escape, but to the scene of action, humping himself at last in the open panel, his round eyes fixed upon the Hoobat with a fascinated stare.

Scrape-scrape—the monotonous noise bit into the ears of the men, gnawed at their nerves.

“Ahhh—” Ali kept his voice to a whisper, but his hand jerked to draw their attention to the right at deck level. Dane saw that flicker along a log. The stowaway pest was now the same brilliant color as the wood, indistinguishable until it moved, which probably explained how it had come on board.

But that was only the first arrival. A second flash of movement and a third followed. Then the hunted remained stationary, able to resist for a period the insidious summoning of Queex. The Hoobat maintained an attitude of indifference, of being so wrapped in its music that nothing else existed. Rip whispered to Weeks:

“There's one to the left—on the very end of that log. Can you net it?”

The small oiler slipped the coiled mesh through his calloused hands. He edged around Ali, keeping his eyes on the protruding bump of red upon red which was his quarry.

“—two—three—four—five—” Ali was counting under his breath but Dane could not see that many. He was sure of only four, and those because he had seen them move.

The things were ringing in the pile of wood where the Hoobat fiddled, and two had ascended the first logs toward their doom. Weeks went down on one knee, ready to cast his net, when

Dane had his first inspiration. He drew his sleep rod, easing it out of its holster, set the lever on “spray” and beamed it at three of those humps.

Rip seeing what he was doing, dropped a hand on Weeks’ shoulder, holding the oiler in check. A hump moved, slid down the rounded side of the log into the narrow aisle of deck between two piles of wood. It lay quiet, a bright scarlet blot against the gray.

Then Weeks did move, throwing his net over it and jerking the draw string tight, at the same time pulling the captive toward him over the deck. But, even as it came, the scarlet of the thing’s body was fast fading to an ashy pink and at last taking on a gray as dull as the metal on which it lay—the complete camouflage. Had they not had it enmeshed they might have lost it altogether, so well did it now blend with the surface.

The other two in the path of the ray had not lost their grip upon the logs, and the men could not advance to scoop them up. Not while there were others not affected, free to flee back into hiding. Weeks bound the net about the captive and looked to Rip for orders.

“Deep freeze,” the acting-commander of the Queen said succinctly. “Let me see it get out of that!”

Surely the cold of the deep freeze, united to the sleep ray, would keep the creature under control until they had a chance to study it. But, as Weeks passed Sinbad on his errand, the cat was so frantic to avoid him, that he reared up on his hind legs, almost turning a somersault, snarling and spitting until Weeks was up the ladder to the next level. It was very evident that the ship’s cat was having none of this pest.

They might have been invisible and their actions non-existent as far as Queex was concerned. For the Hoobat continued its siren concert. The lured became more reckless, mounting the logs to Queex’s post in sudden darts. Dane wondered how the Hoobat proposed handling four of the creatures at once. For, although the other two which had been in the path of the ray had not moved, he now counted four climbing.

“Stand by to ray—” that was Rip.

But it would have been interesting to see how Queex was prepared to handle the four. And, though Rip had given the order to stand by, he had not ordered the ray to be used. Was he, too, interested in that?

The first red projection was within a foot of the Hoobat now and its fellows had frozen as if to allow it the honor of battle with the feathered enemy. To all appearances Queex did not see it, but when it sprang with a whirl of speed which would baffle a human, the Hoobat was ready and its claws, halting their rasp, met around the wasp-thin waist of the pest, speedily cutting it in two. Only this time the Hoobat made no move to unjoint and consume the victim. Instead it squatted in utter silence, as motionless as a tri-dee print.

The heavy lower half of the creature rolled down the pile of logs to the deck and there paled to the gray of its background. None of its kind appeared to be interested in its fate. The two which had been in the path of the ray, continued to be humps on the wood, the others faced the Hoobat.

But Rip was ready to waste no more time. “Ray them!” he snapped.

All three of their sleep rods sprayed the pile, catching in passing the Hoobat. Queex’s pop eyes closed, but it showed no other sign of falling under the spell of the beam.

Certain that all the creatures in sight were now relatively harmless, the three approached the logs. But it was necessary to get into touching distance before they could even make out the

outlines of the nightmare things, so well did their protective coloring conceal them. Wearing gloves Ali detached the little monsters from their holds on the wood and put them for temporary safekeeping—during a transfer to the deep freeze—into the Hoobat’s cage. Queex, they decided to leave where it was for a space, to awaken and trap any survivor which had been too wary to emerge at the first siren song. As far as they could tell the Hoobat was their only possible protection against the pest and to leave it in the center of infection was the wisest course.

Having dumped the now metal colored catch into the freeze, they held a conference.

“No plague—” Weeks breathed a sigh of relief.

“No proof of that yet,” Ali caught him up short. “We have to prove it past any reasonable doubt.”

“And how are we going to do—?” Dane began when he saw what the other had brought in from Tau’s stores. A lancet and the upper half of the creature Queex had killed in the cargo hold.

The needle pointed front feet of the thing were curled up in its death throes and it was now a dirty white shade as if the ability to change color had been lost before it matched the cotton on which it lay. With the lancet Ali forced a claw away from the body. It was oozing the watery liquid which they had seen on the one in the hydro.

“I have an idea,” he said slowly, his eyes on the mangled creature rather than on his shipmates, “that we might have escaped being attacked because they sheered off from us. But if we were clawed we might take it too. Remember those marks on the throats and backs of the rest? That might be the entry point of this poison—if poison it is—”

Dane could see the end of that line of reasoning. Rip and Ali—they couldn’t be spared. The knowledge they had would bring the Queen to earth. But a Cargo-master was excess baggage when there was no reason for trade. It was his place to try out the truth of Ali’s surmise.

But while he thought another acted. Weeks leaned over and twitched the lancet out of Ali’s fingers. Then, before any of them could move, he thrust its contaminated point into the back of his hand.

“Don’t!”

Both Dane’s cry and Rip’s hand came too late. It had been done. And Weeks sat there, looking alone and frightened, studying the drop of blood which marked the dig of the surgeon’s keen knife. But when he spoke his voice sounded perfectly natural.

“Headache first, isn’t it?”

Only Ali was outwardly unaffected by what the little man had just done. “Just be sure you have a real one,” he warned with what Dane privately considered real callousness.

Weeks nodded. “Don’t let my imagination work,” he answered shrewdly. “I know. It has to be real. How long do you suppose?”

“We don’t know,” Rip sounded tired, beaten. “Meanwhile,” he got to his feet, “we’d better set a course home—”

“Home,” Weeks repeated. To him Terra was not his own home—he had been born in the polar swamps of Venus. But to All Solarians—no matter which planet had nurtured them—Terra was home.

“You,” Rip’s big hand fell gently on the little oiler’s shoulder, “stay here with Thorson—”

“No,” Weeks shook his head. “Unless I black out, I’m riding station in the engine room. Maybe the bug won’t work on me anyway.”

And because he had done what he had done they could not deny him the right to ride his station as long as he could during the grueling hours to come.

Dane visited the cargo hold once more. To be greeted by an irate scream which assured him that Queex was again awake and on guard. Although the Hoobat was ready enough to give tongue, it still squatted in its chosen position on top of the log stack and he did not try to dislodge it. Perhaps with Queex planted in the enemies’ territory they would have nothing to fear from any pests not now confined in the deep freeze.

Rip set his course for Terra—for that plague spot on their native world where they might hide out the Queen until they could prove their point—that the spacer was not a disease ridden ship to be feared. He kept to the control cabin, shifting only between the Astrogator’s and the pilot’s station. Upon him alone rested the responsibility of bringing in the ship along a vector which crossed no well traveled space lane where the Patrol might challenge them. Dane rode out the orbiting in the Com-tech’s seat, listening in for the first warning of danger—that they had been detected.

The mechanical repetition of their list of crimes was now stale news and largely off-ether. And from all traces he could pick up, they were lost as far as the authorities were concerned. On the other hand, the Patrol might indeed be as far knowing as its propaganda stated and the Queen was running headlong into a trap. Only they had no choice in the matter.

It was the ship’s inter-com bringing Ali’s voice from the engine room which broke the concentration in the control cabin.

“Weeks’ down!”

Rip barked into the mike. “How bad?”

“He hasn’t blacked out yet. The pains in his head are pretty bad and his hand is swelling—”

“He’s given us our proof. Tell him to report off—”

But the disembodied voice which answered that was Weeks’.

“I haven’t got it as bad as the others. I’ll ride this out.”

Rip shook his head. But short-handed as they were he could not argue Weeks away from his post if the man insisted upon staying. He had other, and for the time being, more important matters before him.

How long they sweated out that descent upon their native world Dane could never afterwards have testified. He only knew that hours must have passed, until he thought groggily that he could not remember a time he was not glued in the seat which had been Tang’s, the earphones pressing against his sweating skull, his fatigue-drugged mind being held with difficulty to the duty at hand.

Sometime during that haze they made their landing. He had a dim memory of Rip sprawled across the pilot’s control board and then utter exhaustion claimed him also and the darkness closed in. When he roused it was to look about a cabin tilted to one side. Rip was still slumped in a muscle cramping posture, breathing heavily. Dane bit out a forceful word born of twinges of his own, and then snapped on the visa-plate.

For a long moment he was sure that he was not yet awake. And then, as his dazed mind supplied names for what he saw, he knew that Rip had failed. Far from being in the center—or at least well within the perimeter of the dread Big Burn—they must have landed in some

civic park or national forest. For the massed green outside, the bright flowers, the bird he sighted as a brilliant flash of wind coasting color—those were not to be found in the twisted horror left by man’s last attempt to impress his will upon his resisting kind.

Well, it had been a good try, but there was no use expecting luck to ride their fins all the way, and they had had more than their share in the E-Stat affair. How long would it be before the Law arrived to collect them? Would they have time to state their case?

The faint hope that they might aroused him. He reached for the com key and a second later tore the headphones from his appalled ears. The crackle of static he knew—and the numerous strange noises which broke in upon the lanes of communication in space—but this solid, paralyzing roar was something totally new—new, and frightening.

And because it was new and he could not account for it, he turned back to regard the scene on the viewer with a more critical eye. The foliage which grew in riotous profusion was green right enough, and Terra green into the bargain—there was no mistaking that. But—Dane caught at the edge of Com-unit for support. But—What was that liver-red blossom which had just reached out to engulf a small flying thing?

Feverishly he tried to remember the little natural history he knew. Sure that what he had just witnessed was unnatural—un-Terran—and to be suspect!

He started the spy lens on its slow revolution in the Queen’s nose, to get a full picture of their immediate surroundings. It was tilted at an angle—apparently they had not made a fin-point landing this time—and sometimes it merely reflected slices of sky. But when it swept earthward he saw enough to make him believe that wherever the spacer had set down it was not on the Terra he knew.

Subconsciously he had expected the Big Burn to be barren land—curdled rock with rivers of frozen quartz, substances boiled up through the crust of the planet by the action of the atomic explosives. That was the way it had been on Limbo—on the other “burned-off” worlds they had discovered where those who had preceded mankind into the Galaxy—the mysterious, long vanished “Forerunners”—had fought their grim and totally annihilating wars.

But it would seem that the Big Burn was altogether different—at least here it was. There was no rock sterile of life outside—in fact there would appear to be too much life. What Dane could sight on his limited field of vision was a teeming jungle. And the thrill of that discovery almost made him forget their present circumstances. He was still staring bemused at the screen when Rip muttered, turned his head on his folded arms and opened his sunken eyes:

“Did we make it?” he asked dully.

Dane, not taking his eyes from that fascinating scene without, answered: “You brought us down. But I don’t know where—”

“Unless our instruments were ‘way off, we’re near to the heart of the Burn.”

“Some heart!”

“What does it look like?” Rip sounded too tired to cross the cabin and see for himself.

“Barren as Limbo?”

“Hardly! Rip, did you ever see a tomato as big as a melon—At least it looks like a tomato,” Dane halted the spy lens as it focused upon this new phenomena.

“A what?” There was a note of concern in Shannon’s voice. “What’s the matter with you, Dane?”

“Come and see,” Dane willingly yielded his place to Rip but he did not step out of range of the screen. Surely that did have the likeness to a good, old fashioned earth-side tomato—but it was melon size and it hung from a bush which was close to a ten foot tree!

Rip stumbled across to drop into the Com-tech’s place. But his expression of worry changed to one of simple astonishment as he saw that picture.

“Where are we?”

“You name it,” Dane had had longer to adjust, the excitement of an explorer sighting virgin territory worked in his veins, banishing fatigue. “It must be the Big Burn!”

“But,” Rip shook his head slowly as if with that gesture to deny the evidence before his eyes, “that country’s all bare rock. I’ve seen pictures—”

“Of the outer rim,” Dane corrected, having already solved that problem for himself. “This must be farther in than any survey ship ever came. Great Spirit of Outer Space, what has happened here?”

Rip had enough technical training to know how to get part of the answer. He leaned halfway across the com, and was able to flick down a lever with the very tip of his longest finger. Instantly the cabin was filled with a clicking so loud as to make an almost continuous drone of sound.

Dane knew that danger signal, he didn’t need Rip’s words to underline it for him.

“That’s what’s happened. This country is pile ‘hot’ out there!”

## 14. Special Mission

That click, the dial beneath the counter, warned them that they were as cut off from the luxuriance outside as if they were viewing a scene on Mars or Sargol from their present position. To go beyond the shielding walls of the spacer into that riotous green world would sentence them to death as surely as if the Patrol was without, with a flamer trained on their hatch. There was no escape from that radiation—it would be in the air one breathed, strike though one's skin. And yet the wilderness flourished and beckoned.

“Mutations—” Rip mused. “Space, Tau'd go wild if he could see it!”

And that mention of the Medic brought them back to the problem which had earthed them. Dane leaned back against the slanting wall of the cabin.

“We have to have a Medic—”

Rip nodded without looking away from the screen.

“Can one of the flitters be shielded?” The Cargo-apprentice persisted.

“That's a thought! Ali should know—” Rip reached for the inter-com mike. “Engines!”

“So you *are* alive?” Ali's voice had a bite in it. “About time you're contacting. Where are we? Besides being lopsided from a recruit's scrambled set-down, I mean.”

“In the Big Burn. Come top-side. Wait—how's Weeks?”

“He has a devil's own headache, but he hasn't blacked out yet. Looks like his immunity holds in part. I've sent him bunkside for a while with a couple of pain pills. So we've made it—”

He must have left to join them for when Rip answered: “After a fashion,” into the mike there was no reply.

And the clang of his boot plates on the ladder heralded his arrival at their post. There was an interval for him to view the outer world and accept the verdict of the counter and then Rip voiced Dane's question:

“Can we shield one of the flitters well enough to cross that? I can't take the Queen up and earth her again—”

“I know you can't!” the acting-engineer cut in. “Maybe you could get her off world, but you'll come close to blasting out when you try for another landing. Fuel doesn't go on forever—though some of you space jockeys seem to think it does. The flitter? Well, we've some spare rocket linings. But it's going to be a job and a half to get those beaten out and reassembled. And, frankly, the space whirly one who flies her had better be suited and praying loudly when he takes off. We can always try—” He was frowning, already busied with the problem which was one for his department.

So with intervals of snatched sleep, hurried meals and the time which must be given to tending their unconscious charges, Rip and Dane became only hands to be directed by Ali's brain and garnered knowledge. Weeks slept off the worst of his pain and, though he complained of weakness, he tottered back on duty to help.

The flitter—an air sled intended to hold three men and supplies for exploring trips on strange-worlds—was first stripped of all non-essentials until what remained was not much more than the pilot's seat and the motor. Then they labored to build up a shielding of the tough radiation dulling alloy which was used to line rocket tubes. And they could only praise the foresight of

Stotz who carried such a full supply of spare parts and tools. It was a task over which they often despaired, and Ali improvised frantically, performing weird adjustments of engineering structure. He was still unsatisfied when they had done.

“She’ll fly,” he admitted. “And she’s the best we can do. But it’ll depend a lot on how far she has to go over ‘hot’ country. Which way do we head her?”

Rip had been busy with a map of Terra—a small thing he had discovered in one of the travel recordings carried for crew entertainment.

“The Big Burn covers three quarters of this continent. There’s no use going north—the devastated area extends into the arctic regions. I’d say west—there’s some fringe settlements on the sea coast and we need to contact a frontier territory. Now do we have it straight—? I take the flitter, get a Medic and bring him back?”

Dane cut in at that point. “Correct course! You stay here. If the Queen has to lift, you’re the only one who can take her off world. And the same’s true for Ali. I can’t ride out a blast-off in either the pilot’s or the engineer’s seat. And Weeks is on the sick list. So I’m elected to do the Medic hunting—”

They were forced to agree to that. He was no hero, Dane thought, as he gave a last glance about his cabin early the next morning. The small cubby, utilitarian and bare as it was, never looked more inviting or secure. No, no hero, it was merely a matter of common sense. And although his imagination—that deeply hidden imagination with which few of his fellows credited him—shrank from the ordeal ahead, he had not the slightest intention of allowing that to deter him.

The space suit, which had been bulky and clumsy enough on the E-Stat asteroid under limited gravity, was almost twice as poorly adapted to progression on earth. But he climbed into it with Rip’s aid, while Ali lashed a second suit under the seat—ready to encase the man Dane must bring back with him. Before he closed the helmet, Rip had one last order to give, along with an unexpected piece of equipment. And, when Dane saw that, he knew just how desperate Shannon considered their situation to be. For only on life or death terms would the Astrogator-apprentice have used Jellico’s private key, opened the forbidden arms cabinet, and withdrawn that blaster.

“If you need it—use this—” Rip’s face was very sober.

Ali arose from fastening the extra suit in place. “It’s ready—”

He came back into the corridor and Dane clanked out in his place, settling himself behind the controls. When they saw him there, the inner hatch closed and he was alone in the bay.

With tantalizing slowness the outer wall of the spacer slid back. His hands blundering with the metallic claws of the gloves, Dane buckled two safety belts about him. Then the skeleton flitter moved to the left—out into the glare of the early day, a light too bright, even through the shielded viewplates of his helmet.

For some dangerous moments the machine creaked out and down on the landing cranes, the warning counter on its control panel going into a mad whirl of color as it tried to record the radiation. There came a jar as it touched the scorched earth at the foot of the Queen’s fins.

Dane pressed the release and watched the lines whip up and the hatch above snap shut. Then he opened the controls. He used too much energy and shot into the air, tearing a wide gap through what was luckily a thin screen of the matted foliage, before he gained complete mastery.



Then he was able to level out and bore westward, the rising sun at his back, the sea of deadly green beneath him, and somewhere far ahead the faint promise of clean, radiation free land holding the help they needed.

Mile after mile of the green jungle swept under the flitter, and the flash of the counter's light continued to record a land unfit for mankind. Even with the equipment used on distant worlds to protect what spacemen had come to recognize was a reasonably tough human frame, no ground force could hope to explore that wilderness in person. And flying above it, as well insulated as he was, Dane knew that he could be dangerously exposed. If the contaminated territory extended more than a thousand miles, his danger was no longer problematical—it was an established fact.

He had only the vague directions from the scrap of map Rip had uncovered. To the west—he had no idea how far away—there stretched a length of coastline, far enough from the radiation blasted area to allow small settlements. For generations the population of Terra, decimated by the atomic wars, and then drained by first system and then Galactic exploration and colonization, had been decreasing. But within the past hundred years it was again on the upswing. Men retiring from space were returning to their native planet to live out their remaining years. The descendants of far-flung colonists, coming home on visits, found the sparsely populated mother world appealed to some basic instinct so that they remained. And now the settlements of mankind were on the march, spreading out from the well established sections which had not been blighted by ancient wars.

It was mid-afternoon when Dane noted that the green carpet beneath the flitter was displaying holes—that small breaks in the vegetation became sizable stretches of rocky waste. He kept one eye on the counter and what, when he left the spacer, had been an almost steady beam of warning light was now a well defined succession of blinks. The land below was cooling off—perhaps he had passed the worst of the journey. But in that passing how much had he and the flitter become contaminated? Ali had devised a method of protection for the empty suit the Medic would wear—had that held? There were an alarming number of dark ifs in the immediate future.

The mutant growths were now only thin patches of stunted and yellowish green. Had man penetrated only this far into the Burn, the knowledge of what lay beyond would be totally false. This effect of dreary waste might well discourage exploration.

Now the blink of the counter was deliberate, with whole seconds of pause between the flashes. Cooling off—? It was getting cold fast! He wished that he had a com-unit. Because of the interference in the Burn he had left it behind—but with one he might be able now to locate some settlement. All that remained was to find the seashore and, with it as a guide, flit south towards the center of modern civilization.

He laid no plans of action—this whole exploit must depend upon improvisation. And, as a Free Trader, spur-of-the-moment action was a necessary way of life. On the frontier Rim of the Galaxy, where the independent spacers traced the star trails, fast thinking and the ability to change plans on an instant were as important as skill in aiming a blaster. And it was very often proven that the tongue—and the brain behind it—were more deadly than a flamer.

The sun was in Dane's face now and he caught sight of patches of uncontaminated earth with honest vegetation—in place of the "hot" jungle now miles behind. That night he camped out on the edge of rough pasturage where the counter no longer flashed its warning and he was able to shed the suit and sleep under the stars with the fresh air of early summer against his cheek and the smell of honest growing things replacing the dry scent of the spacer and the languorous perfumes of Sargol.

He lay on his back, flat against the earth of which he was truly a part, staring up into the dark, inverted bowl of the heavens. It was so hard to connect those distant points of icy light making the well remembered patterns overhead with the suns whose rays had added to the brown stain on his skin. Sargol's sun—the one which gave such limited light to dead Limbo—the sun under which Naxos, his first Galactic port, grew its food. He could not pick them out—was not even sure that any could be sighted from Terra. Strange suns, red, orange, blue green, white—yet here all looked alike—points of glitter.

Tomorrow at dawn he must go on. He turned his head away from the sky and grass, green Terran grass, was soft beneath his cheek. Yet unless he was successful tomorrow or the next day—he might never have the right to feel that grass again. Resolutely Dane willed that thought out of his mind, tried to fix upon something more lulling which would bring with it the sleep he must have before he went on. And in the end he did sleep, deeply, dreamlessly, as if the touch of Terra's soil was in itself the sedative his tautly strung nerves needed.

It was before sunrise that he awoke, stiff, and chilled. The dryness of pre-dawn gave partial light and somewhere a bird was twittering. There had been birds—or things whose far off ancestors had been birds—in the “hot” forest. Did they also sing to greet the dawn?

Dane went over the flitter with his small counter and was relieved to find that they had done a good job of shielding under Ali's supervision. Once the suit he had worn was stored, he could sit at the controls without danger and in comfort. And it was good to be free of that metal prison.

This time he took to the air with ease, the salt taste of food concentrate on his tongue as he sucked a cube. And his confidence arose with the flitter. This was the day, somehow he knew it. He was going to find what he sought.

It was less than two hours after sunrise that he did so. A village which was a cluster of perhaps fifty or so house units strung along into the land. He skimmed across it and brought the flitter down in a rock cliff walled sand pocket with surf booming some yards away, where he would be reasonably sure of safe hiding.

All right, he had found a village. Now what? A Medic—A stranger appearing on the lane which served the town, a stranger in a distinctive uniform of Trade, would only incite conjecture and betrayal. He had to plan now—

Dane unsealed his tunic. He should, by rights, shed his space boots too. But perhaps he could use those to color his story. He thrust the blaster into hiding at his waist. A rip or two in his undertunic, a shallow cut from his bush knife allowed to bleed messily. He could not see himself to judge the general effect, but had to hope it was the right one.

His chance to test his acting powers came sooner than he had anticipated. Luckily he had climbed out of the hidden cove before he was spotted by the boy who came whistling along the path, a fishing pole over his shoulder, a basket swinging from his hand. Dane assumed an expression which he thought would suggest fatigue, pain, and bewilderment and lurched forward as if, in sighting the oncoming boy, he had also sighted hope.

“Help—!” Perhaps it was excitement which gave his utterance that convincing croak.

Rod and basket fell to the ground as the boy, after one astounded stare, ran forward.

“What's the matter!” His eyes were on those space boots and he added a “sir” which had the ring of hero worship.

“Escape boat—” Dane waved toward the sea's general direction. “Medic—must get to Medic—”

“Yes, sir,” the boy’s basic Terran sounded good. “Can you walk if I help you?”

Dane managed a weak nod, but contrived that he did not lean too heavily on his avidly helpful guide.

“The Medic’s my father, sir. We’re right down this slope—third house. And father hasn’t left—he’s supposed to go on a northern inspection tour today—”

Dane felt a stab of distaste for the role being forced upon him. When he had visualized the Medic he must abduct to serve the Queen in her need, he had not expected to have to kidnap a family man. Only the knowledge that he did have the extra suit, and that he had made the outward trip without dangerous exposure, bolstered up his determination to see the plan through.

When they came out at the end of the single long lane which tied the houses of the village together, Dane was puzzled to see the place so deserted. But, since it was not within his role of dazed sufferer to ask questions, he did not do so. It was his young guide who volunteered the information he wanted.

“Most everyone is out with the fleet. There’s a run of red-backs—”

Dane understood. Within recent times the “red-backs” of the north had become a desirable luxury item for Terran tables. If a school of them were to be found in the vicinity no wonder this village was now deserted as its fleet went out to garner in the elusive but highly succulent fish.

“In here, sir—” Dane found himself being led to a house on the right. “Are you in Trade—?”

He suppressed a start, shedding his uniform tunic had not done much in the way of disguise. It would be nice, he thought a little bitterly, if he could flash an I-S badge now to completely confuse the issue. But he answered with the partial truth and did not enlarge.

“Yes—”

The boy was flushed with excitement. “I’m trying for Trade Service Medic,” he confided. “Passed the Directive exam last month. But I still have to go up for Prelim psycho—”

Dane had a flash of memory. Not too many months before not the Prelim psycho, but the big machine at the Assignment Center had decided his own future arbitrarily, fitting him into the crew of the Solar Queen as the ship where *his* abilities, knowledge and potentialities could best work to the good of the Service. At the time he had resented, had even been slightly ashamed of being relegated to a Free Trading spacer while Artur Sands and other classmates from the Pool had walked off with Company assignments. Now he knew that he would not trade the smallest and most rusty bolt from the Solar Queen for the newest scout ship in I-S or Combine registry. And this boy from the frontier village might be himself as he was five years earlier. Though he had never known a real home or family, scrapping into the Pool from one of the children’s Depots.

“Good luck!” He meant that and the boy’s flush deepened.

“Thank you, sir. Around here—Father’s treatment room has this other door—”

Dane allowed himself to be helped into the treatment room and sat down in a chair while the boy hurried off to locate the Medic. The Trader’s hand went to the butt of his concealed blaster. It was a job he had to do—one he had volunteered for—and there was no backing out. But his mouth had a wry twist as he drew out the blaster and made ready to point it at the inner door. Or—his mind leaped to another idea—could he get the Medic safely out of the village? A story about another man badly injured—perhaps pinned in the wreckage of an

escape boat—He could try it. He thrust the blaster back inside his torn undertunic, hoping the bulge would pass unnoticed.

“My son says—”

Dane looked up. The man who came through the inner door was in early middle age, thin, wiry, with a hard, fined-down look about him. He could almost be Tau’s elder brother. He crossed the room with a brisk stride and came to stand over Dane, his hand reaching to pull aside the bloody cloth covering the Trader’s breast. But Dane fended off that examination.

“My partner,” he said. “Back there—pinned in—” he jerked his hand southward. “Needs help—”

The Medic frowned. “Most of the men are out with the fleet. Jorge,” he spoke to the boy who had followed him, “go and get Lex and Hartog. Here,” he tried to push Dane back into the chair as the Trader got up, “let me look at that cut—”

Dane shook his head. “No time now, sir. My partner’s hurt bad. Can you come?”

“Certainly.” The Medic reached for the emergency kit on the shelf behind him. “You able to make it?”

“Yes,” Dane was exultant. It was going to work! He could toll the Medic away from the village. Once out among the rocks on the shoreline he could pull the blaster and herd the man to the flitter. His luck was going to hold after all!

## 15. Medic Hovan Reports

Fortunately the path out of the straggling town was a twisted one and in a very short space they were hidden from view. Dane paused as if the pace was too much for an injured man. The Medic put out a steadying hand, only to drop it quickly when he saw the weapon which had appeared in Dane's grip.

"What—?" His mouth snapped shut, his jaw tightened.

"You will march ahead of me," Dane's low voice was steady. "Beyond that rock spur to the left you'll find a place where it is possible to climb down to sea level. Do it!"

"I suppose I shouldn't ask why?"

"Not now. We haven't much time. Get moving!"

The Medic mastered his surprise and without further protest obeyed orders. It was only when they were standing by the flitter and he saw the suits that his eyes widened and he said:

"The Big Burn!"

"Yes, and I'm desperate—"

"You must be—or mad—" The Medic stared at Dane for a long moment and then shook his head. "What is it? A plague ship?"

Dane bit his lip. The other was too astute. But he did not ask why or how he had been able to guess so shrewdly. Instead he gestured to the suit Ali had lashed beneath the seat in the flitter. "Get into that and be quick about it!"

The Medic rubbed his hand across his jaw. "I think that you might just be desperate enough to use that thing you're brandishing about so melodramatically if I don't," he remarked in a calmly conversational tone.

"I won't kill. But a blaster burn—"

"Can be pretty painful. Yes, I know that, young man. And," suddenly he shrugged, put down his kit and started donning the suit. "I wouldn't put it past you to knock me out and load me aboard if I did say no. All right—"

Suited, he took his place on the seat as Dane directed, and then the Trader followed the additional precaution of lashing the Medic's metal encased arms to his body before he climbed into his own protective covering. Now they could only communicate by sight through the vision plates of their helmets.

Dane triggered the controls and they arose out of the sand and rock hollow just as a party of two men and a boy came hurrying along the top of the cliff—Jorge and the rescuers arriving too late. The flitter spiraled up into the sunlight and Dane wondered how long it would be before this outrage was reported to the nearest Plant Police base. But would any Police cruiser have the hardihood to follow him into the Big Burn? He hoped that the radiation would hold them back.

There was no navigation to be done. The flitter's "memory" should deposit them at the Queen. Dane wondered at what his silent companion was now thinking. The Medic had accepted his kidnapping with such docility that the very ease of their departure began to bother Dane. Was the other expecting a trailer? Had exploration into the Big Burn from the seaside villages been more extensive than reported officially?

He stepped up the power of the flitter to the top notch and saw with some relief that the ground beneath them was now the rocky waste bordering the devastated area. The metal encased figure that shared his seat had not moved, but now the bubble head turned as if the Medic were intent upon the ground flowing beneath them.

The flicker of the counter began and Dane realized that nightfall would find them still air borne. But so far he had not been aware of any pursuit. Again he wished he had the use of a com—only here the radiation would blanket sound with that continuous roar.

Patches of the radiation vegetation showed now and something in the lines of the Medic's tense figure suggested that these were new to him. Afternoon waned as the patches united, spread into the beginning of the jungle as the counter was once more an almost steady light. When evening closed in they were not caught in darkness—for below trees, looping vines, brush, had a pale, evil glow of their own, proclaiming their toxicity with bluish halos. Sometimes pockets of these made a core of light which pulsed, sending warning fingers at the flitter which sped across it.

The hour was close on midnight before Dane sighted the other light, the pink-red of which winked through the ghastly blue-white with a natural and comforting promise, even though it had been meant for an entirely different purpose. The Queen had earthed with her distress lights on and no one had remembered to snap them off. Now they acted as a beacon to draw the flitter to its berth.

Dane brought the stripped flyer down on the fused ground as close to the spot from which he had taken off as he could remember. Now—if those on the spacer would only move fast enough—!

But he need not have worried, his arrival had been anticipated. Above, the rounded side of the spacer bulged as the hatch opened. Lines swung down to fasten their magnetic clamps on the flitter. Then once more they were air borne, swinging up to be warped into the side of the ship. As the outer port of the flitter berth closed Dane reached over and pulled loose the lashing which immobilized his companion. The Medic stood up, a little awkwardly as might any man who wore space armor the first time.

The inner hatch now opened and Dane waved his captive into the small section which must serve them as a decontamination space. Free at last of the suits, they went through one more improvised hatch to the main corridor of the Queen where Rip and Ali stood waiting, their weary faces lighting as they saw the Medic.

It was the latter who spoke first. "This *is* a plague ship—"

Rip shook his head. "It is *not*, sir. And you're the one who is going to help us prove that."

The man leaned back against the wall, his face expressionless. "You take a rather tough way of trying to get help."

"It was the only way left us. I'll be frank," Rip continued, "we're Patrol Posted."

The Medic's shrewd eyes went from one drawn young face to the next. "You don't look like desperate criminals," was his comment. "This your full crew?"

"All the rest are your concern. That is—if you will take the job—" Rip's shoulders slumped a little.

"You haven't left me much choice, have you? If there is illness on board, I'm under the Oath—whether you are Patrol Posted or not. What's the trouble?"

They got him down to Tau's laboratory and told him their story. From a slight incredulity his expression changed to an alert interest and he demanded to see, first the patients and then the pests now immured in a deep freeze. Sometime in the middle of this, Dane, overcome by fatigue which was partly relief from tension, sought his cabin and the bunk from which he wearily disposed Sinbad, only to have the purring cat crawl back once more when he had lain down.

And when he awoke, renewed in body and spirit, it was in a new Queen, a ship in which hope and confidence now ruled.

"Hovan's already got it!" Rip told him exultantly. "It's that poison from the little devils' claws right enough! A narcotic—produces some of the affects of deep sleep. In fact—it may have a medical use. He's excited about it—"

"All right," Dane waved aside information which under other circumstances, promising as it did a chance for future trade, would have engrossed him, to ask a question which at the moment seemed far more to the point. "Can he get our men back on their feet?"

A little of Rip's exuberance faded. "Not right away. He's given them all shots. But he thinks they'll have to sleep it off."

"And we have no idea how long that is going to take," Ali contributed.

Time—for the first time in days Dane was struck by that—time! Because of his training a fact he had forgotten in the past weeks of worry now came to mind—their contract with the storm priests. Even if they were able to clear themselves of the plague charge, even if the rest of the crew were speedily restored to health, he was sure that they could not hope to return to Sargol with the promised cargo, the pay for which was already on board the Queen. They would have broken their pledge and there could be no hope of holding to their trading rights on that world—if they were not blacklisted for breaking contract into the bargain. I-S would be able to move in and clean up and probably they could never prove that the Company was behind their misfortunes—though the men of the Queen would always be convinced that that fact was the truth.

"We're going to break contract—" he said aloud and that shook the other two, knocked some of their assurance out of them.

"How about that?" Rip asked Ali.

The acting-engineer nodded. "We have fuel enough to lift from here and maybe set down at Terraport—if we take it careful and cut vectors. We can't lift from there without refueling—and of course the Patrol are going to sit on their hands while we do that—with us Posted! No, put out of your heads any plan for getting back to Sargol within the time limit. Thorson's right—that way we're flamed out!"

Rip slumped in his seat. "So the Eysies can take over after all?"

"As I see it," Dane cut in, "let's just take one thing at a time. We may have to argue a broken contract out before the Board. But first we have to get off the Posted hook with the Patrol. Have you any idea about how we are going to handle that?"

"Hovan's on our side. In fact if we let him have the bugs to play with he'll back us all the way. He can swear us a clean bill of health before the Medic Control Center."

"How much will that count after we've broken all their regs?" Ali wanted to know. "If we surrender now we're not going to have much chance, no matter what Hovan does or does not swear to. Hovan's a frontier Medic—I won't say that he's not a member in good standing of

their association—but he doesn't have top star rating. And with the Eysies and the Patrol on our necks, we'll need more than one medic's word—"

But Rip looked from the pessimistic Kamil to Dane. Now he asked a question which was more than half statement.

"You've thought of something?"

"I've remembered something," the Cargo-apprentice corrected. "Recall the trick Van pulled on Limbo when the Patrol was trying to ease us out of our rights there after they took over the outlaw hold?"

Ali was impatient. "He threatened to talk to the Video people and broadcast—tell everyone about the ships wrecked by the Forerunner installation and left lying about full of treasure. But what has that to do with us now—? We bargained away our rights on Limbo for the rest of Cam's monopoly on Sargol—not that it's done us much good—"

"The Video," Dane fastened on the important point, "Van threatened publicity which would embarrass the Patrol and he was legally within his rights. We're outside the law now—but publicity might help again. How many earth-side people know of the unwritten law about open war on plague ships? How many who aren't spacemen know that we could be legally pushed into the sun and fried without any chance to prove we're innocent of carrying a new disease? If we could talk loud and clear to the people at large maybe we'd have a chance for a real hearing—"

"Right from the Terraport broadcast station, I suppose?" Ali taunted.

"Why not?"

There was silence in the cabin as the other two chewed upon that and he broke it again:

"We set down here when it had never been done before."

With one brown forefinger Rip traced some pattern known only to himself on the top of the table. Ali stared at the opposite wall as if it were a bank of machinery he must master.

"It just might be whirly enough to work—" Kamil commented softly. "Or maybe we've been spaced too long and the Whisperers have been chattering into our ears. What about it, Rip, could you set us down close enough to Center Block there?"

"We can try anything once. But we might crash the old girl bringing her in. There's that apron between the Companies' Launching cradles and the Center—. It's clear there and we could give an E signal coming down which would make them stay rid of it. But I won't try it except as a last resort."

Dane noticed that after that discouraging statement Rip made straight for Jellico's record tapes and routed out the one which dealt with Terraport and the landing instructions for that metropolis of the star ships. To land unbidden there would certainly bring them publicity—and to get the Video broadcast and tell their story would grant them not only world wide, but system wide hearing. News from Terraport was broadcast on every channel every hour of the day and night and not a single viewer could miss their appeal.

But first there was Hovan to be consulted. Would he be willing to back them with his professional knowledge and assurance? Or would their high-handed method of recruiting his services operate against them now? They decided to let Rip ask such questions of the Medic.

"So you're going to set us down in the center of the big jump-off?" was his first comment, as the acting-Captain of the Queen stated their case. "Then you want me to fire my rockets to certify you are harmless. You don't ask for very much, do you, son?"



Rip spread his hands. "I can understand how it looks to you, sir. We grabbed you and brought you here by force. We can't make you testify for us if you decide not to—"

"Can't you?" The Medic cocked an eyebrow at him. "What about this bully boy of yours with his little blaster? He could herd me right up to the telecast, couldn't he? There's a lot of persuasion in one of those nasty little arms. On the other hand, I've a son who's set on taking out on one of these tin pots to go star hunting. If I handed you over to the Patrol he might make some remarks to me in private. You may be Posted, but you don't look like very hardened criminals to me. It seems that you've been handed a bad situation and handled it as best you know. And I'm willing to ride along the rest of the way on your tail blast. Let me see how many pieces you land us in at Terraport and I'll give you my final answer. If luck holds we may have a couple more of your crew present by that time, also—"

They had had no indication that the Queen had been located, that any posse hunting the kidnapped Medic had followed them into the Big Burn. And they could only hope that they would continue to remain unsighted as they upped-ship once more and cruised into a regular traffic lane for earthing at the port. It would be a chancy thing and Ali and Rip spent hours checking the mechanics of that flight, while Dane and the recovering Weeks worked with Hovan in an effort to restore the sleeping crew.

After three visits to the hold and the discovery that the Hoobat had uncovered no more of the pests, Dane caged the angry blue horror and returned it to its usual stand in Jellico's cabin, certain that the ship was clean for Sinbad now confidently prowled the corridors and went into every cabin of storage space Dane opened for him.

And on the morning of the day they had planned for take-off, Hovan at last had a definite response to his treatment. Craig Tau roused, stared dazedly around, and asked a vague question. The fact he immediately relapsed once more into semi-coma did not discourage the other Medic. Progress had been made and he was now sure that he knew the proper treatment.

They strapped down at zero hour and blasted out of the weird green wilderness they had not dared to explore, lifting into the arch of the sky, depending upon Rip's knowledge to put them safely down again.

Dane once more rode out the take-off at the com-unit, waiting for the blast of radiation born static to fade so that he could catch any broadcast.

"—turned back last night. The high level of radiation makes it almost certain that the outlaws could not have headed into the dangerous central portion. Search is now spreading north. Authorities are inclined to believe that this last outrage may be a clue to the vanished 'Solar Queen,' a plague ship, warned off and Patrol Posted after her crew plundered an E-Stat belonging to the Inter-Solar Corporation. Anyone having any information concerning this ship—or any strange spacer—report at once to the nearest Terrapolice or Patrol station. Do not take chances—report any contact at once to the nearest Terrapolice or Patrol station!"

"That's putting it strongly," Dane commented as he relayed the message. "Good as giving orders for us to be flamed down at sight—"

"Well, if we set down in the right spot," Rip replied, "they can't flame us out without blasting the larger part of Terraport field with us. And I don't think they are going to do that in a hurry."

Dane hoped Shannon was correct in that belief. It would be more chancy than landing at the E-Stat or in the Big Burn—to gauge it just right and put them down on the Terraport apron where they could not be flamed out without destroying too much, where their very position

would give them a bargaining point, was going to be a top star job. If Rip could only pull it off!

He could not evaluate the niceties of that flight, he did not understand all Rip was doing. But he did know enough to remain quietly in his place, ask no questions, and await results with a dry mouth and a wildly beating heart. There came a moment when Rip glanced up at him, one hand poised over the control board. The pilot's voice came tersely, thin and queer:

“Pray it out, Dane—here we go!”

Dane heard the shrill of a riding beam, so tearing he had to move his earphones. They must be almost on top of the control tower to get it like that! Rip was planning on a set down where the Queen would block things neatly. He brought his own fingers down on the E-E-Red button to give the last and most powerful warning. That, to be used only when a ship landing was out of control, should clear the ground below. They could only pray it would vacate the port they were still far from seeing.

“Make it a fin-point, Rip,” he couldn't repress that one bit of advice. And was glad he had given it when he saw a ghost grin tug for a moment at Rip's full lips.

“Good enough for a check-ride?”

They were riding her flaming jets down as they would on a strange world. Below the port must be wild. Dane counted off the seconds. Two—three—four—five—just a few more and they would be too low to intercept—without endangering innocent coasters and groundhuggers. When the last minute during which they were still vulnerable passed, he gave a sigh of relief. That was one more point on their side. In the earphones was a crackle of frantic questions, a gabble of orders screaming at him. Let them rave, they'd know soon enough what it was all about.

## 16. The Battle Of The Video

Oddly enough, in spite of the tension which must have boiled within him, Rip brought them in with a perfect four fin-point landing—one which, under the circumstances, must win him the respect of master star-star pilots from the Rim. Though Dane doubted whether if they lost, that skill would bring Shannon anything but a long term in the moon mines. The actual jar of their landing contact was mostly absorbed by the webbing of their shock seats and they were on their feet, ready to move almost at once.

The next operation had been planned. Dane gave a glance at the screen. Ringed now about the Queen were the buildings of Terraport. Yes, any attempt to attack the ship would endanger too much of the permanent structure of the field itself. Rip had brought them down—not on the rocket scarred outer landing space—but on the concrete apron between the Assignment Center and the control tower—a smooth strip usually sacred to the parking of officials' ground scooters. He speculated as to whether any of the latter had been converted to molten metal by the exhausts of the Queen's descent.

Like the team they had come to be the four active members of the crew went into action. Ali and Weeks were waiting by an inner hatch, Medic Hovan with them. The Engineer-apprentice was bulky in a space suit, and two more of the unwieldy body coverings waited beside him for Rip and Dane. With fingers which were inclined to act like thumbs they were sealed into what would provide some protection against any blaster or sleep ray. Then with Hovan, conspicuously wearing no such armor, they climbed into one of the ship's crawlers.

Weeks activated the outer hatch and the crane lines plucked the small vehicle out of the Queen, swinging it dizzily down to the blast scored apron.

"Make for the tower—" Rip's voice was thin in the helmet coms.

Dane at the controls of the crawler pulled on as Ali cast off the lines which anchored them to the spacer.

Through the bubble helmet he could see the frenzied activity in the aroused port. An ant hill into which some idle investigator had thrust a stick and given it a turn or two was nothing compared with Terraport after the unorthodox arrival of the Solar Queen.

"Patrol mobile coming in on southeast vector," Ali announced calmly. "Looks like she mounts a portable flamer on her nose—"

"So." Dane changed direction, putting behind him a customs check point, aware as he ground by that stand, of a line of faces at its vision ports. Evasive action—and he'd have to get the top speed from the clumsy crawler.

"Police 'copter over us—" that was Rip reporting.

Well, they couldn't very well avoid *that*. But at the same time Dane was reasonably sure that its attack would not be an overt one—not with the unarmed, unprotected Hovan prominently displayed in their midst.

But there he was too sanguine. A muffled exclamation from Rip made him glance at the Medic beside him. Just in time to see Hovan slump limply forward, about to tumble from the crawler when Shannon caught him from behind. Dane was too familiar with the results of sleep rays to have any doubts as to what had happened.

The P-copter had sprayed them with its most harmless weapon. Only the suits, insulated to the best of their makers' ability against most of the dangers of space, real and anticipated, had kept the three Traders from being overcome as well. Dane suspected that his own responses were a trifle sluggish, that while he had not succumbed to that attack, he had been slowed. But with Rip holding the unconscious Medic in his seat, Thorson continued to head the crawler for the tower and its promise of a system wide hearing for their appeal.

"There's a P-mobile coming in ahead—"

Dane was irritated by that warning from Rip. He had already sighted that black and silver ground car himself. And he was only too keenly conscious of the nasty threat of the snub nosed weapon mounted on its hood, now pointed straight at the oncoming, too deliberate Traders' crawler. Then he saw what he believed would be their only chance—to play once more the same type of trick as Rip had used to earth them safely.

"Get Hovan under cover," he ordered. "I'm going to crash the tower door!"

Hasty movements answered that as the Medic's limp body was thrust under the cover offered by the upper framework of the crawler. Luckily the machine had been built for heavy duty on rugged worlds where roadways were unknown. Dane was sure he could build up the power and speed necessary to take them into the lower floor of the tower—no matter if its door was now barred against them.

Whether his audacity daunted the P-mobile, or whether they held off from an all out attack because of Hovan, Dane could not guess. But he was glad for a few minutes of grace as he raced the protesting engine of the heavy machine to its last and greatest effort. The treads of the crawler bit on the steps leading up to the impressive entrance of the tower. There was a second or two before traction caught and then the driver's heart snapped back into place as the machine tilted its nose up and headed straight for the portal.

They struck the closed doors with a shock which almost hurled them from their seats. But that engraved bronze expanse had not been cast to withstand a head-on blow from a heavy duty off-world vehicle and the leaves tore apart letting them into the wide hall beyond.

"Take Hovan and make for the riser!" For the second time it was Dane who gave the orders. "I have a blocking job to do here." He expected every second to feel the bit of a police blaster somewhere along his shrinking body—could even a space suit protect him now?

At the far end of the corridor were the attendants and visitors, trapped in the building, who had fled in an attempt to find safety at the crashing entrance of the crawler. These flung themselves flat at the steady advance of the two space-suited Traders who supported the unconscious Medic between them, using the low-powered anti-grav units on their belts to take most of his weight so each had one hand free to hold a sleep rod. And they did not hesitate to use those weapons—spraying the rightful inhabitants of the tower until all lay unmoving.

Having seen that Ali and Rip appeared to have the situation in hand, Dane turned to his own self-appointed job. He jammed the machine on reverse, maneuvering it with an ease learned by practice on the rough terrain of Limbo, until the gate doors were pushed shut again. Then he swung the machine around so that its bulk would afford an effective bar to keep the door locked for some very precious moments to come. Short of using a flamer full power to cut their way in, no one was going to force an entrance now.

He climbed out of the machine, to discover, when he turned, that the trio from the Queen had disappeared—leaving all possible opposition asleep on the floor. Dane clanked on to join them, carrying in plated fingers their most important weapon to awake public opinion—an

improvised cage in which was housed one of the pests from the cargo hold—the proof of their plague-free state which they intended Hovan to present, via the telecast, to the whole system.

Dane reached the shaft of the riser—to find the platform gone. Would either Rip or Ali have presence of mind enough to send it down to him on automatic?

“Rip—return the riser,” he spoke urgently into the throat mike of his helmet com.

“Keep your rockets straight,” Ali’s cool voice was in his earphones, “It’s on its way down. Did *you* remember to bring Exhibit A?”

Dane did not answer. For he was very much occupied with another problem. On the bronze doors he had been at such pains to seal shut there had come into being a round circle of dull red which was speedily changing into a coruscating incandescence. They *had* brought a flamer to bear! It would be a very short time now before the Police could come through. That riser—

Afraid of overbalancing in the bulky suit Dane did not lean forward to stare up into the shaft. But, as his uncertainty reached a fever pitch, the platform descended and he took two steps forward into temporary safety, still clutching the cage. At the first try the thick fingers of his gloved hand slipped from the lever and he hit it again, harder than he intended, so that he found himself being wafted upward with a speed which did not agree with a stomach, even one long accustomed to space flight. And he almost lost his balance when it came to a stop many floors above.

But he had not lost his wits. Before he stepped from the platform he set the dial on a point which would lift the riser to the top of the shaft and hold it there. That might trap the Traders on the broadcasting floor, but it would also insure them time before the forces of the law could reach them.

Dane located the rest of his party in the circular core chamber of the broadcasting section. He recognized a backdrop he had seen thousands of times behind the announcer who introduced the news-casts. In one corner Rip, his suit off, was working over the still relaxed form of the Medic. While Ali, a grim set to his mouth, was standing with a man who wore the insignia of a Com-tech.

“All set?” Rip looked up from his futile ministrations.

Dane put down the cage and began the business of unhooking his own protective covering. “They were burning through the outer doors of the entrance hall when I took off.”

“You’re not going to get away with this—” that was the Com-tech.

Ali smiled wearily, a stretch of lips in which there was little or no mirth. “Listen, my friend. Since I started to ride rockets I’ve been told I wasn’t going to get away with this or that. Why not be more original? Use what is between those outsize ears of yours. We fought our way in here—we landed at Terraport against orders—we’re Patrol Posted. Do you think that one man, one lone man, is going to keep us now from doing what we came to do? And don’t look around for any reinforcements. We sprayed both those rooms. You can run the emergency hook-up singlehanded and you’re going to. We’re Free Traders—Ha,” the man had lost some of his assurance as he stared from one drawn young face to another, “I see you begin to realize what that means. Out on the Rim we play rough, and we play for keeps. I know half a hundred ways to set you screaming in three minutes and at least ten of them will not even leave a mark on your skin! Now do we get Service—or don’t we?”

“You’ll go to the Chamber for this—!” snarled the tech.

“All right. But first we broadcast. Then maybe someday a ship that’s run into bad luck’ll have a straighter deal than we’ve had. You get on your post. And we’ll have the play back on—remember that. If you don’t give us a clear channel we’ll know it. How about it, Rip—how’s Hovan?”

Rip’s face was a mask of worry. “He must have had a full dose. I can’t bring him around.”

Was this the end of their bold bid? Let each or all of them go before the screen to plead their case, let them show the caged pest. But without the professional testimony of the Medic, the weight of an expert opinion on their side, they were licked. Well, sometimes luck did not ride a man’s fins all the way in.

But some stubborn core within Dane refused to let him believe that they had lost. He went over to the Medic huddled in a chair. To all appearances Hovan was deeply asleep, sunk in the semi-coma the sleep ray produced. And the frustrating thing was that the man himself could have supplied the counter to his condition, given them the instructions how to bring him around. How many hours away was a natural awaking? Long before that their hold on the station would be broken—they would be in the custody of either Police or Patrol.

“He’s sunk—” Dane voiced the belief which put an end to their hopes. But Ali did not seem concerned.

Kamil was standing with their captive, an odd expression on his handsome face as if he were striving to recall some dim memory. When he spoke it was to the Com-tech. “You have an HD OS here?”

The other registered surprise. “I think so—”

Ali made an abrupt gesture. “Make sure,” he ordered, following the man into another room. Dane looked to Rip for enlightenment.

“What in the Great Nebula is an HD OS?”

“I’m no engineer. It may be some gadget to get us out of here—”

“Such as a pair of wings?” Dane was inclined to be sarcastic. The memory of that incandescent circle on the door some twenty floors below stayed with him. Tempers of Police and Patrol were not going to be improved by fighting their way around or over the obstacles the Traders had arranged to delay them. If they caught up to the outlaws before the latter had their chance for an impartial hearing, the result was not going to be a happy one as far as the Queen’s men were concerned.

Ali appeared in the doorway. “Bring Hovan in here.” Together Rip and Dane carried the Medic into a smaller chamber where they found Ali and the tech busy lashing a small, lightweight tube chair to a machine which, to their untutored eyes, had the semblance of a collection of bars. Obeying instructions they seated Hovan in that chair, fastening him in, while the Medic continued to slumber peacefully. Uncomprehendingly Rip and Dane stepped back while, under Ali’s watchful eye, the Com-tech made adjustments and finally snapped some hidden switch.

Dane discovered that he dared not watch too closely what followed. Inured as he thought he was to the tricks of Hyperspace, to acceleration and anti-gravity, the oscillation of that swinging seat, the weird swaying of the half-recumbent figure, did things to his sight and to his sense of balance which seemed perilous in the extreme. But when the groan broke through the hum of Ali’s mysterious machine, all of them knew that the Engineer-apprentice had found the answer to their problem, that Hovan was waking.

The Medic was bleary-eyed and inclined to stagger when they freed him. And for several minutes he seemed unable to grasp either his surroundings or the train of events which had brought him there.

Long since the Police must have broken into the entrance corridor below. Perhaps they had by now secured a riser which would bring them up. Ali had forced the Com-tech to throw the emergency control which was designed to seal off from the outer world the entire unit in which they now were. But whether that protective device would continue to hold now, none of the three were certain. Time was running out fast.

Supporting the wobbling Hovan, they went back into the panel room and under Ali's supervision the Com-tech took his place at the control board. Dane put the cage with the pest well to the fore on the table of the announcer and waited for Rip to take his place there with the trembling Medic. When Shannon did not move Dane glanced up in surprise—this was no time to hesitate. But he discovered that the attention of both his shipmates was now centered on him. Rip pointed to the seat.

“You're the talk merchant, aren't you?” the acting commander of the Queen asked crisply. “Now's the time to shout the Lingo—”

They couldn't mean—! But it was very evident that they did. Of course, a Cargo-master was supposed to be the spokesman of a ship. But that was in matters of trade. And how could *he* stand there and argue the case for the Queen? He was the newest joined, the greenest member of her crew. Already his mouth was dry and his nerves tense. But Dane didn't know that none of that was revealed by his face or manner. The usual impassiveness which had masked his inner conflicts since his first days at the Pool served him now. And the others never noted the hesitation with which he approached the announcer's place.

Dane had scarcely seated himself, one hand resting on the cage of the pest, before Ali brought down two fingers in the sharp sweep which signaled the Com-tech to duty. Far above them there was a whisper of sound which signified the opening of the play-back. They would be able to check on whether the broadcast was going out or not. Although Dane could see nothing of the system wide audience which he currently faced, he realized that the room and those in it were now visible on every tuned-in video set. Instead of the factual cast, the listeners were about to be treated to a melodrama which was as wild as their favorite romances. It only needed the break-in of the Patrol to complete the illusion of action-fiction—crime variety.

A second finger moved in his direction and Dane leaned forward. He faced only the folds of a wall wide curtain, but he must keep in mind that in truth there was a sea of faces before him, the faces of those whom he and Hovan, working together, must convince if he were to save the Queen and her crew.

He found his voice and it was steady and even, he might have been outlining some stowage problem for Van Rycke's approval.

“People of Terra—”

Martian, Venusian, Asteroid colonist—inwardly they were still all Terran and on that point he would rest. He was a Terran appealing to his own kind.

“People of Terra, we come before you to ask justice—” from somewhere the words came easily, flowing from his lips to center on a patch of light ahead. And that “justice” rang with a kind of reassurance.

## 17. In Custody

“To those of you who do not travel the star trails our case may seem puzzling—” the words were coming easily. Dane gathered confidence as he spoke, intent on making those others out there know what it meant to be outlawed.

“We are Patrol Posted, outlawed as a plague ship,” he confessed frankly. “But this is our true story—”

Swiftly, with a flow of language he had not known he could command, Dane swung into the story of Sargol, of the pest they had carried away from that world. And at the proper moment he thrust a gloved hand into the cage and brought out the wriggling thing which struck vainly with its poisoned talons, holding it above the dark table so that those unseen watchers could witness the dramatic change of color which made it such a menace. Dane continued the story of the Queen’s ill-fated voyage—of their forced descent upon the E-Stat.

“Ask the truth of Inter-Solar,” he demanded of the audience beyond those walls. “We were no pirates. They will discover in their records the vouchers we left.” Then Dane described the weird hunt when, led by the Hoobat, they had finally found and isolated the menace, and their landing in the heart of the Big Burn. He followed that with his own quest for medical aid, the kidnapping of Hovan. At that point he turned to the Medic.

“This is Medic Hovan. He has consented to appear in our behalf and to testify to the truth—that the Solar Queen has not been stricken by some unknown plague, but infested with a living organism we now have under control—” For a suspenseful second or two he wondered if Hovan was going to make it. The man looked shaken and sick, as if the drastic awaking they had subjected him to had left him too dazed to pull himself together.

But out of some hidden reservoir of strength the Medic summoned the energy he needed. And his testimony was all they had hoped it would be. Though now and then he strayed into technical terms. But, Dane thought, their use only enhanced the authority of his description of what he had discovered on board the spacer and what he had done to counteract the power of the poison. When he had done Dane added a few last words.

“We have broken the law,” he admitted forthrightly, “but we were fighting in self-defense. All we ask now is the privilege of an impartial investigation, a chance to defend ourselves—such as any of you take for granted on Terra—before the courts of this planet—” But he was not to finish without interruption.

From the play-back over their heads another voice blared, breaking across his last words:

“Surrender! This is the Patrol. Surrender or take the consequences!” And that faint sighing which signaled their open contact with the outer world was cut off. The Com-tech turned away from the control board, a sneering half smile on his face.

“They’ve reached the circuit and cut you off. You’re done!”

Dane stared into the cage where the now almost invisible thing sat humped together. He had done his best—they had all done their best. He felt nothing but a vast fatigue, an overwhelming weariness, not so much of body, but of nerve and spirit too.

Rip broke the silence with a question aimed at the tech. “Can you signal below?”

“Going to give up?” The fellow brightened. “Yes, there’s an inter-com I can cut in.”



Rip stood up. He unbuckled the belt about his waist and laid it on the table—disarming himself. Without words Ali and Dane followed his example. They had played their hand—to prolong the struggle would mean nothing. The acting Captain of the Queen gave a last order:

“Tell them we are coming down unarmed—to surrender.” He paused in front of Hovan. “You’d better stay here. If there’s any trouble—no reason for you to be caught in the middle.”

Hovan nodded as the three left the room. Dane, remembering the trick he had pulled with the riser, made a comment:

“We may be marooned here—”

Ali shrugged. “Then we can just wait and let them collect us.” He yawned, his dark eyes set in smudges. “I don’t care if they’ll just let us sleep the clock around afterwards. D’you really think,” he addressed Rip, “that we’ve done ourselves any good?”

Rip neither denied nor confirmed. “We took our only chance. Now it’s up to them—” He pointed to the wall and the teeming world which lay beyond it.

Ali grinned wryly. “I note you left the what-you-call-it with Hovan.”

“He wanted one to experiment with,” Dane replied. “I thought he’d earned it.”

“And now here comes what we’ve earned—” Rip cut in as the hum of the riser came to their ears.

“Should we take to cover?” Ali’s mobile eyebrows underlined his demand. “The forces of law and order may erupt with blasters blazing.”

But Rip did not move. He faced the riser door squarely and, drawn by something in that stance of his, the other two stepped in on either side so that they fronted the dubious future as a united group. Whatever came now, the Queen’s men would meet it together.

In a way Ali was right. The four men who emerged all had their blasters or riot stun-rifles at ready, and the sights of those weapons were trained at the middles of the Free Traders. As Dane’s empty hands, palm out, went up on a line with his shoulders, he estimated the opposition. Two were in the silver and black of the Patrol, two wore the forest green of the Terrapolice. But they all looked like men with whom it was better not to play games.

And it was clear they were prepared to take no chances with the outlaws. In spite of the passiveness of the Queen’s men, their hands were locked behind them with force bars about their wrists. When a quick search revealed that the three were unarmed, they were herded onto the riser by two of their captors, while the other pair remained behind, presumably to uncover any damage they had done to the Tower installations.

The police did not speak except for a few terse words among themselves and a barked order to march, delivered to the prisoners. Very shortly they were in the entrance hall facing the wreckage of the crawler and doors through which a ragged gap had been burned. Ali viewed the scene with his usual detachment.

“Nice job,” he commended Dane’s enterprise. “They’ll have a moving—”

“Get going!” A heavy hand between his shoulder blades urged him on.

The Engineer-apprentice whirled, his eyes blazing. “Keep your hands to yourself! We aren’t mine fodder yet. I think that the little matter of a trial comes first—”

“You’re Posted,” the Patrolman was openly contemptuous.

Dane was chilled. For the first time that aspect of their predicament really registered. Posted outlaws might, within reason, be shot on sight without further recourse to the law. If that label stuck on the crew of the Queen, they had practically no chance at all. And when he saw that Ali was no longer inclined to retort, he knew that fact had dawned upon Kamil also. It would all depend upon how big an impression their broadcast had made. If public opinion veered to their side—then they could defend themselves legally. Otherwise the moon mines might be the best sentence they dare hope for.

They were pushed out into the brilliant sunlight. There stood the Queen, her meteor scarred side reflecting the light of her native sun. And ringed around her at a safe distance was what seemed to be a small mechanized army corps. The authorities were making very sure that no more rebels would burst from her interior.

Dane thought that they would be loaded into a mobile or ‘copter and taken away. But instead they were marched down, through the ranks of portable flamers, scramblers, and other equipment, to an open space where anyone on duty at the visa-screen within the control cabin of the spacer could see them. An officer of the Patrol, the sun making an eye-blinding flash of his lightning sword breast badge, stood behind a loud speaker. When he perceived that the three prisoners were present, he picked up a hand mike and spoke into it—his voice so being relayed over the field as clearly as it must be reaching Weeks inside the sealed freighter.

“You have five minutes to open hatch. Your men have been taken. Five minutes to open hatch and surrender.”

Ali chuckled. “And how does he think he’s going to enforce that?” he inquired of the air and incidentally of the guards now forming a square about the three. “He’ll need more than a flamer to unlatch the old girl if she doesn’t care for his offer.”

Privately Dane agreed with that. He hoped that Weeks would decide to hold out—at least until they had a better idea of what the future would be. No tool or weapon he saw in the assembly about them was forceful enough to penetrate the shell of the Queen. And there were sufficient supplies on board to keep Weeks and his charges going for at least a week. Since Tau had shown signs of coming out of his coma, it might even be that the crew of the ship would arouse to their own defense in that time. It all depended upon Weeks’ present decision.

No hatch yawned in the ship’s sleek sides. She might have been an inert derelict for all response to that demand. Dane’s confidence began to rise. Weeks had picked up the challenge, he would continue to baffle police and Patrol.

Just how long that stalemate would have lasted they were not to know for another player came on the board. Through the lines of besiegers Hovan, escorted by the Patrolmen, made his way up to the officer at the mike station. There was something in his air which suggested that he was about to give battle. And the conversation at the mike was relayed across the field, a fact of which they were not at once aware.

“There are sick men in there—” Hovan’s voice boomed out. “I demand the right to return to duty—”

“If and when they surrender they shall all be accorded necessary aid,” that was the officer. But he made no impression on the Medic from the frontier. Dane, by chance, had chosen better support than he had guessed.

“Pro Bono Publico—” Hovan invoked the battle cry of his own Service. “For the Public Good—”

“A plague ship—” the officer was beginning. Hovan waved that aside impatiently.

“Nonsense!” His voice scaled up across the field. “There is no plague aboard. I am willing to certify that before the Council. And if you refuse these men medical attention—which they need—I shall cite the case all the way to my Board!”

Dane drew a deep breath. That *was* taking off on their orbit! Not being one of the Queen’s crew, in fact having good reason to be angry over his treatment at their hands, Hovan’s present attitude would or should carry weight.

The Patrol officer who was not yet ready to concede all points had an answer: “If you are able to get on board—go.”

Hovan snatched the mike from the astonished officer. “Weeks!” His voice was imperative. “I’m coming aboard—alone!”

All eyes were on the ship and for a short period it would seem that Weeks did not trust the Medic. Then, high in her needle nose, one of the escape ports, not intended for use except in dire emergency opened and allowed a plastic link ladder to fall link by link.

Out of the corner of his eye Dane caught a flash of movement to his left. Manacled as he was he threw himself on the policeman who was aiming a stun rifle into the port. His shoulder struck the fellow waist high and his weight carried them both with a bruising crash to the concrete pavement as Rip shouted and hands clutched roughly at the now helpless Cargo-apprentice.

He was pulled to his feet, tasting the flat sweetness of blood where a flailing blow from the surprised and frightened policeman had cut his lip against his teeth. He spat red and glowered at the ring of angry men.

“Why don’t you kick him?” Ali inquired, a vast and blistering contempt sawtoothing his voice. “He’s got his hands cuffed so he’s fair game—”

“What’s going on here?” An officer broke through the ring. The policeman, on his feet once more, snatched up the rifle Dane’s attack had knocked out of his hold.

“Your boy here,” Ali was ready with an answer, “tried to find a target inside the hatch. Is this the usual way you conduct a truce, sir?”

He was answered by a glare and the rifleman was abruptly ordered to the rear. Dane, his head clearing, looked at the Queen. Hovan was climbing the ladder—he was within arm’s length of that half open hatch. The very fact that the Medic had managed to make his point stick was, in a faint way, encouraging. But the three were not allowed to enjoy that small victory for long. They were marched from the field, loaded into a mobile and taken to the city several miles away. It was the Patrol who held them in custody—not the Terrapolice. Dane was not sure whether that was to be reckoned favorable or not. As a Free Trader he had a grudging respect for the organization he had seen in action on Limbo.

Sometime later they found themselves, freed of the force bars, alone in a room which, bare walled as it was, did have a bench on which all three sank thankfully. Dane caught the warning gesture from Ali—they were under unseen observation and they must have a listening audience too—located somewhere in the maze of offices.

“They can’t make up their minds,” the Engineer-apprentice settled his shoulders against the wall. “Either we’re desperate criminals, or we’re heroes. They’re going to let time decide.”

“If we’re heroes,” Dane asked a little querulously, “what are we doing locked up here? I’d like a few earth-side comforts—beginning with a full meal—”

“No thumb printing, no psycho testing,” Rip mused. “Yes, they haven’t put us through the system yet.”

“And we decidedly aren’t the forgotten men. Wipe your face, child,” Ali said to Dane, “you’re still dribbling.”

The Cargo-apprentice smeared his hand across his chin and brought it away red and sticky. Luckily his teeth remained intact.

“We need Hovan to read them more law,” observed Kamil. “You should have medical attention.”

Dane dabbed at his mouth. He didn’t need all that solicitude, but he guessed that Ali was talking for the benefit of those who now kept them under surveillance.

“Speaking of Hovan—I wonder what became of that pest he was supposed to have under control. He didn’t bring the cage with him when he came out of the Tower, did he?” asked Rip.

“If it gets loose in that building,” Dane decided to give the powers who held them in custody something to think about, “they’ll have trouble. Practically invisible and poisonous. And maybe it can reproduce its kind, too. We don’t know anything about it—”

Ali laughed. “Such fun and games! Imagine a hundred of the dear creatures flitting in and out of the broadcasting section. And Captain Jellico has the only Hoobat on Terra! He can name his own terms for rounding up the plague. The whole place will be filled with sleepers before they’re through—”

Would that scrap of information send some Patrolmen hurtling off to the Tower in search of the caged creature? The thought of such an expedition was, in a small way, comforting to the captives.

An hour or so later they were fed, noiselessly and without visible attendants, when three trays slid through a slit in the wall at floor level. Rip’s nose wrinkled.

“Now I get the vector! We’re plague-ridden—keep aloof and watch to see if we break out in purple spots!”

Ali was lifting thermo lids from the containers and now he suddenly arose and bowed in the direction of the blank wall. “Many, many thanks,” he intoned. “Nothing but the best—a sub-commander’s rations at least! We shall deliver top star rating to this thoughtfulness when we are questioned by the powers that shine.”

It *was* good food. Dane ate cautiously because of his torn lip, but the whole adventure took on a more rose-colored hue. The lapse of time before they were put through the usual procedure followed with criminals, this excellent dinner—it was all promising. The Patrol could not yet be sure how they were to be handled.

“They’ve fed us,” Ali observed as he clanged the last dish back on a tray. “Now you’d think they’d bed us. I could do with several days—and nights—of bunk time right about now.”

But that hint was not taken up and they continued to sit on the bench as time limped by. According to Dane’s watch it must be night now, though the steady light in the windowless room did not vary. What had Hovan discovered in the Queen? Had he been able to rouse any of the crew? And was the spacer still inviolate, or had the Terrapolice and the Patrol managed to take her over?

He was so very tired, his eyes felt as if hot sand had been poured beneath the lids, his body ached. And at last he nodded into naps from which he awoke with jerks of the neck. Rip was

frankly asleep, his shoulders and head resting against the wall, while Ali lounged with closed eyes. Though the Cargo-apprentice was sure that Kamil was more alert than his comrades, as if he waited for something he thought was soon to occur.

Dane dreamed. Once more he trod the reef rising out of Sargol's shallow sea. But he held no weapon and beneath the surface of the water a gorp lurked. When he reached the break in the water-washed rock just ahead, the spidery horror would strike and against its attack he was defenseless. Yet he must march on for he had no control over his own actions!

"Wake up!" Ali's hand was on his shoulder, shaking him back and forth with something close to gentleness. "Must you give an imitation of a space-whirly moonbat?"

"The gorp—" Dane came back to the present and flushed. He dreaded admitting to a nightmare—especially to Ali whose poise he had always found disconcerting.

"No gorps here. Nothing but—"

Kamil's words were lost in the escape of metal against metal as a panel slid back in the wall. But no guard wearing the black and silver of the Patrol stepped through to summon them to trial. Van Rycke stood in the opening, half smiling at them with his customary sleepy benevolence.

"Well, well, and here's our missing ones," his purring voice was the most beautiful sound Dane thought he had ever heard.

## 18. Bargain Concluded

“—and so we landed here, sir,” Rip concluded his report in the matter-of-fact tone he might have used in describing a perfectly ordinary voyage, say between Terraport and Luna City, a run of no incident and dull cargo carrying.

The crew of the Solar Queen, save for Tau, were assembled in a room somewhere in the vastness of Patrol Headquarters. Since the room seemed a comfortable conference chamber, Dane thought that their status must now be on a higher level than that of Patrol Posted outlaws. But he was also sure that if they attempted to walk out of the building that effort would not be successful.

Van Rycke sat stolidly in his chosen seat, fingers of both hands laced across his substantial middle. He had sat as impassively as the Captain while Rip had outlined their adventures since they had all been stricken. Though the other listeners had betrayed interest in the story, the senior officers made no comments. Now Jellico turned to his Cargo-master.

“How about it, Van?”

“What’s done is done—”

Dane’s elation vanished as if ripped away by a Sargolian storm wind. The Cargo-master didn’t approve. So there must have been another way to achieve their ends—one the younger members of the crew had been too inexperienced or too dense to see—

“If we blasted off today we might just make cargo contract.”

Dane started. That was it! The point they had lost sight of during their struggles to get aid. There was no possible chance of upping the ship today—probably not for days to come—or ever, if the case went against them. So they had broken contract—and the Board would be down on them for that. Dane shivered inside. He could try to fight back against the Patrol—there had always been a slight feeling of rivalry between the Free Traders and the space police. But you couldn’t buck the Board—and keep your license and so have a means of staying in space. A broken contract could cut one off from the stars forever. Captain Jellico looked very bleak at that reminder.

“The Eysies will be all ready to step in. I’d like to know why they were so sure we had the plague on board—”

Van Rycke snorted. “I can supply you five answers to that—for one they may have known the affinity of those creatures for the wood, and it would be easy to predict as a result of our taking a load on board—or again they may have deliberately planted the things on us through the Salariki—But we can’t ever prove it. It remains that they are going to get for themselves the Sargolian contract unless—” He stopped short, staring straight ahead of him at the wall between Rip and Dane. And his assistant knew that Van was exploring a fresh idea. Van’s ideas were never to be despised and Jellico did not now disturb the Cargo-master with questions.

It was Rip who spoke next and directly to the Captain. “Do you know what they plan to do about us, sir?”

Captain Jellico grunted and there was a sardonic twist to his mouth as he replied, “It’s my opinion that they’re now busy adding up the list of crimes you four have committed—maybe

they had to turn the big HG computer loose on the problem. The tally isn't in yet. We gave them our automat flight record and that ought to give them more food for thought."

Dane speculated as to what the experts *would* make of the mechanical record of the Queen's past few weeks—the section dealing with their landing in the Big Burn ought to be a little surprising. Van Rycke got to his feet and marched to the door of the conference room. It was opened from without so quickly Dane was sure that they had been under constant surveillance.

"Trade business," snapped the Cargo-master, "contract deal. Take me to a sealed com booth!"

Contracts might not be as sacred to the protective Service as they were to Trade, but Trade had its powers and since Van Rycke, an innocent bystander of the Queen's troubles, could not legally be charged with any crime, he was escorted out of the room. But the door panel was sealed behind him, shutting in the rest with the unspoken warning that they were not free agents. Jellico leaned back in his chair and stretched. Long years of close friendship had taught him that his Cargo-master was to be trusted with not only the actual trading and cargo tending, but could also think them out of some of the tangles which could not be solved by his own direct action methods. Direct action had been applied to their present problem—now the rest was up to Van, and he was willing to delegate all responsibility.

But they were not left long to themselves. The door opened once more to admit star rank Patrolmen. None of the Free Traders arose. As members of another Service they considered themselves equals. And it was their private boast that the interests of Galactic civilization, as represented by the black and silver, often followed, not preceded the brown tunics into new quarters of the universe.

However, Rip, Ali, Dane, and Weeks answered as fully as they could the flood of questions which engulfed them. They explained in detail their visit to the E-Stat, the landing in the Big Burn, the kidnapping of Hovan. Dane's stubborn feeling of being in the right grew in opposition to the questioning. Under the same set of circumstances how would that Commander—that Wing Officer—that Senior Scout—now all seated there—have acted? And every time they inferred that his part in the affair had been illegal he stiffened.

Sure, there had to be law and order out on the Rim—and doubly sure it had to cover and protect life on the softer planets of the inner systems. He wasn't denying that on Limbo, he, for one, had been very glad to see the Patrol blast their way into the headquarters of the pirates holed up on that half-dead world. And he was never contemptuous of the men in the field. But like all Free Traders he was influenced by a belief that too often the laws as enforced by the Patrol favored the wealth and might of the Companies, that law could be twisted and the Patrol sent to push through actions which, though legal, were inherently unfair to those who had not the funds to fight it out in the far off Council courts. Just as now he was certain that the Eysies were bringing all the influence they had to bear here against the Queen's men. And Inter-Solar had a lot of influence.

At the end of their ordeal their statements were read back to them from the recording tape and they thumb signed them. Were these statements or confessions, Dane mused. Perhaps in their honest reports they had just signed their way into the moon mines. Only there was no move to lead them out and book them. And when Weeks pressed his thumb at the bottom of the tape, Captain Jellico took a hand. He looked at his watch.

"It is now ten hours," he observed. "My men need rest, and we all want food. Are you through with us?"

The Commander was spokesman for the other group. “You are to remain in quarantine, Captain. Your ship has not yet been passed as port-free. But you will be assigned quarters—”

Once again they were marched through blank halls to the other section of the sprawling Patrol Headquarters. No windows looked upon the outer world, but there were bunks and a small mess alcove. Ali, Dane, and Rip turned in, more interested in sleep than food. And the last thing the Cargo-apprentice remembered was seeing Jellico talking earnestly with Steen Wilcox as they both sipped steaming mugs of real Terran coffee.

But with twelve hours of sleep behind them the three were less contented in confinement. No one had come near them and Van Rycke had not returned. Which fact the crew clung to as a ray of hope. Somewhere the Cargo-master must be fighting their battle. And all Van’s vast store of Trade knowledge, all his knack of cutting corners and driving a shrewd bargain, enlisted on their behalf, must win them some concessions.

Medic Tau came in, bringing Hovan with him. Both looked tired but triumphant. And their report was a shot in the arm for the now uneasy Traders.

“We’ve rammed it down their throats,” Tau announced. “They’re willing to admit that it was those poison bugs and not a plague. Incidentally,” he grinned at Jellico and then looked around expectantly, “where’s Van? This comes in his department. We’re going to cash in on those the kids dumped in the deep freeze. Terra-Lab is bidding on them. I said to see Van—he can arrange the best deal for us. Where is he?”

“Gone to see about our contract,” Jellico reported. “What’s the news about our status now?”

“Well, they’ve got to wipe out the plague ship listing. Also—we’re big news. There’re about twenty video men rocketing around out in the offices trying to get in and have us do some spot broadcasts. Seems that the children here,” he jerked his thumb at the three apprentices, “started something. An inter-solar invasion couldn’t be bigger news! Human interest by the tankful. I’ve been on Video twice and they’re trying to sign up Hovan almost steady—”

The Medic from the frontier nodded. “Wanted me to appear on a three week schedule,” he chuckled. “I was asked to come in on ‘Our Heroes of the Starlines’ and two Quiz programs. As for you, you young criminal,” he swung to Dane, “you’re going to be fair game for about three networks. It seems you transmit well,” he uttered the last as if it were an accusation and Dane squirmed. “Anyway you did something with your crazy stunt. And, Captain, three men want to buy your Hoobat. I gather they are planning a showing of how it captures those pests. So be prepared—”

Dane tried to visualize a scene in which he shared top billing with Queex and shuddered. All he wanted now was to get free of Terra for a nice, quiet, uncomplicated world where problems could be settled with a sleep rod or a blaster and the Video screen was unknown.

Having heard of what awaited them without, the men of the Queen were more content to be incarcerated in the quarantine section. But as time wore on and the Cargo-master did not return, their anxieties awoke. They were fairly sure by now that any penalty the Patrol or the Terrapolic would impose would not be too drastic. But a broken contract was another and more serious affair—a matter which might ground them more effectively than any rule of the law enforcement bodies. And Jellico took to pacing the room, while Tang and Wilcox who had started a game of four dimensional chess made countless errors of move, and Stotz glared moodily at the wall, apparently too sunk in his own gloomy thoughts to rise from the mess table in the alcove.

Though time had ceased to have much meaning for them except as an irritating reminder of the now sure failure of their Sargolian venture, they marked the hours into a second full day



of detention before Van Rycke finally put in appearance. The Cargo-master was plainly tired, but he showed no signs of discomposure. In fact as he came in he was humming what he fondly imagined was a popular tune.

Jellico asked no questions, he merely regarded his trusted officer with a quizzically raised eyebrow. But the others drew around. It was so apparent that Van Rycke was pleased with himself. Which could only mean that in some fantastic way he had managed to bring their venture down in a full fin landing, that somehow he had argued the Queen out of danger into a position where he could control the situation.

He halted just within the doorway and eyed Dane, Ali, and Rip with mock severity. “You’re baaaad boys,” he told them with a shake of the head and a drawl of the adjective. “You’ve been demoted ten files each on the list.”

Which must put him on the bottom rung once more, Dane calculated swiftly. Or even below—though he didn’t see how he could fall beneath the rank he held at assignment. However, he found the news heartening instead of discouraging. Compared to a bleak sentence at the moon mines such demotion was absolutely nothing and he knew that Van Rycke was breaking the worst news first.

“You also forfeit all pay for this voyage,” the Cargo-master was continuing. But Jellico broke in.

“Board fine?”

At the Cargo-master’s nod, Jellico added. “Ship pays that.”

“So I told them,” Van Rycke agreed. “The Queen’s warned off Terra for ten solar years—”

They could take that, too. Other Free Traders got back to their home ports perhaps once in a quarter century. It was so much less than they had expected that the sentence was greeted with a concentrated sigh of relief.

“No earth-side leave—”

All right—no leave. They were not, after their late experiences so entranced with Terraport that they wanted to linger in its environs any longer than they had to.

“We lose the Sargol contract—”

That did hurt. But they had resigned themselves to it since the hour when they had realized that they could not make it back to the perfumed planet.

“To Inter-Solar?” Wilcox asked the important question.

Van Rycke was smiling broadly, as if the loss he had just announced was in some way a gain. “No—to Combine!”

“Combine?” the Captain echoed and his puzzlement was duplicated around the circle. How did Inter-Solar’s principal rival come into it?

“We’ve made a deal with Combine,” Van Rycke informed them. “I wasn’t going to let I-S cash in on our loss. So I went to Vickers at Combine and told him the situation. He understands that we were in solid with the Salariki and that the Eysies are not. And a chance to point a blaster at I-S’s tail is just what he has been waiting for. The shipment will go out to the storm priests tomorrow on a light cruiser—it’ll make it on time.”

Yes, a light cruiser, one of the fast ships maintained by the big Companies, could make the transition to Sargol with a slight margin to spare. Stotz nodded his approval at this practical solution.

“I’m going with it—” That did jerk them all up short. For Van Rycke to leave the Queen—*that* was as unthinkable as if Captain Jellico had suddenly announced that he was about to retire and become a kelp farmer. “Just for the one trip,” the Cargo-master hastened to assure them. “I smooth their vector with the storm priests and hand over so the Eysies will be frozen out—”

Captain Jellico interrupted at that point. “D’you mean that Combine is *buying* us out—not just taking over? What kind of a deal—”

But Van Rycke, his smile a brilliant stretch across his plump face, was nodding in agreement. “They’re taking over our contract and our place with the Salariki.”

“In return for what?” Steen Wilcox asked for them all.

“For twenty-five thousand credits and a mail run between Xecho and Trewsworld—frontier planets. They’re far enough from Terra to get around the exile ruling. The Patrol will escort us out and see that we get down to work like good little space men. We’ll have two years of a nice, quiet run on regular pay. Then, when all the powers that shine have forgotten about us, we can cut in on the trade routes again.”

“And the pay?” “First or second class mail?” “When do we start?”

“Standard pay on the completion of each run—Board rates,” he made replies in order. “First, second and third class mail—anything that bears the government seal and out in those quarters it is apt to be *anything!* And you start as soon as you can get to Xecho and relieve the Combine scout which has been holding down the run.”

“While you go to Sargol—” commented Jellico.

“While I make one voyage to Sargol. You can spare me,” he dropped one of his big hands on Dane’s shoulder and gave the flesh beneath it a quick squeeze. “Seeing as how our juniors helped pull us out of this last mix-up we can trust them about an inch farther than we did before. Anyway—Cargo-master on a mail run is more or less a thumb-twiddling job at the best. And you can trust Thorson on stowage—that’s one thing he *does* know.” Which dubious ending left Dane wondering as to whether he had been complimented or warned. “I’ll be on board again before you know it—the Combine will ship me out to Trewsworld on your second trip across and I’ll join ship there. For once we won’t have to worry for awhile. Nothing can happen on a mail run.” He shook his head at the three youngest members of the crew. “You’re in for a very dull time—and it will serve you right. Give you a chance to learn your jobs so that when you come up for reassignment you can pick up some of those files you were just demoted. Now,” he started briskly for the door, “I’ll tranship to the Combine cruiser. I take it that you *don’t* want to meet the Video people?”

At their hasty agreement to that, he laughed. “Well, the Patrol doesn’t want the Video spouting about ‘high-handed official news suppression’ so about an hour or so from now you’ll be let out the back way. They put the Queen in a cradle and a field scooter will take you to her. You’ll find her serviced for a take-off to Luna City. You can refit there for deep space. Frankly the sooner you get off-world the happier all ranks are going to be—both here and on the Board. It will be better for us to walk softly for a while and let them forget that the Solar Queen and her crazy crew exists. Separately and together you’ve managed to break—or at least bend—half the laws in the books and they’d like to have us out of their minds.”

Captain Jellico stood up. “They aren’t any more anxious to see us go than we are to get out of here. You’ve pulled it off for us again, Van, and we’re lucky to get out of it this easy—”

Van Rycke rolled his eyes ceilingward. “You’ll never know how lucky! Be glad Combine hates the space I-S blasts through. We were able to use that to our advantage. Get the big fellows at each others’ throats and they’ll stop annoying us—simple proposition but it works. Anyway we’re set in blessed and peaceful obscurity now. Thank the Spirit of Free Space there’s practically no trouble one can get into on a safe and sane mail route!”

But Cargo-master Van Rycke, in spite of knowing the Solar Queen and the temper of her crew, was exceedingly over-optimistic when he made that emphatic statement.

## **The Time Traders**

## 1

To anyone who glanced casually inside the detention room the young man sitting there did not seem very formidable. In height he might have been a little above average, but not enough to make him noticeable. His brown hair was cropped conservatively; his unlined boy's face was not one to be remembered—unless one was observant enough to note those light-gray eyes and catch a chilling, measuring expression showing now and then for an instant in their depths.

Neatly and inconspicuously dressed, in this last quarter of the twentieth century his like was to be found on any street of the city ten floors below—to all outward appearances. But that other person under the protective coloring so assiduously cultivated could touch heights of encased and controlled fury which Murdock himself did not understand and was only just learning to use as a weapon against a world he had always found hostile.

He was aware, though he gave no sign of it, that a guard was watching him. The cop on duty was an old hand—he probably expected some reaction other than passive acceptance from the prisoner. But he was not going to get it. The law had Ross sewed up tight this time. Why didn't they get about the business of shipping him off? Why had he had that afternoon session with the skull thumper? Ross had been on the defensive then, and he had not liked it. He had given to the other's questions all the attention his shrewd mind could muster, but a faint, very faint, apprehension still clung to the memory of that meeting.

The door of the detention room opened. Ross did not turn his head, but the guard cleared his throat as if their hour of mutual silence had dried his vocal cords. "On your feet, Murdock! The judge wants to see you."

Ross rose smoothly, with every muscle under fluid control. It never paid to talk back, to allow any sign of defiance to show. He would go through the motions as if he were a bad little boy who had realized his errors. It was a meek-and-mild act that had paid off more than once in Ross's checkered past. So he faced the man seated behind the desk in the other room with an uncertain, diffident smile, standing with boyish awkwardness, respectfully waiting for the other to speak first.

Judge Ord Rawle. It was his rotten luck to pull old Eagle Beak on his case. Well, he would simply have to take it when the old boy dished it out. Not that he had to remain stuck with it later...

"You have a bad record, young man."

Ross allowed his smile to fade; his shoulders slumped. But under concealing lids his eyes showed an instant of cold defiance.

"Yes, sir," he agreed in a voice carefully cultivated to shake convincingly about the edges. Then suddenly all Ross's pleasure in the skill of his act was wiped away. Judge Rawle was not alone; that blasted skull thumper was sitting there, watching the prisoner with the same keenness he had shown the other day.

"A very bad record for the few years you have had to make it." Eagle Beak was staring at him, too, but without the same look of penetration, luckily for Ross. "By rights, you should be turned over to the new Rehabilitation Service...."

Ross froze inside. That was the “treatment,” icy rumors of which had spread throughout his particular world. For the second time since he had entered the room his self-confidence was jarred. Then he clung with a degree of hope to the phrasing of that last sentence.

“Instead, I have been authorized to offer you a choice, Murdock. One which I shall state—and on record—I do not in the least approve.”

Ross’s twinge of fear faded. If the judge didn’t like it, there must be something in it to the advantage of Ross Murdock. He’d grab it for sure!

“There is a government project in need of volunteers. It seems that you have tested out as possible material for this assignment. If you sign for it, the law will consider the time spent on it as part of your sentence. Thus you may aid the country which you have heretofore disgraced——”

“And if I refuse, I go to this rehabilitation. Is that right, sir?”

“I certainly consider you a fit candidate for rehabilitation. Your record——” He shuffled through the papers on his desk.

“I choose to volunteer for the project, sir.”

The judge snorted and pushed all the papers into a folder. He spoke to a man waiting in the shadows. “Here then is your volunteer, Major.”

Ross bottled in his relief. He was over the first hump. And since his luck had held so far, he might be about to win all the way....

The man Judge Rawle called “Major” moved into the light. At the first glance Ross, to his hidden annoyance, found himself uneasy. To face up to Eagle Beak was all part of the game. But somehow he sensed one did not play such games with this man.

“Thank you, your honor. We will be on our way at once. This weather is not very promising.”

Before he realized what was happening, Ross found himself walking meekly to the door. He considered trying to give the major the slip when they left the building, losing himself in a storm-darkened city. But they did not take the elevator downstairs. Instead, they climbed two or three flights up the emergency stairs. And to his humiliation Ross found himself panting and slowing, while the other man, who must have been a good dozen years his senior, showed no signs of discomfort.

They came out into the snow on the roof, and the major flashed a torch skyward, guiding in a dark shadow which touched down before them. A helicopter! For the first time Ross began to doubt the wisdom of his choice.

“On your way, Murdock!” The voice was impersonal enough, but that very impersonality got under one’s skin.

Bundled into the machine between the silent major and an equally quiet pilot in uniform, Ross was lifted over the city, whose ways he knew as well as he knew the lines on his own palm, into the unknown he was already beginning to regard dubiously. The lighted streets and buildings, their outlines softened by the soft wet snow, fell out of sight. Now they could mark the outer highways. Ross refused to ask any questions. He could take this silent treatment; he *had* taken a lot of tougher things in the past.

The patches of light disappeared, and the country opened out. The plane banked. Ross, with all the familiar landmarks of his world gone, could not have said if they were headed north or south. But moments later not even the thick curtain of snowflakes could blot out the pattern of red lights on the ground, and the helicopter settled down.

“Come on!”

For the second time Ross obeyed. He stood shivering, engulfed in a miniature blizzard. His clothing, protection enough in the city, did little good against the push of the wind. A hand gripped his upper arm, and he was drawn forward to a low building. A door banged and Ross and his companion came into a region of light and very welcome heat.

“Sit down—over there!”

Too bewildered to resent orders, Ross sat. There were other men in the room. One, wearing a queer suit of padded clothing, a bulbous headgear hooked over his arm, was reading a paper. The major crossed to speak to him and after they conferred for a moment, the major beckoned Ross with a crooked finger. Ross trailed the officer into an inner room lined with lockers.

From one of the lockers the major pulled a suit like the pilot's, and began to measure it against Ross. “All right,” he snapped. “Climb into this! We haven't all night.”

Ross climbed into the suit. As soon as he fastened the last zipper his companion jammed one of the domed helmets on his head. The pilot looked in the door. “We'd better scramble, Kelgarries, or we may be grounded for the duration!”

They hurried back to the flying field. If the helicopter had been a surprising mode of travel, this new machine was something straight out of the future—a needle-slim ship poised on fins, its sharp nose lifting vertically into the heavens. There was a scaffolding along one side, which the pilot scaled to enter the ship.

Unwillingly, Ross climbed the same ladder and found that he must wedge himself in on his back, his knees hunched up almost under his chin. To make it worse, cramped as those quarters were, he had to share them with the major. A transparent hood snapped down and was secured, sealing them in.

During his short lifetime Ross had often been afraid, bitterly afraid. He had fought to toughen his mind and body against such fears. But what he experienced now was no ordinary fear; it was panic so strong that it made him feel sick. To be shut in this small place with the knowledge that he had no control over his immediate future brought him face to face with every terror he had ever known, all of them combined into one horrible whole.

How long does a nightmare last? A moment? An hour? Ross could not time his. But at last the weight of a giant hand clamped down on his chest, and he fought for breath until the world exploded about him.

He came back to consciousness slowly. For a second he thought he was blind. Then he began to sort out one shade of grayish light from another. Finally, Ross became aware that he no longer rested on his back, but was slumped in a seat. The world about him was wrung with a vibration that beat in turn through his body.

Ross Murdock had remained at liberty as long as he had because he was able to analyze a situation quickly. Seldom in the past five years had he been at a loss to deal with any challenging person or action. Now he was aware that he was on the defensive and was being kept there. He stared into the dark and thought hard and furiously. He was convinced that everything that was happening to him this day was designed with only one end in view—to shake his self-confidence and make him pliable. Why?

Ross had an enduring belief in his own abilities and he also possessed a kind of shrewd understanding seldom granted to one so young. He knew that while Murdock was important to Murdock, he was none too important in the scheme of things as a whole. He had a

record—a record so bad that Rawle might easily have thrown the book at him. But it differed in one important way from that of many of his fellows; until now he had been able to beat most of the raps. Ross believed this was largely because he had always worked alone and taken pains to plan a job in advance.

Why now had Ross Murdock become so important to someone that they would do all this to shake him? He was a volunteer—for what? To be a guinea pig for some bug they wanted to learn how to kill cheaply and easily? They'd been in a big hurry to push him off base. Using the silent treatment, this rushing around in planes, they were really working to keep him groggy. So, all right, he'd give them a groggy boy all set up for their job, whatever it was. Only, was his act good enough to fool the major? Ross had a hunch that it might not be, and that really hurt.

It was deep night now. Either they had flown out of the path of the storm or were above it. There were stars shining through the cover of the cockpit, but no moon.

Ross's formal education was sketchy, but in his own fashion he had acquired a range of knowledge which would have surprised many of the authorities who had had to deal with him. All the wealth of a big city library had been his to explore, and he had spent much time there, soaking up facts in many odd branches of learning. Facts were very useful things. On at least three occasions assorted scraps of knowledge had preserved Ross's freedom, once, perhaps his life.

Now he tried to fit together the scattered facts he knew about his present situation into some proper pattern. He was inside some new type of super-super atomjet, a machine so advanced in design that it would not have been used for anything that was not an important mission. Which meant that Ross Murdock had become necessary to someone, somewhere. Knowing that fact should give him a slight edge in the future, and he might well need such an edge. He'd just have to wait, play dumb, and use his eyes and ears.

At the rate they were shooting along they ought to be out of the country in a couple of hours. Didn't the Government have bases half over the world to keep the "cold peace"? Well, there was nothing for it. To be planted abroad someplace might interfere with plans for escape, but he'd handle that detail when he was forced to face it.

Then suddenly Ross was on his back once more, the giant hand digging into his chest and middle. This time there were no lights on the ground to guide them in. Ross had no intimation that they had reached their destination until they set down with a jar which snapped his teeth together.

The major wriggled out, and Ross was able to stretch his cramped body. But the other's hand was already on his shoulder, urging him along. Ross crawled free and clung dizzily to a ladderlike disembarking structure.

Below there were no lights, only an expanse of open snow. Men were moving across that blank area, gathering at the foot of the ladder. Ross was hungry and very tired. If the major wanted to play games, he hoped that such action could wait until the next morning.

In the meantime he must learn where "here" was. If he had a chance to run, he wanted to know the surrounding territory. But that hand was on his arm, drawing him along toward a door that stood half-open. As far as Ross could see, it led to the interior of a hillock of snow. Either the storm or men had done a very good cover-up job, and somehow Ross knew the camouflage was intentional.

That was Ross's introduction to the base, and after his arrival his view of the installation was extremely limited. One day was spent in undergoing the most searching physical he had ever



experienced. And after the doctors had poked and pried he was faced by a series of other tests no one bothered to explain. Thereafter he was introduced to solitary, that is, confined to his own company in a cell-like room with a bunk that was more comfortable than it looked and an announcer in a corner of the ceiling. So far he had been told exactly nothing. And so far he had asked no questions, stubbornly keeping up his end of what he believed to be a tug of wills. At the moment, safely alone and lying flat on his bunk he eyed the announcer, a very dangerous young man and one who refused to yield an inch.

“Now hear this....” The voice transmitted through that grill was metallic, but its rasp held overtones of Kelgarries’ voice. Ross’s lips tightened. He had explored every inch of the walls and knew that there was no trace of the door which had admitted him. With only his bare hands to work with he could not break out, and his only clothes were the shirt, sturdy slacks, and a pair of soft-soled moccasins that they had given him.

“... to identify ...” droned the voice. Ross realized that he must have missed something, not that it mattered. He was almost determined not to play along any more.

There was a click, signifying that Kelgarries was through braying. But the customary silence did not close in again. Instead, Ross heard a clear, sweet trilling which he vaguely associated with a bird. His acquaintance with all feathered life was limited to city sparrows and plump park pigeons, neither of which raised their voices in song, but surely those sounds were bird notes. Ross glanced from the mike in the ceiling to the opposite wall and what he saw there made him sit up, with the instant response of an alerted fighter.

For the wall was no longer there! Instead, there was a sharp slope of ground cutting down from peaks where the dark green of fir trees ran close to the snow line. Patches of snow clung to the earth in sheltered places, and the scent of those pines was in Ross’s nostrils, real as the wind touching him with its chill.

He shivered as a howl sounded loudly and echoed, bearing the age-old warning of a wolf pack, hungry and a-hunt. Ross had never heard that sound before, but his human heritage subconsciously recognized it for what it was—death on four feet. Similarly, he was able to identify the gray shadows slinking about the nearest trees, and his hands balled into fists as he looked wildly about him for some weapon.

The bunk was under him and three of the four walls of the room enclosed him like a cave. But one of those gray skulkers had raised its head and was looking directly at him, its reddish eyes alight. Ross ripped the top blanket off the bunk with a half-formed idea of snapping it at the animal when it sprang.

Stiff-legged, the beast advanced, a guttural growl sounding deep in its throat. To Ross the animal, larger than any dog he had even seen and twice as vicious, was a monster. He had the blanket ready before he realized that the wolf was not watching him after all, and that its attention was focused on a point out of his line of vision.

The wolf’s muzzle wrinkled in a snarl, revealing long yellow-white teeth. There was a singing twang, and the animal leaped into the air, fell back, and rolled on the ground, biting despairingly at a shaft protruding from just behind its ribs. It howled again, and blood broke from its mouth.

Ross was beyond surprise now. He pulled himself together and got up, to walk steadily toward the dying wolf. And he wasn’t in the least amazed when his outstretched hands flattened against an unseen barrier. Slowly, he swept his hands right and left, sure that he was touching the wall of his cell. Yet his eyes told him he was on a mountain side, and every sight, sound, and smell was making it real to him.

Puzzled, he thought a moment and then, finding an explanation that satisfied him, he nodded once and went back to sit at ease on his bunk. This must be some superior form of TV that included odors, the illusion of wind, and other fancy touches to make it more vivid. The total effect was so convincing that Ross had to keep reminding himself that it was all just a picture.

The wolf was dead. Its pack mates had fled into the brush, but since the picture remained, Ross decided that the show was not yet over. He could still hear a click of sound, and he waited for the next bit of action. But the reason for his viewing it still eluded him.

A man came into view, crossing before Ross. He stooped to examine the dead wolf, catching it by the tail and hoisting its hindquarters off the ground. Comparing the beast's size with the hunter's, Ross saw that he had not been wrong in his estimation of the animal's unusually large dimensions. The man shouted over his shoulder, his words distinct enough, but unintelligible to Ross.

The stranger was oddly dressed—too lightly dressed if one judged the climate by the frequent snow patches and the biting cold. A strip of coarse cloth, extending from his armpit to about four inches above the knee, was wound about his body and pulled in at the waist by a belt. The belt, far more ornate than the cumbersome wrapping, was made of many small chains linking metal plates and supported a long dagger which hung straight in front. The man also wore a round blue cloak, now swept back on his shoulders to free his bare arms, which was fastened by a large pin under his chin. His footgear, which extended above his calves, was made of animal hide, still bearing patches of shaggy hair. His face was beardless, though a shadowy line along his chin suggested that he had not shaved that particular day. A fur cap concealed most of his dark-brown hair.

Was he an Indian? No, for although his skin was tanned, it was as fair as Ross's under that weathering. And his clothing did not resemble any Indian apparel Ross had ever seen. Yet, in spite of his primitive trappings, the man had such an aura of authority, of self-confidence, and competence that it was clear he was top dog in his own section of the world.

Soon another man, dressed much like the first, but with a rust-brown cloak, came along, pulling behind him two very reluctant donkeys, whose eyes rolled fearfully at sight of the dead wolf. Both animals wore packs lashed on their backs by ropes of twisted hide. Then another man came along, with another brace of donkeys. Finally, a fourth man, wearing skins for covering and with a mat of beard on his cheeks and chin, appeared. His uncovered head, a bush of uncombed flaxen hair, shone whitish as he knelt beside the dead beast, a knife with a dull-gray blade in his hand, and set to work skinning the wolf with appreciable skill. Three more pairs of donkeys, all heavily laden, were led past the scene before he finished his task. Finally, he rolled the bloody skin into a bundle and gave the flayed body a kick before he ran lightly after the disappearing train of pack animals.

## 2

Ross, absorbed in the scene before him, was not prepared for the sudden and complete darkness which blotted out not only the action but the light in his own room as well.

“What—?” His startled voice rang loudly in his ears, too loudly, for all sound had been wiped out with the light. The faint swish of the ventilating system, of which he had not been actively aware until it had disappeared, was also missing. A trace of the same panic he had known in the cockpit of the atomjet tingled along his nerves. But this time he could meet the unknown with action.

Ross slowly moved through the dark, his hands outstretched before him to ward off contact with the wall. He was determined that somehow he would discover the hidden door, escape from this dark cell....

There! His palm struck flat against a smooth surface. He swept out his hand—and suddenly it passed over emptiness. Ross explored by touch. There *was* a door and now it was open. For a moment he hesitated, upset by a nagging little fear that if he stepped through he would be out on the hillside with the wolves.

“That’s stupid!” Again he spoke aloud. And, just because he did feel uneasy, he moved. All the frustrations of the past hours built up in him a raging desire to do something—anything—just so long as it was what *he* wanted to do and not at another’s orders.

Nevertheless, Ross continued to move slowly, for the space beyond that open door was as deep and dark a pit as the room he left. To squeeze along one wall, using an outstretched arm as a guide, was the best procedure, he decided.

A few feet farther on, his shoulder slipped from the surface and he half tumbled into another open door. But there was the wall again, and he clung to it thankfully. Another door ... Ross paused, trying to catch some faint sound, the slightest hint that he was not alone in this blindman’s maze. But without even air currents to stir it, the blackness itself took on a thick solidity which encased him as a congealing jelly.

The wall ended. Ross kept his left hand on it, flailed out with his right, and felt his nails scrape across another surface. The space separating the two surfaces was wider than any doorway. Was it a cross-corridor? He was about to make a wider arm sweep when he heard a sound. He was not alone.

Ross went back to the wall, flattening himself against it, trying to control the volume of his own breathing in order to catch the slightest whisper of the other noise. He discovered that lack of sight can confuse the ear. He could not identify those clicks, the wisp of fluttering sound that might be air displaced by the opening of another door.

Finally, he detected something moving at floor level. Someone or something must be creeping, not walking, toward him. Ross pushed back around the corner. It never occurred to him to challenge that crawler. There was an element of danger in this strange encounter in the dark; it was not meant to be a meeting between fellow explorers.

The sound of crawling was not steady. There were long pauses, and Ross became convinced that each rest was punctuated by heavy breathing as if the crawler was finding progress a great and exhausting effort. He fought the picture that persisted in his imagination—that of a wolf snuffing along the blacked-out hall. Caution suggested a quick retreat, but Ross’s urge to rebellion held him where he was, crouching, straining to see what crept toward him.

Suddenly there was a blinding flare of light, and Ross's hands went to cover his dazzled eyes. And he heard a despairing, choked exclamation from near to floor level. The same steady light that normally filled hall and room was bright again. Ross found himself standing at the juncture of two corridors—momentarily, he was absurdly pleased that he had deduced that correctly—and the crawler—?

A man—at least the figure was a two-legged, two-armed body reasonably human in outline—was lying several yards away. But the body was so wrapped in bandages and the head so totally muffled, that it lacked all identity. For that reason it was the more startling.

One of the mittened hands moved slightly, raising the body from the ground so it could squirm forward an inch or so. Before Ross could move, a man came running into the corridor from the far end. Murdock recognized Major Kelgarries. He wet his lips as the major went down on his knees beside the creature on the floor.

“Hardy! Hardy!” That voice, which carried the snap of command whenever it was addressed to Ross, was now warmly human. “Hardy, man!” The major's hands were on the bandaged body, lifting it, easing the head and shoulders back against his arm. “It's all right, Hardy. You're back—safe. This is the base, Hardy.” He spoke slowly, soothingly, with the steadiness one would use to comfort a frightened child.

Those mittened paws which had beat feebly into the air fell onto the bandage-wreathed chest. “Back—safe—” The voice from behind the face mask was a rusty croak.

“Back, safe,” the major assured him.

“Dark—dark all around again—” protested the croak.

“Just a power failure, man. Everything's all right now. We'll get you into bed.”

The mitten pawed again until it touched Kelgarries' arm; then it flexed a little as if the hand under it was trying to grip.

“Safe—?”

“You bet you are!” The major's tone carried firm reassurance. Now Kelgarries looked up at Ross as if he knew the other had been there all the time.

“Murdock, get down to the end room. Call Dr. Farrell!”

“Yes, sir!” The “sir” came so automatically that Ross had already reached the end room before he realized he had used it.

Nobody explained matters to Ross Murdock. The bandaged Hardy was claimed by the doctor and two attendants and carried away, the major walking beside the stretcher, still holding one of the mittened hands in his. Ross hesitated, sure he was not supposed to follow, but not ready either to explore farther or return to his own room. The sight of Hardy, whoever he might be, had radically changed Ross's conception of the project he had too speedily volunteered to join.

That what they did here was important, Ross had never doubted. That it was dangerous, he had early suspected. But his awareness had been an abstract concept of danger, not connected with such concrete evidence as Hardy crawling through the dark. From the first, Ross had nursed vague plans for escape; now he knew he must get out of this place lest he end up a twin for Hardy.

“Murdock?”

Having heard no warning sound from behind, Ross whirled, ready to use his fists, his only weapons. But he did not face the major, or any of the other taciturn men he knew held positions of authority. The newcomer's brown skin was startling against the neutral shade of the walls. His hair and brows were only a few shades darker; but the general sameness of color was relieved by the vivid blue of his eyes.

Expressionless, the dark stranger stood quietly, his arms hanging loosely by his sides, studying Ross, as if the younger man was some problem he had been assigned to solve. When he spoke, his voice was a monotone lacking any modulation of feeling.

"I am Ashe." He introduced himself baldly; he might have been saying "This is a table and that is a chair."

Ross's quick temper took spark from the other's indifference. "All right—so you're Ashe!" He strove to make a challenge of it. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

But the other did not rise to the bait. He shrugged. "For the time being we have been partnered——"

"Partnered for what?" demanded Ross, controlling his temper.

"We work in pairs here. The machine sorts us ..." he answered briefly and consulted his wrist watch. "Mess call soon."

Ashe had already turned away, and Ross could not stand the other's lack of interest. While Murdock refused to ask questions of the major or any others on that side of the fence, surely he could get some information from a fellow "volunteer."

"What is this place, anyway?" he asked.

The other glanced back over his shoulder. "Operation Retrograde."

Ross swallowed his anger. "Okay, but what do they do here? Listen, I just saw a fellow who'd been banged up as if he'd been in a concrete mixer, creeping along this hall. What sort of work do they do here? And what do we have to do?"

To his amazement Ashe smiled, at least his lips quirked faintly. "Hardy got under your skin, eh? Well, we have our percentage of failures. They are as few as it's humanly possible to make, and they give us every advantage that can be worked out for us——"

"Failures at what?"

"Operation Retrograde."

Somewhere down the hall a buzzer gave a muted whirr.

"That's mess call. And I'm hungry, even if you're not." Ashe walked away as if Ross Murdock had ceased to exist.

But Ross Murdock did exist, and to him that was an important fact. As he trailed along behind Ashe he determined that he was going to continue to exist, in one piece and unharmed, Operation Retrograde or no Operation Retrograde. And he was going to pry a few enlightening answers out of somebody very soon.

To his surprise he found Ashe waiting for him at the door of a room from which came the sound of voices and a subdued clatter of trays and tableware.

"Not many in tonight," Ashe commented in a take-it-or-leave-it tone. "It's been a busy week."

The room was rather sparsely occupied. Five tables were empty, while the men gathered at the remaining two. Ross counted ten men, either already eating or coming back from a serving hatch with well-filled trays. All of them were dressed in slacks, shirt, and moccasins like himself—the outfit seemed to be a sort of undress uniform—and six of them were ordinary in physical appearance. The other four differed so radically that Ross could barely conceal his amazement.

Since their fellows accepted them without comment, Ross silently stole glances at them as he waited behind Ashe for a tray. One pair were clearly Oriental; they were small, lean men with thin brackets of long black mustache on either side of their mobile mouths. Yet he had caught a word or two of their conversation, and they spoke his own language with the facility of the native born. In addition to the mustaches, each wore a blue tattoo mark on the forehead and others of the same design on the backs of their agile hands.

The second duo were even more fantastic. The color of their flaxen hair was normal, but they wore it in braids long enough to swing across their powerful shoulders, a fashion unlike any Ross had ever seen. Yet any suggestion of effeminacy certainly did not survive beyond the first glance at their ruggedly masculine features.

“Gordon!” One of the braided giants swung halfway around from the table to halt Ashe as he came down the aisle with his tray. “When did you get back? And where is Sanford?”

One of the Orientals laid down the spoon with which he had been vigorously stirring his coffee and asked with real concern, “Another loss?”

Ashe shook his head. “Just reassignment. Sandy’s holding down Outpost Gog and doing well.” He grinned and his face came to life with an expression of impish humor Ross would not have believed possible. “He’ll end up with a million or two if he doesn’t watch out. He takes to trade as if he were born with a beaker in his fist.”

The Oriental laughed and then glanced at Ross. “Your new partner, Ashe?”

Some of the animation disappeared from Ashe’s brown face; he was noncommittal again. “Temporary assignment. This is Murdock.” The introduction was flat enough to daunt Ross. “Hodaki, Feng,” he indicated the two Easterners with a nod as he put down his tray. “Jansen, Van Wyke.” That accounted for the blonds.

“Ashe!” A man arose at the other table and came to stand beside theirs. Thin, with a dark, narrow face and restless eyes, he was much younger than the others, younger and not so well controlled. He might answer questions if there was something in it for him, Ross decided, and filed the thought away.

“Well, Kurt?” Ashe’s recognition was as dampening as it could be, and Ross’s estimation of the younger man went up a fraction when the snub appeared to have no effect upon him.

“Did you hear about Hardy?”

Feng looked as if he were about to speak, and Van Wyke frowned. Ashe made a deliberate process of chewing and swallowing before he replied. “Naturally.” His tone reduced whatever had happened to Hardy to a matter-of-fact proceeding far removed from Kurt’s implied melodrama.

“He’s smashed up ... kaput...” Kurt’s accent, slight in the beginning, was thickening. “Tortured...”

Ashe regarded him levelly. “You aren’t on Hardy’s run, are you?”

Still Kurt refused to be quashed. “Of course, I’m not! You know the run I am in training for. But that is not saying that such can not happen as well on my run, or yours, or yours!” He pointed a stabbing finger at Feng and then at the blond men.

“You can fall out of bed and break your neck, too, if your number comes up that way,” observed Jansen. “Go cry on Millaird’s shoulder if it hurts you that much. You were told the score at your briefing. You know why you were picked...”

Ross caught a faint glance aimed at him by Ashe. He was still totally in the dark, but he would not try to pry any information from this crowd. Maybe part of their training was this hush-hush business. He would wait and see, until he could get Kurt aside and do a little pumping. Meanwhile he ate stolidly and tried to cover up his interest in the conversation.

“Then you are going to keep on saying ‘Yes, sir,’ ‘No, sir,’ to every order here——?”

Hodaki slammed his tattooed hand on the table. “Why this foolishness, Kurt? You well know how and why we are picked for runs. Hardy had the deck stacked against him through no fault of the project. That has happened before; it will happen again——”

“Which is what I have been saying! Do you wish it to happen to you? Pretty games those tribesmen on your run play with their prisoners, do they not?”

“Oh, shut up!” Jansen got to his feet. Since he loomed at least five inches above Kurt and probably could have broken him in two over one massive knee, his order was one to be considered. “If you have any complaints, go make them to Millaird. And, little man”—he poked a massive forefinger into Kurt’s chest—“wait until you make that first run of yours before you sound off so loudly. No one is sent out without every ounce of preparation he can take. But we can’t set up luck in advance, and Hardy was unlucky. That’s that. We got him back, and that was lucky for him. He’d be the first to tell you so.” He stretched. “I’m for a game—Ashe? Hodaki?”

“Always so energetic,” murmured Ashe, but he nodded as did the small Oriental.

Feng smiled at Ross. “Always these three try to beat each other, and so far all the contests are draws. But we hope ... yes, we have hopes....”

So Ross had no chance to speak to Kurt. Instead, he was drawn into the knot of men who, having finished their meal, entered a small arena with a half circle of spectator seats at one side and a space for contestants at the other. What followed absorbed Ross as completely as the earlier scene of the wolf killing. This too was a fight, but not a physical struggle. All three contenders were not only unlike in body, but as Ross speedily came to understand, they were also unlike in their mental approach to any problem.

They seated themselves crosslegged at the three points of a triangle. Then Ashe looked from the tall blond to the small Oriental. “Territory?” he asked crisply.

“Inland plains!” That came almost in chorus, and each man, looking at his opponent, began to laugh.

Ashe himself chuckled. “Trying to be smart tonight, boys?” he inquired. “All right, plains it is.”

He brought his hand down on the floor before him, and to Ross’s astonishment the area around the players darkened and the floor became a stretch of miniature countryside. Grassy plains rippled under the wind of a fair day.

“Red!”

“Blue!”

“Yellow!”

The choices came quickly from the dusk masking the players. And upon those orders points of the designated color came into being as small lights.

“Red—caravan!” Ross recognized Jansen’s boom.

“Blue—raiders!” Hodaki’s choice was only an instant behind.

“Yellow—unknown factor.”

Ross was sure that sigh came from Jansen. “Is the unknown factor a natural phenomenon?”

“No—tribe on the march.”

“Ah!” Hodaki was considering that. Ross could picture his shrug.

The game began. Ross had heard of chess, of war games played with miniature armies or ships, of games on paper which demand from the players a quick wit and a trained memory. This game, however, was all those combined, and more. As his imagination came to life the moving points of light were transformed into the raiders, the merchants’ caravan, the tribe on the march. There was ingenious deployment, a battle, a retreat, a small victory here, to be followed by a bigger defeat there. The game might have gone on for hours. The men about him muttered, taking sides and arguing heatedly in voices low enough not to drown out the moves called by the players. Ross was thrilled when the red traders avoided a very cleverly laid ambush, and indignant when the tribe was forced to withdraw or the caravan lost points. It was the most fascinating game he had ever seen, and he realized that the three men ordering those moves were all masters of strategy. Their respective skills checkmated each other so equally that an outright win was far away.

Then Jansen laughed, and the red line of the caravan gathered in a tight knot. “Camped at a spring,” he announced, “but with plenty of sentries out.” Red sparks showed briefly beyond that center core. “And they’ll have to stay there for all of me. We could keep this up till doomsday, and nobody would crack.”

“No”—Hodaki contradicted him—“someday one of you will make a little mistake and then—”

“And then whatever bully boys you’re running will clobber us?” asked Jansen. “That’ll be the day! Anyway, truce for now.”

“Granted!”

The lights of the arena went on and the plains vanished into a dark, tiled floor. “Any time you want a return engagement it’ll be fine with me,” said Ashe, getting up.

Jansen grinned. “Put that off for a month or so, Gordon. We push into time tomorrow. Take care of yourselves, you two. I don’t want to have to break in another set of players when I come back.”

Ross, finding it difficult to shake off the illusion which had held him entranced, felt a slight touch on his shoulder and glanced up. Kurt stood behind him, apparently intent upon Jansen and Hodaki as they argued over some point of the game.

“See you tonight.” The boy’s lips hardly moved, a trick Ross knew from his own past. Yes, he *would* see Kurt tonight, or whenever he could. He was going to learn what it was this odd company seemed determined to keep as their own private secret.



## 3

Ross stood cautiously against the wall of his darkened room, his head turned toward the slightly open door. A slight shuffling sound had awakened him, and he was now as ready as a cat before her spring. But he did not hurl himself at the figure now easing the door farther open. He waited until the visitor was approaching the bunk before he slid along the wall, closing the door and putting his shoulders against it.

“What’s the pitch?” Ross demanded in a whisper.

There was a ragged breath, maybe two, then a little laugh out of the dark. “You are ready?” The visitor’s accent left no doubt as to his identity. Kurt was paying him the promised visit.

“Did you think that I wouldn’t be?”

“No.” The dim figure sat without invitation on the edge of the bunk. “I would not be here otherwise, Murdock. You are plenty ... have plenty on the ball. You see, I have heard things about you. Like me, you were tricked into this game. Tell me, is it not true that you saw Hardy tonight.”

“You hear a lot, don’t you?” Ross was noncommittal.

“I hear, I see, I learn more than these big mouths, like the major with all his do’s and don’ts. That I can tell you! You saw Hardy. Do *you* want to be a Hardy?”

“Is there any danger of that?”

“Danger!” Kurt snorted. “Danger—you have not yet known the meaning of danger, little man. Not until now. I ask you again, do you want to end like Hardy? They have not yet looped you in with all their big talk. That is why I came here tonight. If you know what is good for you, Murdock, you will make a break before they tape you——”

“Tape me?”

Kurt’s laugh was full of anger, not amusement. “Oh, yes. They have many tricks here. They are big brains, eggheads, all of them with their favorite gadgets. They put you through a machine to get you registered on a tape. Then, my boy, you cannot get outside the base without ringing all the alarms! Neat, eh? So if you want to make a break, you must try it before they tape you.”

Ross did not trust Kurt, but he was listening to him attentively. The other’s argument sounded convincing to one whose general ignorance of science led him to be as fearful of the whole field as his ancestors had been of black magic. As all his generation, he was conditioned to believe that all kinds of weird inventions were entirely possible and probable—usually to be produced in some dim future, but perhaps today.

“They must have you taped,” Ross pointed out.

Kurt laughed again, but this time he was amused. “They believe that they have. Only they are not as smart as they believe, the major and the rest, including Millaird! No, I have a fighting chance to get out of this place, only I cannot do it alone. That is why I have been waiting for them to bring in a new guy I could get to before they had him pinned down for good. You are tough, Murdock. I saw your record, and I’m betting that you did not come here with the intention of staying. So—here is your chance to go along with one who knows the ropes. You will not have such a good one again.”

The longer Kurt talked, the more convincing he was. Ross lost a few of his suspicions. It was true that he had come prepared to run at the first possible opportunity, and if Kurt had everything planned, so much the better. Of course, it was possible that Kurt was a stool pigeon, leading him on as a test. But that was a chance Ross would have to take.

“Look here, Murdock, maybe you think it’s easy to break out of here. Do you know where we are, boy? We’re near enough to the North Pole as makes no difference! Are you going to leg it back some hundreds of miles through thick ice and snow? A nice jaunt if you make it. I do not think that you can—not without plans and a partner who knows what he is about.”

“And how *do* we go? Steal one of those atomjets? I’m no pilot—are you?”

“They have other things besides a-j’s here. This place is strictly hush-hush. Even the a-j’s do not set down too often for fear they will be tracked by radar. Where have you been, boy? Don’t you know the Reds are circling around up here? These fellows watch for Red activity, and the Reds watch them. They play it under the table on both sides. We get our supplies overland by cats——”

“Cats?”

“Snow sleds, like tractors,” the other answered impatiently. “Our stuff is dumped miles to the south, and the cats go down once a month to bring it back. There’s no trick to driving a cat, and they tear off the miles——”

“How many miles to the south?” inquired Ross skeptically. Granted Kurt was speaking the truth, travel over an arctic wilderness in a stolen machine was risky, to say the least. Ross had only a very vague idea of the polar regions, but he was sure that they could easily swallow up the unwary forever.

“Maybe only a hundred or so, boy. But I have more than one plan, and I’m willing to risk *my* neck. Do you think I intend to start out blind?”

There was that, of course. Ross had early sized up his visitor as one who was first of all interested in his own welfare. He wouldn’t risk his neck without a definite plan in mind.

“Well, what do you say, Murdock? Are you with me or not?”

“I’ll take some time to chew it over——”

“Time is what you do not have, boy. Tomorrow they will tape you. Then—no over the wall for you.”

“Suppose you tell me your trick for fooling the tape,” Ross countered.

“That I cannot do, seeing as how it lies in the way my brain is put together. Do you think I can break open my skull and hand you a piece of what is inside? No, you jump with me tonight or else I must wait to grab the next one who lands here.”

Kurt stood up. His last words were spoken matter-of-factly, and Ross believed he meant exactly what he said. But Ross hesitated. He wanted to try for freedom, a desire fed by his suspicions of what was going on here. He neither liked nor trusted Kurt, but he thought he understood him—better than he understood Ashe or the others. Also, with Kurt he was sure he could hold his own; it would be the kind of struggle he had experienced before.

“Tonight...” he repeated slowly.

“Yes, tonight!” There was new eagerness in Kurt’s voice, for he sensed that the other was wavering. “I have been preparing for a long time, but there must be two of us. We have to take turns driving the cat. There can be no rest until we are far to the south. I tell you it will

be easy. There are food caches arranged along the route for emergencies. I have a map marked to show where they are. Are you coming?"

When Ross did not answer at once the other moved closer to him.

"Remember Hardy? He was not the first, and he will not be the last. They use us up fast here. That is why they brought you so quickly. I tell you, it is better to take your chance with me than on a run."

"And what is a run?"

"So they have not yet briefed you? Well, a run is a little jaunt back into history—not nice comfortable history such as you learned out of a book when you were a little kid. No, you are dropped back into some savage time before history——"

"That's impossible!"

"Yes? You saw those two big blond boys tonight, did you not? Why do you suppose they sport those braids? Because they are taking a little trip into the time when he-men wore braids, and carried axes big enough to crack a man open! And Hodaki and his partner.... Ever hear of the Tartars? Maybe you have not, but once they nearly overran most of Europe."

Ross swallowed. He now knew where he had seen braids pictured on warriors—the Vikings! And Tartars, yes, that movie about someone named Khan, Genghis Khan! But to return into the past was impossible.

Yet, he remembered the picture he had watched today with the wolf slayer and the shaggy-haired man who wore skins. Neither of these was of his own world! Could Kurt be telling the truth? Ross's vivid memory of the scene he had witnessed made Kurt's story more convincing.

"Suppose you get sent back to a time where they do not like strangers," Kurt continued.

"Then you are in for it. That is what happened to Hardy. And it is not good—not good at all!"

"But why?"

Kurt snorted. "*That* they do not tell you until just before you take your first run. I do not want to know why. But I do know that I am not going to be sent into any wilderness where a savage may run a spear through me just to prove something or other for Major John Kelgarries, or for Millaird either. I will try my plan first."

The urgency in Kurt's protest carried Ross past the wavering point. He, too, would try the cat. He was only familiar with this time and world; he had no desire to be sent into another one.

Once Ross had made his decision, Kurt hurried him into action. Kurt's knowledge of the secret procedures at the base proved excellent. Twice they were halted by locked doors, but only momentarily, for Kurt had a tiny gadget, concealed in the palm of his hand, which had only to be held over a latch to open a recalcitrant door.

There was enough light in the corridors to give them easy passage, but the rooms were dark, and twice Kurt had to lead Ross by the hand, avoiding furniture or installations with the surety of one who had practiced that same route often. Murdock's opinion of his companion's ability underwent several upward revisions during that tour, and he began to believe that he was really in luck to have found such a partner.

In the last room, Ross willingly followed Kurt's orders to put on the fur clothing Kurt passed to him. The fit was not exact, but he surmised that Kurt had chosen as well as possible. A final door opened, and they stepped out into the polar night of winter. Kurt's mittened hand

grasped Ross's, pulling him along. Together, they pushed back the door of a hangar shed to get at their escape vehicle.

The cat was a strange machine, but Ross was given no time to study it. He was shoved into the cockpit, a bubble covering settled down over them, closing them in, and the engine came to life under Kurt's urging. The cat must be traveling at its best pace, Ross thought. Yet the crawl which took them away from the mounded snow covering the base seemed hardly better than a man could make afoot.

For a short time Kurt headed straight away from the starting point, but Ross soon heard him counting slowly to himself as if he were timing something. At the count of twenty the cat swung to the right and made a wide half circle which was copied at the next count of twenty by a similar sweep in the opposite direction. After this pattern had been repeated for six turns, Ross found it difficult to guess whether they had ever returned to their first course. When Kurt stopped counting he asked, "Why the dance pattern?"

"Would you rather be scattered in little pieces all over the landscape?" the other snapped. "The base doesn't need fences two miles high to keep us in, or others out; they take other precautions. You should thank fortune we got through that first mine field without blowing..."

Ross swallowed, but he refused to let Kurt know that he was rattled. "So it isn't as easy to get away as you said?"

"Shut up!" Kurt began counting again, and Ross had some cold apprehensive moments in which to reflect upon the folly of quick decisions and wonder bleakly why he had not thought things through before he leaped.

Again they sketched a weaving pattern in the snow, but this time the arcs formed acute angles. Ross glanced now and then at the intent man at the wheel. How had Kurt managed to memorize this route? His urge to escape the base must certainly be a strong one.

Back and forth they crawled, gaining only a few yards in each of those angled strikes to right or left.

"Good thing these cats are atomic powered," Kurt commented during one of the intervals between mine fields. "We'd run out of fuel otherwise."

Ross fought down the impulse to move his feet away from any possible contact point with the engine. These machines must be safe to ride in, but the bogy of radiation was frightening. Luckily, Kurt was now back to a straight track, with no more weaving.

"We are out!" Kurt said with exultation. But he added no more than just the reassurance of their escape.

The cat crawled on. To Ross's eyes there was no trail to follow, no guideposts, yet Kurt steered ahead with confidence. A little later he pulled to a stop and said to Ross, "We have to drive turn and turn about—your turn."

Ross was dubious. "Well, I can drive a car—but this——"

"Is fool proof." Kurt caught him up. "The worst was getting through the mine fields, and we are out of that now. See here—" his hand made a shadow on the lighted instrument panel, "this will keep you straight. If you can steer a car, you can steer this. Watch!" He started up again and once more swung the cat to the left.

A light on the panel began to blink at a rate which increased rapidly as they veered farther away from their original course.

“See? You keep that light steady, and you are on course. If it begins to blink, you cast about until it steadies again. Simple enough for a baby. Take over and see.”

It was hard to change places in the sealed cabin of the cat, but they were successful, and Ross took the wheel gingerly. Following Kurt’s directions, he started ahead, his eyes focused on the light rather than the white expanse before him. And after a few minutes of strain he caught the hang of it. As Kurt had promised, it was very simple. After watching him for a while, his instructor gave a grunt of satisfaction and settled down for a nap.

Once the first excitement of driving the cat wore off, the operation tended to become monotonous. Ross caught himself yawning, but he kept at his post with dogged stubbornness. This had been Kurt’s game all the way through—so far—and he was certainly not going to resign his first chance to show that he could be of use also. If there had only been some break in the eternal snow, some passing light or goal to be seen ahead, it would not have been so bad. Finally, every now and then, Ross had to jiggle off course just enough so that the warning blink of light would alert him and keep him from falling asleep. He was unaware that Kurt had awakened during one of those maneuvers until the other spoke. “Your own private alarm clock, Murdock? Okay, I do not quarrel with anyone who uses his head. But you had better get some shut-eye, or we will not keep rolling.”

Ross was too tired to protest. They changed places, and he curled up as best he could on his small share of seat. Only now that he was free to sleep, he realized he no longer wanted to. Kurt must have thought Ross had fallen asleep, for after perhaps two miles of steady grinding along, he moved cautiously behind the wheel. Ross saw by the trace of light from the instrument panel that his companion was digging into the breast of his parka to bring out a small object which he held against the wheel of the cat with one hand, while with the other he tapped out an irregular rhythm.

To Ross the action made no sense. But he did not miss the other’s sigh of relief as he restored his treasure to hiding once more, as if some difficult task was now behind him. Shortly afterward the cat ground to a stop, and Ross sat up, rubbing his eyes. “What’s the matter? Engine trouble?”

Kurt had folded his arms across the wheel. “No. It is just that we are to wait here——”  
 “Wait? For what? Kelgarries to come along and pick us up?”

Kurt laughed. “The major? How I wish that he *would* arrive presently. What a surprise he would receive! Not two little mice to be put back into their cages, but the tiger cat, all claws and fangs!”

Ross sat up straighter. This now had the bad smell of a frame, a frame with himself planted right in the middle. He figured out the possibilities and came up with an answer which would smear Ross Murdock all over any map. If Kurt were waiting to meet friends out here, they could only be of one brand.

For most of his short life Ross had been engaged in a private war against the restrictions imposed upon him by a set of legal rules to which something within him would not conform. And he had, during those same years filled with attacks, retreats, and strategic maneuvering, formulated a code of rules by which to play his dangerous game. He had not murdered, and he would never follow the path Kurt took. To one who was supremely impatient of restraint, the methods and aims of Kurt’s employers were not only impossibly fantastic and illogical—they were to be opposed to the last ounce of any man’s energy.

“Your friends late?” He tried to sound casual.

“Not yet, and if you now plan to play the hero, Murdock, think better of it!” Kurt’s tone held the crack of an order—that note Ross had so much disliked in the major’s voice. “This is an operation which has been most carefully planned and upon which a great deal depends. No one shall spoil it for us now——”

“The Reds planted you on the project, eh?” Ross wanted to keep the other talking to give himself a chance to think. And this was one time he had to think, clearly and with speed.

“There is no need for me to tell you the sad tale of my life, Murdock. And you would doubtless find much of it boring. If you wish to continue to live—for a while, at least—you will remain quiet and do as you are told.”

Kurt must be armed, for he would not be so confident unless he had a weapon he could now turn on Ross. On the other hand, if what Ross guessed were true, this *was* the time to play the hero—when there was only Kurt to handle. Better to be a dead hero than a live captive in the hands of Kurt’s dear friends across the pole.

Without warning, Ross threw his body to the left, striving to pin Kurt against the driver’s side of the cabin, his hands clawing at the fur ruff bordering the other’s hood, trying for a throat hold. Perhaps it was Kurt’s over-confidence which betrayed him and left him open to a surprise attack. He struggled hard to bring up his arm, but both his weight and Ross’s held him tight. Ross caught at his wrist, noticing a gleam of metal.

They threshed about, the bulkiness of the fur clothing hampering them. Ross wondered fleetingly why the other had not made sure of him earlier. As it was he fought with all his vigor to keep Kurt immobile, to try and knock him out with a lucky blow.

In the end Kurt aided in his own defeat. When Ross relaxed somewhat, the other pushed against him, only to have Ross flinch to one side. Kurt could not stop himself, and his head cracked against the wheel of the cat. He went limp.

Ross made the most of the next few moments. He brought his belt from under his parka, twisting it around Kurt’s wrists with no gentleness. Then he wriggled about, changing places with the unconscious man.

He had no idea of where to go, but he was sure he was going to get away—at the cat’s top speed—from that point. And with that in mind and only a limited knowledge of how to manage the machine, Ross started up and turned in a wide circle until he was sure the cat was headed in the opposite direction.

The light which had guided them was still on. Would reversing its process take him back to the base? Lost in the immensity of the cold wilderness, he made the only choice possible and gunned the cat again.

## 4

Once again Ross sat waiting for others to decide his future. He was as outwardly composed as he had been in Judge Rawle's chambers, but inwardly he was far more apprehensive. Out in the wilderness of the polar night he had had no chance for escape. Heading away from Kurt's rendezvous, Ross had run straight into the search party from the base, had seen in action that mechanical hound that Kurt had said they would put on the fugitives' trail—the thing which would have gone on hunting them until its metal rusted into powder. Kurt's boasted immunity to that tracker had not been as good as he had believed, though it had won them a start.

Ross did not know just how much it might count in his favor that he had been on his way back, with Kurt a prisoner in the cat. As his waiting hours wore on he began to think it might mean very little indeed. This time there was no show on the wall of his cell, nothing but time to think—too much of that—and no pleasant things to think about.

But he had learned one valuable lesson on that cold expedition. Kelgarries and the others at the base were the most formidable opponents he had ever met, and all the balance of luck and equipment lay on their side of the scales. Ross was now convinced that there could be no escape from this base. He had been impressed by Kurt's preparations, knowing that some of them were far beyond anything he himself could have devised. He did not doubt that Kurt had come here fully prepared with every ingenious device the Reds could supply.

At least Kurt's friends had had a rude welcome when they did arrive at the meeting place. Kelgarries had heard Ross out and then had sent ahead a team. Before Ross's party had reached the base there had been a blast which split the arctic night wide open. And Kurt, conscious by then, had shown his only sign of emotion when he realized what it meant.

The door to Ross's cell room clicked, and he swung his feet to the floor, sitting up on his bunk to face his future. This time he made no attempt to put on an act. He was not in the least sorry he had tried to get away. Had Kurt been on the level, it would have been a bright play. That Kurt was not, was just plain bad luck.

Kelgarries and Ashe entered, and at the sight of Ashe the taut feeling in Ross's middle loosened a bit. The major might come by himself to pass sentence, but he would not bring Ashe along if the sentence was a really harsh one.

"You got off to a bad start here, Murdock." The major sat down on the edge of the wall shelf which doubled as a table. "You're going to have a second chance, so consider yourself lucky. We know you aren't another plant of our enemies, a fact that saves your neck. Do you have anything to add to your story?"

"No, sir." He was not adding that "sir" to curry any favor; it came naturally when one answered Kelgarries.

"But you have some questions?"

Ross met that with the truth. "A lot of them."

"Why don't you ask them?"

Ross smiled thinly, an expression far removed and years older than his bashful boy's grin of the shy act. "A wise guy doesn't spill his ignorance. He uses his eyes and ears and keeps his trap shut——"

“And goes off half cocked as a result...” the major added. “I don’t think you would have enjoyed the company of Kurt’s paymaster.”

“I didn’t know about him then—not when I left here.”

“Yes, and when you discovered the truth, you took steps. Why?” For the first time there was a trace of feeling in the major’s voice.

“Because I don’t like the line-up on his side of the fence.”

“That single fact has saved your neck this time, Murdock. Step out of line once more, and nothing will help you. But just so we won’t have to worry about that, suppose you ask a few of those questions.”

“How much of what Kurt fed me is the truth?” Ross blurted out. “I mean all that stuff about shooting back in time.”

“All of it.” The major said it so quietly that it carried complete conviction.

“But why—how—?”

“You have us on a spot, Murdock. Because of your little expedition, we have to tell you more now than we tell any of our men before the final briefing. Listen, and then forget all of it except what applies to the job at hand.

“The Reds shot up Sputnik and then Muttnik.... When—? Twenty-five years ago. We got up our answers a little later. There were a couple of spectacular crashes on the moon, then that space station that didn’t stay in orbit, after that—stalemate. In the past quarter century we’ve had no voyages into space, nothing that was prophesied. Too many bugs, too many costly failures. Finally we began to get hints of something big, bigger than any football roaming the heavens.

“Any discovery in science comes about by steps. It can be traced back through those steps by another scientist. But suppose you were confronted by a result which apparently had been produced without any preliminaries. What would be your guess concerning it?”

Ross stared at the major. Although he didn’t see what all this had to do with time-jumping, he sensed that Kelgarries was waiting for a serious answer, that somehow Ross would be judged by his reply.

“Either that the steps were kept strictly secret,” he said slowly, “or that the result didn’t rightfully belong to the man who said he discovered it.”

For the first time the major regarded him with approval. “Suppose this discovery was vital to your life—what would you do?”

“Try to find the source!”

“There you have it! Within the past five years our friends across the way have come up with three such discoveries. One we were able to trace, duplicate, and use, with a few refinements of our own. The other two remain rootless; yet they are linked with the first. We are now attempting to solve that problem, and the time grows late. For some reason, though the Reds now have their super, super gadgets, they are not yet ready to use them. Sometimes the things work, and sometimes they fail. Everything points to the fact that the Reds are now experimenting with discoveries which are not basically their own——”

“Where did they get them? From another world?” Ross’s imagination came to life. Had a successful space voyage been kept secret? Had there been contact made with another intelligent race?



“In a way it’s another world, but the world of time—not space. Seven years ago we got a man out of East Berlin. He was almost dead, but he lived long enough to record on tape some amazing data, so wild it was almost dismissed as the ravings of delirium. But that was after Sputnik, and we didn’t dare disregard any hints from the other side of the Iron Curtain. So the recording was turned over to our scientists, who proved it had a core of truth.

“Time travel has been written up in fiction; it has been discussed otherwise as an impossibility. Then we discover that the Reds have it working——”

“You mean, they go into the future and bring back machines to use now.”

The major shook his head. “Not the future, the past.”

Was this an elaborate joke? Somewhat heatedly Ross snapped out the answer to that. “Look here, I know I haven’t the education of your big brains, but I do know that the farther back you go into history the simpler things are. We ride in cars; only a hundred years ago men drove horses. We have guns; go back a little and you’ll find them waving swords and shooting guys with bows and arrows—those that don’t wear tin plate on them to stop being punctured——”

“Only they were, after all,” commented Ashe. “Look at Agincourt, m’lad, and remember what arrows did to the French knights in armor.”

Ross disregarded the interruption. “Anyway”—he stuck doggedly to his point—“the farther back you go, the simpler things are. How are the Reds going to find anything in history we can’t beat today?”

“That is a point which has baffled us for several years now,” the major returned. “Only it is not *how* they are going to find it, but *where*. Because somewhere in the past of this world they have contacted a civilization able to produce weapons and ideas so advanced as to baffle our experts. We have to find that source and either mine it ourselves or close it off. As yet we’re still trying to find it.”

Ross shook his head. “It must be a long way back. Those guys who discover tombs and dig up old cities—couldn’t they give you some hints? Wouldn’t a civilization like that have left something we could find today?”

“It depends,” Ashe remarked, “upon the type of civilization. The Egyptians built in stone, grandly. They used tools and weapons of copper, bronze, and stone, and they were considerate enough to operate in a dry climate which preserved relics well. The cities of the Fertile Crescent built in mud brick and used stone, copper, and bronze tools. They also chose a portion of the world where climate was a factor in keeping their memory green.

“The Greeks built in stone, wrote their books, kept their history to bequeath it to their successors, and so did the Romans. And on this side of the ocean the Incas, the Mayas, the unknown races before them, and the Aztecs of Mexico all built in stone and worked in metal. And stone and metal survive. But what if there had been an early people who used plastics and brittle alloys, who had no desire to build permanent buildings, whose tools and artifacts were meant to wear out quickly, perhaps for economic reasons? What would they leave us—considering, perhaps, that an ice age had intervened between their time and ours, with glaciers to grind into dust what little they did possess?

“There is evidence that the poles of our world have changed and that this northern region was once close to being tropical. Any catastrophe violent enough to bring about a switch in the poles of this planet might well have wiped out all traces of a civilization, no matter how

superior. We have good reason to believe that such a people must have existed, but we must find them.

“And Ashe is a convert from the skeptics—” the major slipped down from his perch on the wall shelf—“he is an archaeologist, one of your tomb discoverers, and knows what he is talking about. We must do our hunting in time earlier than the first pyramid, earlier than the first group of farmers who settled by the Tigris River. But we have to let the enemy guide us to it. That’s where you come in.”

“Why me?”

“That is a question to which our psychologists are still trying to find the answer, my young friend. It seems that the majority of the people of the several nations linked together in this project have become too civilized. The reactions of most men to given sets of circumstances have become set in regular patterns and they cannot break that conditioning, or if personal danger forces them to change those patterns, they are afterward so adrift they cannot function at their highest potential. Teach a man to kill, as in war, and then you have to recondition him later.

“But during these same wars we also develop another type. He is the born commando, the secret agent, the expendable man who lives on action. There are not many of this kind, and they are potent weapons. In peacetime that particular collection of emotions, nerve, and skills becomes a menace to the very society he has fought to preserve during a war. He is pressured by the peaceful environment into becoming a criminal or a misfit.

“The men we send out from here to explore the past are not only given the best training we can possibly supply for them, but they are all of the type once heralded as the frontiersman. History is sentimental about that type—when he is safely dead—but the present finds him difficult to live with. Our time agents are misfits in the modern world because their inherited abilities are born out of season now. They must be young enough and possess a certain brand of intelligence to take the stiff training and to adapt, and they must pass our tests. Do you understand?”

Ross nodded. “You want crooks because they are crooks——”

“No, not because they are crooks, but because they are misfits in their time and place. Don’t, I beg of you, Murdock, think that we are operating a penal institution here. You would never have been recruited if you hadn’t tested out to suit us. But the man who may be labeled murderer in his own period might rank as a hero in another, an extreme example, but true. When we train a man he not only can survive in the period to which he is sent, but he can also pass as a native born in that era——”

“What about Hardy?”

The major gazed into space. “There is no operation which is foolproof. We have never said that we don’t run into trouble or that there is no danger in this. We have to deal with both natives of different times, and if we are lucky and hit a hot run, with the Reds. They suspect that we are casting about, hunting their trail. They managed to plant Kurt Vogel on us. He had an almost perfect cover and conditioning. Now you have it straight, Murdock. You satisfy our tests, and you’ll be given a chance to say yes or no before your first run. If you say no and refuse duty, it means you must become an exile and stay here. No man who has gone through our training can return to normal life; there is too much chance of his being picked up and sweated by the opposition.”

“Never?”

The major shrugged. "This may be a long-term operation. We hope not, but there is no way of telling now. You will be in exile until we either find what we want or fail entirely. That is the last card I have to lay on the table." He stretched. "You're slated for training tomorrow. Think it over and then let us know your answer when the time comes. Meanwhile, you are to be teamed with Ashe, who will see to putting you through the course."

It was a big hunk to swallow, but once down, Ross found it digestible. The training opened up a whole new world to him. Judo and wrestling were easy enough to absorb, and he thoroughly enjoyed the workouts. But the patient hours of archery practice, the strict instruction in the use of a long-bladed bronze dagger were more demanding. The mastering of one new language and then another, the intensive drill in unfamiliar social customs, the memorizing of strict taboos and ethics were difficult. Ross learned to keep records in knots on hide thongs and was inducted into the art of primitive bargaining and trade. He came to understand the worth of a cross-shaped tin ingot compared to a string of amber beads and some well-cured white furs. He now understood why he had been shown a traders' caravan during that first encounter with the purpose behind Operation Retrograde.

During the training days his feeling toward Ashe changed materially. A man could not work so closely with another and continue to resent his attitude; either he blew up entirely, or he learned to adjust. His awe at Ashe's vast amount of practical knowledge, freely offered to serve his own blundering ignorance, created a respect for the man which might have become friendship, had Ashe ever relaxed his own shield of impersonal efficiency. Ross did not try to breach the barrier between them mainly because he was sure that the reason for it was the fact that he was a "volunteer." It gave him an odd new feeling he avoided trying to analyze. He had always had a kind of pride in his record; now he had begun to wish sometimes that it was a record of a different type.

Men came and went. Hodaki and his partner disappeared, as did Jansen and his. One lost track of time within that underground warren which was the base. Ross gradually discovered that the whole establishment covered a large area under an external crust of ice and snow. There were laboratories, a well-appointed hospital, armories which stocked weapons usually seen only in museums, but which here were free of any signs of age, and ready for use. There were libraries with mile upon mile of tape recordings as well as films. Ross could not understand everything he heard and saw, but he soaked up all he could so that once or twice, when drifting off to sleep at night, he thought of himself as a sponge which had nearly reached its total limit of absorption.

He learned to wear naturally the clumsy kilt-tunic he had seen on the wolf slayer, to shave with practiced assurance, using a leaf-shaped bronze razor, to eat strange food until he relished the taste. Making lesson time serve a double duty, he lay under sunlamps while listening to tape recordings, until his skin darkened to a weathered hue resembling Ashe's. There was always talk to listen to, important talk which he was afraid to miss.

"Bronze." Ashe weighed a dagger in his hand one day. Its hilt, made of dark horn studded with an intricate pattern of tiny golden nail heads, had a gleam not unlike that of the blade. "Do you know, Murdock, that bronze can be tougher than steel? If it wasn't that iron is so much more plentiful and easier to work, we might never have come out of the Bronze Age? Iron is cheaper and easier found, and when the first smith learned to work it, an end came to one way of life, a beginning to another.

"Yes, bronze is important to us here, and so are the men who worked it. Smiths were sacred in the old days. We know that they made a secret of their trade which overrode the bounds of district, tribe, and race. A smith was welcome in any village, his person safe on the road. In

fact, the roads themselves were under the protection of the gods; there was peace on them for all wayfarers. The land was wide then, and it was empty. The tribes were few and small, and there was plenty of room for the hunter, the farmer, the trader. Life was not such a scramble of man against man, but rather of man against nature——”

“No wars?” asked Ross. “Then why the bow-and-dagger drill?”

“Wars were small affairs, disputes between family clans or tribes. As for the bow, there were formidable things in the forests—giant animals, wolves, wild boars——”

“Cave bears?”

Ashe sighed with weary patience. “Get it through your head, Murdock, that history is much longer than you seem to think. Cave bears and the use of bronze weapons do not overlap. No, you will have to go back maybe several thousand years earlier and then hunt your bear with a flint-tipped spear in your hand if you are fool enough to try it.”

“Or take a rifle with you.” Ross made a suggestion he had longed to voice for some time.

Ashe rounded on him swiftly, and Ross knew him well enough now to realize that he was seriously displeased.

“That is just what you don’t do, Murdock, not from this base, as you well know by now. You take no weapon from here which is not designed for the period in which your run lies. Just as you do not become embroiled while on that run in any action which might influence the course of history.”

Ross went on polishing the blade he held. “What would happen if someone did break that rule?”

Ashe put down the dagger he had been playing with. “We don’t know—we just don’t know. So far we have operated in the fringe territory, keeping away from any district with a history which we can trace accurately. Maybe some day——” his eyes were on a wall of weapon racks he plainly did not see——”maybe some day we can stand and watch the rise of the pyramids, witness the march of Alexander’s armies.... But not yet. We stay away from history, and we are sure that the Reds are doing the same. It has become the old problem once presented by the atom bomb. Nobody wants to upset the balance and take the consequences. Let us find their outpost and we’ll withdraw our men from all the other runs at once.”

“What makes everyone so sure that they have an outpost somewhere? Couldn’t they be working right at the main source, sir?”

“They could, but for some reason they are not. As for how we know that much, it’s information received.” Ashe smiled thinly. “No, the source is much farther back in time than their halfway post. But if we find that, then we can trail them. So we plant men in suitable eras and hope for the best. That’s a good weapon you have there, Murdock. Are you willing to wear it in earnest?”

The inflection in that question caught Ross’s full attention. His gray eyes met those blue ones. This was it—at long last.

“Right away?”

Ashe picked up a belt of bronze plates strung together with chains, a twin to that Ross had seen worn by the wolf slayer. He held it out to the younger man. “You can take your trial run any time—tomorrow.”

Ross drew a deeper breath. “Where—to when?”

“An island which will later be Britain. When? About two thousand b.c. Beaker traders were beginning to open their stations there. This is your graduation exercise, Murdock.”

Ross fitted the blade he had been polishing into the wooden sheath on the belt. “If you say I can do it, I’m willing to try.”

He caught that glance Ashe shot at him, but he could not read its meaning. Annoyance? Impatience? He was still puzzling over it when the other turned abruptly and left him alone.

## 5

He might have said yes, but that didn't mean, Ross discovered, that he was to be shipped off at once to early Britain. Ashe's "tomorrow" proved to be several days later. The cover was that of a Beaker trader, and Ross's impersonation was checked again and again by experts, making sure that the last detail was correct and that no suspicion of a tribesman, no mistake on Ross's part would betray him.

The Beaker people were an excellent choice for infiltration. They were not a closely knit clan, suspicious of strangers and alert to any deviation from the norm, as more race-conscious tribes might be. For they lived by trade, leaving to Ross's own time the mark of their far-flung "empire" in the beakers found in graves scattered in clusters of a handful or so from the Rhineland to Spain, and from the Balkans to Britain.

They did not depend only upon the taboo of the trade road for their safety, for the Beakermen were master bowmen. A roving people, they pushed into new territory to establish posts, living amicably among peoples with far different customs—the Downs farmers, horse herders, shore-side fisherfolk.

With Ashe, Ross passed a last inspection. Their hair had not grown long enough to require braiding, but they did have enough to hold it back from their faces with hide headbands. The kilt-tunics of coarse material, duplicating samples brought from the past, were harsh to the skin and poorly fitting. But the workmanship of their link-and-plate bronze belts, the sleek bow guards strapped to their wrists, and the bows themselves approached fine art. Ashe's round cloak was the blue of a master trader, and he wore wealth in a necklace of polished wolf's teeth alternating with amber beads. Ross's more modest position in the tribe was indicated not only by his red-brown cloak, but by the fact that his personal jewelry consisted only of a copper bracelet and a cloak pin with a jet head.

He had no idea how the time transition was to be made, nor how one might step from the polar regions of the Western Hemisphere to the island of Britain lying off the Eastern. And it was a complicated business as he discovered.

The transition itself was a fairly simple, though disturbing, process. One walked a short corridor and stood for an instant on a plate while the light centered there curled about in a solid core, shutting one off from floor and wall. Ross gasped for breath as the air was sucked out of his lungs. He experienced a moment of deathly sickness with the sensation of being lost in nothingness. Then he breathed again and looked through the dying wall of light to where Ashe waited.

Quick and easy as the trip through time had been, the journey to Britain was something else. There could be only one transfer point if the secret was to be preserved. But men from that point must be moved swiftly and secretly to their appointed stations. Ross, knowing the strict rules concerning the transportation of objects from one time to another, wondered how that travel could be effected. After all, they could not spend months, or even years, getting across continents and seas.

The answer was ingenious. Three days after they had stepped through the barrier of time at the outpost, Ross and Ashe balanced on the rounded back of a whale. It was a whale which would deceive anyone who did not test its hide with a harpoon, and whalers with harpoons large enough to trouble such a monster were yet well in the future.

Ashe slid a dugout into the water, and Ross climbed into that unsteady craft, holding it against the side of the disguised sub until his partner joined him. The day, misty and drizzling, made the shore they aimed for a half-seen line across the water. With a shiver born of more than cold, Ross dipped his paddle and helped Ashe send their crude boat toward that half-hidden strip of land.

There was no real dawn; the sky lightened somewhat, but the drizzle continued. Green patches showed among the winter-denuded trees back from the beach, but the countryside facing them gave an impression of untamed wilderness. Ross knew from his briefing that the whole of Britain was as yet only sparsely settled. The first wave of hunter-fishers to establish villages had been joined by other invaders who built massive tombs and had an elaborate religion. Small village-forts had been linked from hill to hill by trackways. There were “factories,” which turned out in bulk such fine flint weapons and tools that a thriving industry was in full operation, not yet having been superseded by the metal imported by the Beaker merchants. Bronze was still so rare and costly that only the head man of a village could hope to own one of the long daggers. Even the arrowheads in Ross’s quiver were chipped of flint.

They drew the dugout well up onto the shore and ran it into a shallow depression in the bank, heaping stones and brush about for its concealment. Then Ashe intently surveyed the surrounding country, seeking a landmark.

“Inland from here....” Ashe used the language of the Beakermen, and Ross knew that from now on he must not only live as a trader, but also think as one. All other memories must be buried under the false one he had learned; he must be interested in the present rate of exchange and the chance for profit. The two men were on their way to Outpost Gog, where Ashe’s first partner, the redoubtable Sanford, was playing his role so well.

The rain squished in their hide boots, made sodden strings of their cloaks, plastered their woven caps to their thick mats of hair. Yet Ashe bore steadily on across the land with the certainty of one following a marked trail. His self-confidence was rewarded within the first half mile when they came out upon one of the link trackways, its beaten surface testifying to constant use.

Here Ashe turned eastward, stepping up the pace to a ground-covering trot. The peace of the road held—at least by day. By night only the most hardened and desperate outlaws would brave the harmful spirits roving in the dark.

All the lore that had been pounded into him at the base began to make some sense to Ross as he followed his guide, sniffing strange wet smells from the brush, the trees, and the damp earth; piecing together in his mind what he had been taught and what he now saw for himself, until it made a tight pattern.

The track they were following sloped slightly upward, and a change in the wind brought to them a sour odor, blanking out all normal scents. Ashe halted so suddenly that Ross almost plowed into him. But he was alerted by the older man’s attitude.

Something had been burned! Ross drew in a deep lungful of the smell and then wished that he had not. It was wood—burned wood—and something else. Since this was not possibly normal, he was prepared for the way Ashe melted into cover in the brush.

They worked their way, sometimes crawling on their bellies, through the wet stands of dead grass, taking full advantage of all cover. They crouched at the top of the hill while Ashe parted the prickly branches of an evergreen bush to make them a window.

The black patch left by the fire, which had come from a ruin above, had spread downhill on the opposite side of the valley. Charred posts still stood like lone teeth in a skull to mark what

must have once been one of the stockade walls of a post. But all they now guarded was a desolation from which came that overpowering stench.

“Our post?” Ross asked in a whisper.

Ashe nodded. He was studying the scene with an intent absorption which, Ross knew, would impress every important detail upon his mind. That the place had been burned was clear from the first. But why and by whom was a problem vital to the two lurking in the brush.

It took them almost an hour to cross the valley—an hour of hiding, casting about, searching. They had made a complete circle of the destroyed post and Ashe stood in the shadow of a copse, rubbing clots of mud from his hands and frowning up at the charred posts.

“They weren’t rushed. Or if they were, the attackers covered their trail afterward—” Ross ventured.

The older man shook his head. “Tribesmen would not have muddled a trail if they had won. No, this was no regular attack. There have been no signs of a war party coming or leaving.”

“Then what?” demanded Ross.

“Lightning for one thing—and we’d better hope it was that. Or—” Ashe’s blue eyes were very cold and bleak, as cold and bleak as the countryside about them.

“Or—?” Ross dared to prompt him.

“Or we have made contact with the Reds in the wrong way!”

Ross’s hand instinctively went to the dagger at his belt. Little help a dagger would be in an unequal struggle like this! They were only two in a thin web of men strung out through centuries of time with orders to seek out that which did not fit properly into the pattern of the past: to locate the enemy wherever in history or prehistory he had gone to earth. Had the Reds been searching, too, and was this first disaster their victory?

The time traders had their evidence when they at last ventured into what had been the heart of Outpost Gog. Ross, inexperienced as he was in such matters, could not mistake the signs of the explosion. There was a crater on the crown of the hill, and Ashe stood apart from it, eying the fragments about them—scorched wood, blackened stone.

“The Reds?”

“It must have been. This damage was done by explosives.”

It was clear why Outpost Gog could not report the disaster. The attack had destroyed their one link with the post on this time level; the concealed communicator had gone up with the blast.

“Eleven—” Ashe’s finger tapped on the ornate buckle of his wide belt. “We have about ten days to stick it out,” he added, “and it seems we may be able to use them to better advantage than just letting you learn how it feels to walk about some four thousand years before you were born. We have to find out—if we can—what happened here and why!”

Ross gazed at the mess. “Dig?” he asked.

“Some digging is indicated.”

So they dug. Finally, black with charcoal smudges and sick with the evidences of death they had chanced upon, they collapsed on the cleanest spot they could find.



“They must have hit at night,” Ashe said slowly. “Only at that time would they find everyone here. Men don’t trust a night filled with ghosts, and our agents conform to local custom as usual. All of the post people could be erased with one bomb at night.”

All except two of them had been true Beaker traders, including women and children. No Beaker trading post was large, and this one was unusually small. The attacker had wiped out some twenty people, eighteen of them innocent victims.

“How long ago?” Ross wanted to know.

“Maybe two days. And this attack came without any warning, or Sandy would have sent a message. He had no suspicions at all; his last reports were all routine, which means that if they were on to him—and they must have been, judging by the results—he was not even aware of it.”

“What do we do now?”

Ashe looked at him. “We wash—no—” he corrected himself—“we don’t! We go to Nodren’s village. We are frightened, grief-stricken. We have found our kinsmen dead under strange circumstances. We ask questions of one to whom I am known as an inhabitant of this post.”

So, covered with dirt, they walked along the trackway toward the neighboring village with a weariness they did not have to counterfeit.

The dog sighted or perhaps scented them first. It was a rough-coated beast, showing its fangs with a wolflike ferocity. But it was smaller than a wolf, and it barked between its warning snarls. Ashe brought his bow from beneath the shelter of his cloak and held it ready.

“Ho, one comes to speak with Nodren—Nodren of the Hill!”

Only the dog snapped and snarled. Ashe rubbed his forearm across his face, the gesture of a weary and heartsick man, smearing the ash and grime into an awesome mask.

“Who speaks to Nodren—?” There was a different twist to the pronunciation of some words, but Ross was able to understand.

“One who has hunted with him and feasted with him. The one who gave into his hand the friendship gift of the ever-sharp knife. It is Assha of the traders——”

“Go far from us, man of ill luck. You who are hunted by the evil spirits.” The last was a shrill cry.

Ashe remained where he was, facing into the bushes which hid the tribesman.

“Who speaks for Nodren yet not with the voice of Nodren?” he demanded. “This is Assha who asks. We have drunk blood together and faced the white wolf and the wild boar in their fury. Nodren lets not others speak for him, for Nodren is a man and a chief!”

“And you are cursed!” A stone flew through the air, striking a rain pool and splattering mud on Ashe’s boots. “Go and take your evil with you!”

“Is it from the hand of Nodren or Nodren’s young men that doom came upon those of my blood? Have war arrows passed between the place of the traders and the town of Nodren? Is that why you hide in the shadows so that I, Assha, cannot look upon the face of one who speaks boldly and throws stones?”

“No war arrows between us, trader. *We* do not provoke the spirits of the hills. No fire comes from the sky at night to eat us up with a noise of many thunders. Lurgha speaks in such thunders; Lurgha’s hand smites with such fire. You have the Wrath of Lurgha upon you, trader! Keep away from us lest Lurgha’s wrath fall upon us also.”

Lurgha was the local storm god, Ross recalled. The sound of thunder and fire coming out of the sky at night—the bomb! Perhaps the very method of attack on the post would defeat Ashe’s attempt to learn anything from these neighbors. The superstitions of the people would lead them to shun both the site of the post and Ashe himself as cursed and taboo.

“If the Wrath of Lurgha had struck at Assha, would Assha still live to walk upon this road?” Ashe prodded the ground with the tip of his bowstave. “Yet Assha walks, as you see him; Assha talks, as you hear him. It is ridiculous to answer him with the nonsense of little children——”

“Spirits so walk and talk to unlucky men,” retorted the man in hiding. “It may be the spirit of Assha who does so now——”

Ashe made a sudden leap. There was a flurry of action behind the bush screen and he reappeared, dragging into the gray light of the rainy day a wriggling captive, whom he bumped without ceremony onto the beaten earth of the road.

The man was bearded, wearing his thick mop of black hair in a round topknot secured by a hide loop. He wore a skin tunic, now in considerable disarray, which was held in place with a woven, tasseled belt.

“Ho, so it is Lal of the Quick Tongue who speaks so loudly of spirits and the Wrath of Lurgha!” Ashe studied his captive. “Now, Lal, since you speak for Nodren—which I believe will greatly surprise him—you will continue to tell me of this Wrath of Lurgha from the night skies and what has happened to Sanfra, who was my brother, and those others of my kin. I am Assha, and you know of the wrath of Assha and how it ate up Twist-tooth, the outlaw, when he came in with his evil men. The Wrath of Lurgha is hot, but so too is the wrath of Assha.” Ashe contorted his face in such a way that Lal squirmed and looked away. When the tribesman spoke, all his former authority and bluster had gone.

“Assha knows that I am as his dog. Let him not turn upon me his swift-cutting big knife, nor the arrows from his lightning bow. It was the Wrath of Lurgha which smote the place on the hill, first the thunder of his fist meeting the earth, and then the fire which he breathed upon those whom he would slay——”

“And this you saw with your own eyes, Lal?”

The shaggy head shook an emphatic negative. “Assha knows that Lal is no chief who can stand and look upon the wonders of Lurgha’s might and keep his eyes in his head. Nodren himself saw this wonder——”

“And if Lurgha came in the night, when all men keep to their homes and leave the outer world to the restless spirits, how did Nodren see his coming?”

Lal crouched lower to the ground, his eyes darting to the bushes and the freedom they promised, then back to Ashe’s firmly planted boots.

“I am not a chief, Assha. How could I know in what way or for what reason Nodren saw the coming of Lurgha——?”

“Fool!” A second voice, that of a woman, spat the word from the brush which fringed the roadway. “Speak to Assha with a straight tongue. If he is a spirit, he will know that you do not tell him the truth. And if he has been spared by Lurgha...” She showed her wonderment with a hiss of indrawn breath.

So urged, Lal mumbled sullenly, “It is said that there came a message for one to witness the Wrath of Lurgha in its descent upon the outlanders so that Nodren and the men of Nodren

would truly know that the traders were cursed, and should be put to the spear should they come here again——”

“This message—how was it brought? Did the voice of Lurgha sound in Nodren’s ear alone, or came it by the tongue of some man?”

“Ahee!” Lal lay flat on the ground, his hands over his ears.

“Lal is a fool and fears his own shadow as it skips before him on a sunny day!” Out of the bushes stepped a young woman, obviously of some importance in her own group. Walking with a proud stride, her eyes boldly met Ashe’s. A shining disk hung about her neck on a thong, and another decorated the woven belt of her cloth tunic. Her hair was bound in a thread net fastened with jet pins.

“I greet Cassca, who is the First Sower.” There was a formal note in Ashe’s voice. “But why should Cassca hide from Assha?”

“There has been death on your hill, Assha——” she sniffed——“you smell of it now—Lurgha’s death. Those who come from that hill may well be some who no longer walk in their bodies.” Cassca placed her fingers momentarily on Ashe’s outstretched palm before she nodded. “No spirit are you, Assha, for all know that a spirit is solid to the eye, but not to the touch. So it would seem that you were not burned up by Lurgha, after all.”

“This matter of a message from Lurgha——” he prompted.

“It came out of the empty air in the hearing not only of Nodren, but also of Hangor, Effar, and myself, Cassca. For we stood at that time near the Old Place....” She made a curious gesture with the fingers of her right hand. “It will soon be the time of sowing, and though Lurgha brings sun and rain to feed the grain, yet it is in the Great Mother that the seed lies. Upon her business only women may go into the Inner Circle.” She gestured again. “But as we met to make the first sacrifice there came music out of the air such as we have never heard, voices singing like birds in a strange tongue.” Her face assumed an awesome expression. “Afterward a voice said that Lurgha was angered with the hill of the men-from-afar and that in the night he would send his Wrath against them, and that Nodren must witness this thing so that he could see what Lurgha did to those he would punish. So it was done by Nodren. And there was a sound in the air——”

“What kind of a sound?” Ashe asked quietly.

“Nodren said it was a hum and there was the dark shadow of Lurgha’s bird between him and the stars. Then came the smiting of the hill with thunder and lightning, and Nodren fled, for the Wrath of Lurgha is a fearsome thing. Now do the people come to the Great Mother’s Place with many fine offerings that she may stand between them and that Wrath.”

“Assha thanks Cassca, who is the handmaiden of the Great Mother. May the sowing prosper and the reaping be good this year!” Ashe said finally, ignoring Lal, who still groveled on the road.

“You go from this place, Assha?” she asked. “For though I stand under the protecting hand of the Mother and so do not fear, yet there are others who will raise their spears against you for the honor of Lurgha.”

“We go, and again thanks be to you, Cassca.”

He turned back the way they had come, and Ross fell in beside him as the woman watched them out of sight.

## 6

“That bird of Lurgha’s—” said Ross, once they were out of sight of Cassca and Lal, “could it have been a plane?”

“Sounds like it,” snapped his companion. “If the Reds have done their work efficiently, and there’s no reason to suppose otherwise, then there is no use in contacting either Dorhta’s town or Munga’s. The same announcement concerning the Wrath of Lurgha was probably made there—to their good purpose, not ours.”

“Cassca didn’t seem to be overly impressed with Lurgha’s curse, not as much as the man was.”

“She is the closest thing to a priestess that this tribe knows, and she serves a goddess older and more powerful than Lurgha—the Mother Earth, the Great Mother, goddess of fertility and growth. Nodren’s people believe that unless Cassca performs her mysteries and sows part of the first field in the spring there won’t be any harvest. Consequently, she is secure in her office and doesn’t fear the Wrath of Lurgha too much. These people are now changing from one type of worship to another, but some of Cassca’s beliefs will persist clear down to our day, taking on the coating of ‘magic’ and a lot of other enameling along the way.”

Ashe had been talking as a man talks to cover up furious thinking. Now he paused again and turned toward the sea. “We have to stick it out somewhere until the sub comes to pick us up. We’ll need shelter.”

“Will the tribesmen be after us?”

“They may well be. Let the right men get to talking up a holy extermination of those upon whom the Wrath of Lurgha has fallen and we could be in for plenty of trouble. Some of those men are trained hunters and trackers, and the Reds may have planted an agent to report the return of anyone to our post. Just now we’re about the most important time travelers out, for we know the Reds have appeared on this line. They must have a large post here, too, or they couldn’t have sent a plane on that raid. You can’t build a time transport large enough to take through a considerable amount of material. Everything used by us in this age has to be assembled on this side, and the use of all machines is limited to where they can not be seen by any natives. Luckily large sections of this world are mostly wilderness and unpopulated in the areas where we operate the base posts. So if the Reds have a plane, it was put together here, and that means a big post somewhere.” Again Ashe was thinking aloud as he pushed ahead of Ross into the fringes of a wood. “Sandy and I scouted this territory pretty well last spring. There is a cave about half a mile to the west; it will shelter us for tonight.”

Ashe’s plans would probably have been easily accomplished if the cave had been unoccupied. Without incident they came down into a hollow through which trickled a small stream, its banks laced with a thin edging of ice. Under Ashe’s direction Ross collected an armload of firewood. He was no woodsman and his prolonged exposure to the chilling drizzle made him eager for even the very rough shelter of a cave, so eager that he plunged forward carelessly. His foot came down on a slippery patch of mud, sending him sprawling on his face. There was a growl, and a white bulk rushed him. The cloak, rucked up about his throat and shoulders, then saved his life, for only stout cloth was caught between those fangs.

With a startled cry, Ross rolled as he might have to escape a man’s attack, struggling to unsheathe his dagger. A white-hot flash of pain scored his upper arm. The breath was driven out of him as a fight raged over his prone body; he heard grunts, snarls, and was severely

pommeled. Then he was free as the bodies broke away. Shaken, he got to his knees. A short distance away the fight was still in progress. He saw Ashe straddle the body of a huge white wolf, his legs clamped about the animal's haunches, his hooked arm under the beast's head, forcing it up and back while his dagger rose and sank twice in the underparts of the heaving body.

Ross held his own weapon ready. He leaped from a half crouch, and his dagger sank cleanly home behind the short ribs. One of their blows must have reached the animal's heart. With an almost human cry the wolf stiffened convulsively. Then it was still. Ashe squatted near it, methodically driving his dagger into the moist soil to clean the blade.

A red rivulet trickled down his thigh where the lower edge of his kilt-tunic had been ripped up to the link belt. He was breathing hard, but otherwise he was as composed as always. "These sometimes hunt in pairs at this season," he observed. "Be ready with your bow—"

Ross strung his with the cord he had been keeping dry within the breast folds of his tunic. He fitted an arrow to the string, grateful to be a passable marksman. The slash on his arm smarted in protest as he moved, and he noted that Ashe did not try to get up.

"A bad one?" Ross indicated the blood now thickening into a stream along Ashe's thigh.

Ashe pulled away the torn tunic and exposed a nasty looking gash on the outside of his hip. He pressed his palm against the gaping wound and motioned Ross to scout ahead. "See if the cave is clear. We can't do anything until we know that."

Reluctantly Ross followed the stream until he found the cave, a snug-looking place with an overhang to keep it dry. The unpleasant smell of a lair hung about its mouth. He chose a stone from the stream, chucked it into the dark opening, and waited. The stone rattled as it struck an inner wall, but there was no other sound. A second stone from a different angle followed the first, with the same results. Ross was now certain that the cave was unoccupied. Once they were inside with a fire going at the entrance, they could hope to keep it free of intruders. A little heartened, he cast about a bit upstream and then turned back to where he had left Ashe.

"No male?" the other greeted him. "This is a female, and she was close to whelping—" He nudged the white wolf with his toe. His hands held a pad of rags against his hip, and his face was shaded with pain.

"Nothing in the cave anyway. Let's see about this...." Ross laid aside the bow and kneeled to examine Ashe's thigh wound. His own slash was more of a smarting graze, but this tear was deep and ugly.

"Second plate—belt—" Ashe got the words out between set teeth, and Ross clicked open the hidden recess in the other's bronze belt to bring out a small packet. Ashe made a wry face as he swallowed three of the pills within. Ross mashed another pill onto the bandage he prepared, and when the last cumbersome fold was secure Ashe relaxed.

"Let us hope that works," he commented a little bleakly. "Now come here where I can get my hands on you and let me see your scratch. Animal bites can be a nasty business."

Bandaged in turn, with the bitterness of the anti-septo pill on his tongue, Ross helped Ashe limp upstream to the cave. He left the older man outside while he cleaned up the floor of the cave and then made his companion as comfortable as he could on a bed of bracken. The fire Ross had longed for was built. They stripped off their sodden clothing and hung it to dry. Ross wrapped a bird he had shot in clay and tucked it under the hot coals to be roasted.

They had surely had bad luck, he thought, but they were now undercover, had a fire, and food of a sort. His arm ached, sharp pain shooting from fingers to elbow when he moved it.

Though Ashe made no complaint, Ross gauged that the older man's discomfort was far worse than his own, and he carefully hid all signs of his own twinges.

They ate the bird, saltless, and with their fingers. Ross savored each greasy bite, licking his hands clean afterward while Ashe lay back on the improvised bed, his face gaunt in the half light of the fire.

"We are about five miles from the sea here. There is no way of raising our base now that Sandy's installation is gone. I'll have to lay up, since I can't risk any more loss of blood. And you're not too good in the woods—"

Ross accepted that valuation with a new humbleness. He was only too well aware that if it had not been for Ashe, he and not the white wolf would have died down in the valley. Yet a strange shyness kept him from trying to put his thanks into words. The only kind of amends he could make for the other's hurt was to provide hands, feet, and strength for the man who did know what to do and how to do it.

"We'll have to hunt—" he ventured.

"Deer," Ashe caught him up. "But the marsh at the mouth of this stream provides a better hunting ground than inland. If the wolf laired here very long, she has already frightened away any large game. It isn't the matter of food which bothers me——"

"It is being tied up here," Ross filled in for him with some daring. "But look here, I'll take orders. This is your territory, and I'm green at the game. You tell me what to do, and I'll do it the best that I can." He glanced up to find Ashe surveying him intently, but as usual there was no readable expression on the other's brown face.

"The first thing to do is get the wolf's hide," Ashe said briskly. "Then bury the carcass. You'd better drag it up here to work on it. If her mate is hanging around, he might try to jump you."

Why Ashe should think it necessary to acquire the wolf skin puzzled Ross, but he asked no questions. His skinning task took four times as long and was far from being the neat job the shock-haired man of the record tape had accomplished. Ross had to wash himself off in the stream before piling stones over the corpse in temporary burial. When he pulled his bloody burden back to the cave, Ashe lay with his eyes closed. Ross thankfully sat on his own pile of bracken and tried not to notice the throbbing ache in his arm.

He must have fallen asleep, for when he roused it was to see Ashe crawl over to mend the dying fire from their store of wood. Ross, angry at himself, beat the other to the task.

"Get back," he said roughly. "This is my job. I didn't mean to fail."

Surprisingly, Ashe settled back without a word, leaving Ross to sit by the fire, a fire he was very glad to have a moment or so later when a wailing howl sounded down-wind. If this was not the white wolf's mate, then it was another of her kin who prowled the upper reaches of the small valley.

The next day, having provided Ashe with a supply of firewood, Ross went to try his luck in the marsh. The thick drizzle which had hung over the land the day before was gone, and he faced a clear, bright morning, though the breeze had an icy snap. But it was a good morning to be alive and out in the open, and Ross's spirits rose.

He tried to put to use all the woodlore he had learned at the base. But it was one thing to learn something academically and another to put that learning into practice. He was uncomfortably certain that Ashe would not have found his showing very good.

The marsh was a series of pools between rank growths of leafless willows and coarse tufts of grass, with hillocks of firmer soil rising like islands. Ross, approaching with caution, was glad of it, for from one of those hillocks arose a trail of white smoke, and he saw a black blot which was probably a rude hut. Why one should choose to live in the midst of such country he could not guess, though it might be merely the temporary camp of some hunter.

Ross also saw thousands of birds feeding greedily on the dried seed of the marsh grasses, paddling in the pools, and setting up a clamor to drive a man mad. They did not seem in the least disturbed by that distant camper.

Ross had reason to be proud of his marksmanship that morning. He had in his quiver perhaps half a dozen of the lighter shafts made for shooting birds. In place of the finely chipped and wickedly barbed flint points used for heavier game, these were tipped with needle-sharp, light bone heads. He had a string of four birds looped together by their feet within almost as many minutes. For the flocks rose in their first alarm only to settle again to feast.

Then he knocked over a hare—a fat giant of its race—that stared at him brazenly from a tussock. The hare kicked back into a pool in its death struggle, however, and Ross was forced to leave cover to retrieve its body. But he was alert and he stood up, dagger out and ready, to greet the man who parted the bushes to watch him.

For a long minute gray eyes stared into brown ones, and then Ross noted the other's bedraggled and tattered dress. The kilt-tunic smudged with mud, scorched and charred along one edge, was styled like his own. The fellow wore his hair fastened back with a band, unlike the topknot of the local tribesman.

Ross, his dagger still ready, broke the silence first. "I am a believer in the fire and the fashioned metal, the climbing sun, and the moving water." He repeated the recognition speech of the Beakermen.

"The fire warms by the grace of Tuldén, the metal is fashioned by the mystery of the smith, the sun climbs without our aid, and who can stop the water from running?" The stranger's voice was hoarse. Now that Ross had time to examine him more closely he saw the dark bruise on his exposed shoulder, the raw red mark of a burn running across the man's broad chest. He dared to test his surmise concerning the other.

"I am of the kin of Assha. We returned to the hill——"

"Ashe!"

Not "Assha" but "Ashe!" Ross, though sure of that pronunciation, was still cautious. "You are from the hill place, where Lurgha smote with thunder and fire?"

The man slid his long legs across the log which had been his shelter. The burn across his chest was not his only brand, for Ross noticed another red stripe, puffed and fiery looking, which swelled the calf of one leg. The man studied Ross closely, and then his fingers moved in a sign which to the uninitiated native might have been one for the warding off of evil, but which to Ross was the "thumbs up" of his own age.

"Sanford?"

At that name the man shook his head. "McNeil," he named himself. "Where is Ashe?"

He might really be what he seemed, but on the other hand, he could be a Red spy. Ross had not forgotten Kurt. "What happened?" he parried one question with another.

"Bomb. The Reds must have spotted us, and we didn't have a chance. We weren't expecting any trouble. I'd been down to see about a missing burden donkey and was about halfway

back up the hill when she hit. When I came to I was all the way down the hill with part of the fort on top of me. The rest.... Well, you saw the place, didn't you?"

Ross nodded. "What are you doing here?"

McNeil spread his hands in a tired little gesture. "I tried to talk to Nodren, but they stoned me away. I knew that Ashe was coming through and hoped to reach him when he hit the beach, but I was too late. Then I figured he would pass here to make contact with the sub, so I was waiting it out until I saw you. Where is Ashe?"

It all sounded logical enough. Still, with Ashe injured, Ross was taking no chances. He pushed his dagger back into its sheath and picked up the hare. "Stay here," he told McNeil, "I'll be back——"

"But—wait! Where's Ashe, you young fool? We have to get together."

Ross went on. He was sure that the stranger was in no shape to race after him, and he would lay a muddled trail before he returned to the cave valley. If this man was a Red plant, he would have to reckon with one who had already met Kurt Vogel.

The laying of that muddled trail took time. It was past midday when Ross came back to Ashe, who was sitting up by the mouth of the cave at the fire, using his dagger to fashion a crutch out of a length of sapling. He surveyed Ross's burden with approval, but lost interest in the promise of food as soon as the other reported his meeting in the marsh.

"McNeil—chap with brown hair, brown eyes, a right eyebrow which quirks up toward his hairline when he smiles?"

"Brown hair and eyes, okay—and he didn't smile any."

"Chip broken off a front tooth—upper right?"

Ross shut his eyes to visualize the stranger. Yes, there had been a small break on a front tooth. He nodded.

"That's McNeil. Not that you didn't do right not to bring him here without being sure. What made you so watchful? Kurt?"

Again Ross nodded. "And what you said about the Reds' planting someone here to wait for us."

Ashe scratched the bristles on his chin. "Never underrate them—we don't dare do that. But the man you met is McNeil, and we'd better get him here. Can you bring him?"

"I think he's able to get about, in spite of that leg. From his story he's been stirring around."

Ashe bit absent-mindedly into a piece of hare and swore mildly when he burned his tongue. "Odd that Cassca didn't tell us about him. Unless she thought there was no use causing trouble by admitting they had driven him away. You going now?"

Ross moved around the fire. "Might as well. He didn't look too comfortable. And I'll bet he's hungry."

He took the direct route back to the marsh, but this time no thread of smoke spiraled into the air. Ross hesitated. That shelter on the small island was surely the place where McNeil had holed up. Should he try to work his way out to it now? Or had something happened to the man while he was gone?

Again that sixth sense of impending disaster, which is perhaps bred into some men, alerted Ross. Why he turned suddenly and backed against a bushy willow, he could not have



explained. However, because he did so the loop of hide rope meant for his throat hit his shoulder harmlessly. It fell to the ground, and he stamped one boot down on it. Then it was the work of seconds to grasp it and give it a quick jerk. The surprised man who held the other end was brought sprawling into the open.

Ross had seen that round face before. "Lal of the town of Nodren." He found words to greet the ropeman even as his knee came up against the fellow's jaw, jarring Lal so that he dropped a flint knife. Ross kicked it into the willows. "What do you hunt here, Lal?"

"Traders!" The voice was weak, but it held heat.

The tribesman did not try to struggle against Ross's hold, and Ross, gripping him by the nape of the neck, moved through a screen of brush to a hollow. Luckily there was no water cupped there, for McNeil lay in the bottom of that dip, his arms tied tightly behind him and his ankles lashed together with no thought for the pain of his burned leg.

## 7

Ross whirled the rope which had been meant to bring him down around Lal. He lashed the tribesman's arms tight to his body before he knelt to cut loose his fellow time traveler. Lal now huddled against the far wall of the cup, fear in every line of his small body. So apparent was this fear that Ross felt no satisfaction at turning the tables on him. Instead he felt increasingly uneasy.

"What is this all about?" he asked McNeil as he stripped off his bonds and helped him up.

McNeil massaged his wrists, took a step or two, and grimaced with pain. "Our friend seeks to be an obedient servant of Lurgha."

Ross picked up his bow. "The tribe is out to hunt us?"

"Lurgha has ordered—out of thin air again—that any traders who escaped are to be brought in and introduced to him personally at the sacrifice for the enrichment of the fields!"

The old, old gift of blood and life at the spring sowing. Ross recalled grisly details from his cram lessons. Any wandering stranger or enemy tribesman taken in a raid before that day would meet such a fate. On unlucky years when people were not available a deer or wolf might serve. But the best sacrifice of all was a man. So Lurgha had decreed—from the air—that traders were his meat? What of Ashe? Let any hunter from the village track him down.

"We have to move fast," Ross told McNeil as he took up the rope which made a leading cord for Lal. Ashe would want to question the tribesman about this second order from Lurgha.

Impatient as Ross was, he had to mend his pace to accommodate McNeil. The man from the hill post was close to the end of his strength. He had started off bravely enough, but now he wavered. Ross sent Lal ahead with a sharp push, ordering him to stay there, while he went to McNeil's aid. It was well into the afternoon before they came up the stream and saw the fire before the cave.

"Macna!" Ashe hailed Ross's companion with the native version of his name. "And Lal. But what do you here, Lal of Nodren's town?"

"Mischief." Ross helped McNeil within the cave and to the pile of brush which was his own bed. "He was hunting traders as a present for Lurgha."

"So—" Ashe turned upon the tribesman—"and by whose word did you go hunting my kinsman, Lal? Was it Nodren's? Has he forgotten the blood bond between us? For it was in the name of Lurgha himself that that bond was made——"

"Aaaah—" The tribesman squatted down against the wall where Ross had shoved him. Unable to hide his head in his arms, he brought his face down upon his knees so that only his shaggy topknot of hair was exposed. Ross realized, with stupefaction, that the little man was crying like a child, his hunched shoulders rising and falling with the force of his sobs.

"Aaaah—" he wailed.

Ashe allowed him a moment or two of noisy grief and then limped over to grasp his topknot and pull up his head. Lal's eyes were screwed tightly shut, but there were tears on his cheeks, and his mouth twisted in another wail.

“Be quiet!” Ashe shook him, but not too harshly. “Have you yet felt the bite of my sharp knife? Has an arrow holed your skin? You are alive, and you could be dead. Show that you are glad you live and continue to breathe by telling us what you know, Lal.”

The woman Cassca had displayed a measure of intelligence and ease at their meeting upon the road. But it was very plain that Lal was of different stuff, a simple man in whose head few ideas could find house room at one time. And to him the present was all black. Little by little they dragged the story out of him.

Lal was poor, so poor that he had never dared dream of owning for himself some of the precious things the hill traders displayed to the wealthy of Nodren’s town. But he was also a follower of the Great Mother’s, rather than one who made sacrifices to Lurgha. Lurgha was the god for warriors and great men; he was too high to concern himself with such as Lal.

So when Nodren reported the end of the hill post under the storm fist of Lurgha, Lal had been impressed only to a point. He was still convinced it was none of his concern, and instead he began thinking of the treasures which might lie hidden in the destroyed buildings. It occurred to him that Lurgha’s Wrath had been laid upon the men who had owned them, but perhaps it would not stretch to the fine things themselves. So he had gone secretly to the hill to explore.

What he had seen there had utterly converted him to a belief in the fury of Lurgha and he had been frightened out of his simple wits, fleeing without making the search he had intended. But Lurgha had seen him there, had read his impious thoughts....

At that point Ashe interrupted the stream of Lal’s story. How had Lurgha seen Lal?

Because—Lal shuddered, began to cry again, and spoke the next few sentences haltingly—that very morning when he had gone out to hunt wild fowl in the marshes Lurgha had spoken to *him*, to Lal, who was less than a flea creeping upon a worn-out fur rug.

And how had Lurgha spoken? Ashe’s voice was softer, gentle.

Out of the air, even as he had spoken to Nodren, who was a chief. He said that he had seen Lal in the hill post, and so Lal was his meat. But not yet would he eat him, not if Lal served him in other ways. And he, Lal, had lain flat on the ground before the bodiless voice of Lurgha and had sworn that he would serve Lurgha to the end of his life.

Then Lurgha had told him to hunt down one of the evil traders who was hiding in the marshes, and bind him with ropes. Then he was to call the men of the village and together they would carry the prisoner to the hill where Lurgha had loosed his wrath, and there they would leave him. Later they might return and take what they found there and use it to bless the fields at sowing time, and all would be well with Nodren’s village. And Lal had sworn that he would do as Lurgha bade, but now he could not. So Lurgha would eat him up—he was a man without hope.

“Yet,” Ashe said even more gently, “have you not served the Great Mother all these years, giving to her a portion of the first fruits even when the yield of your one field was small?”

Lal stared at him, his woebegone face still smeared with tears. It took a second or two for the question to penetrate his fear-clouded mind. Then he nodded timidly.

“Has she not dealt with you well in return, Lal? You are a poor man, that is true. But you are not gaunt of belly, even though this is the thin season when men fast before the coming of the new harvest. The Great Mother watches over her own. And it is she who has brought you to us now. For this I say to you, Lal, and I, Assha of the traders, speak with a straight tongue. The Lurgha who struck our post, who spoke to you from the air, means you no good——”

“Aaaah!” wailed Lal. “So do I know, Assha. He is of the blackness and the wandering spirits of the dark!”

“Just so. Thus he is no kin to the mother, for she is of the light and of good things, of the new grain, and the newborn lambs for your flocks, of the maids who wed with men and bring forth sons to lift their fathers’ spears, daughters to spin by the hearth and sow the yellow grain in the furrows. Lurgha’s quarrel lies with us, Lal, not with Nodren nor with you. And we take upon us that quarrel.” He limped into the outer air where the shadows of evening were beginning to creep across the ground.

“Hear me, Lurgha,” he called into the coming night, “I am Assha of the traders, and upon myself I take your hate. Not upon Lal, nor upon Nodren, nor upon the people who live in Nodren’s town, shall your wrath lie. Thus do I say it!”

Ross, noticing that Ashe concealed from Lal a wave of his hand, was prepared for some display meant to impress the tribesman. It came in a spectacular burst of green fire beyond the stream. Lal wailed again, but when that fire was followed by no other manifestation he ventured to raise his head once more.

“You have seen how Lurgha answered me, Lal. Toward me only will his wrath be turned. Now—” Ashe limped back and dragged out the white wolf skin, dropping it before Lal—”this you will give to Cassca that she may make a curtain for the Mother’s home. See, it is white and so rare that the Mother will be pleased with such a fine gift. And you will tell her all that has chanced and how you believe in her powers over the powers of Lurgha, and the Mother will be well pleased with you. But you shall say nothing to the men of the village, for this quarrel is between Lurgha and Assha now and not for the meddling of others.”

He unfastened the rope which bound Lal’s arms. Lal reached out a hand to the wolf skin, his eyes filled with wonderment. “This is a fine thing you give me, Assha, and the Mother will be pleased, for in many years she has not had such a curtain for her secret place. Also, I am but a little man; the quarrels of great ones are not for me. Since Lurgha has accepted your words this is none of my affair. Yet I will not go back to the village for a while—with your permission, Assha. For I am a man of loose and wagging tongue and oftentimes I speak what I do not really wish to say. So if I am asked questions, I answer. If I am not there to be asked such questions, I cannot answer.”

McNeil laughed, and Ashe smiled. “Well enough, Lal. Perhaps you are a wiser man than you think. But also I do not believe you should stay here.”

The tribesman was already nodding. “That do I say, too, Assha. You are now facing the Wrath of Lurgha, and with that I wish no part. Thus I shall go into the marsh for a while. There are birds and hares to hunt, and I shall work upon this fine skin so that when I take it to the Mother it shall indeed be a gift worth her smiles. Now, Assha, I would go before the night comes if it pleases you.”

“Go with good fortune, Lal.” Ashe stood apart while the tribesman ducked his head in a shy, awkward farewell to the others, pattering out into the valley.

“What if they pick him up?” McNeil asked wearily.

“I don’t think they can,” Ashe returned. “And what would you do—keep him here? If we tried that, he’d scheme to escape and try to turn the tables on us. Now he’ll keep away from Nodren’s village and out of sight for the time being. Lal’s not too bright in some ways, but he’s a good hunter. If he has reason for hiding out, it’ll take a better hunter to track him. At least we know now that the Reds are afraid they did not make a clean sweep here. What happened, McNeil?”

While he was telling his story in more detail both Ashe and Ross worked on his burns, making him comfortable. Then Ashe sat back as Ross prepared food.

“How did they spot the post?” Ashe rubbed his chin and frowned at the fire.

“Only way I can guess is that they picked up our post signal and pinpointed the source. That means they must have been hunting us for some time.”

“No strangers about lately?”

McNeil shook his head. “Our cover wasn’t broken that way. Sanford was a wonder. If I hadn’t known better, I would have sworn he was born one of the Beaker folk. He had a network of informants running all the way from here into Brittany. Amazing how he was able to work without arousing any suspicions. I suppose his being a member of the smiths’ guild was a big help. He could pick up a lot of news from any village where there was one at work. And I tell you,” McNeil propped himself up on his elbow to exclaim more vehemently— “there wasn’t a whisper of trouble from here clear across the channel and pretty far to the north. We were already sure the south was clean before we ever took cover as Beakers, especially since their clans are thick in Spain.”

Ashe chewed a broiled wing reflectively. “Their permanent base with the transport *has* to be somewhere within the bounds of the territory they hold in our own time.”

“They could plant it in Siberia and laugh at us,” McNeil exploded. “No hope of our getting in there——”

“No.” Ashe threw the stripped bone into the fire and licked grease from his fingers. “Then they would be faced with the old problem of distance. If what they are exploiting lay within their modern boundaries, we would never have tumbled to the thing in the first place. What the Reds want must lie outside their twentieth century holdings, a slender point in our favor. Therefore they will plant their shift point as close to it as they can. Our transportation problem is more difficult than theirs will ever be.

“You know why we chose the arctic for our base; it lies in a section of the world never populated by other than roving hunters. But I’ll wager anything you want to name that their point is somewhere in Europe where they have people to contend with. If they are using a plane, they can’t risk its being seen——”

“I don’t see why not,” Ross broke in. “These people couldn’t possibly know what it was—Lurgha’s bird—magic——”

Ashe shook his head. “They must have the interference-with-history worry as much as we have. Anything of our own time has to be hidden or disguised in such a way that the native who may stumble upon it will never know it is man-made. Our sub is a whale to all appearances. Possibly their plane is a bird, but neither can bear too close an examination. We don’t know what could result from a leak of real knowledge in this or any primitive time ... how it might change history——”

“But,” Ross advanced what he believed to be the best argument against that reasoning, “suppose I handed Lal a gun and taught him to use it. He couldn’t duplicate the weapon—the technology required lies so far beyond this age. These people couldn’t reproduce such a thing.”

“True enough. On the other hand, don’t belittle the ingenuity of the smiths or the native intelligence of men in any era. These tribesmen might not be able to reproduce your gun, but it would set them thinking along new lines. We might find that they would think our time right out of being. No, we dare not play tricks with the past. This is the same situation we

faced immediately after the discovery of the atom bomb. Everybody raced to produce that new weapon and then sat around and shivered for fear we'd be crazy enough to use it on each other.

"The Reds have made new discoveries which we have to match, or we will go under. But back in time we have to be careful, both of us, or perhaps destroy the world we do live in."

"What do we do now?" McNeil wanted to know.

"Murdock and I came here only for a trial run. It's his test. The sub is to call for us about nine days from now."

"So if we sit tight—if we *can* sit tight—" McNeil lay down again—"they will take us out. Meanwhile we have nine days."

They spent three more days in the cave. McNeil was on his feet and impatient to leave before Ashe was able to hobble well enough to travel. Though Ross and McNeil took turns at hunting and guard duty, they saw no signs that the tribesmen were tracking them. Apparently Lal had done as he promised, withdrawing to the marsh and hiding there apart from his people.

In the gray of pre-dawn on the fourth day Ashe wakened Ross. Their fire had been buried with earth, and already the cave seemed bleak. They ate venison roasted the night before and went out into the chill of a fog. A little way down the valley McNeil joined them out of the mist from his guard post. Keeping their pace to one which favored Ashe's healing wound, they made their way inland in the direction of the track linking the villages.

Crossing that road they continued northward, the land beginning to rise under them. Far away they heard the blating of sheep, the bark of a dog. In the fog, Ross stumbled in a shallow ditch beyond which lay a stubbled field. Ashe paused to look about him, his nostrils expanding as if he were a hound smelling out their trail.

The three went on, crossing a whole series of small, irregular fields. Ross was sure that the yield from any of these cleared strips must be scanty. The fog was thickening. Ashe pressed the pace, using his handmade crutch carefully. He gave an audible sigh of relief when they were faced at last by two stone monoliths rising like pillars. A third stone lay across them, forming a rude arch through which they saw a narrow valley running back into the hills.

Through the fog Ross could sense the eerie strangeness of the valley beyond the massive gate. He would have said that he was not superstitious, that he had merely studied these tribal beliefs as lessons; he had not accepted them. Yet now, if he had been alone, he would have avoided that place and turned aside from the valley, for that which waited within was not for him. To his secret relief Ashe paused by the arch to wait.

The older man gestured the other two into cover. Ross obeyed willingly, though the dank drops of condensing fog dripped on his cloak and wet his face as he brushed against prickly-leaved shrubs. Here were walls of evergreen plants and dwarfed pines almost as if this tunnel of year-round greenery had been planted with some purpose in mind. Once his companions had concealed themselves, Ashe called, shrill but sweetly, with a bird's rising notes. Three times he made that sound before a figure moved in the fog, the rough gray-white of its long cloak melting in the wisps of mist.

Down that green tunnel, out of the heart of the valley, the other came, a loop of cloak concealing the entire figure. It halted right in back of the arch and Ashe, making a gesture to the others to stay where they were, faced the muffled stranger.

"Hands and feet of the Mother, she who sows what may be reaped——"

“Outland stranger who is under the Wrath of Lurgha,” the other mocked him in the voice of Cassca. “What do you want, outlander, that you dare to come here where no man may enter?”

“That which you know. For on the night when Lurgha came you also saw——”

Ross heard the hiss of a sharply drawn breath. “How knew you that, outlander?”

“Because you serve the Mother and you are jealous for her and her service. If Lurgha is a mighty god, you wanted to see his acts with your own eyes.”

When she finally answered, there was anger as well as frustration in her voice. “And you know of my shame then, Assha. For Lurgha came—on a bird he came, and he did even as he said he would. So now the village will make offerings to Lurgha and beg his favor, and the Mother will no more have those to harken to her words and offer her the first fruits——”

“But from whence came this bird which was Lurgha, can you tell me that, she who waits upon the Mother?”

“What difference does it make from what direction Lurgha came? That does not add nor take from his power.” Cassca moved beneath the arch. “Or does it in some strange way, Assha?”

“Perhaps it does. Only tell me.”

She turned slowly and pointed over her right shoulder. “From that way he came, Assha. Well did I watch, knowing that I was the Mother’s and that even Lurgha’s thunderbolts could not eat me up. Does knowing that make Lurgha smaller in your eyes, Assha? When he has eaten up all that is yours and your kin with it?”

“Perhaps,” Assha repeated. “I do not think Lurgha will come so again.”

She shrugged, and the heavy cloak flapped. “That shall be as it shall be, Assha. Now go, for it is not good that any man come hither.”

Cassca paced back into the heart of the green tunnel, and Ross and McNeil came out of concealment. McNeil faced in the direction she had pointed. “Northeast——” he commented thoughtfully, “the Baltic lies in that quarter.”

## 8

“... and that is about all.” Ten days later Ashe, a dressing on his leg and a few of the pain lines smoothed from his face, sat on a bunk in the arctic time post nursing a mug of coffee in his hands and smiling, a little crookedly, at Nelson Millaird.

Millaird, Kelgarries, Dr. Webb, all the top brass of the project had not only come through the transfer point to meet the three from Britain but were now crammed into the room, nearly pushing Ross and McNeil through the wall. Because this was it! What they had hunted for months—years—now lay almost within their grasp.

Only Millaird, the director, did not seem so confident. A big man with a bushy thatch of coarse graying hair and a heavy, fleshy face, he did not look like a brain. Yet Ross had been on the roster long enough to know that it was Millaird’s thick and hairy hands that gathered together all the loose threads of Operation Retrograde and deftly wove them into a workable pattern. Now the director leaned back in a chair which was too small for his bulk, chewing thoughtfully on a toothpick.

“So we have the first whiff of a trail,” he commented without elation.

“A pretty strong lead!” Kelgarries broke in. Too excited to sit still, the major stood with his back against the door, as alert as if he were about to turn and face the enemy. “The Reds wouldn’t have moved against Gog if they did not consider it a menace to them. Their big base must be in this time sector!”

“A big base,” Millaird corrected. “The one we are after, no. And right now they may be switching times. Do you think they will sit here and wait for us to show up in force?” But Millaird’s tone, intended to deflate, had no effect on the major.

“And just how long would it take them to dismantle a big base?” that officer countered. “At least a month. If we shoot a team in there in a hurry—”

Millaird folded his huge hands over his barrel-shaped body and laughed, without a trace of humor. “Just where do we send that team, Kelgarries? Northeast of a coastal point in Britain is a rather vague direction, to say the least. Not,” he spoke to Ashe now, “that you didn’t do all you could, Ashe. And you, McNeil, nothing to add?”

“No, sir. They jumped us out of the blue when Sandy thought he had every possible line tapped, every safeguard working. I don’t know how they caught on to us, unless they located our beam to this post. If so, they must have been deliberately hunting us for some time, because we only used the beam as scheduled——”

“The Reds have patience and brains and probably some more of their surprise gadgets to help them. We have the patience and the brains, but not the gadgets. And time is against us. Get anything out of this, Webb?” Millaird asked the hitherto silent third member of his ruling committee.

The quiet man adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose, a flattish nose which did not support them very well. “Just another point to add to our surmises. I would say that they are located somewhere near the Baltic Sea. There are old trade routes there, and in our own time it is a territory closed to us. We never did know too much about that section of Europe. Their installation may be close to the Finnish border. They could disguise their modern station under half a dozen covers; that is strange country.”



Millaird's hands unfolded and he produced a notebook and pen from a shirt pocket. "Won't hurt to stir up some of the present-day agents of the M.I. and the rest. They might just come up with a useful hint. So you'd say the Baltic. But that is a big slice of country."

Webb nodded. "We have one advantage—the old trade routes. In the Beaker period they are pretty well marked. The major one into that section was established for the amber trade. The country is forested, but not so heavily as it was in an earlier period. The native tribes are mostly roving hunters, and fishermen along the coast. But they have had contact with traders." He shoved his glasses back into place with a nervous gesture. "The Reds may run into trouble themselves there at this time——"

"How?" Kelgarries demanded.

"Invasion of the ax people. If they have not yet arrived, they are due very soon. They formed one of the big waves of migratory people, who flooded the country, settled there. Eventually they became the Norse or Celtic stock. We don't know whether they stamped out the native tribes they found there or assimilated them."

"That might be a nice point to have settled more definitely," McNeil commented. "It could mean the difference between getting your skull split and continuing to breathe."

"I don't think they would tangle with the traders. Evidence found today suggests that the Beaker folk simply went on about their business in spite of a change in customers," Webb returned.

"Unless they were pushed into violence." Ashe handed his empty mug to Ross. "Don't forget Lurgha's Wrath. From now on our enemies might take a very dim view of any Beaker trade posts near their property."

Webb shook his head slowly. "A wholesale attack on Beaker establishments would constitute a shift in history. The Reds won't dare that, not just on general suspicion. Remember, they are not any more eager to tinker with history than we are. No, they will watch for us. We will have to stop communication by radio——"

"We can't!" snapped Millaird vehemently. "We can cut it down, but I won't send the boys out without some means of quick communication. You lab boys put your brains to work and see what you can turn out in the way of talk boxes that they can't snoop. Time!" He drummed on his knee with his thick fingers. "It all comes back to a question of time."

"Which we do not have," Ashe observed in his usual quiet voice. "If the Reds are afraid they have been spotted, they must be dismantling their post right now, working around the clock. We'll never again have such a good chance to nail them. We must move now."

Millaird's lids drooped almost shut; he might have been napping. Kelgarries stirred restlessly by the door, and Webb's round face had settled into what looked like permanent lines of disapproval.

"Doc," Millaird spoke over his shoulder to the fourth man of his following, "what is your report?"

"Ashe must be under treatment for at least five days. McNeil's burns aren't too bad, and Murdock's slash is almost healed."

"Five days——" Millaird droned, and then flashed a glance at the major. "Personnel. We're tied down without any useful personnel. Who in processing could be switched without tangling them up entirely?"

“No one. I can recall Jansen and Van Wyke. These ax people might be a good cover for them.” The momentary light in Kelgarries’ eyes faded. “No, we have no proper briefing and can’t get it until the tribe does appear on the map. I won’t send any men in cold. Their blunders would not only endanger them but might menace the whole project.”

“So that leaves us with you three,” Millaird said. “We’ll recall what men we can and brief them again as fast as possible. But you know how long that will take. In the meantime——”

Ashe spoke directly to Webb. “You can’t pinpoint the region closer than just the Baltic?”

“We can do this much,” the other answered him slowly, and with obvious reluctance. “We can send the sub cruising offshore there for the next five days. If there is any radio activity—any communication—we should be able to trace the beams. It all depends upon whether the Reds have any parties operating from their post. Flimsy——”

“But something!” Kelgarries seized upon it with the relief of one who needed action.

“And they will be waiting for just such a move on our part,” Webb continued deliberately.

“All right, so they’ll be watching!” the major said, about to lose his temper, “but it is about the only move we can make to back up the boys when they do go in.”

He whipped around the door and was gone. Webb got up slowly. “I will work over the maps again,” he told Ashe. “We haven’t scouted that area, and we don’t dare send a photo-plane over it now. Any trip in will be a stab in the dark.”

“When you have only one road, you take it,” Ashe replied. “I’ll be glad to see anything you can show me, Miles.”

If Ross had believed that his pre-trial-run cramming had been a rigorous business, he was soon to laugh at that estimation. Since the burden of the next jump would rest on only three of them—Ashe, McNeil, and himself—they were plunged into a whirlwind of instruction, until Ross, dazed and too tired to sleep on the third night, believed that he was more completely bewildered than indoctrinated. He said as much sourly to McNeil.

“Base has pulled back three other teams,” McNeil replied. “But the men have to go to school again, and they won’t be ready to come on for maybe three, four weeks. To change runs means unlearning stuff as well as learning it——”

“What about new men?”

“Don’t think Kelgarries isn’t out now beating the bushes for some! Only, we have to be fitted to the physical type we are supposed to represent. For instance, set a small, dark-headed pugnose among your Norse sea rovers, and he’s going to be noticed—maybe remembered too well. We can’t afford to take that chance. So Kelgarries had to discover men who not only look the part but are also temperamentally fitted for this job. You can’t plant a fellow who thinks as a seaman—not a seaman, you understand, but one whose mind works in that pattern—among a wandering tribe of cattle herders. The protection for the man and the project lies in his being fitted into the right spot at the right time.”

Ross had never really thought of that point before. Now he realized that he and Ashe and McNeil were of a common mold. All about the same height, they shared brown hair and light eyes—Ashe’s blue, his own gray, and McNeil’s hazel—and they were of similar build, small-boned, lean, and quick-moving. He had not seen any of the true Beakermen except on the films. But now, recalling those, he could see that the three time traders were of the same general physical type as the far-roving people they used as a cover.

It was on the morning of the fifth day while the three were studying a map Webb had produced that Kelgarries, followed at his own weighty pace by Millaird, burst in upon them.

“We have it! This time *we* have the luck! The Reds slipped. Oh, how they slipped!”

Webb watched the major, a thin little smile pulling at his pursed mouth. “Miracles sometimes do happen,” he remarked. “I suppose the sub has a fix for us.”

Kelgarries passed over the flimsy strip of paper he had been waving as a banner of triumph. Webb read the notation on it and bent over the map, making a mark with one of those needle-sharp pencils which seemed to grow in his breast pocket, ready for use. Then he made a second mark.

“Well, it narrows it a bit,” he conceded. Ashe looked in turn and laughed.

“I would like to hear your definition of ‘narrow’ sometime, Miles. Remember we have to cover this on foot, and a difference of twenty miles can mean a lot.”

“That mark is quite a bit in from the sea.” McNeil offered his own protest when he saw the marking. “We don’t know that country—”

Webb shoved his glasses back for the hundredth time that morning. “I suppose we could consider this critical, condition red,” he said in such a dubious tone that he might have been begging someone to protest his statement. But no one did. Millaird was busy with the map.

“I think we do, Miles!” He looked to Ashe. “You’ll parachute in. The packs with which you will be equipped are special stuff. Once you have them off sprinkle them with a powder Miles will provide and in ten minutes there won’t be enough of them left for anyone to identify. We haven’t but a dozen of these, and we can’t throw them away except in a crisis. Find the base and rig up the detector. Your fix in this time will be easy—but it is the other end of the line we must have. Until you locate that, stick to the job. Don’t communicate with us until you have it!”

“There is the possibility,” Ashe pointed out, “the Reds may have more than one intermediate post. They probably have played it smart and set up a series of them to spoil a direct trace, as each would lead only to another farther back in time——”

“All right. If that proves true, just get us the next one back,” Millaird returned. “From that we can trace them along if we must send in some of the boys wearing dinosaur skins later. We *have* to find their primary base, and if that hunt goes the hard way, well, we do it the hard way.”

“How did you get the fix?” McNeil asked.

“One of their field parties ran into trouble and yelled for help.”

“Did they get it?”

The major grinned. “What do you think? You know the rules—and the ones the Reds play by are twice as tough on their own men.”

“What kind of trouble?” Ashe wanted to know.

“Some kind of a local religious dispute. We do our best with their code, but we’re not a hundred per cent perfect in reading it. I gather they were playing with a local god and got their fingers burned.”

“Lurgha again, eh?” Ashe smiled.

“Foolish,” Webb said impatiently. “That is a silly thing to do. You were almost over the edge of prudence yourself, Gordon, with that Lurgha business. To use the Great Mother was a ticklish thing to try, and you were lucky to get out of it so easily.”

“Once was enough,” Ashe agreed. “Though using it may have saved our lives. But I assure you I am not starting a holy war or setting up as a prophet.”

Ross had been taught something of map reading, but mentally he could not make what he saw on paper resemble the countryside. A few landmarks, if there were any outstanding ones, were all he could hope to impress upon his memory until he was actually on the ground.

Landing there according to Millaird’s instruction was another experience he would not have chosen of his own accord. To jump was a matter of timing, and in the dark with a measure of rain thrown in, the action was anything but pleasant. Leaving the plane in a blind, follow-the-leader fashion, Ross found the descent into darkness one of the worst trials he had yet faced. But he did not make too bad a landing in the small parklike expanse they had chosen for their target.

Ross pulled loose his harness and chute, dragging them to what he judged to be the center of the clearing. Hearing a plaintive bray from the air, he dodged as one of the two burden asses sent to join them landed and began to kick at its trappings. The animals they had chosen were the most docile available and they had been given sedation before the jump so that now, feeling Ross’s hands, the donkey stood quietly while Ross stripped it of its hanging straps.

“Rossa—” The sound of his Beaker name called through the dark brought Ross facing in the other direction.

“Here, and I have one of the donkeys.”

“And I the other!” That was McNeil.

Their eyes adjusted to a gloom which was not as thick as it would be in the forest and they worked fast. Then they dragged the parachutes together in a heap. The rain would, Webb had assured them, add to the rapid destruction wrought by the chemical he had provided. Ashe shook it over the pile, and there was a faint greenish glow. Then they moved away to the woodland and made camp for the balance of the night.

So much of their whole exploit depended upon luck, and this small part had been successful. Unless some agent had been stationed to watch for their arrival Ross believed they could not be spotted.

The rest of their plan was elastic. Posing as traders who had come to open a new station, they were to stay near a river which drained a lake and then angled southward to the distant sea. They knew this section was only sparsely settled by small tribes, hardly larger than family clans. These people were generations behind the civilized level of the villagers of Britain—roving hunters who followed the sweep of game north or south with the seasons.

Along the seashore the fishermen had established more permanent holdings which were slowly becoming towns. There were perhaps a few hardy pioneer farmers on the southern fringes of the district, but the principle reason traders came to this region was to get amber and furs. The Beaker people dealt in both.

Now as the three sheltered under the wide branches of a towering pine Ashe fumbled with a pack and brought out the “beaker” which was the identifying mark of his adopted people. He measured into it a portion of the sour, stimulating drink which the traders introduced wherever they went. The cup passed from hand to hand, its taste unpleasant on the tongue, but comfortingly warm to one’s middle.

They took turns keeping the watch until the gray of false dawn became the clearer light of morning. After breakfasting on flat cakes of meal, they packed the donkeys, using the same knots and cross lashing which were the mark of real Beaker traders. Their bows protected from dampness under their cloaks, they set out to find the river and their path southward.

Ashe led, Ross towed the donkeys, and McNeil brought up the rear. In the absence of a path they had to set a ragged course, keeping to the edge of the clearing until they saw the end of the lake.

“Woodsmoke,” Ashe commented when they had completed two thirds of their journey. Ross sniffed and was able to smell it too. Nodding to Ashe, McNeil oozed into nothingness between the trees with an ease Murdock envied. As they waited for him to return, Ross became conscious of another life about them, one busy with its own concerns, which were in no way those of human beings, except that food and perhaps shelter were to be reckoned among them.

In Britain, Ross had known there were others of his kind about, but this was different. Here, he could have believed it if he had been told he was the first man to walk this way.

A squirrel ran out on a tree limb and surveyed the two men with curious beady eyes, then clung head down on the tree trunk to see them better. One of the donkeys tossed its head, and the squirrel was gone with a flirt of its tail. Although it was quiet, there was a hum underneath the surface which Ross tried to analyze, to identify the many small sounds which went into its making.

Perhaps because he was trying so hard, he noted the faint noise. His hand touched Ashe’s arm and a slight movement of his head indicated the direction of the sound. Then, as fluidly as he had melted into the woods, McNeil returned. “Company,” he said in a soft voice.

“What kind?”

“Tribesmen, but wilder than any I’ve seen, even on the tapes. We are certainly out on the fringes now. These people look about cave level. I don’t think they’ve ever heard of traders.”

“How many?”

“Three, maybe four families. Most of the males must be out hunting, but there’re about ten children and six or seven women. I don’t think they’ve had good luck lately by the look of them.”

“Maybe their luck and ours are going to turn together,” Ashe said, motioning Ross forward with the donkeys. “We will circle about them to the river and then try bartering later. But I do want to establish contact.”

## 9

“Not to be too hopeful—” McNeil rubbed his arm across his hot face—”so far, so good.” After kicking from his path some of the branches Ross had lopped from the trees they had been felling, he went to help his companion roll another small log up to a shelter which was no longer temporary. If there had been any eyes other than the woodland hunters’ to spy upon them, they would have seen only the usual procedure of the Beaker traders, busily constructing one of their posts.

That they were being watched by the hunters, all three were certain. That there might be other spies in the forest, they had to assume for their own safety. They might prowl at night, but in the daytime all of the time agents kept within the bounds of the roles they were acting.

Barter with the head men of the hunting clan had brought those shy people into the camp of the strangers who had such wonders to exchange for tanned deer hides and better furs. The news of the traders’ arrival spread quickly during the short time they had been here, so that two other clans had sent men to watch the proceedings.

With the trade came news which the agents sifted and studied. Each of them had a list of questions to insert into their conversations with the tribesmen if and when that was possible. Although they did not share a common speech with the forest men, signs were informative and certain nouns could be quickly learned. In the meantime Ashe became friendly with the nearest and first of the clan groups they discovered, going hunting with the men as an excuse to penetrate the unknown section they must quarter in their search for the Red base.

Ross drank river water and mopped his own hot face. “If the Reds aren’t traders,” he mused aloud, “what *is* their cover?”

McNeil shrugged. “A hunting tribe—fishermen—”

“Where would they get the women and children?”

“The same way they get their men—recruit them in our own time. Or in the way lots of tribes grew during periods of stress.”

Ross set down the water jug. “You mean, kill off the men, take over their families?” This was a cold-bloodedness he found sickening. Although he had always prided himself on his toughness, several times during his training at the project he had been confronted by things which shook his belief in his own strong stomach and nerve.

“It has been done,” McNeil remarked bleakly, “hundreds of times by invaders. In this setup—small family clans, widely scattered—that move would be very easy.”

“They would have to pose as farmers, not hunters,” Ross pointed out. “They couldn’t move a base around with them.”

“All right, so they set up a farming village. Oh, I see what you mean—there isn’t any village around here. Yet they are here, maybe underground.”

How right their guesses were they learned that night when Ashe returned, a deer’s haunch on his shoulder. Ross knew him well enough by now to sense his preoccupation. “You found something?”

“A new set of ghosts,” Ashe replied with a strange little smile.

“Ghosts!” McNeil pounced upon that. “The Reds like to play the supernatural angle, don’t they? First the voice of Lurgha and now ghosts. What do these ghosts do?”

“They inhabit a bit of mountainous territory southeast of here, a stretch strictly taboo for all hunters. We were following a bison track until the beast headed for the ghost country. Then Ulffa called us off in a hurry. It seems that the hunter who goes in there after his quarry never reappears, or if he does, it’s in a damaged condition, blown upon by ghosts and burned to death! That’s one point.”

He sat down by the fire and stretched his arms wearily. “The second is a little more disturbing for us. A Beaker camp about twenty miles south of here, as far as I can judge, was exterminated just a week ago. The message was passed to me because I was thought to be a kinsman of the slain——”

McNeil sat up. “Done because they were hunting us?”

“Might well be. On the other hand, the affair may have been just one of general precaution.”

“The ghosts did it?” Ross wanted to know.

“I asked that. No, it seems that strange tribesmen overran it at night.”

“At night?” McNeil whistled.

“Just so.” Ashe’s tone was dry. “The tribes do not fight that way. Either someone slipped up in his briefing, or the Reds are overconfident and don’t care about the rules. But it was the work of tribesmen, or their counterfeits. There is also a nasty rumor speeding about that the ghosts do not relish traders and that they might protest intrusions of such with penalties all around——”

“Like the Wrath of Lurgha,” supplied Ross.

“There is a certain repetition in this which suggests a lot to the suspicious mind,” Ashe agreed.

“I’d say no more hunting expeditions for the present,” McNeil said. “It is too easy to mistake a friend for a deer and weep over his grave afterward.”

“That is a thought which entered my mind several times this afternoon,” Ashe agreed. “These people are deceptively simple on the surface, but their minds do not work along the same patterns as ours. We try to outwit them, but it takes only one slip to make it fatal. In the meantime, I think we’d better make this place a little more snug, and it might be well to post sentries as unobtrusively as possible.”

“How about faking some signs of a ruined camp and heading into the blue ourselves?” McNeil asked. “We could strike for the ghost mountains, traveling by night, and Ulffa’s crowd would think we were finished off.”

“An idea to keep in mind. The point against it would be the missing bodies. It seems that the tribesmen who raided the Beaker camp left some very distasteful evidence of what happened to the camp’s personnel. And those we can’t produce to cover our trail.”

McNeil was not yet convinced. “We might be able to fake something along that line, too——”

“We may have to fake nothing,” Ross cut in softly. He was standing close to the edge of the clearing where they were building their hut, his hand on one of the saplings in the palisade they had set up so laboriously that day. Ashe was beside him in an instant.

“What is it?”

Ross's hours of listening to the sounds of the wilderness were his measuring gauge now. "That bird has never called from inland before. It is the blue one we've seen fishing for frogs along the river."

Ashe, not even glancing at the forest, went for the water jug. "Get your trail supplies," he ordered.

Their leather pouches which held enough iron rations to keep them going were always at hand. McNeil gathered them from behind the fur curtain fronting their half-finished cabin. Again the bird called, its cry piercing and covering a long distance. Ross could understand why a careless man would select it for the signal. He crossed the clearing to the donkeys' shelter, slashing through their nose halters. Probably the patient little beasts would swiftly fall victims to some forest prowlers, but at least they would have their chance to escape.

McNeil, his cloak slung about him to conceal the ration bags, picked up the leather bucket as if he were merely going down to the river for water, and came to join Ross. They believed that they were carrying it off well, that the camp must appear normal to any lurkers in the woods. But either they had made some slip or the enemy was impatient. An arrow sped out of the night to flash across the fire, and Ashe escaped death only because he had leaned forward to feed the flames. His arm swung out and sent the water in the jar hissing onto the blaze as he himself rolled in the other direction.

Ross plunged for the brush with McNeil. Lying flat on the half-frozen ground, they started to work their way to the river bank where the open area would make surprise less possible.

"Ashe?" he whispered and felt McNeil's warm breath on his cheek as he replied:

"He'll make it the other way! He's the best we have for this sort of job."

They made a worm's progress, twice lying, with dagger in hand, while they listened to a faint rustle which betrayed the passing of one of the attackers. Both times Ross was tempted to rise and try to cut off the stranger, but he fought down the impulse. He had learned a control of himself that would have been impossible for him a few months earlier.

The glimmer of the river was pale through the clumps of bushes which sometimes grew into the flood. In this country winter still clung tenaciously in shadowy places with cups of leftover snow, and there was a bite in the wind and water. Ross rose to his knees with an involuntary gasp as a scream cut through the night. He wrenched around toward the camp, only to feel McNeil's hand clamp on his forearm.

"That was a donkey," whispered McNeil urgently. "Come on, let's go down to that ford we discovered!"

They turned south, daring now to trot, half bent to the ground. The river was swollen with spring floods which were only now beginning to subside, but two days earlier they had noticed a sandbar at one spot. By crossing that shelf across the bed, they might hope to put water between them and the unknown enemy tonight. It would give them a breathing space, even though Ross privately shrank from the thought of plowing into the stream. He had seen good-sized trees swirling along in the current only yesterday. And to make such a dash in the dark....

From McNeil's throat burst a startling sound which Ross had last heard in Britain—the questing howl of a hunting wolf. The cry was answered seconds later from downstream.

"Ashe!"



They worked their way along the edge of the water with continued care, until they came upon Ashe at last, so much a part of his background that Ross started when the lump he had taken for a bush hunched forward to join them. Together they made the river crossing and turned south again to head for the mountains. It was then that disaster struck.

Ross heard no birdcall warning this time. Though he was on guard, he never sensed the approach of the man who struck him down from behind. One moment he had been trailing McNeil and Ashe; the next moment was black nothingness.

He was aware of a throb of pain which carried throughout his body and then localized in his head. Forcing open his eyes, the dazzle of light was like a spear point striking directly into his head, intensifying his pain to agony. He brought his hand up to his face and felt stickiness there.

“Assha—” He believed he called that aloud, but he did not even hear his own voice. They were in a valley; a wolf had attacked him out of the bushes. Wolf? No, the wolf was dead, but then it came alive again to howl on a river bank.

Ross forced his eyes open once more, enduring the pain of beams he recognized as sunshine. He turned his head to avoid the glare. It was hard to focus, but he fought to steady himself. There was some reason why it was necessary to move, to get away. But away from what and where? When Ross tried to think he could only see muddled pictures which had no connection.

Then a moving object crossed his very narrow field of vision, passing between him and a thing he knew was a tree trunk. A four-footed creature with a red tongue hanging from its jaws. It came toward him stiff-legged, growling low in its throat, and sniffed at his body before barking in short excited bursts of sound.

The noise hurt his head so much that Ross closed his eyes. Then a shock of icy liquid thrown into his face aroused him to make a feeble protest and he saw, hanging over him in a strange upside-down way, a bearded face which he knew from the past.

Hands were laid on him and the roughness with which he was moved sent Ross spiraling back into the dark once again. When he aroused for the second time it was night and the pain in his head was dulled. He put out his hands and discovered that he lay on a pile of fur robes, and was covered by one.

“Assha—” Again he tried that name. But it was not Assha who came in answer to his feeble call. The woman who knelt beside him with a horn cup in her hand had neatly braided hair in which gray strands showed silver by firelight. Ross knew he had seen her before, but again where and when eluded him. She slipped a sturdy arm under his head and raised him while the world whirled about. The edge of the horn cup was pressed to his lips, and he drank bitter stuff which burned in his throat and lit a fire in his insides. Then he was left to himself once again and in spite of his pain and bewilderment he slept.

How many days he lay in the camp of Ulffa, tended by the chief’s head wife, Ross found it hard to reckon. It was Frigga who had argued the tribe into caring for a man they believed almost dead when they found him, and who nursed Ross back to life with knowledge acquired through half a hundred exchanges between those wise women who were the doctors and priestesses of these roaming peoples.

Why Frigga had bothered with the injured stranger at all Ross learned when he was able to sit up and marshal his bewildered thoughts into some sort of order. The matriarch of the tribe thirsted for knowledge. That same urge which had led her to certain experiments with herbs,

had made her consider Ross a challenge to her healing skill. When she knew that he would live she determined to learn from him all he had to give.

Ulffa and the men of the tribe might have eyed the metal weapons of the traders with awe and avid desire, but Frigga wanted more than trade goods. She wanted the secret of the making of such cloth as the strangers wore, everything she could learn of their lives and the lands through which they had come. She plied Ross with endless questions which he answered as best he could, for he lay in an odd dreamy state where only the present had any reality. The past was dim and far away, and while he was now and then dimly aware that he had something to do, he forgot it easily.

The chief and his men prowled the half-built station after the attackers had withdrawn, bringing back with them a handful of loot—a bronze razor, two skinning knives, some fishhooks, a length of cloth which Frigga appropriated. Ross eyed this spoil indifferently, making no claim upon it. His interest in everything about him was often blanked out by headaches which kept him limp on his bed, uncaring and stupid for hours or even full days.

He gathered that the tribe had been living in fear of an attack from the same raiders who had wiped out the trading post. But at last their scouts returned with the information that the enemy had gone south.

There was one change of which Ross was not aware but which might have startled both Ashe and McNeil. Ross Murdock had indeed died under that blow which had left him unconscious beside the river. The young man whom Frigga had drawn back to sense and a slow recovery was Rossa of the Beaker people. This same Rossa nursed a hot desire for vengeance against those who had struck him down and captured his kinsmen, a feeling which the family tribe who had rescued him could well understand.

There was the same old urgency pushing him to try his strength now, to keep to his feet even when they were unsteady. His bow was gone, but Ross spent hours fashioning another, and he traded his copper bracelet for the best dozen arrows in Ulffa's camp. The jet pin from his cloak he presented to Frigga with all his gratitude.

Now that his strength was coming back he could not rest easy in the camp. He was ready to leave, even though the gashes on his head were still tender to the touch. Ulffa indulgently planned a hunt southward, and Rossa took the trail with the tribesmen.

He broke with the clan hunters when they turned aside at the beginning of the taboo land. Ross, his own mind submerged and taken over by his Beaker cover, hesitated too. Yet he could not give up, and the others left him there, his eyes on the forbidden heights, unhappy and tormented by more than the headaches which still came and went with painful regularity. In the mountains lay what he sought—a hidden something within his brain told him that over and over—but the mountains were taboo, and he should not venture into them.

How long he might have hesitated there if he had not come upon the trail, Ross did not know. But on the day after the hunters of Ulffa's clan left, a glint of sunlight striking between two trees pointed out a woodsman's blaze on a third tree trunk. The two halves of Ross's memory clicked together for an instant as he examined that cut. He knew that it marked a trace and he pushed on, hunting a second cut and then a third. Convinced that these would lead him into the unknown territory, Ross's desire to explore overcame the grafted superstitions of his briefing.

There were other signs that this was an often-traveled route: a spring cleared of leaves and walled with stone, a couple of steps cut in the turf on a steep slope. Ross moved warily, alert

to any sound. He might not be an expert woodsman, but he was learning fast, perhaps the faster because his false memories now supplanted the real ones.

That night he built no fire, crawling instead into the heart of a rotted log to sleep, awakening once to the call of a wolf and another time at the distant crash of a dead tree yielding to wind.

In the morning he was about to climb back to the trail he had prudently left the night before when he saw five bearded, fur-clad men looking much the same as Ulffa's people. Ross hugged the earth and watched them pass out of sight before he followed.

All that day he wove an up-and-down trail behind the small band, sometimes catching sight of them as they topped a rise well ahead or stopped to eat. It was late afternoon when he crept cautiously to the top of a ridge and gazed down into a valley.

There was a town in that valley, sturdy houses of logs behind a stockade. He had seen towns vaguely like it before, yet it had a dreamlike quality as if it were not as real as it appeared.

Ross rested his chin on his arms and watched that town and the people moving in it. Some were fur-clad hunters, but others dressed quite differently. He started up with a little cry at the sight of one of the men who had walked so swiftly from one house to the next; surely he was a Beaker trader!

His unease grew stronger with every moment he watched, but it was the oddness he sensed in that town which bothered him and not any warning that he, himself, was in danger. He had gotten to his knees to see better when out of nowhere a rope sang through the air, settling about his chest with a vicious jerk which not only drove the air from his lungs but pinioned his arms tight to his body.

## 10

Having been cuffed and battered into submission more quickly than would have been possible three weeks earlier, Murdock now stood sullenly surveying the man who, though he dressed like a Beaker trader, persisted in using a language Ross did not know.

“We do not play as children here.” At last the man spoke words Ross could understand. “You will answer me or else others shall ask the questions, and less gently. I say to you now—who are you and from where do you come?”

For a moment Ross glowered across the table at him, his inbred antagonism to authority aroused by that contemptuous demand, but then common sense cautioned. His initial introduction to this village had left him bruised and with one of his headaches. There was no reason to let them beat him until he was in no shape to make a break for freedom when and if there was an opportunity.

“I am Rossa of the traders,” he returned, eying the man with a carefully measured stare. “I came into this land in search of my kinsmen who were taken by raiders in the night.”

The man, who sat on a stool by the table, smiled slowly. Again he spoke in the strange tongue, and Ross merely stared stolidly back. His words were short and explosive sounding, and the man’s smile faded; his annoyance grew as he continued to speak.

One of Ross’s two guards ventured to interrupt, using the Beaker language. “From where did you come?” He was a quiet-faced, slender man, not like his companion, who had roped Murdock from behind and was of the bully breed, able to subdue Ross’s wildcat resistance in a very short struggle.

“I came to this land from the south,” Ross answered, “after the manner of my people. This is a new land with furs and the golden tears of the sun to be gathered and bartered. The traders move in peace, and their hands are raised against no man. Yet in the darkness there came those who would slay without profit, for what reason I have no knowing.”

The quiet man continued the questioning and Ross answered fully with details of the past of one Rossa, a Beaker merchant. Yes, he was from the south. His father was Gurdi, who had a trading post in the warm lands along the big river. This was Rossa’s first trip to open new territory. He had come with his father’s blood brother, Assha, who was a noted far voyager, and it was an honor to be chosen as donkey-leader for such a one as Assha. With Assha had been Macna, one who was also a far trader, though not as noted as Assha.

Of a certainty, Assha was of his own race! Ross blinked at that question. One need only to look upon him to know that he was of trader blood and no uncivilized woodsrunner. How long had he known Assha? Ross shrugged. Assha had come to his father’s post the winter before and had stayed with them through the cold season. Gurdi and Assha had mingled blood after he pulled Gurdi free from the river in flood. Assha had lost his boat and trade goods in that rescue, so Gurdi had made good his loss this year. Detail by detail he gave the story. In spite of the fact that he provided these details glibly, sure that they were true, Ross continued to be haunted by an odd feeling that he was indeed reciting a tale of adventure which had happened long ago and to someone else. Perhaps that pain in his head made him think of these events as very colorless and far away.

“It would seem”—the quiet man turned to the one behind the table—“that this is indeed one Rossa, a Beaker trader.”

But the man looked impatient, angry. He made a sign to the other guard, who turned Ross around roughly and sent him toward the door with a shove. Once again the leader gave an order in his own language, adding a few words more with a stinging snap that might have been a threat or a warning.

Ross was thrust into a small room with a hard floor and not even a skin rug to serve as a bed. Since the quiet man had ordered the removal of the ropes from Ross's arms, he leaned against the wall, rubbing the pain of returning circulation away from his wrists and trying to understand what had happened to him and where he was. Having spied upon it from the heights, he knew it wasn't an ordinary trading station, and he wanted to know what they did here. Also, somewhere in this village he hoped to find Assha and Macna.

At the end of the day his captors opened the door only long enough to push inside a bowl and a small jug. He felt for those in the dusk, dipping his fingers into a lukewarm mush of meal and drinking the water from the jug avidly. His headache dulled, and from experience Ross knew that this bout was almost over. If he slept, he would waken with a clearer mind and no pain. Knowing he was very tired, he took the precaution of curling up directly in front of the door so that no one could enter without arousing him.

It was still dark when he awoke with a curious urgency remaining from a dream he could not remember. Ross sat up, flexing his arms and shoulders to combat the stiffness which had come with his cramped sleep. He could not rid himself of a feeling that there was something to be done and that time was his enemy.

Assha! Gratefully he seized on that. He must find Assha and Macna, for the three of them could surely discover a way to get out of this village. That was what was so important!

He had been handled none too gently, and they were holding him a prisoner. But Ross believed that this was not the worst which could happen to him here, and he must be free before the worst did come. The question was, How could he escape? His bow and dagger were gone, and he did not even have his long cloak pin for a weapon, since he had given that to Frigga.

Running his hands over his body, Ross inventoried what remained of his clothing and possessions. He unfastened the bronze chain-belt still buckled in his kilt tunic, swinging the length speculatively in one hand. A masterpiece of craftsmanship, it consisted of patterned plates linked together with a series of five finely wrought chains and a front buckle in the form of a lion's head, its protruding tongue serving as a hook to support a dagger sheath. Its weight promised a weapon of sorts, which when added to the element of surprise might free him.

By rights they would be expecting him to produce some opposition, however. It was well known that only the best fighters, the shrewdest minds, followed the traders' roads. It was a proud thing to be a trader in the wilderness, a thought that warmed Ross now as he waited in the dark for what luck and Ba-Bal of the Bright Horns would send. Were he ever to return to Gurdi's post, Ba-Bal, whose boat rode across the sky from dawn to dusk, would have a fine ox, jars of the first brewing, and sweet-smelling amber laid upon his altar.

Ross had patience which he had learned from the mixed heritage of his two pasts, the real and the false graft. He could wait as he had waited many times before—quiet, and with outward ease—for the right moment to come. It came now with footsteps ringing sharply, halting before his cell door.

With the noiseless speed of a hunting cat, Ross flung himself from behind the door to a wall, where he would be hidden from the newcomer for that necessary instant or two. If his attack

was to be successful, it must occur inside the room. He heard the sound of a bar being slid out of its brackets, and he poised himself, the belt rippling from his right hand.

The door was opening inward, and a man stood silhouetted against the outer light. He muttered, looking toward the corner where Ross had thrown his single garment in a roll which might just resemble, for the needed second or two, a man curled in slumber. The man in the doorway took the bait, coming forward far enough for Ross to send the door slamming shut as he himself sprang with the belt aimed for the other's head.

There was a startled cry, cut off in the middle as the belt plates met flesh and bone in a crushing force. Luck was with him! Ross caught up his kilt and belted it around him after he had made a hurried examination of the body now lying at his feet. He was not sure that the man was dead, but at any rate he was completely unconscious. Ross stripped off the man's cloak, located his dagger, freed it from the belt hook, and snapped it on his own.

Then inch by inch Ross edged open the door, peering through the crack. As far as he could see, the hall was empty, so he jerked the portal open, and dagger in hand, sprang out, ready for attack. He closed the door, slipping the bar back into its brackets. If the man inside revived and pounded for attention, his own friends might think it was Ross and delay investigating.

But the escape from the cell was the easiest part of what he planned to do, as Ross well knew. To find Assha and Macna in this maze of rooms occupied by the enemy was far more difficult. Although he had no idea in which of the village buildings they might be confined, this one was the largest and seemed to be the headquarters of the chief men, which meant it could also serve as their prison.

Light came from a torch in a bracket halfway down the hall. The wood burned smokily, giving off a resinous odor, and to Ross the glow was sufficient illumination. He slipped along as close to the wall as he could, ready to freeze at the slightest sound. But this portion of the building might well have been deserted, for he saw or heard no one. He tried the only two doors opening out of the hall, but they were secured on the other side. Then he came to a bend in the corridor, and stopped short, hearing a murmur of low voices.

If he had used a hunter's tricks of silent tread and vigilant wariness before, Ross was doubly on guard now as he wriggled to a point from which he could see beyond that turn. Mere luck prevented him from giving himself away a moment later.

Assha! Assha, alive, well, apparently under no restraint, was just turning away from the same quiet man who had had a part in Ross's interrogation. That was surely Assha's brown hair, his slender wiry body draped with a Beaker's kilt. A familiar tilt of the head convinced Ross, though he could not see the man's face. The quiet man went down the hall, leaving Assha before a door. As he passed through it Ross sped forward and followed him inside.

Assha had crossed the bare room and was standing on a glowing plate in the floor. Ross, aroused to desperate action by some fear he did not understand, leaped after him. His left hand fell upon Assha's shoulder, turning the man half around as Ross, too, stepped upon the patch of luminescence.

Murdock had only an instant to realize that he was staring into the face of an astonished stranger. His hand flashed up in an edgewise blow which caught the other on the side of the throat, and then the world came apart about them. There was a churning, whirling sickness which griped and bent Ross almost double across the crumpled body of his victim. He held his head lest it be torn from his shoulders by the spinning thing which seemed based behind his eyes.

The sickness endured only for a moment, and some buried part of Ross's mind accepted it as a phenomenon he had experienced before. He came out of it gasping, to focus his attention once more on the man at his feet.

The stranger was still breathing. Ross stooped to drag him from the plate and began binding and gagging him with lengths torn from his kilt. Only when his captive was secure did he begin looking about him curiously.

The room was bare of any furnishings and now, as he glanced at the floor, Ross saw that the plate had lost its glow. The Beaker trader Rossa rubbed sweating palms on his kilt and thought fleetingly of forest ghosts and other mysteries. Not that the traders bowed to those ghosts which were the plague of lesser men and tribes, but anything which suddenly appeared and then disappeared without any logical explanation, needed thinking on. Murdock pulled the prisoner, who was now reviving, to the far end of the room and then went back to the plate with the persistence of a man who refused to treat with ghosts and wanted something concrete to explain the unexplainable. Though he rubbed his hands across the smooth surface of the plate, it did not light up again.

His captive having writhed himself half out of the corner of the room, Ross debated the wisdom of another silencing—say a tap on the skull with the heavy hilt of his dagger. Deciding against it because he might need a guide, he freed the victim's ankle bonds and pulled him to his feet, holding the dagger ready where the man could see it. Were there any more surprises to be encountered in this place, Assha's double would test them first.

The door did not lead to the same corridor, or even the same kind of corridor Ross had passed through moments earlier. Instead they entered a short passage with walls of some smooth stuff which had almost the sheen of polished metal and were sleek and cold to the touch. In fact, the whole place was chill, chill as river water in the spring.

Still herding the prisoner before him, Ross came to the nearest door and looked within, to be faced by incomprehensible frames of metal rods and boxes. Rossa of the traders marveled and stared, but again, he realized that what he saw was not altogether strange. Part of one wall was a board on which small lights flashed and died, to flash again in winks of bright color. A mysterious object made of wire and disks hung across the back of a chair standing near-by.

The bound man lurched for the chair and fell, rolling toward the wall. Ross pushed him on until he was hidden behind one of the metal boxes. Then he made the rounds of the room, touching nothing, but studying what he could not understand. Puffs of warm air came in through grills near the floor, but the room had the same general chill as the hall outside.

Meanwhile the lights on the board had become more active, flashing on and off in complex patterns. Ross now heard a buzzing, as if a swarm of angry insects were gathered for an attack. Crouching beside his captive, Ross watched the lights, trying to discover the source of the sound.

The buzz grew shriller, almost demanding. Ross heard the tramp of heavy footgear in the corridor, and a man entered the room, crossing purposefully to the chair. He sat down and drew the wire-and-disk frame over his head. His hands moved under the lights, but Ross could not guess what he was doing.

The captive at Murdock's side tried to stir, but Ross's hand pinned him quiet. The shrill noise which had originally summoned the man at the lights was interrupted by a sharp pattern of long-and-short sounds, and his hands flew even more quickly while Ross took in every detail of the other's clothing and equipment. He was neither a shaggy tribesman nor a trader. He

wore a dull-green outer garment cut in one piece to cover his arms and legs as well as his body, and his hair was so short that his round skull might have been shaven. Ross rubbed the back of his wrist across his eyes, experiencing again that dim other memory. Odd as this man looked, Murdock had seen his like before somewhere, yet the background had not been Gurdi's post on the southern river. Where and when had he, Rossa, ever been with such strange beings? And why could he not remember it all more clearly?

Boots sounded once more in the hall, and another figure strode in. This one wore furs, but he, too, was no woods hunter, Ross realized as he studied the newcomer in detail. The loose overshirt of thick fur with its hood thrown back, the high boots, and all the rest were not of any primitive fashioning. And the man had four eyes! One pair were placed normally on either side of his nose, and the other two, black-rimmed and murky, were set above on his forehead.

The fur-clad man tapped the one seated at the board. He freed his head partially from the wire cage so that they could talk together in a strange language while lights continued to flash and the buzzing died away. Ross's captive wriggled with renewed vigor and at last thrashed free a foot to kick at one of the metal installations. The resulting clang brought both men around. The one at the board tore his head cage off as he jumped to his feet, while the other brought out a gun.

Gun? One little fraction of Ross's mind wondered at his recognition of that black thing and of the danger it promised, even as he prepared for battle. He pushed his captive across the path of the man in fur and threw himself in the other direction. There was a blast to make a torment in his head as he hurled toward the door.

So intent was Ross upon escape that he did not glance behind but skidded out on his hands and knees, thus fortunately presenting a poor target to the third man coming down the hall. Ross's shoulder hit the newcomer at thigh level, and they tangled in a struggling mass which saved Ross's life as the others burst out behind them.

Ross fought grimly, his hands and feet moving in blows he was not conscious of planning. His opponent was no easy match and at last Ross was flattened, in spite of his desperate efforts. He was whirled over, his arms jerked behind him, and cold metal rings snapped about his wrists. Then he was rolled back, to lie blinking up at his enemies.

All three men gathered over him, barking questions which he could not understand. One of them disappeared and returned with Ross's former captive, his mouth a straight line and a light in his eyes Ross understood far better than words.

"You are the trader prisoner?" The man who looked like Assha leaned over Murdock, patches of red on his tanned skin where the gag and wrist bonds had been.

"I am Rossa, son of Gurdi, of the traders," Ross returned, meeting what he read in the other's expression with a ready defiance. "I was a prisoner, yes. But you did not keep me one for long then, nor shall you now."

The man's thin upper lip lifted. "You have done yourself ill, my young friend. We have a better prison here for you, one from which you shall not escape."

He spoke to the other men, and there was the ring of an order in his voice. They pulled Ross to his feet, pushing him ahead of them. During the short march Ross used his eyes, noticing things he could not identify in the rooms through which they passed. Men called questions and at last they paused long enough, Ross firmly in the hold of the fur-clad guard, for the other two to put on similar garments.



Ross had lost his cloak in the fight, but no fur shirt was given him. He shivered more and more as the chill which clung to that warren of rooms and halls bit into his half-clad body. He was certain of only one thing about this place; he could not possibly be in the crude buildings of the valley village. However, he was unable to guess where he was and how he had come there.

Finally, they went down a narrow room filled with bulky metal objects of bright scarlet or violet that gleamed weirdly and were equipped with rods along which all the colors of the rainbow ringed. Here was a round door, and when one of the guards used both hands to tug it open, the cold that swept in at them was a frigid breath that burned as it touched bare skin.

# 11

It took Ross a while to learn that the dirty-white walls of this tunnel which were almost entirely opaque, with dark objects showing dimly through them here and there, were of solid ice. A black wire was hooked overhead and at regular intervals hung with lights which did nothing to break the sensation of glacial cold about them.

Ross shuddered. Every breath he drew stung in his lungs; his bare shoulders and arms and the exposed section of thigh between kilt and boot were numb. He could only move on stiffly, pushed ahead by his guards when he faltered. He guessed that were he to lose his footing here and surrender to the cold, he would forfeit the battle entirely and with it his life.

He had no way of measuring the length of the boring through the solid ice, but they were at last fronted by another opening, a ragged one which might have been hacked with an ax. They emerged from it into the wildest scene Ross had ever seen. Of course, he was familiar with ice and snow, but here was a world surrendered completely to the brutal force of winter in a strange, abnormal way. It was a still, dead white-gray world in which nothing moved save the wind which curled the drifts.

His guards covered their eyes with the murky lenses they had worn pushed up on their foreheads within the shelter, for above them sunlight dazzled on the ice crest. Ross, his eyes smarting, kept his gaze centered on his feet. He was given no time to look about. A rope was produced, a loop of it flipped in a noose about his throat, and he was towed along like a leashed dog. Before them was a path worn in the snow, not only by the passing of booted feet, but with more deeply scored marks as if heavy objects had been sledged there. Ross slipped and stumbled in the ruts, fearing to fall lest he be dragged. The numbness of his body reached into his head. He was dizzy, the world about him misting over now and again with a haze which arose from the long stretches of unbroken snow fields.

Tripping in a rut, he went down upon one knee, his flesh too numbed now to feel the additional cold of the snow, snow so hard that its crust delivered a knife's cut.

Unemotionally, he watched a thin line of red trickle in a sluggish drop or two down the blue skin of his leg. The rope jerked him forward, and Ross scrambled awkwardly until one of his captors hooked a fur mitten in his belt and heaved him to his feet once more.

The purpose of that trek through the snow was obscure to Ross. In fact, he no longer cared, save that a hard rebel core deep inside him would not let him give up as long as his legs could move and he had a scrap of conscious will left in him. It was more difficult to walk now. He skidded and went down twice more. Then, the last time he slipped, he sledged past the man who led him, sliding down the slope of a glass-slick slope. He lay at the foot, unable to get up. Through the haze and deadening blanket of the cold he knew that he was being pulled about, shaken, generally mishandled; but this time he could not respond. Someone snapped open the rings about his wrists.

There was a call, echoing eerily across the ice. The fumbling about his body changed to a tugging and once more he was sent rolling down the slope. But the rope was now gone from his throat, and his arms were free. This time when he brought up hard against an obstruction he was not followed.

Ross's conscious mind—that portion of him that was Rossa, the trader—was content to lie there, to yield to the lethargy born of the frigid world about him. But the subconscious Ross Murdock of the Project prodded at him. He had always had a certain cold hatred which could

crystalize and become a spur. Once it had been hatred of circumstances and authority; now it became hatred for those who had led him into this wilderness with the purpose, as he knew now, of leaving him to freeze and die.

Ross pulled his hands under him. Though there was no feeling in them, they obeyed his will clumsily. He levered himself up and looked around. He lay in a narrow crevicolike cut, partly walled in by earth so frozen as to resemble steel. Crusted over it in long streaks from above were tongues of ice. To remain here was to serve his captors' purpose.

Ross inched his way to his feet. This opening, which was intended as his grave, was not so deep as the men had thought it in their hurry to be rid of him. He believed that he could climb out if he could make his body answer to his determination.

Somehow Ross made that supreme effort and came again to the rutted path from which they had tumbled him. Even if he could, there was no sense in going along that rutted trail, for it led back to the ice-encased building from which he had been brought. They had thrust him out to die; they would not take him in.

But a road so well marked must have some goal, and in hopes that he might find shelter at the other end, Ross turned to the left. The trace continued down the slope. Now the towering walls of ice and snow were broken by rocky teeth as if they had bitten deep upon this land, only to be gnawed in return. Rounding one of those rock fangs, Ross looked at a stretch of level ground. Snow lay here, but the beaten-down trail led straight through it to the rounded side of a huge globe half buried in the ground, a globe of dark material which could only be man-made.

Ross was past caution. He must get to warmth and shelter or he was done for, and he knew it. Wavering and weaving, he went on, his attention fixed on the door ahead—a closed oval door. With a sob of exhausted effort, Ross threw himself against it. The barrier gave, letting him fall forward into a queer glimmering radiance of bluish light.

The light rousing him because it promised more, he crawled on past another door which was flattened back against the inner wall. It was like making one's way down a tube. Ross paused, pressing his lifeless hands against his bare chest under the edge of his tunic, suddenly realizing that there was warmth here. His breath did not puff out in frosty streamers before him, nor did the air sear his lungs when he ventured to draw in more than shallow gulps.

With that realization a measure of animal caution returned to him. To remain where he was, just inside the entrance, was to court disaster. He must find a hiding place before he collapsed, for he sensed he was very near the end of his ability to struggle. Hope had given him a flash of false strength, the impetus to move, and he must make the most of that gift.

His path ended at a wide ladder, coiling in slow curves into gloom below and shadows above. He sensed that he was in a building of some size. He was afraid to go down, for even looking in that direction almost finished his sense of balance, so he climbed up.

Step by step, Ross made that painful journey, passing levels from which three or four hallways ran out like the radii of a spider's web. He was close to the end of his endurance when he heard a sound, echoed, magnified, from below. It was someone moving. He dragged his body into the fourth level where the light was very faint, hoping to crawl far enough into one of the passages to remain unseen from the stair. But he had gone only part-way down his chosen road when he collapsed, panting, and fell back against the wall. His hands pawed vainly against that sleek surface. He was falling through it!

Ross had a second, perhaps two, of stupefied wonder. Lying on a soft surface, he was enfolded by a warmth which eased his bruised and frozen body. There was a sharp prick in

his thigh, another in his arm, and the world was a hazy dream until he finally slept in the depths of exhaustion.

There were dreams, detailed ones, and Ross stirred uneasily as his sleep thinned to waking. He lay with his eyes closed, fitting together odd bits of—dreams? No, he was certain that they were memories. Rossa of the Beaker traders and Ross Murdock of the project were again fused into one and the same person. How it had happened he did not know, but it was true.

Opening his eyes, he noticed a curved ceiling of soft blue which misted at the edges into gray. The restful color acted on his troubled, waking mind like a soothing word. For the first time since he had been struck down in the night his headache was gone. He raised his hand to explore that old hurt near his hairline that had been so tender only yesterday that it could not bear pressure. There remained only a thin, rough line like a long-healed scar, that was all.

Ross lifted his head to look about him. His body lay supported in a cradlelike arrangement of metal, almost entirely immersed in a red gelatinous substance with a clean, aromatic odor. Just as he was no longer cold, neither was he hungry. He felt as fit as he ever had in his life. Sitting up in the cradle, he stroked the jelly away from his shoulders and chest. It fell from him cleanly, leaving no trace of grease or dampness on his skin.

There were other fixtures in the small cylinderlike chamber besides that odd bed in which he had lain. Two bucket-shaped seats were placed at the narrow fore part of the room and before those seats was a system of controls he could not comprehend.

As Ross swung his feet to the floor there was a click from the side which brought him around, ready for trouble. But the noise had been caused by the opening of a door into a small cupboard. Inside the cupboard lay a fat package. Obviously this was an invitation to investigate the offering.

The package contained a much folded article of fabric, compressed and sealed in a transparent bag which he fumbled twice before he succeeded in releasing its fastening. Ross shook out a garment of material such as he had never seen before. Its sheen and satin-smooth surface suggested metal, but its stuff was as supple as fine silk. Color rippled across it with every twist and turn he gave to the length—dark blue fading to pale violet, accented with wavering streaks of vivid and startling green.

Ross experimented with a row of small, brilliant-green studs which made a transverse line from the right shoulder to the left hip, and they came apart. As he climbed into the suit the stuff modeled to his body in a tight but perfect fit. Across the shoulders were bands of green to match the studs, and the stockinglike tights were soled with a thick substance which formed a cushion for his feet.

He pressed the studs together, felt them lock, and then stood smoothing that strange, beautiful fabric, unable to account for either it or his surroundings. His head was clear; he could remember every detail of his flight up to the time he had fallen through the wall. And he was certain that he had passed through not only one, but two, of the Red time posts. Could this be the third? If so, was he still a captive? Why would they leave him to freeze in the open country one moment and then treat him this way later?

He could not connect the ice-encased building from which the Reds had taken him with this one. At the sound of another soft noise Ross glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the cradle of jelly, from which he had emerged, close in upon itself until its bulk was a third of its former size. Compact as a box, it folded up against the wall.

Ross, his cushioned feet making no sound, advanced to the bucket-chairs. But lowering his body into one of them for a better look at what vaguely resembled the control of a

helicopter—like the one in which he had taken the first stage of his fantastic journey across space and time—he did not find it comfortable. He realized that it had not been constructed to accommodate a body shaped precisely like his own.

A body like his own.... That jelly bath or bed or whatever it was.... The clothing which adapted so skillfully to his measurements....

Ross leaned forward to study the devices on the control board, confirming his suspicions. He had made the final jump of them all! He was now in some building of that alien race upon whose existence Millaird and Kelgarries had staked the entire project. This was the source, or one of the sources, from which the Reds were getting the knowledge which fitted no modern pattern.

A world encased in ice and a building with strange machinery. This thing—a cylinder with a pilot's seat and a set of controls. Was it an alien place? But the jelly bath—and the rest of it.... Had his presence activated that cupboard to supply him with clothing? And what had become of the tunic he was wearing when he entered?

Ross got up to search the chamber. The bed-bath was folded against the wall, but there was no sign of his Beaker clothing, his belt, the hide boots. He could not understand his own state of well being, the lack of hunger and thirst.

There were two possible explanations for it all. One was that the aliens still lived here and for some reason had come to his aid. The other was that he stood in a place where robot machinery worked, though those who had set it up were no longer there. It was difficult to separate his memory of the half-buried globe he had seen from his sickness of that moment. Yet he knew that he had climbed and crawled through emptiness, neither seeing nor hearing any other life. Now Ross restlessly paced up and down, seeking the door through which he must have come, but there was not even a line to betray such an opening.

“I want out,” he said aloud, standing in the center of the cramped room, his fists planted on his hips, his eyes still searching for the vanished door. He had tapped, he had pushed, he had tried every possible way to find it. If he could only remember how he had come in! But all he could recall was leaning against a wall which moved inward and allowed him to fall. But where had he fallen? Into that jelly bath?

Ross, stung by a sudden idea, glanced at the ceiling. It was low enough so that by standing on tiptoes he could drum his fingers on its surface. Now he moved to the place directly above where the cradle had swung before it had folded itself away.

Rapping and poking, his efforts were rewarded at last. The blue curve gave under his assault. He pushed now, rising on his toes, though in that position he could exert little pressure. Then as if some faulty catch had been released, the ceiling swung up so that he lost his footing and would have fallen had he not caught the back of one of the bucket-seats.

He jumped and by hooking his hands over the edge of the opening, was able to work his way up and out, to face a small line of light. His fingers worked at that, and he opened a second door, entering a familiar corridor.

Holding the door open, Ross looked back, his eyes widening at what he saw. For it was plain now that he had just climbed out of a machine with the unmistakable outline of a snub-nosed rocket. The small flyer—or a jet, or whatever it was—had been fitted into a pocket in the side of the big structure as a ship into a berth, and it must have been set there to shoot from that enclosing chamber as a bullet is shot from a rifle barrel. But why?

Ross's imagination jumped from fact to theory. The torpedo craft could be an atomic jet. All right, he had been in bad shape when he fell into it by chance and the bed machine had caught him as if it had been created for just such a duty. What kind of a small plane would be equipped with a restorative apparatus? Only one intended to handle emergencies, to transport badly injured living things who had to leave the building in a hurry.

In other words, a lifeboat!

But why would a building need a lifeboat? That would be rather standard equipment for a ship. Ross stepped into the corridor and stared about him with open and incredulous wonder. Could this be some form of ship, grounded here, deserted and derelict, and now being plundered by the Reds? The facts fitted! They fitted so well with all he had been able to discover that Ross was sure it was true. But he determined to prove it beyond all doubt.

He closed the door leading to the lifeboat berth, but not so securely that he could not open it again. That was too good a hiding place. On his cushioned feet he padded back to the stairway, and he stood there listening. Far below were sounds, a rasp of metal against metal, a low murmur of muted voices. But from above there was nothing, so he would explore above before he ventured into that other danger zone.

Ross climbed, passing two more levels, to come out into a vast room with a curving roof which must fill the whole crown of the globe. Here was such a wealth of machines, controls, things he could not understand that he stood bewildered, content for the moment merely to look. There were—he counted slowly—five control boards like those he had seen in the small escape ship. Each of these was faced by two or three of the bucket-seats, only these swung in webbing. He put his hand on one, and it bobbed elastically.

The control boards were so complicated that the one in the lifeboat might have been a child's toy in comparison. The air in the ship had been good; in the lifeboat it had held the pleasant odor of the jelly; but here Ross sniffed a faint but persistent hint of corruption, of an old malodor.

He left the vantage point by the stairs and paced between the control boards and their empty swinging seats. This was the main control room, of that he was certain. From this point all the vast bulk beneath him had been set in motion, sailed here and there. Had it been on the sea, or through the air? The globe shape suggested an air-borne craft. But a civilization so advanced as this would surely have left some remains. Ross was willing to believe that he could be much farther back in time than 2000 b.c., but he was still sure that traces of those who could build a thing like this would have existed in the twentieth century a.d.

Maybe that was how the Reds had found this. Something they had turned up within their country—say, in Siberia, or some of the forgotten corners of Asia—had been a clue.

Having had little schooling other than the intensive cramming at the base and his own informal education, the idea of the race who had created this ship overawed Ross more than he would admit. If the project could find this, turn loose on it the guys who knew about such things.... But that was just what they were striving for, and he was the only project man to have found the prize. Somehow, somehow, he had to get back—out of this half-buried ship and its icebound world—back to where he could find his own people. Perhaps the job was impossible, but he had to try. His survival was considered impossible by the men who had thrown him into the crevice, but here he was. Thanks to the men who had built this ship, he was alive and well.

Ross sat down in one of the uncomfortable seats to think and thus avoided immediate disaster, for he was hidden from the stairs on which sounded the tap of boots. A climber, maybe two, were on their way up, and there was no other exit from the control cabin.

## 12

Ross dropped from the web-slung chair to the floor and made himself as small as possible under the platform at the front of the cabin. Here, where there was a smaller control board and two seats placed closely together, the odd, unpleasant odor clung and became stronger to Ross's senses as he waited tensely for the climbers to appear. Though he had searched, there was nothing in sight even faintly resembling a weapon. In a last desperate bid for freedom he crept back to the stairwell.

He had been taught a blow during his training period, one which required a precise delivery and, he had been warned, was often fatal. He would use it now. The climber was very close. A cropped head arose through the floor opening, and Ross struck, knowing as his hand chopped against the folds of a fur hood that he had failed.

But the impetus of that unexpected blow saved him after all. With a choked cry the man disappeared, crashing down upon the one following him. A scream and shouts were heard from below, and a shot ripped up the well as Ross scrambled away from it. He might have delayed the final battle, but they had him cornered. He faced that fact bleakly. They need only sit below and let nature take its course. His session in the lifeboat had restored his strength, but a man could not live forever without food and water.

However, he had bought himself perhaps a yard of time which must be put to work. Turning to examine the seats, Ross discovered that they could be unhooked from their webbing swings. Freeing all of them, he dragged their weight to the stairwell and jammed them together to make a barricade. It could not hold long against any determined push from below, but, he hoped, it would deflect bullets if some sharpshooter tried to wing him by ricochet. Every so often there was the crash of a shot and some shouting, but Ross was not going to be drawn out of cover by that.

He paced around the control cabin, still hunting for a weapon. The symbols on the levers and buttons were meaningless to him. They made him feel frustrated because he imagined that among that countless array were some that might help him out of the trap if he could only guess their use.

Once more he stood by the platform thinking. This was the point from which the ship had been sailed—in the air or on some now frozen sea. These control boards must have given the ship's master the means not only of propelling the vast bulk, but of unloading and loading cargo, lighting, heating, ventilation, and perhaps defense! Of course, every control might be dead now, but he remembered that in the lifeboat the machines had worked successfully, fulfilled expertly the duty for which they had been constructed.

The only step remaining was to try his luck. Having made his decision, Ross simply shut his eyes as he had in a very short and almost forgotten childhood, turned around three times, and pointed. Then he looked to see where luck had directed him.

His finger indicated a board before which there had been three seats, and he crossed to it slowly, with a sense that once he touched the controls he might inaugurate a chain of events he could not stop. The crash of a shot underlined the fact that he had no other recourse.

Since the symbols meant nothing, Ross concentrated on the shapes of the various devices and chose one which vaguely resembled the type of light switch he had always known. Since it was up, he pressed it down, counting to twenty slowly as he waited for a reaction. Below the switch was an oval button marked with two wiggles and a double dot in red. Ross snapped it



level with the panel, and when it did not snap back, he felt somehow encouraged. When the two levers flanking that button did not push in or move up and down, Ross pulled them out without even waiting to count off.

This time he had results! A crackling of noise with a singsong rhythm, the volume of which, low at first, arose to a drone filled the cabin. Ross, deafened by the din, twisted first one lever and then the other until he had brought the sound to a less piercing howl. But he needed action, not just noise; he moved from behind the first chair to the next one. Here were five oval buttons, marked in the same vivid green as that which trimmed his clothing—two wiggles, a dot, a double bar, a pair of entwined circles, and a crosshatch.

Why make a choice? Recklessness bubbled to the surface, and Ross pushed all the buttons in rapid succession. The results were, in a measure, spectacular. Out of the top of the control board rose a triangle of screen which steadied and stood firm while across it played a rippling wave of color. Meanwhile the singsong became an angry squawking as if in protest.

Well, he had something, even if he didn't know what it was! And he had also proved that the ship was alive. However, Ross wanted more than a squawk of exasperation, which was exactly what the noise had become. It almost sounded, Ross decided as he listened, as if he were being expertly chewed out in another language. Yes, he wanted more than a series of squawks and a fanciful display of light waves on a screen.

At the section of board before the third and last seat there was less choice—only two switches. As Ross flicked up the first the pattern on the screen dwindled into a brown color shot with cream in which there was a suggestion of a picture. Suppose one didn't put the switch all the way up? Ross examined the slot in which the bar moved and now noted a series of tiny point marks along it. Selective? It would not do any harm to see. First he hurried back to the cork of chairs he had jammed into the stairwell. The squawks were now coming only at intervals, and Ross could hear nothing to suggest that his barrier was being forced.

He returned to the lever and moved it back two notches, standing open-mouthed at the immediate result. The cream-and-brown streaks were making a picture! Moving another notch down caused the picture to skitter back and forth on the screen. With memories of TV tuning to guide him, Ross brought the other lever down to a matching position, and the dim and shadowy images leaped into clear and complete focus. But the color was still brown, not the black and white he had expected.

Only, he was also looking into a face! Ross swallowed, his hand grasping one of the strings of chair webbing for support. Perhaps because in some ways it did resemble his own, that face was more preposterously nonhuman. The visage on the screen was sharply triangular with a small, sharply pointed chin and a jaw line running at an angle from a broad upper face. The skin was dark, covered largely with a soft and silky down, out of which hooked a curved and shining nose set between two large round eyes. On top of that astonishing head the down rose to a peak not unlike a cockatoo's crest. Yet there was no mistaking the intelligence in those eyes, nor the other's amazement at sight of Ross. They might have been staring at each other through a window.

Squawk ... squeek ... squawk.... The creature in the mirror—on the vision plate—or outside the window—moved its absurdly small mouth in time to those sounds. Ross swallowed again and automatically made answer.

“Hello.” His voice was a weak whistle, and perhaps it did not reach the furry-faced one, for he continued his questions if questions they were. Meanwhile Ross, over his first stupefaction, tried to see something of the creature's background. Though the objects were

slightly out of focus, he was sure he recognized fittings similar to those about him. He must be in communication with another ship of the same type and one which was not deserted!

Furry-face had turned his head away to squawk rapidly over his shoulder, a shoulder which was crossed by a belt or sash with an elaborate pattern. Then he got up from his seat and stood aside to make room for the one he had summoned.

If Furry-face had been a startling surprise, Ross was now to have another. The man who now faced him on the screen was totally different. His skin registered as pale—cream-colored—and his face was far more human in shape, though it was hairless as was the smooth dome of his skull. When one became accustomed to that egg slickness, the stranger was not bad-looking, and he was wearing a suit which matched the one Ross had taken from the lifeboat.

This one did not attempt to say anything. Instead, he stared at Ross long and measuringly, his eyes growing colder and less friendly with every second of that examination. Ross had resented Kelgarries back at the project, but the major could not match Baldy for the sheer weight of unpleasant warning he could pack into a look. Ross might have been startled by Furry-face, but now his stubborn streak arose to meet this implied challenge. He found himself breathing hard and glaring back with an intensity which he hoped would get across and prove to Baldy that he would not have everything his own way if he proposed to tangle with Ross.

His preoccupation with the stranger on the screen betrayed Ross into the hands of those from below. He heard their attack on the barricade too late. By the time he turned around, the cork of seats was heaved up and a gun was pointing at his middle. His hands went up in small reluctant jerks as that threat held him where he was. Two of the fur-clad Reds climbed into the control chamber.

Ross recognized the leader as Ashe's double, the man he had followed across time. He blinked for just an instant as he faced Ross and then shouted an order at his companion. The other spun Murdock around, bringing his hands down behind him to clamp his wrists together. Once again Ross fronted the screen and saw Baldy watching the whole scene with an expression suggesting that he had been shocked out of his complacent superiority.

"Ah..." Ross's captors were staring at the screen and the unearthly man there. Then one flung himself at the control panel and his hands whipped back and forth, restoring to utter silence both screen and room.

"What are you?" The man who might have been Ashe spoke slowly in the Beaker tongue, drilling Ross with his stare as if by the force of his will alone he could pull the truth out of his prisoner.

"What do you think I am?" Ross countered. He was wearing the uniform of Baldy, and he had clearly established contact with the time owners of this ship. Let that worry the Red!

But they did not try to answer him. At a signal he was led to the stair. To descend that ladder with his hands behind him was almost impossible, and they had to pause at the next level to unclasp the handcuffs and let him go free. Keeping a gun on him carefully, they hurried along, trying to push the pace while Ross delayed all he could. He realized that in his recognition of the power of the gun back in the control chamber, his surrender to its threat, he had betrayed his real origin. So he must continue to confuse the trail to the project in every possible way left to him. He was sure that this time they would not leave him in the first convenient crevice.

He knew he was right when they covered him with a fur parka at the entrance to the ship, once more manacled his hands and dropping a noose leash on him.

So, they were taking him back to their post here. Well, in the post was the time transporter which could return him to his own kind. It would be, it must be possible to get to that! He gave his captors no more trouble but trudged, outwardly dispirited, along the rutted way through the snow up the slope and out of the valley.

He did manage to catch a good look at the globe-ship. More than half of it, he judged, was below the surface of the ground. To be so buried it must either have lain there a long time or, if it were an air vessel, crashed hard enough to dig itself that partial grave. Yet Ross had established contact with another ship like it, and neither of the creatures he had seen were human, at least not human in any way he knew.

Ross chewed on that as he walked. He believed that those with him were looting the ship of its cargo, and by its size, that cargo must be a large one. But cargo from where? Made by what hands, what *kind* of hands? Enroute to what port? And how had the Reds located the ship in the first place? There were plenty of questions and very few answers. Ross clung to the hope that somehow he had endangered the Reds' job here by activating the communication system of the derelict and calling the attention of its probable owners to its fate.

He also believed that the owners might take steps to regain their property. Baldy had impressed him deeply during those few moments of silent appraisal, and he knew he would not like to be on the receiving end of any retaliation from the other. Well, now he had only one chance, to keep the Reds guessing as long as he could and hope for some turn of fate which would allow him to try for the time transport. How the plate operated he did not know, but he had been transferred here from the Beaker age and if he could return to that time, escape might be possible. He had only to reach the river and follow it down to the sea where the sub was to make rendezvous at intervals. The odds were overwhelmingly against him, and Ross knew it. But there was no reason, he decided, to lie down and roll over dead to please the Reds.

As they approached the post Ross realized how much skill had gone into its construction. It looked as if they were merely coming up to the outer edge of a glacier tongue. Had it not been for the track in the snow, there would have been no reason to suspect that the ice covered anything but a thick core of its own substance. Ross was shoved through the white-walled tunnel to the building beyond.

He was hurried through the chain of rooms to a door and thrust through, his hands still fastened. It was dark in the cubby and colder than it had been outside. Ross stood still, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. It was several moments after the door had slammed shut that he caught a faint thud, a dull and hollow sound.

"Who is here?" he used the Beaker speech, determining to keep to the rags of his cover, which probably was a cover no longer. There was no reply, but after a pause that distant beat began again. Ross stepped cautiously forward, and by the simple method of running fullface into the walls, discovered that he was in a bare cell. He also discovered that the noise lay behind the left-hand wall, and he stood with his ear flat against it, listening. The sound did not have the regular rhythm of a machine in use—there were odd pauses between some blows, others came in a quick rain. It was as if someone were digging!

Were the Reds engaged in enlarging their icebound headquarters? Having listened for a considerable time, Ross doubted that, for the sound was too irregular. It seemed almost as if the longer pauses were used to check up on the result of labor—was it the extent of the excavation or the continued preservation of secrecy?

Ross slipped down along the wall, his shoulders still resting against it, and rested with his head twisted so he could hear the tapping. Meanwhile he flexed his wrists inside the hoops which confined them, and folding his hands as small as possible, tried to slip them through the rings. The only result was that he chafed his skin raw to no advantage. They had not taken off his parka, and in spite of the chill about him, he was too warm. Only that part of his body covered by the suit he had taken from the ship was comfortable; he could almost believe that it possessed some built-in conditioning device.

With no hope of relief Ross rubbed his hands back and forth against the wall, scraping the hoops on his wrists. The distant pounding had ceased, and this time the pause lengthened into so long a period that Ross fell asleep, his head falling forward on his chest, his raw wrists still pushed against the surface behind him.

He was hungry when he awoke, and with that hunger his rebellion sparked into flame. Awkwardly he got to his feet and lurched along to the door through which he had been thrown, where he proceeded to kick at the barrier. The cushiony stuff forming the soles of his tights muffled most of the force of those blows, but some noise was heard outside, for the door opened and Ross faced one of the guards.

“Food! I want to eat!” He put into the Beaker language all the resentment boiling in him.

The fellow ignoring him, reached in a long arm, and nearly tossing the prisoner off balance, dragged him out of the cell. Ross was marched into another room to face what appeared to be a tribunal. Two of the men there he knew—Ashe’s double and the quiet man who had questioned him back in the other time station. The third, clearly one of greater authority, regarded Ross bleakly.

“Who are you?” the quiet man asked.

“Rossa, son of Gurdi. And I would eat before I make talk with you. I have not done any wrong that you should treat me as a barbarian who has stolen salt from the trading post——”

“You are an agent,” the leader corrected him dispassionately, “of whom you will tell us in due time. But first you shall speak of the ship, of what you found there, and why you meddled with the controls.... Wait a moment before you refuse, my young friend.” He raised his hand from his lap, and once again Ross faced an automatic. “Ah, I see that you know what I hold—odd knowledge for an innocent Bronze Age trader. And please have no doubts about my hesitation to use this. I shall not kill you, naturally,” the man continued, “but there are certain wounds which supply a maximum of pain and little serious damage. Remove his parka, Kirschov.”

Once more Ross was unmanacled, the fur stripped from him. His questioner carefully studied the suit he wore under it. “Now you will tell us exactly what we wish to hear.”

There was a confidence in that statement which chilled Ross; Major Kelgarries had displayed its like. Ashe had it in another degree, and certainly it had been present in Baldy. There was no doubt that the speaker meant exactly what he said. He had at his command methods which would wring from his captive the full sum of what he wanted, and there would be no consideration for that captive during the process.

His implied threat struck as cold as the glacial air, and Ross tried to meet it with an outward show of uncracked defenses. He decided to pick and choose from his information, feeding them scraps to stave off the inevitable. Hope dies very hard, and Ross having been pushed into corners long before his work at the project, had had considerable training in verbal fencing with hostile authority. He would volunteer nothing.... Let it be pulled from him

reluctant word by word! He would spin it out as long as he could and hope that time might fight for him.

“You are an agent...”

Ross accepted this statement as one he would neither affirm nor deny.

“You came to spy under the cover of a barbarian trader,” smoothly, without pause, the man changed language in mid-sentence, slipping from the Beaker speech into English.

But long experience in meeting the dangerous with an expression of complete lack of comprehension was Ross’s weapon now. He stared somewhat stupidly at his interrogator with that bewildered, boyish look he had so long cultivated to bemuse enemies in his past.

Whether he could have held out long against the other’s skill—for Ross possessed no illusions concerning the type of examiner he now faced—he was never to know. Perhaps the drastic interruption that occurred the next moment saved for Ross a measure of self-esteem.

There was a distant boom, hollow and thunderous. Underneath and around them the floor, walls, and ceiling of the room moved as if they had been pried from their setting of ice and were being rolled about by the exploring thumb and forefinger of some impatient giant.

# 13

Ross swayed against a guard, was fended off, and bounced against the wall as the man shouted words Ross could not understand. A determined roar from the leader brought a semblance of order, but it was plain that they had not been expecting this. Ross was hustled out of the room back to his cell. His guards were opening the cell door when a second shock was felt and he was thrust into safekeeping with no ceremony.

He half crouched against the questionable security of the wall, waiting through two more twisting earth waves, both of which were accompanied or preceded by dull sounds. Bombing! That last wrench was really bad. Ross found himself lying on the floor, feeling tremors rippling along the earth. His stomach knotted convulsively with a fear unlike any he had known before. It was as if the very security of the world had been jerked from under him.

But that last explosion—if it was an explosion—appeared to be the end. Ross sat up gingerly after several long moments during which no more shocks moved the floor and walls. A line of light marked the door, showing cracks where none had previously existed. Ross, not yet ready to try standing erect, was heading toward it on his hands and knees when a sharp noise behind him brought him to a stop.

There was no light to see by, but he was certain that the scrape of metal against metal sounded from the far side of the wall. He crawled back and put his ear to the surface. Now he heard not only that scraping, but an undercurrent of clicks, chippings....

Under his exploring hands the surface remained as smooth as ever, however. Then suddenly, perhaps a foot from his head, there sounded a rip of metal. The wall was being holed from the other side! Ross caught a flicker of very weak light, and moving in it was the point of a tool pulling at the smooth surface of the wall. It broke away with a brittle sound, and a hand holding a light reached through the aperture.

Ross wondered if he should catch that wrist, but the hope that the digger might just possibly be an ally kept him motionless. After the hand with the light whipped back beyond the wall, a wide section gave away and a hunched figure crawled through, followed by a second. In the limited glow he saw the first tunneler clearly enough.

“Assha!”

Ross was unprepared for what followed his cry. The lean brown man moved with a panther’s striking speed, and Ross was forced back. A hand like a steel ring on his throat shut the breath away from his bursting lungs; the other’s muscular body held him flat in spite of his struggles. The light of the small flash glowed inches beyond his eyes as he fought to fill his lungs. Then the hand on his throat was gone and he gasped, a little dizzy.

“Murdock! What are you doing—?” Ashe’s clipped voice was muffled by another sudden explosion. This time the earth tremors not only hurled them from their feet, but seemed to run along the walls and across the ceiling. Ross, burying his face in the crook of his arm, could not rid himself of the fear that the building was being slowly twisted into scrap. When the shock was over he raised his head.

“What’s going on?” He heard McNeil ask.

“Attack.” That was Ashe. “But why, and by whom—don’t ask me! You are a prisoner, I suppose, Murdock?”

“Yes, sir.” Ross was glad that his voice sounded normal enough.

He heard someone sigh and guessed it was McNeil. “Another digging party.” There was tired disgust in that.

“I don’t understand,” Ross appealed to that section of the dark where Ashe had been. “Have you been here all the time? Are you trying to dig your way out? I don’t see how you can cut out of this glacier that we’re parked under——”

“Glacier!” Ashe’s exclamation was as explosive as the tremors. “So we’re inside a glacier! That explains it. Yes, we’ve been here——”

“On ice!” McNeil commented and then laughed. “Glacier—ice—that’s right, isn’t it?”

“We’re collaborating,” Ashe continued. “Supplying our dear friends with a lot of information they already have and some flights of fancy they never dreamed about. However, they didn’t know we had a few surprise packets of our own strewn about. It’s amazing what the boys back at the project can pack away in a belt, or between layers of hide in a boot. So we’ve been engaged in some research of our own——”

“But I didn’t have any escape gadgets.” Ross was struck by the unfairness of that.

“No,” Ashe agreed, his voice even and cold, “they are not entrusted to first-run men. You might slip up and use them at the wrong moment. However, you appear to have done fairly well....”

The heat of Ross’s rising anger was chilled by the noise which cracked over their heads, ground to them through the walls, flattened and threatened them. He had thought those first shocks the end of this ice burrow and the world; he knew that this one was.

And the silence that followed was as threatening in its way as the clamor had been. Then there was a shout, a shriek. The space of light near the cell door was widening as that barrier, broken from its lock, swung open slowly. The fear of being trapped sent the men in that direction.

“Out!”

Ross was ready enough to respond to that order, but they were stopped by a crackle of sound that could be only one thing—rapid-fire guns. Somewhere in this warren a fight was in progress. Ross, remembering the arrogant face of the bald ship’s officer, wondered if this was not an attack in force—the aliens against the looting Reds. If so, would the ship people distinguish between those found here. He feared not.

The room outside was clear, but not for long. As they lay watching, two men backed in, then whirled to stare at each other. A voice roared from beyond as if ordering them back to some post. One of them took a step forward in reluctant obedience, but the other grabbed his arm and pulled him away. They turned to run, and an automatic cracked.

The man nearest Ross gave a queer little cough and folded forward to his knees, sprawling on his face. His companion stared at him wildly for an instant, and then skidded into the passage beyond, escaping by inches a shot which clipped the door as he lunged through it.

No one followed, for outside there was a crescendo of noise—shouting, cries of pain, an unidentifiable hissing. Ashe darted into the room, taking cover by the body. Then he came back, the fellow’s gun in his hand, and with a jerk of his head summoned the other two. He motioned them on in a direction away from the sounds of battle.

“I don’t get all this,” McNeil commented as they reached the next passage. “What’s going on? Mutiny? Or have our boys gotten through?”

“It must be the ship people,” Ross answered.

“What ship?” Ashe caught him up swiftly.

“The big one the Reds have been looting——”

“Ship?” echoed McNeil. “And *where* did you get that rig?” In the bright light it was easy to see Ross’s alien dress. McNeil fingered the elastic material wonderingly.

“From the ship,” Ross returned impatiently. “But if the ship people are attacking, I don’t think they will notice any difference between us and the Reds....”

There was a burst of ear-splitting sound. For the third time Ross was thrown from his feet. This time the burrow lights flickered, dimmed, and went out.

“Oh, fine,” commented McNeil bitterly out of the dark. “I never did care for blindman’s buff.”

“The transfer plate——” Ross clung to his own plan of escape——“if we can reach that——”

The light which had served Ashe and McNeil in their tunneling clicked on. Since the earth shocks appeared to be over for a while, they moved on, with Ashe in the lead and McNeil bringing up the rear. Ross hoped Ashe knew the way. The sound of fighting had died out, so one side or the other must have gained the victory. They might have only a few moments left to pass undetected.

Ross’s sense of direction was fairly acute, but he could not have gone so unerringly to what he sought as Ashe did. Only he did not lead them to the room with the glowing plate, and Ross stifled a protest as they came instead to a small record room.

On a table were three spools of tape which Ashe caught up avidly, thrusting two in the front of his baggy tunic, passing the third to McNeil. Then he sped about trying the cupboards on the walls, but all were locked. His hand falling from the last latch, Ashe came back to the door where Ross waited.

“To the plate!” Ross urged.

Ashe surveyed the cupboards once more regretfully. “If we could have just ten minutes here——”

McNeil snorted. “Listen, you may yearn to be the filling in an ice sandwich, but I don’t! Another shock and we’ll be buried so deep even a drill couldn’t find us. Let’s get out now. The kid is right about that—if we still can.”

Once more Ashe took the lead and they wove through ghostly rooms to what must have been the heart of the post—the transfer point. To Ross’s unvoiced relief the plate was glowing. He had been nagged by the fear that when the lights blew out the transfer plate might also have been affected. He jumped for the plate.

Neither Ashe nor McNeil wasted time in joining him there. As they clung together there was a cry from behind them, underlined by a shot. Ross, feeling Ashe sag against him, caught him in his arms. By the reflected glow of the plate he saw the Red leader of the post and behind him, his hairless face hanging oddly bodiless in the gloom, was the alien. Were those two now allies? Before Ross could be sure that he had really seen them, the wracking of space time caught him and the rest of the room faded away.

“... free. Get a move on!”

Ross glanced across Ashe’s bowed shoulders to McNeil’s excited face. The other was pulling at Ashe, who was only half-conscious. A stream of blood from a hole in his bare shoulder



soaked the upper edge of his Beaker tunic, but as they steadied him between them, he gained some measure of awareness and moved his feet as they pulled him off the plate.

Well, they were free if only for a few seconds, and there was no reception committee waiting for them. Ross gave thanks silently for those two small favors. But if they were now returned to the Bronze Age village, they were still in enemy territory. With Ashe wounded, the odds against them were so high it was almost hopeless.

Working hurriedly with strips torn from McNeil's kilt, they managed to stop the flow of blood from Ashe's wound. Although he was still groggy, he was fighting, driven by the fear which whipped them all—time was one of their foremost enemies. Ross, Ashe's gun in hand, kept watch on the transfer plate, ready to shoot at anything appearing there.

"That will have to do!" Ashe pulled free from McNeil. "We must move." He hesitated, and then pulling the spools of tape from his bloodstained tunic, passed them to McNeil. "You'd better carry these."

"All right," the other answered almost absently.

"Move!" The force of that order from Ashe sent them into the corridor beyond. "The plate...."

But the plate remained clear. And Ross noted that they must have returned to the proper time, for the walls about them were the logs and stone of the village he remembered.

"Someone coming through?"

"Should be—soon."

They fled, the hide boots of the other two making only the faintest whisper of sound, Ross's foam-soled feet none at all. He could not have found the door to the outer world, but again Ashe guided them, and only once did they have to seek cover. At last they faced a barred door. Ashe leaned against the wall, McNeil supporting him, as Ross pulled free the locking beam. They let themselves out into the night.

"Which way?" McNeil asked.

To Ross's surprise Ashe did not turn to the gate in the outer stockade. Instead he gestured at the mountain wall in the opposite direction. "They'll expect us to try for the valley pass. So we had better go up the slope there."

"That has the look of a tough climb," ventured McNeil.

Ashe stirred. "When it becomes too tough for me"—his voice was dry—"I shall say so, never fear."

He started out with some of his old ease of movement, but his companions closed in on either side, ready to offer aid. Ross often wondered later if they could have won free of the village on their own efforts that night. He was sure their resolution would have been equal to the attempt, but their escape would have depended upon a fabulous run of luck such as men seldom encounter.

As it was, they had just reached a pool of shadow beside a small hut some two buildings away from the one they had fled, when the fireworks began. As if on signal the three fugitives threw themselves flat. From the roof of the building at the center of the village a pencil of brilliant-green light pointed straight up into the sky, and around that spear of radiance the roof sprouted tongues of more natural red-and-yellow flames. Figures shot from doors as the fire lapped down the peak of the roof.

"Now!" In spite of the rising clamor, Ashe's voice carried to his two companions.

The three sprinted for the palisade, mingling with bewildered men who ran out of the other cabins. The waves of fire washed on, providing light, too much light. Ashe and McNeil could pass as part of the crowd, but Ross's unusual clothing might be easily marked.

Others were running for the wall. Ross and McNeil boosted Ashe to the top, saw him over in safety. McNeil followed. Ross was just reaching to draw himself up when he was enveloped in a beam of light.

A high, screeching call, unlike any shout he had heard, split the clamor. Frantically Ross tried for a hold, knowing that he was presenting a perfect target for those behind. He gained the top of the stockade, looked down into a black block of shadow, not knowing whether Ashe and McNeil were waiting for him or had gone ahead. Hearing that strange cry again, Ross leaped blindly out into the darkness.

He landed badly, hitting hard enough to bruise, but thanks to the skill he had learned for parachuting, he broke no bones. He got to his feet and blundered on in the general direction of the mountain Ashe had picked as their goal. There were others coming over the wall of the village and moving through the shadows, so he dared not call out for fear of alerting the enemy.

The village had been set in the widest part of the valley. Behind its stockade the open ground narrowed swiftly, like the point of a funnel, and all fugitives from the settlement had to pass through that channel to escape. Ross's worst fear was that he had lost contact with Ashe and McNeil, and that he would never be able to pick up their trail in the wilderness ahead.

Thankful for the dark suit he wore which was protective covering in the night, he twice ducked into the brush to allow parties of refugees to pass him. Hearing them speak the guttural clicking speech he had learned from Ulffa's people, Ross deduced that they were innocent of the village's real purpose. These people were convinced they had been attacked by night demons. Perhaps there had only been a handful of Reds in that hidden retreat.

Ross pulled himself up a hard climb, and pausing to catch his breath, looked back. He was not overly surprised to see figures moving leisurely about the village examining the cabins, perhaps in search of the inhabitants. Each of those searchers was clad in a form-fitting suit that matched his own, and their bulbous hairless heads gleamed white in the firelight. Ross was astonished to see that they passed straight through walls of flame, apparently unconcerned and unsinged by the heat.

The human beings trapped in the town wailed and ran, or lay and beat their heads and hands on the ground, supine before the invaders. Each captive was dragged back to a knot of aliens near the main building. Some were hurled out again into the dark, unharmed; a few others were retained. A sorting of prisoners was plainly in progress. There was no question that the ship people had followed through into this time, and that they had their own arrangements for the Reds.

Ross had no desire to learn the particulars. He started climbing again, finding the pass at last. Beyond, the ground fell away again, and Ross went forward into the full darkness of the night with a vast surge of thankfulness.

Finally, he stopped simply because he was too weary, too hungry, to keep on his feet without stumbling, and a fall in the dark on these heights could be costly. Ross discovered a small hollow behind a stunted tree and crept into it as best he could, his heart laboring against his ribs, a hot stab of pain cutting into his side with every breath he drew.

He awoke all at once with the snap of a fighting man who is alert to ever present danger. A hand lay warm and hard over his mouth, and above it his eyes met McNeil's. When he saw

that Ross was awake McNeil withdraw his hand. The morning sunlight was warm about them. Moving clumsily because of his stiff, bruised body, Ross crawled out of the hollow. He looked around, but McNeil stood there alone. “Ashe?” Ross questioned him.

McNeil, showing a haggard face covered with several days’ growth of rusty-brown beard, nodded his head toward the slope. Fumbling inside his kilt, he brought out something clenched in his fist and offered it to Ross. The latter held out his palm and McNeil covered it with a handful of coarse-ground grain. Just to look at the stuff made Ross long for a drink, but he mouthed it and chewed, getting up to follow McNeil down into the tree-grown lower slopes.

“It’s not good.” McNeil spoke jerkily, using Beaker speech. “Ashe is out of his head some of the time. That hole in his shoulder is worse than we thought it was, and there’s always the threat of infection. This whole wood is full of people flushed out of that blasted village! Most of them—all I’ve seen—are natives. But they have it firmly planted in their minds now that there are devils after them. If they see you wearing that suit——”

“I know, and I’d strip if I could,” Ross agreed. “But I’ll have to get other clothing first; I can’t run bare in this cold.”

“That might be safer,” McNeil growled. “I don’t know just what happened back there, but it certainly must have been plenty!”

Ross swallowed a very dry mouthful of grain and then stooped to scoop up some leftover snow in the shadow of a tree root. It was not as refreshing as a real drink, but it helped. “You said Ashe is out of his head. What do we do for him, and what are your plans?”

“We have to reach the river, somehow. It drains to the sea, and at its mouth we are supposed to make contact with the sub.”

The proposal sounded impossible to Ross, but so many impossible things had happened lately he was willing to go along with the idea—as long as he could. Gathering up more snow, he stuffed it into his mouth before he followed the already disappearing McNeil.

## 14

“... that’s my half of it. The rest of it you know.” Ross held his hands close to the small fire sheltered in the pit he had helped dig and flexed his cold-numbered fingers in the warmth.

From across the handful of flames Ashe’s eyes, too bright in a fever-flushed face, watched him demandingly. The fugitives had taken cover in an angle where the massed remains of an old avalanche provided a cave-pocket. McNeil was off scouting in the gray drizzle of the day, and their escape from the village was now some forty-eight hours behind them.

“So the crackpots were right, after all. They only had their times mixed.” Ashe shifted on the bed of brush and leaves they had raked together for his comfort.

“I don’t understand——”

“Flying saucers,” Ashe returned with an odd little laugh. “It was a wild possibility, but it was on the books from the start. This certainly will make Kelgarries turn red——”

“Flying saucers?”

Ashe must be out of his head from the fever, Ross supposed. He wondered what he should do if Ashe tried to get up and walk away. He could not tackle a man with a bad hole in his shoulder, nor was he certain he could wrestle Ashe down in a real fight.

“That globe-ship was never built on this world. Use your head, Murdock. Think about your furry-faced friend and the baldy with him. Did either look like normal Terrans to you?”

“But—a spaceship!” It was something that had so long been laughed to scorn. When men had failed to break into space after the initial excitement of the satellite launchings, space flight had become a matter for jeers. On the other hand, there was the evidence collected by his own eyes and ears, his own experience. The services of the lifeboat had been techniques outside of his experience.

“This was insinuated once”—Ashe was lying flat now, gazing speculatively up at the projection of logs and earth which made them a partial roof—“along with a lot of other bright ideas, by a gentleman named Charles Fort, who took a lot of pleasure in pricking what he considered to be vastly over-inflated scientific pomposity. He gathered together four book loads of reported incidents of unexplainable happenings which he dared the scientists of his day to explain. And one of his bright suggestions was that such phenomena as the vast artificial earthworks found in Ohio and Indiana were originally thrown up by space castaways to serve as S O S signals. An intriguing idea, and now perhaps we may prove it true.”

“But if such spaceships were wrecked on this world, I still don’t see why we didn’t find traces of them in our own time.”

“Because that wreck you explored was bedded in a glacial era. Do you have any idea how long ago that was, counting from our own time? There were at least three glacial periods—and we don’t know in which one the Reds went visiting. That age began about a million years before we were born, and the last of the ice ebbed out of New York State some thirty-eight thousand years ago, boy. That was the early Stone Age, reckoning it by the scale of human development, with an extremely thin population of the first real types of man clinging to a few warmer fringes of wilderness.

“Climatic changes, geographical changes, all altered the face of our continents. There was a sea in Kansas; England was part of Europe. So, even though as many as fifty such ships were

lost here, they could all have been ground to bits by the ice flow, buried miles deep in quakes, or rusted away generations before the first really intelligent man arrived to wonder at them. Certainly there couldn't be too many such wrecks to be found. What do you think this planet was, a flypaper to attract them?"

"But if ships crashed here once, why didn't they later when men were better able to understand them?" Ross countered.

"For several reasons—all of them possible and able to be fitted into the fabric of history as we know it on this world. Civilizations rise, exist, and fall, each taking with it into the limbo of forgotten things some of the discoveries which made it great. How did the Indian civilizations of the New World learn to harden gold into a useable point for a cutting weapon? What was the secret of building possessed by the ancient Egyptians? Today you will find plenty of men to argue these problems and half a hundred others.

"The Egyptians once had a well-traveled trade route to India. Bronze Age traders opened up roads down into Africa. The Romans knew China. Then came an end to each of these empires, and those trade routes were forgotten. To our European ancestors of the Middle Ages, China was almost a legend, and the fact that the Egyptians had successfully sailed around the Cape of Good Hope was unknown. Suppose our space voyagers represented some star-born confederacy or empire which lived, rose to its highest point, and fell again into planet-bound barbarism all before the first of our species painted pictures on a cave wall?

"Or take it that this world was an unlucky reef on which too many ships and cargoes were lost, so that our whole solar system was posted, and skippers of star ships thereafter avoided it? Or they might even have had some rule that when a planet developed a primitive race of its own, it was to be left strictly alone until it discovered space flight for itself."

"Yes." Every one of Ashe's suppositions made good sense, and Ross was able to believe them. It was easier to think that both Furry-face and Baldy were inhabitants of another world than to think their kind existed on this planet before his own species was born. "But how did the Reds locate that ship?"

"Unless that information is on the tapes we were able to bring along, we shall probably never know," Ashe said drowsily. "I might make one guess—the Reds have been making an all-out effort for the past hundred years to open up Siberia. In some sections of that huge country there have been great climatic changes almost overnight in the far past. Mammoths have been discovered frozen in the ice with half-digested tropical plants in their stomach. It's as if the beasts were given some deep-freeze treatment instantaneously. If in their excavations the Reds came across the remains of a spaceship, remains well enough preserved for them to realize what they had discovered, they might start questing back in time to find a better one intact at an earlier date. That theory fits everything we know now."

"But why would the aliens attack the Reds now?"

"No ship's officers ever thought gently of pirates." Ashe's eyes closed.

There were questions, a flood of them, that Ross wanted to ask. He smoothed the fabric on his arm, that stuff which clung so tightly to his skin yet kept him warm without any need for more covering. If Ashe were right, on what world, what kind of world, had that material been woven, and how far had it been brought that he could wear it now?

Suddenly McNeil slid into their shelter and dropped two hares at the edge of the fire.

"How goes it?" he said, as Ross began to clean them.

“Reasonably well,” Ashe, his eyes still closed, replied to that before Ross could. “How far are we from the river? And do we have company?”

“About five miles—if we had wings.” McNeil answered in a dry tone. “And we have company all right, lots of it!”

That brought Ashe up, leaning forward on his good elbow. “What kind?”

“Not from the village.” McNeil frowned at the fire which he fed with economic handfuls of sticks. “Something’s happening on this side of the mountains. It looks as if there’s a mass migration in progress. I counted five family clans on their way west—all in just this one morning.”

“The village refugees’ stories about devils might send them packing,” Ashe mused.

“Maybe.” But McNeil did not sound convinced. “The sooner we head downstream, the better. And I hope the boys will have that sub waiting where they promised. We do possess one thing in our favor—the spring floods are subsiding.”

“And the high water should have plenty of raft material.” Ashe lay back again. “We’ll make those five miles tomorrow.”

McNeil stirred uneasily and Ross, having cleaned and spitted the hares, swung them over the flames to broil. “Five miles in this country,” the younger man observed, “is a pretty good day’s march”—he did not add as he wanted to—“for a well man.”

“I will make it,” Ashe promised, and both listeners knew that as long as his body would obey him he meant to keep that promise. They also knew the futility of argument.

Ashe proved to be a prophet to be honored on two counts. They did make the trek to the river the next day, and there was a wealth of raft material marking the high-water level of the spring flood. The migrations McNeil had reported were still in progress, and the three men hid twice to watch the passing of small family clans. Once a respectably sized tribe, including wounded men, marched across their route, seeking a ford at the river.

“They’ve been badly mauled,” McNeil whispered as they watched the people huddled along the water’s edge while scouts cast upstream and down, searching for a ford. When they returned with the news that there was no ford to be found, the tribesmen then sullenly went to work with flint axes and knives to make rafts.

“Pressure—they are on the run.” Ashe rested his chin on his good forearm and studied the busy scene. “These are not from the village. Notice the dress and the red paint on their faces. They’re not like Ulffa’s kin either. I wouldn’t say they were local at all.”

“Reminds me of something I saw once—animals running before a forest fire. They can’t all be looking for new hunting territory,” McNeil returned.

“Reds sweeping them out,” Ross suggested. “Or could the ship people—?”

Ashe started to shake his head and then winced. “I wonder...” The crease between his level brows deepened. “The ax people!” His voice was still a whisper, but it carried a note of triumph as if he had fitted some stubborn jigsaw piece into its proper place.

“Ax people?”

“Invasion of another people from the east. They turned up in prehistory about this period. Remember, Webb spoke of them. They used axes for weapons and tamed horses.”

“Tartars”—McNeil was puzzled—“This far west?”

“Not Tartars, no. You needn’t expect those to come boiling out of middle Asia for some thousands of years yet. We don’t know too much about the ax people, save that they moved west from the interior plains. Eventually they crossed to Britain; perhaps they were the ancestors of the Celts who loved horses too. But in their time they were a tidal wave.”

“The sooner we head downstream, the better.” McNeil stirred restlessly, but they knew that they must keep to cover until the tribesmen below were gone. So they lay in hiding another night, witnessing on the next morning the arrival of a smaller party of the red-painted men, again with wounded among them. At the coming of this rear guard the activity on the river bank rose close to frenzy.

The three men out of time were doubly uneasy. It was not for them to merely cross the river. They had to build a raft which would be water-worthy enough to take them downstream—to the sea if they were lucky. And to build such a sturdy raft would take time, time they did not have now.

In fact, McNeil waited only until the last tribal raft was out of bow shot before he plunged down to the shore, Ross at his heels. Since they lacked even the stone tools of the tribesmen, they were at a disadvantage, and Ross found he was hands and feet for Ashe, working under the other’s close direction. Before night closed in they had a good beginning and two sets of blistered hands, as well as aching backs.

When it was too dark to work any longer, Ashe pointed back over the track they had followed. Marking the mountain pass was a light. It looked like fire, and if it was, it must be a big one for them to be able to sight it across this distance.

“Camp?” McNeil wondered.

“Must be,” Ashe agreed. “Those who built that blaze are in such numbers that they don’t have to take precautions.”

“Will they be here by tomorrow?”

“Their scouts might, but this is early spring, and forage can’t have been too good on the march. If I were the chief of that tribe, I’d turn aside into the meadow land we skirted yesterday and let the herds graze for a day, maybe more. On the other hand, if they need water——”

“They will come straight ahead!” McNeil finished grimly. “And we can’t be here when they arrive.”

Ross stretched, grimacing at the twinge of pain in his shoulders. His hands smarted and throbbed, and this was just the beginning of their task. If Ashe had been fit, they might have trusted to logs for support and swum downstream to hunt a safer place for their shipbuilding project. But he knew that Ashe could not stand such an effort.

Ross slept that night mainly because his body was too exhausted to let him lie awake and worry. Roused in the earliest dawn by McNeil, they both crawled down to the water’s edge and struggled to bind stubbornly resisting saplings together with cords twisted from bark. They reinforced them at crucial points with some strings torn from their kilts, and strips of rabbit hide saved from their kills of the past few days. They worked with hunger gnawing at them, having no time now to hunt. When the sun was well westward they had a clumsy craft which floated sluggishly. Whether it would answer to either pole or improvised paddle, they could not know until they tried it.

Ashe, his face flushed and his skin hot to the touch, crawled on board and lay in the middle, on the thin heap of bedding they had put there for him. He eagerly drank the water they

carried to him in cupped hands and gave a little sigh of relief as Ross wiped his face with wet grass, muttering something about Kelgarries which neither of his companions understood.

McNeil shoved off and the bobbing craft spun around dizzily as the current pulled it free from the shore. They made a brave start, but luck deserted them before they had gotten out of sight of the spot where they embarked.

Striving to keep them in mid-current, McNeil poled furiously, but there were too many rocks and snagged trees projecting from the banks. Sharing that sweep of water with them, and coming up fast, was a full-sized tree. Twice its mat of branches caught on some snag, holding it back, and Ross breathed a little more freely, but it soon tore free again and rolled on, as menacing as a battering ram.

“Get closer to shore!” Ross shouted the warning. Those great, twisted roots seemed aimed straight at the raft, and he was sure if that mass struck them fairly, they would not have a chance. He dug in with his own pole, but his hasty push did not meet bottom; the stake in his hands plunged into some pothole in the hidden river bed. He heard McNeil cry out as he toppled into the water, gasping as the murky liquid flooded his mouth, choking him.

Half dazed by the shock, Ross struck out instinctively. The training at the base had included swimming, but to fight water in a pool under controlled conditions was far different from fighting death in a river of icy water when one had already swallowed a sizable quantity of that flood.

Ross had a half glimpse of a dark shadow. Was it the edge of the raft? He caught at it desperately, skinning his hands on rough bark, dragged on by it. The tree! He blinked his eyes to clear them of water, to try to see. But he could not pull his exhausted body high enough out of the water to see past the screen of roots; he could only cling to the small safety he had won and hope that he could rejoin the raft somewhere downstream.

After what seemed like a very long time he wedged one arm between two water-washed roots, sure that the support would hold his head above the surface. The chill of the stream struck at his hands and head, but the protection of the alien clothing was still effective, and the rest of his body was not cold. He was simply too tired to wrest himself free and trust again to the haphazard chance of making shore through the gathering dusk.

Suddenly a shock jarred his body and strained the arm he had thrust among the roots, wringing a cry out of him. He swung around and brushed footing under the water; the tree had caught on a shore snag. Pulling loose from the roots, he floundered on his hands and knees, falling afoul of a mass of reeds whose roots were covered with stale-smelling mud. Like a wounded animal he dragged himself through the ooze to higher land, coming out upon an open meadow flooded with moonlight.

For a while he lay there, his cold, sore hands under him, plastered with mud and too tired to move. The sound of a sharp barking aroused him—an imperative, summoning bark, neither belonging to a wolf nor a hunting fox. He listened to it dully and then, through the ground upon which he lay, Ross felt as well as heard the pounding of hoofs.

Hoofs—horses! Horses from over the mountains—horses which might mean danger. His mind seemed as dull and numb as his hands, and it took quite a long time for him to fully realize the menace horses might bring.

Getting up, Ross noticed a winged shape sweeping across the disk of the moon like a silent dart. There was a single despairing squeak out of the grass about a hundred feet away, and the winged shape arose again with its prey. Then the barking sound once more—eager, excited barking.



Ross crouched back on his heels and saw a smoky brand of light moving along the edge of the meadow where the band of trees began. Could it be a herd guard? Ross knew he had to head back toward the river, but he had to force himself on the path, for he did not know whether he dared enter the stream again. But what would happen if they hunted him with the dog? Confused memories of how water spoiled scent spurred him on.

Having reached the rising bank he had climbed so laboriously before, Ross miscalculated and tumbled back, rolling down into the mud of the reed bed. Mechanically he wiped the slime from his face. The tree was still anchored there; by some freak the current had rammed its rooted end up on a sand spit.

Above in the meadow the barking sounded very close, and now it was answered by a second canine belling. Ross wormed his way back through the reeds to the patch of water between the tree and the bank. His few poor efforts at escape were almost half-consciously taken; he was too tired to really care now.

Soon he saw a four-footed shape running along the top of the bank, giving tongue. It was then joined by a larger and even more vocal companion. The dogs drew even with Ross, who wondered dully if the animals could sight him in the shadows below, or whether they only scented his presence. Had he been able, he would have climbed over the log and taken his chances in the open water, but now he could only lie where he was—the tangle of roots between him and the bank serving as a screen, which would be little enough protection when men came with torches.

Ross was mistaken, however, for his worm's progress across the reed bed had liberally besmeared his dark clothing and masked the skin of his face and hands, giving him better cover than any he could have wittingly devised. Though he felt naked and defenseless, the men who trailed the hounds to the river bank, thrusting out the torch over the edge to light the sand spit, saw nothing but the trunk of the tree wedged against a mound of mud.

Ross heard a confused murmur of voices broken by the clamor of the dogs. Then the torch was raised out of line of his dazzled eyes. He saw one of the indistinct figures above cuff away a dog and move off, calling the hounds after it. Reluctantly, still barking, the animals went. Ross, with a little sob, subsided limply in the uncomfortable net of roots, still undiscovered.

## 15

It was such a small thing, a tag of ragged stuff looped about a length of splintered sapling. Ross climbed stiffly over the welter of drift caught on the sand spit and pulled it loose, recognizing the string even before he touched it. That square knot was of McNeil's tying, and as Murdock sat down weakly in the sand and mud, nervously fingering the twisted cord, staring vacantly at the river, his last small hope died. The raft must have broken up, and neither Ashe nor McNeil could have survived the ultimate disaster.

Ross Murdock was alone, marooned in a time which was not his own, with little promise of escape. That one thought blanked out his mind with its own darkness. What was the use of getting up again, of trying to find food for his empty stomach, or warmth and shelter?

He had always prided himself on being able to go it alone, had thought himself secure in that calculated loneliness. Now that belief had been washed away in the river along with most of the will power which had kept him going these past days. Before, there had always been some goal, no matter how remote. Now, he had nothing. Even if he managed to reach the mouth of the river, he had no idea of where or how to summon the sub from the overseas post. All three of the time travelers might already have been written off the rolls, since they had not reported in.

Ross pulled the rag free from the sapling and wreathed it in a tight bracelet about his grimed wrist for some unexplainable reason. Worn and tired, he tried to think ahead. There was no chance of again contacting Ulffa's tribe. Along with all the other woodland hunters they must have fled before the advance of the horsemen. No, there was no reason to go back, and why make the effort to advance?

The sun was hot. This was one of those spring days which foretell the ripeness of summer. Insects buzzed in the reed banks where a green sheen showed. Birds wheeled and circled in the sky, some flock disturbed, their cries reaching Ross in hoarse calls of warning.

He was still plastered with patches of dried mud and slime, the reek of it thick in his nostrils. Now Ross brushed at a splotch on his knee, picking loose flakes to expose the alien cloth of his suit underneath, seemingly unbefouled. All at once it became necessary to be clean again at least.

Ross waded into the stream, stooping to splash the brown water over his body and then rubbing away the resulting mud. In the sunlight the fabric had a brilliant glow, as if it not only drew the light but reflected it. Wading farther out into the water, he began to swim, not with any goal in view, but because it was easier than crawling back to land once more.

Using the downstream current to supplement his skill, he watched both banks. He could not really hope to see either the raft or indications that its passengers had won to shore, but somewhere deep inside him he had not yet accepted the probable.

The effort of swimming broke through that fog of inertia which had held him since he had awakened that morning. It was with a somewhat healthier interest in life that Ross came ashore again on an arm of what was a bay or inlet angling back into the land. Here the banks of the river were well above his head, and believing that he was well sheltered, he stripped, hanging his suit in the sunlight and letting the unusual heat of the day soothe his body.

A raw fish, cornered in the shallows and scooped out, furnished one of the best meals he had ever tasted. He had reached for the suit draped over a willow limb when the first and only

warning that his fortunes had once again changed came, swiftly, silently, and with deadly promise.

One moment the willows had moved gently in the breeze, and then a spear suddenly set them all quivering. Ross, clutching the suit to him with a frantic grab, skated about in the sand, going to one knee in his haste.

He found himself completely at the mercy of the two men standing on the bank well above him. Unlike Ulffa's people or the Beaker traders, they were very tall, with heavy braids of light or sun-bleached hair swinging forward on their wide chests. Their leather tunics hung to mid-thigh above leggings which were bound to their limbs with painted straps. Cuff bracelets of copper ringed their forearms, and necklaces of animal teeth and beads displayed their personal wealth. Ross could not remember having seen their like on any of the briefing tapes at the base.

One spear had been a warning, but a second was held ready, so Ross made the age-old signal of surrender, reluctantly dropping his suit and raising his hands palm out and shoulder high.

"Friend?" Ross asked in the Beaker tongue. The traders ranged far, and perhaps there was a chance they had had contact with this tribe.

The spear twirled, and the younger stranger effortlessly leaped down the bank, paddling over to Ross to pick up the suit he had dropped, holding it up while he made some comment to his companion. He seemed fascinated by the fabric, pulling and smoothing it between his hands, and Ross wondered if there was a chance of trading it for his own freedom.

Both men were armed, not only with the long-bladed daggers favored by the Beaker folk, but also with axes. When Ross made a slight effort to lower his hands the man before him reached to his belt ax, growling what was plainly a warning. Ross blinked, realizing that they might well knock him out and leave him behind, taking the suit with them.

Finally, they decided in favor of including him in their loot. Throwing the suit over one arm, the stranger caught Ross by the shoulder and pushed him forward roughly. The pebbled beach was painful to Ross's feet, and the breeze which whipped about him as he reached the top of the bank reminded him only too forcibly of his ordeal in the glacial world.

Murdock was tempted to make a sudden dash out on the point of the bank and dive into the river, but it was already too late. The man who was holding the spear had moved behind him, and Ross's wrist, held in a vise grip at the small of his back, kept him prisoner as he was pushed on into the meadow. There three shaggy horses grazed, their nose ropes gathered into the hands of a third man.

A sharp stone half buried in the ground changed the pattern of the day. Ross's heel scraped against it, and the resulting pain triggered his rebellion into explosion. He threw himself backward, his bruised heel sliding between the feet of his captor, bringing them both to the ground with himself on top. The other expelled air from his lungs in a grunt of surprise, and Ross whipped over, one hand grasping the hilt of the tribesman's dagger while the other, free of that prisoning wrist-lock, chopped at the fellow's throat.

Dagger out and ready, Ross faced the men in a half crouch as he had been drilled. They stared at him in open-mouthed amazement, then too late the spears went up. Ross placed the point of his looted weapon at the throat of the now quiet man by whom he knelt, and he spoke the language he had learned from Ulffa's people.

"You strike—this one dies."

They must have read the determined purpose in his eyes, for slowly, reluctantly, the spears went down. Having gained so much of a victory, Ross dared more. "Take—" he motioned to the waiting horses—"take and go!"

For a moment he thought that this time they would meet his challenge, but he continued to hold the dagger above the brown throat of the man who was now moaning faintly. His threat continued to register, for the other man shrugged the suit from his arm, left it lying on the ground, and retreated. Holding the nose rope of his horse, he mounted, waved the herder up also, and both of them rode slowly away.

The prisoner was slowly coming around, so Ross only had time to pull on the suit; he had not even fastened the breast studs before those blue eyes opened. A sunburned hand flashed to a belt, but the dagger and ax which had once hung there were now in Ross's possession. He watched the tribesman carefully as he finished dressing.

"What you do?" The words were in the speech of the forest people, distorted by a new accent.

"You go—" Ross pointed to the third horse the others had left behind—"I go—" he indicated the river—"I take these"—he patted the dagger and the ax. The other scowled.

"Not good..."

Ross laughed, a little hysterically. "Not good you," he agreed, "good—me!"

To his surprise the tribesman's stiff face relaxed, and the fellow gave a bark of laughter. He sat up, rubbing at his throat, a big grin pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"You—hunter?" The man pointed northeast to the woodlands fringing the mountains.

Ross shook his head. "Trader, me."

"Trader," the other repeated. Then he tapped one of the wide metal cuffs at his wrist.

"Trade—this?"

"That. More things."

"Where?"

Ross pointed downstream. "By bitter water—trade there."

The man appeared puzzled. "Why you here?"

"Ride river water, like you ride," he said, pointing to the horse. "Ride on trees—many trees tied together. Trees break apart—I come here."

The conception of a raft voyage apparently got across, for the tribesman was nodding. Getting to his feet, he walked across to take up the nose rope of the waiting horse. "You come camp—Foscar. Foscar chief. He like you show trick how you take Tulka, make him sleep—hold his ax, knife."

Ross hesitated. This Tulka seemed friendly now, but would that friendliness last? He shook his head. "I go to bitter water. My chief there."

Tulka was scowling again. "You speak crooked words—your chief there!" He pointed eastward with a dramatic stretch of the arm. "Your chief speak Foscar. Say he give much these—" he touched his copper cuffs—"good knives, axes—get you back."

Ross stared at him without understanding. Ashe? Ashe in this Foscar's camp offering a reward for him? But how could that be?

"How you know my chief?"

Tulka laughed, this time derisively. “You wear shining skin—your chief wear shiny skin. He say find other shiny skin—give many good things to man who bring you back.”

Shiny skin! The suit from the alien ship! Was it the ship people? Ross remembered the light on him as he climbed out of the Red village. He must have been sighted by one of the spacemen. But why were they searching for him, alerting the natives in an effort to scoop him up? What made Ross Murdock so important that they must have him? He only knew that he was not going to be taken if he could help it, that he had no desire to meet this “chief” who had offered treasure for his capture.

“You will come!” Tulka went into action, his mount flashing forward almost in a running leap at Ross, who stumbled back when horse and rider loomed over him. He swung up the ax, but it was a weapon with which he had had no training, too heavy for him.

As his blow met only thin air the shoulder of the mount hit him, and Ross went down, avoiding by less than a finger’s breadth the thud of an unshod hoof against his skull. Then the rider landed on him, crushing him flat. A fist connected with his jaw, and for Ross the sun went out.

He found himself hanging across a support which moved with a rocking gait, whose pounding hurt his head, keeping him half dazed. Ross tried to move, but he realized that his arms were behind his back, fastened wrist to wrist, and a warm weight centered in the small of his spine to hold him face down on a horse. He could do nothing except endure the discomfort as best he could and hope for a speedy end to the gallop.

Over his head passed the cackle of speech. He caught short glimpses of another horse matching pace to the one that carried him. Then they swept into a noisy place where the shouting of many men made a din. The horse stopped and Ross was pulled from its back and dropped to the trodden dust, to lie blinking up dizzily, trying to focus on the scene about him.

They had arrived at the camp of the horsemen, whose hide tents served as a backdrop for the fair long-haired giants and the tall women hovering about to view the captive. The circle about him then broke, and men stood aside for a newcomer. Ross had believed that his original captors were physically imposing, but this one was their master. Lying on the ground at the chieftain’s feet, Ross felt like a small and helpless child.

Foscar, if Foscar this was, could not yet have entered middle age, and the muscles which moved along his arms and across his shoulders as he leaned over to study Tulka’s prize made him bear-strong. Ross glared up at him, that same hot rage which had led to his attack on Tulka now urging him to the only defiance he had left—words.

“Look well, Foscar. Free me, and I would do more than *look* at you,” he said in the speech of the woods hunters.

Foscar’s blue eyes widened and he lowered a fist which could have swallowed in its grasp both of Ross’s hands, linking those great fingers in the stuff of the suit and drawing the captive to his feet, with no sign that his act had required any effort. Even standing, Ross was a good eight inches shorter than the chieftain. Yet he put up his chin and eyed the other squarely, without giving ground.

“So—yet still my hands are tied.” He put into that all the taunting inflection he could summon. His reception by Tulka had given him one faint clue to the character of these people; they might be brought to acknowledge the worth of one who stood up to them.

“Child—” The fist shifted from its grip on the fabric covering Ross’s chest to his shoulder, and now under its compulsion Ross swayed back and forth.

“Child?” From somewhere Ross raised that short laugh. “Ask Tulka. I be no child, Foscar. Tulka’s ax, Tulka’s knife—they were in my hand. A horse Tulka had to use to bring me down.”

Foscar regarded him intently and then grinned. “Sharp tongue,” he commented. “Tulka lost knife—ax? So! Ennar,” he called over his shoulder, and one of the men stepped out a pace beyond his fellows.

He was shorter and much younger than his chief, with a boy’s rangy slimness and an open, good-looking face, his eyes bright on Foscar with a kind of eager excitement. Like the other tribesmen he was armed with belt dagger and ax, and since he wore two necklaces and both cuff bracelets and upper armlets as did Foscar, Ross thought he must be a relative of the older man.

“Child!” Foscar clapped his hand on Ross’s shoulder and then withdrew the hold. “Child!” He indicated Ennar, who reddened. “You take from Ennar ax, knife,” Foscar ordered, “as you took from Tulka.” He made a sign, and someone cut the thongs about Ross’s wrists.

Ross rubbed one numbed hand against the other, setting his jaw. Foscar had stung his young follower with that contemptuous “child,” so the boy would be eager to match all his skill against the prisoner. This would not be as easy as his taking Tulka by surprise. But if he refused, Foscar might well order him killed out of hand. He had chosen to be defiant; he would have to do his best.

“Take—ax, knife—” Foscar stepped back, waving at his men to open out a ring encircling the two young men.

Ross felt a little sick as he watched Ennar’s hand go to the haft of the ax. Nothing had been said about Ennar’s not using his weapons in defense, but Ross discovered that there was some sense of sportmanship in the tribesmen, after all. It was Tulka who pushed to the chief’s side and said something which made Foscar roar bull-voiced at his youthful champion.

Ennar’s hand came away from the ax hilt as if that polished wood were white-hot, and he transferred his discomfiture to Ross as the other understood. Ennar had to win now for his own pride’s sake, and Ross felt *he* had to win for his life. They circled warily, Ross watching his opponent’s eyes rather than those half-closed hands held at waist level.

Back at the base he had been matched with Ashe, and before Ashe with the tough-bodied, skilled, and merciless trainers in unarmed combat. He had had beaten into his bruised flesh knowledge of holds and blows intended to save his skin in just such an encounter. But then he had been well-fed, alert, prepared. He had not been knocked silly and then transported for miles slung across a horse after days of exposure and hard usage. It remained to be learned—was Ross Murdock as tough as he always thought himself to be? Tough or not, he was in this until he won—or dropped.

Comments from the crowd aroused Ennar to the first definite action. He charged, stooping low in a wrestler’s stance, but Ross squatted even lower. One hand flicked to the churned dust of the ground and snapped up again, sending a cloud of grit into the tribesman’s face. Then their bodies met with a shock, and Ennar sailed over Ross’s shoulder to skid along the earth.

Had Ross been fresh, the contest would have ended there and then in his favor. But when he tried to whirl and throw himself on his opponent he was too slow. Ennar was not waiting to be pinned flat, and it was Ross’s turn to be caught at a disadvantage.

A hand shot out to catch his leg just above the ankle, and once again Ross obeyed his teaching, falling easily at that pull, to land across his opponent. Ennar, disconcerted by the too-quick success of his attack, was unprepared for this. Ross rolled, trying to escape steel-fingered hands, his own chopping out in edgewise blows, striving to serve Ennar as he had Tulka.

He had to take a lot of punishment, though he managed to elude the powerful bear's hug in which he knew the other was laboring to engulf him, a hold which would speedily crush him into submission. Clinging to the methods he had been taught, he fought on, only now he knew, with a growing panic, that his best was not good enough. He was too spent to make an end. Unless he had some piece of great good luck, he could only delay his own defeat.

Fingers clawed viciously at his eyes, and Ross did what he had never thought to do in any fight—he snapped wolfishly, his teeth closing on flesh as he brought up his knee and drove it home into the body wriggling on his. There was a gasp of hot breath in his face as Ross called upon the last few rags of his strength, tearing loose from the other's slackened hold. He scrambled to one knee. Ennar was also on his knees, crouching like a four-legged beast ready to spring. Ross risked everything on a last gamble. Claspng his hands together, he raised them as high as he could and brought them down on the nape of the other's neck. Ennar sprawled forward face-down in the dust where seconds later Ross joined him.

## 16

Murdock lay on his back, gazing up at the laced hides which stretched to make the tent roofing. Having been battered just enough to feel all one aching bruise, Ross had lost interest in the future. Only the present mattered, and it was a dark one. He might have fought Ennar to a standstill, but in the eyes of the horsemen he had also been beaten, and he had not impressed them as he had hoped. That he still lived was a minor wonder, but he deduced that he continued to breathe only because they wanted to exchange him for the reward offered by the aliens from out of time, an unpleasant prospect to contemplate.

His wrists were lashed over his head to a peg driven deeply into the ground; his ankles were bound to another. He could turn his head from side to side, but any further movement was impossible. He ate only bits of food dropped into his mouth by a dirty-fingered slave, a cowed hunter captured from a tribe overwhelmed in the migration of the horsemen.

“Ho—taker of axes!” A toe jarred into his ribs, and Ross bit back the grunt of pain which answered that rude bid for his attention. He saw in the dim light Ennar’s face and was savagely glad to note the discolorations about the right eye and along the jaw line, the signatures left by his own skinned knuckles.

“Ho—warrior!” Ross returned hoarsely, trying to lade that title with all the scorn he could summon.

Ennar’s hand, holding a knife, swung into his limited range of vision. “To clip a sharp tongue is a good thing!” The young tribesman grinned as he knelt down beside the helpless prisoner.

Ross knew a thrill of fear worse than any pain. Ennar might be about to do just what he hinted! Instead, the knife swung up and Ross felt the sawing at the cords about his wrists, enduring the pain in the raw gouges they had cut in his flesh with gratitude that it was not mutilation which had brought Ennar to him. He knew that his arms were free, but to draw them down from over his head was almost more than he could do, and he lay quiet as Ennar loosed his feet.

“Up!”

Without Ennar’s hands pulling at him, Ross could not have reached his feet. Nor did he stay erect once he had been raised, crashing forward on his face as the other let him go, hot anger eating at him because of his own helplessness.

In the end, Ennar summoned two slaves who dragged Ross into the open where a council assembled about a fire. A debate was in progress, sometimes so heated that the speakers fingered their knife or ax hilts when they shouted their arguments. Ross could not understand their language, but he was certain that he was the subject under discussion and that Foscar had the deciding vote and had not yet given the nod to either side.

Ross sat where the slaves had dumped him, rubbing his smarting wrists, so deathly weary in mind and beaten in body that he was not really interested in the fate they were planning for him. He was content merely to be free of his bonds, a small favor, but one he savored dully.

He did not know how long the debate lasted, but at length Ennar came to stand over him with a message. “Your chief—he give many good things for you. Foscar take you to him.”



“My chief is not here,” Ross repeated wearily, making a protest he knew they would not heed. “My chief sits by the bitter water and waits. He will be angry if I do not come. Let Foscar fear his anger——”

Ennar laughed. “You run from your chief. He will be happy with Foscar when you lie again under his hand. You will not like that—I think it so!”

“I think so, too,” Ross agreed silently.

He spent the rest of that night lying between the watchful Ennar and another guard, though they had the humanity not to bind him again. In the morning he was allowed to feed himself, and he fished chunks of venison out of a stew with his unwashed fingers. But in spite of the messiness, it was the best food he had eaten in days.

The trip, however, was not to be a comfortable one. He was mounted on one of the shaggy horses, a rope run under the animal’s belly to loop one foot to the other. Fortunately, his hands were bound so he was able to grasp the coarse, wiry mane and keep his seat after a fashion. The nose rope of his mount was passed to Tulka, and Ennar rode beside him with only half an eye for the path of his own horse and the balance of his attention for the prisoner.

They headed northeast, with the mountains as a sharp green-and-white goal against the morning sky. Though Ross’s sense of direction was not too acute, he was certain that they were making for the general vicinity of the hidden village, which he believed the ship people had destroyed. He tried to discover something of the nature of the contact which had been made between the aliens and the horsemen.

“How find other chief?” he asked Ennar.

The young man tossed one of his braids back across his shoulder and turned his head to face Ross squarely. “Your chief come our camp. Talk with Foscar—two—four sleeps ago.”

“How talk with Foscar? With hunter talk?”

For the first time Ennar did not appear altogether certain. He scowled and then snapped, “He talk—Foscar, us. We hear right words—not woods creeper talk. He speak to us good.”

Ross was puzzled. How could the alien out of time speak the proper language of a primitive tribe some thousands of years removed from his own era? Were the ship people also familiar with time travel? Did they have their own stations of transfer? Yet their fury with the Reds had been hot. This was a complete mystery.

“This chief—he look like me?”

Again Ennar appeared at a loss. “He wear covering like you.”

“But was he like me?” persisted Ross. He didn’t know what he was trying to learn, only that it seemed important at that moment to press home to at least one of the tribesmen that he *was* different from the man who had put a price on his head and to whom he was to be sold.

“Not like!” Tulka spoke over his shoulder. “You look like hunter people—hair, eyes—Strange chief no hair on head, eyes not like——”

“You saw him too?” Ross demanded eagerly.

“I saw. I ride to camp—they come so. Stand on rock, call to Foscar. Make magic with fire—it jump up!” He pointed his arm stiffly at a bush before them on the trail. “They point little, little spear—fire come out of the ground and burn. They say burn our camp if we do not give

them man. We say—not have man. Then they say many good things for us if we find and bring man——”

“But they are not my people,” Ross cut in. “You see, I have hair, I am not like them. They are bad——”

“You may be taken in war by them—chief’s slave.” Ennar had a reply to that which was logical according to the customs of his own tribe. “They want slave back—it is so.”

“My people strong too, much magic,” Ross pushed. “Take me to bitter water and they pay much—more than stranger chief!”

Both tribesmen were amused. “Where bitter water?” asked Tulka.

Ross jerked his head to the west. “Some sleeps away——”

“Some sleeps!” repeated Ennar jeeringly. “We ride some sleeps, maybe many sleeps where we know not the trails—maybe no people there, maybe no bitter water—all things you say with split tongue so that we not give you back to master. We go this way not even one sleep—find chief, get good things. Why we do hard thing when we can do easy?”

What argument could Ross offer in rebuttal to the simple logic of his captors? For a moment he raged inwardly at his own helplessness. But long ago he had learned that giving away to hot fury was no good unless one did it deliberately to impress, and then only when one had the upper hand. Now Ross had no hand at all.

For the most part they kept to the open, whereas Ross and the other two agents had skulked in wooded areas on their flight through this same territory. So they approached the mountains from a different angle, and though he tried, Ross could pick out no familiar landmarks. If by some miracle he was able to free himself from his captors, he could only head due west and hope to strike the river.

At midday their party made camp in a grove of trees by a spring. The weather was as unseasonably warm as it had been the day before, and flies, brought out of cold-weather hiding, attacked the stamping horses and crawled over Ross. He tried to keep them off with swings of his bound hands, for their bites drew blood.

Having been tumbled from his mount, he remained fastened to a tree with a noose about his neck while the horsemen built a fire and broiled strips of deer meat.

It would seem that Foscar was in no hurry to get on, since after they had eaten, the men continued to lounge at ease, some even dropping off to sleep. When Ross counted faces he learned that Tulka and another had both disappeared, possibly to contact and warn the aliens they were coming.

It was midafternoon before the scouts reappeared, as unobtrusively as they had gone. They went before Foscar with a report which brought the chief over to Ross. “We go. Your chief waits——”

Ross raised his swollen, bitten face and made his usual protest. “Not my chief!”

Foscar shrugged. “He say so. He give good things to get you back under his hand. So—he your chief!”

Once again Ross was boosted on his mount, and bound. But this time the party split into two groups as they rode off. He was with Ennar again, just behind Foscar, with two other guards bringing up the rear. The rest of the men, leading their mounts, melted into the trees. Ross watched that quiet withdrawal speculatively. It argued that Foscar did not trust those he was about to do business with, that he was taking certain precautions of his own. Only Ross could

not see how that distrust, which might be only ordinary prudence on Foscar's part, could in any way be an advantage for him.

They rode at a pace hardly above a walk into a small open meadow narrowing at the east. Then for the first time Ross was able to place himself. They were at the entrance to the valley of the village, about a mile away from the narrow throat above which Ross had lain to spy and had been captured, for he had come from the north over the spurs of rising ridges.

Ross's horse was pulled up as Foscar drove his heel into the ribs of his own mount, sending it at a brisker pace toward the neck of the valley. There was a blot of blue there—more than one of the aliens were waiting. Ross caught his lip between his teeth and bit down on it hard. He had stood up to the Reds, to Foscar's tribesmen, but he shrank from meeting those strangers with an odd fear that the worst the men of his own species could do would be but a pale shadow to the treatment he might meet at their hands.

Foscar was now a toy man astride a toy horse. He halted his galloping mount to sit facing the handful of strangers. Ross counted four of them. They seemed to be talking, though there was still a good distance separating the mounted man and the blue suits.

Minutes passed before Foscar's arm raised in a wave to summon the party guarding Ross. Ennar kicked his horse to a trot, towing Ross's mount behind, the other two men thudding along more discreetly. Ross noted that they were both armed with spears which they carried to the fore as they rode.

They were perhaps three quarters of the way to join Foscar, and Ross could see plainly the bald heads of the aliens as their faces turned in his direction. Then the strangers struck. One of them raised a weapon shaped similarly to the automatic Ross knew, except that it was longer in the barrel.

Ross did not know why he cried out, except that Foscar had only an ax and dagger which were both still sheathed at his belt. The chief sat very still, and then his horse gave a swift sidewise swerve as if in fright. Foscar collapsed, limp, bonelessly, to the trodden turf, to lie unmoving face down.

Ennar whooped, a cry combining defiance and despair in one. He reined up with violence enough to set his horse rearing. Then, dropping his hold on the leading rope of Ross's mount, he whirled and set off in a wild dash for the trees to the left. A spear lanced across Ross's shoulder, ripping at the blue fabric, but his horse whirled to follow the other, taking him out of danger of a second thrust. Having lost his opportunity, the man who had wielded the spear dashed by at Ennar's back.

Ross clung to the mane with both hands. His greatest fear was that he might slip from the saddle pad and since he was tied by his feet, lie unprotected and helpless under those dashing hoofs. Somehow he managed to cling to the horse's neck, his face lashed by the rough mane while the animal pounded on. Had Ross been able to grasp the dangling nose rope, he might have had a faint chance of controlling that run, but as it was he could only hold fast and hope.

He had only broken glimpses of what lay ahead. Then a brilliant fire, as vivid as the flames which had eaten up the Red village, burst from the ground a few yards ahead, sending the horse wild. There was more fire and the horse changed course through the rising smoke. Ross realized that the aliens were trying to cut him off from the thin safety of the woodlands. Why they didn't just shoot him as they had Foscar he could not understand.

The smoke of the burning grass was thick, cutting between him and the woods. Might it also provide a curtain behind which he could hope to escape both parties? The fire was sending the horse back toward the waiting ship people. Ross could hear a confused shouting in the

smoke. Then his mount made a miscalculation, and a tongue of red licked too close. The animal screamed, dashing on blindly straight between two of the blazes and away from the blue-clad men.

Ross coughed, almost choking, his eyes watering as the stench of singed hair thickened the smoke. But he had been carried out of the fire circle and was shooting back into the meadowland. Mount and unwilling rider were well away from the upper end of that cleared space when another horse cut in from the left, matching speed to the uncontrolled animal to which Ross clung. It was one of the tribesmen riding easily.

The trick worked, for the wild race slowed to a gallop and the other rider, in a feat of horsemanship at which Ross marveled, leaned from his seat to catch the dangling nose rope, bringing the runaway against his own steady steed. Ross shaken, still coughing from the smoke and unable to sit upright, held to the mane. The gallop slowed to a rocking pace and finally came to a halt, both horses blowing, white-foam patches on their chests and their riders' legs.

Having made his capture, the tribesman seemed indifferent to Ross, looking back instead at the wide curtain of grass smoke, frowning as he studied the swift spread of the fire. Muttering to himself, he pulled the lead rope and brought Ross's horse to follow in the direction from which Ennar had brought the captive less than a half hour earlier.

Ross tried to think. The unexpected death of their chief might well mean his own, should the tribe's desire for vengeance now be aroused. On the other hand, there was a faint chance that he could now better impress them with the thought that he was indeed of another clan and that to aid him would be to work against a common enemy.

But it was hard to plan clearly, though wits alone could save him now. The parley which had ended with Foscar's murder had brought Ross a small measure of time. He was still a captive, even though of the tribesmen and not the unearthly strangers. Perhaps to the ship people these primitives were hardly higher in scale than the forest animals.

Ross did not try to talk to his present guard, who towed him into the western sun of late afternoon. They halted at last in that same small grove where they had rested at noon. The tribesman fastened the mounts and then walked around to inspect the animal Ross had ridden. With a grunt he loosened the prisoner and spilled him unceremoniously on the ground while he examined the horse. Ross levered himself up to sight the mark of the burn across that roan hide where the fire had blistered the skin.

Thick handfuls of mud from the side of the spring were brought and plastered over the seared strip. Then, having rubbed down both animals with twists of grass, the man came over to Ross, pushed him back to the ground, and studied his left leg.

Ross understood. By rights, his thigh should also have been scorched where the flame had hit, yet he had felt no pain. Now as the tribesman examined him for a burn, he could not see even the faintest discoloration of the strange fabric. He remembered how the aliens had strolled unconcerned through the burning village. As the suit had insulated him against the cold of the ice, so it would seem that it had also protected him against the fire, for which he was duly thankful. His escape from injury was a puzzle to the tribesman, who, failing to find any trace of burn on him, left Ross alone and went to sit well away from his prisoner as if he feared him.

They did not have long to wait. One by one, those who had ridden in Foscar's company gathered at the grove. The very last to come were Ennar and Tulka, carrying the body of their chief. The faces of both men were smeared with dust and when the others sighted the body

they, too, rubbed dust into their cheeks, reciting a string of words and going one by one to touch the dead chieftain's right hand.

Ennar, resigning his burden to the others, slid from his tired horse and stood for a long moment, his head bowed. Then he gazed straight at Ross and came across the tiny clearing to stand over the man of a later time. The boyishness which had been a part of him when he had fought at Foscar's command was gone. His eyes were merciless as he leaned down to speak, shaping each word with slow care so that Ross could understand the promise—that frightful promise:

“Woods rat, Foscar goes to his burial fire. And he shall take a slave with him to serve him beyond the sky—a slave to run at his voice, to shake when he thunders. Slave-dog, you shall run for Foscar beyond the sky, and he shall have you forever to walk upon as a man walks upon the earth. I, Ennar, swear that Foscar shall be sent to the chiefs in the sky in all honor. And that you, dog-one, shall lie at his feet in that going!”

He did not touch Ross, but there was no doubt in Ross's mind that he meant every word he spoke.

## 17

The preparations for Foscar's funeral went on through the night. A wooden structure, made up of tied fagots dragged in from the woodland, grew taller beyond the big tribal camp. The constant crooning wail of the women in the tents produced a minor murmur of sound, enough to drive a man to the edge of madness. Ross had been left under guard where he could watch it all, a refinement of torture which he would earlier have believed too subtle for Ennar. Though the older men carried minor commands among the horsemen, because Ennar was the closest of blood kin among the adult males, he was in charge of the coming ceremony.

The pick of the horse herd, a roan stallion, was brought in to be picketed near Ross as sacrifice number two, and two of the hounds were in turn leashed close by. Foscar, his best weapons to hand and a red cloak lapped about him, lay waiting on a bier. Near-by squatted the tribal wizard, shaking his thunder rattle and chanting in a voice which approached a shriek. This wild activity might have been a scene lifted directly from some tape stored at the project base. It was very difficult for Ross to remember that this was reality, that he was to be one of the main actors in the coming event, with no timely aid from Operation Retrograde to snatch him to safety.

Sometime during that nightmare he slept, his weariness of body overcoming him. He awoke, dazed, to find a hand clutching his mop of hair, pulling his head up.

"You sleep—you do not fear, Foscar's dog-one?"

Groggily Ross blinked up. Fear? Sure, he was afraid. Fear, he realized with a clear thrust of consciousness such as he had seldom experienced before, had always stalked beside him, slept in his bed. But he had never surrendered to it, and he would not now if he could help it.

"I do not fear!" He threw that creed into Ennar's face in one hot boast. He *would* not fear!

"We shall see if you speak so loudly when the fire bites you!" The other spat, yet in that oath there was a reluctant recognition of Ross's courage.

"When the fire bites..." That sang in Ross's head. There was something else—if he could only remember! Up to that moment he had kept a poor little shadow of hope. It is always impossible—he was conscious again with that strange clarity of mind—for a man to face his own death honestly. A man always continues to believe to the last moment of his life that something will intervene to save him.

The men led the horse to the mound of fagots which was now crowned with Foscar's bier. The stallion went quietly, until a tall tribesman struck true with an ax, and the animal fell. The hounds were also killed and laid at their dead master's feet.

But Ross was not to fare so easily. The wizard danced about him, a hideous figure in a beast mask, a curled fringe of dried snakeskins swaying from his belt. Shaking his rattle, he squawked like an angry cat as they pulled Ross to the stacked wood.

Fire—there was something about fire—if he could only remember! Ross stumbled and nearly fell across one leg of the dead horse they were propping into place. Then he remembered that tongue of flame in the meadow grass which had burned the horse but not the rider. His hands and his head would have no protection, but the rest of his body was covered with the flame-resistant fabric of the alien suit. Could he do it? There was such a slight chance, and they were already pushing him onto that mound, his hands tied. Ennar stooped, and bound his ankles, securing him to the brush.

So fastened, they left him. The tribe ringed around the pyre at a safe distance, Ennar and five other men approaching from different directions, torches aflame. Ross watched those blazing knots thrust into the brush and heard the crackle of the fire. His eyes, hard and measuring, studied the flash of flame from dried brush to seasoned wood.

A tongue of yellow-red flame licked up at him. Ross hardly dared to breathe as it wreathed about his foot, his hide fetters smoldering. The insulation of the suit did not cut all the heat, but it allowed him to stay put for the few seconds he needed to make his escape spectacular.

The flame had eaten through his foot bonds, and yet the burning sensation on his feet and legs was no greater than it would have been from the direct rays of a bright summer sun. Ross moistened his lips with his tongue. The impact of heat on his hands and his face was different. He leaned down, held his wrists to the flame, taking in stoical silence the burns which freed him.

Then, as the fire curled up so that he seemed to stand in a frame of writhing red banners, Ross leaped through that curtain, protecting his bowed head with his arms as best he could. But to the onlookers it seemed he passed unhurt through the heart of a roaring fire.

He kept his footing and stood facing that part of the tribal ring directly before him. He heard a cry, perhaps of fear, and a blazing torch flew through the air and struck his hip. Although he felt the force of the blow, the burning bits of the head merely slid down his thigh and leg, leaving no mark on the smooth blue fabric.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

Now the wizard capered before him, shaking his rattle to make a deafening din. Ross struck out, slapping the sorcerer out of his path, and stooped to pick up the smoldering brand which had been thrown at him. Whirling it about his head, though every movement was torture to his scorched hands, he set it flaming once more. Holding it in front of him as a weapon, he stalked directly at the men and women before him.

The torch was a poor enough defense against spears and axes, but Ross did not care—he put into this last gamble all the determination he could summon. Nor did he realize what a figure he presented to the tribesmen. A man who had crossed a curtain of fire without apparent hurt, who appeared to wash in tongues of flame without harm, and who now called upon fire in turn as a weapon, was no man but a demon!

The wall of people wavered and broke. Women screamed and ran; men shouted. But no one threw a spear or struck with an ax. Ross walked on, a man possessed, looking neither to the right or left. He was in the camp now, stalking toward the fire burning before Foscar’s tent. He did not turn aside for that either, but holding the torch high, strode through the heart of the flames, risking further burns for the sake of insuring his ultimate safety.

The tribesmen melted away as he approached the last line of tents, with the open land beyond. The horses of the herd, which had been driven to this side to avoid the funeral pyre, were shifting nervously, the scent of burning making them uneasy.

Once more Ross whirled the dying torch about his head. Recalling how the aliens had sent his horse mad, he tossed it behind him into the grass between the tents and the herd. The tinder-dry stuff caught immediately. Now if the men tried to ride after him, they would have trouble.

Without hindrance he walked across the meadow at the same even pace, never turning to look behind. His hands were two separate worlds of smarting pain; his hair and eyebrows were singed, and a finger of burn ran along the angle of his jaw. But he was free, and he did not believe that Foscar’s men would be in any haste to pursue him. Somewhere before him lay

the river, the river which ran to the sea. Ross walked on in the sunny morning while behind him black smoke raised a dark beacon to the sky.

Afterward he guessed that he must have been lightheaded for several days, remembering little save the pain in his hands and the fact that it was necessary to keep moving. Once he fell to his knees and buried both hands in the cool, moist earth where a thread of stream trickled from a pool. The muck seemed to draw out a little of the agony while he drank with a fever thirst.

Ross seemed to move through a haze which lifted at intervals during which he noted his surroundings, was able to recall a little of what lay behind him, and to keep to the correct route. However, the gaps of time in between were forever lost to him. He stumbled along the banks of a river and fronted a bear fishing. The massive beast rose on its hind legs, growled, and Ross walked by it uncaring, unmenaced by the puzzled animal.

Sometimes he slept through the dark periods which marked the nights, or he stumbled along under the moon, nursing his hands against his breast, whimpering a little when his foot slipped and the jar of that mishap ran through his body. Once he heard singing, only to realize that it was himself who sang hoarsely a melody which would be popular thousands of years later in the world through which he wavered. But always Ross knew that he must go on, using that thick stream of running water as a guide to his final goal, the sea.

After a long while those spaces of mental clarity grew longer, appearing closer together. He dug small shelled things from under stones along the river and ate them avidly. Once he clubbed a rabbit and feasted. He sucked birds' eggs from a nest hidden among some reeds—just enough to keep his gaunt body going, though his gray eyes were now set in what was almost a death's-head.

Ross did not know just when he realized that he was again being hunted. It started with an uneasiness which differed from his previous fever-bred hallucinations. This was an inner pulling, a growing compulsion to turn and retrace his way back toward the mountains to meet something, or someone, waiting for him on the backward path.

But Ross kept on, fearing sleep now and fighting it. For once he had lain down to rest and had wakened on his feet, heading back as if that compulsion had the power to take over his body when his waking will was off guard.

So he rested, but he dared not sleep, the desire constantly tearing at his will, striving to take over his weakened body and draw it back. Perhaps against all reason he believed that it was the aliens who were trying to control him. Ross did not even venture to guess why they were so determined to get him. If there were tribesmen on his trail as well, he did not know, but he was sure that this was now purely a war of wills.

As the banks of the river were giving way to marshes, he had to wade through mud and water, detouring the boggy sections. Great clouds of birds whirled and shrieked their protests at his coming, and sleek water animals paddled and poked curious heads out of the water as this two-legged thing walked mechanically through their green land. Always that pull was with him, until Ross was more aware of fighting it than of traveling.

Why did they want him to return? Why did they not follow him? Or were they afraid to venture too far from where they had come through the transfer? Yet the unseen rope which was tugging at him did not grow less tenuous as he put more distance between himself and the mountain valley. Ross could understand neither their motives nor their methods, but he could continue to fight.



The bog was endless. He found an island and lashed himself with his suit belt to the single willow which grew there, knowing that he must have sleep, or he could not hope to last through the next day. Then he slept, only to waken cold, shaking, and afraid. Shoulder deep in a pool, he was aware that in his sleep he must have opened the belt buckle and freed himself, and only the mishap of falling into the water had brought him around to sanity.

Somehow he got back to the tree, rehooked the buckle and twisted the belt around the branches so that he was sure he could not work it free until daybreak. He lapsed into a deepening doze, and awoke, still safely anchored, with the morning cries of the birds. Ross considered the suit as he untangled the belt. Could the strange clothing be the tie by which the aliens held to him? If he were to strip, leaving the garment behind, would he be safe?

He tried to force open the studs across his chest, but they would not yield to the slight pressure which was all his seared fingers could exert, and when he pulled at the fabric, he was unable to tear it. So, still wearing the livery of the off-world men, Ross continued on his way, hardly caring where he went or how. The mud plastered on him by his frequent falls was some protection against the swarm of insect life his passing stirred into attack. However, he was able to endure a swollen face and slitted eyes, being far more conscious of the wrenching feeling within him than the misery of his body.

The character of the marsh began to change once more. The river was splitting into a dozen smaller streams, shaping out fanlike. Looking down at this from one of the marsh hillocks, Ross knew a faint surge of relief. Such a place had been on the map Ashe had made them memorize. He was close to the sea at last, and for the moment that was enough.

A salt-sharpened wind cut at him with the force of a fist in the face. In the absence of sunlight the leaden clouds overhead set a winterlike gloom across the countryside. To the constant sound of birdcalls Ross tramped heavily through small pools, beating a path through tangles of marsh grass. He stole eggs from nests, sucking his nourishment eagerly with no dislike for the fishy flavor, and drinking from stagnant, brackish ponds.

Suddenly Ross halted, at first thinking that the continuous roll of sound he heard was thunder. Yet the clouds overhead were massed no more than before and there was no sign of lightning. Continuing on, he realized that the mysterious sound was the pounding of surf—he was near the sea!

Willing his body to run, he weaved forward at a reeling trot, pitting all his energy against the incessant pull from behind. His feet skidded out of marsh mud into sand. Ahead of him were dark rocks surrounded by the white lace of spray.

Ross headed straight toward that spray until he stood knee-deep in the curling, foam-edged water and felt its tug on his body almost as strong as that other tug upon his mind. He knelt, letting the salt water sting to life every cut, every burn, sputtering as it filled his mouth and nostrils, washing from him the slime of the bog lands. It was cold and bitter, but it was the sea! He had made it!

Ross Murdock staggered back and sat down suddenly in the sand. Glancing about, he saw that his refuge was a rough triangle between two of the small river arms, littered with the debris of the spring floods which had grounded here after rejection by the sea. Although there was plenty of material for a fire, he had no means of kindling a flame, having lost the flint all Beaker traders carried for such a purpose.

This was the sea, and against all odds he had reached it. He lay back, his self-confidence restored to the point where he dared once more to consider the future. He watched the

swooping flight of gulls drawing patterns under the clouds above. For the moment he wanted nothing more than to lie here and rest.

But he did not surrender to this first demand of his over-driven body for long. Hungry and cold, sure that a storm was coming, he knew he had to build a fire—a fire on shore could provide him with the means of signaling the sub. Hardly knowing why—because one part of the coastline was as good as another—Ross began to walk again, threading a path in and out among the rocky outcrops.

So he found it, a hollow between two such windbreaks within which was a blackened circle of small stones holding charred wood, with some empty shells piled near-by. Here was unmistakable evidence of a camp! Ross plunged forward, thrusting a hand impetuously into the black mass of the dead fire. To his astonishment, he touched warmth!

Hardly daring to disturb those precious bits of charcoal, he dug around them, then carefully blew into what appeared to be dead ashes. There was an answering glow! He could not have just imagined it.

From a pile of wood that had been left behind, Ross snatched a small twig, poking it at the coal after he had rubbed it into a brush on the rough rock. He watched, all one ache of hope. The twig caught!

With his stiff fingers so clumsy, he had to be very careful, but Ross had learned patience in a hard school. Bit by bit he fed that tiny blaze until he had a real fire. Then, leaning back against the rock, he watched it.

It was now obvious that the placement of the original fire had been chosen with care, for the outcrops gave it wind shelter. They also provided a dark backdrop, partially hiding the flames on the landward side but undoubtedly making them more visible from the sea. The site seemed just right for a signal fire—but to what?

Ross's hands shook slightly as he fed the blaze. It was only too clear why anyone would make a signal on this shore. McNeil—or perhaps both he and Ashe—had survived the breakup of the raft, after all. They had reached this point—abandoned no earlier than this morning, judging by the life remaining in the coals—and put up the signal. Then, just as arranged, they had been collected by the sub, by now on its way back to the hidden North American post. There was no hope of any pickup for him now. Just as he had believed them dead after he had found that rag on the sapling, so they must have thought him finished after his fall in the river. He was just a few hours too late!

Ross folded his arms across his hunched knees and rested his head on them. There was no possible way he could ever reach the post or his own kind—ever again. Thousands of miles lay between him and the temporary installation in this time.

He was so sunk in his own complete despair that he was long unaware of finally being free of the pressure to turn back which had so long haunted him. But as he roused to feed the fire he got to wondering. Had those who hunted him given up the chase? Since he had lost his own race with time, he did not really care. What did it matter?

The pile of wood was getting low, but he decided that did not matter either. Even so, Ross got to his feet, moving over to the drifts of storm wrack to gather more. Why should he stay here by a useless beacon? But somehow he could not force himself to move on, as futile as his vigil seemed.

Dragging the sun-dried, bleached limbs of long-dead trees to his half shelter, he piled them up, working until he laughed at the barricade he had built. “A siege!” For the first time in

days he spoke aloud. "I might be ready for a siege..." He pulled over another branch, added it to his pile, and kneeled down once more by the flames.

There were fisherfolk to be found along this coast, and tomorrow when he was rested he would strike south and try to find one of their primitive villages. Traders would be coming into this territory now that the Red-inspired raiders were gone. If he could contact them....

But that spark of interest in the future died almost as soon as it was born. To be a Beaker trader as an agent for the project was one thing, to live the role for the rest of his life was something else.

Ross stood by his fire, staring out to sea for a sign he knew he would never see again as long as he lived. Then, as if a spear had struck between his shoulder blades, he was attacked.

The blow was not physical, but came instead as a tearing, red pain in his head, a pressure so terrible he could not move. He knew instantly that behind him now lurked the ultimate danger.

# 18

Ross fought to break that hold, to turn his head, to face the peril which crept upon him now. Unlike anything he had ever met before in his short lifetime, it could only have come from some alien source. This strange encounter was a battle of will against will! The same rebellion against authority which had ruled his boyhood, which had pushed him into the orbit of the project, stiffened him to meet this attack.

He was going to turn his head; he was going to see who stood there. He *was*! Inch by inch, Ross's head came around, though sweat stung his seared and bitten flesh, and every breath was an effort. He caught a half glimpse of the beach behind the rocks, and the stretch of sand was empty. Overhead the birds were gone—as if they had never existed. Or, as if they had been swept away by some impatient fighter, who wanted no distractions from the purpose at hand.

Having successfully turned his head, Ross decided to turn his body. His left hand went out, slowly, as if it moved some great weight. His palm gritted painfully on the rock and he savored that pain, for it pierced through the dead blanket of compulsion that was being used against him. Deliberately he ground his blistered skin against the stone, concentrating on the sharp torment in his hand as the agony shot up his arm. While he focused his attention on the physical pain, he could feel the pressure against him weaken. Summoning all his strength, Ross swung around in a movement which was only a shadow of his former feline grace.

The beach was still empty, except for the piles of driftwood, the rocks, and the other things he had originally found there. Yet he knew that something was waiting to pounce. Having discovered that for him pain was a defense weapon, he had that one resource. If they took him, it would be after besting him in a fight.

Even as he made this decision, Ross was conscious of a curious weakening of the force bent upon him. It was as if his opponents had been surprised, either at his simple actions of the past few seconds or at his determination. Ross leaped upon that surprise, adding it to his stock of unseen weapons.

He leaned forward, still grinding his torn hand against the rock as a steadying influence, took up a length of dried wood, and thrust its end into the fire. Having once used fire to save himself, he was ready and willing to do it again, although at the same time, another part of him shrank from what he intended.

Holding his improvised torch breast-high, Ross stared across it, searching the land for the faintest sign of his enemies. In spite of the fire and the light he held before him, the dusk prevented him from seeing too far. Behind him the crash of the surf could have covered the noise of a marching army.

“Come and get me!”

He whirled his brand into bursting life and then hurled it straight into the drift among the dunes. He was grabbing for a second brand almost before the blazing head of the first had fallen into the twisted, bleached roots of a dead tree.

He stood tense, a second torch now kindled in his hand. The sharp vise of another's will which had nipped him so tightly a moment ago was easing, slowly disappearing as water might trickle away. Yet he could not believe that this small act of defiance had so daunted his

unseen opponent as to make him give up the struggle this easily. It was more likely the pause of a wrestler seeking for a deadlier grip.

The brand in his hand—Ross's second line of defense—was a weapon he was loath to use, but would use if he were forced to it. He kept his hand mercilessly flat against the rock as a reminder and a spur.

Fire twisted and crackled among the driftwood where the first torch had lodged, providing a flickering light yards from where he stood. He was grateful for it in the gloom of the gathering storm. If they would only come to open war before the rain struck....

Ross sheltered his torch with his body as spray, driven inward from the sea, splattered his shoulders and his back. If it rained, he would lose what small advantage the fire gave him, but then he would find some other way to meet them. They would neither break him nor take him, even if he had to wade into the sea and swim out into the lash of the cold northern waves until he could not move his tired limbs any longer.

Once again that steel-edge will struck at Ross, probing his stubbornness, assaulting his mind. He whirled the torch, brought the scorching breath of the flame across the hand resting on the rock. Unable to control his own cry of protest, he was not sure he had the fortitude to repeat such an act.

He had won again! The pressure had fallen away in a flick, almost as if some current had been snapped off. Through the red curtain of his torment Ross sensed a surprise and disbelief. He was unaware that in this queer duel he was using both a power of will and a depth of perception he had never known he possessed. Because of his daring, he had shaken his opponents as no physical attack could have affected them.

“Come and get me!” He shouted again at the barren shoreline where the fire ate at the drift and nothing stirred, yet something very much alive and conscious lay hidden. This time there was more than simple challenge in Ross's demand—there was a note of triumph.

The spray whipped by him, striking at his fire, at the brand he held. Let the sea water put both out! He would find another way of fighting. He was certain of that, and he sensed that those out there knew it too and were troubled.

The fire was being driven by the wind along the crisscross lines of bone-white wood left high on the beach, forming a wall of flame between him and the interior, not, however, an insurmountable barrier to whatever lurked there.

Again Ross leaned against the rock, studying the length of beach. Had he been wrong in thinking that they were within the range of his voice? The power they had used might carry over a greater distance.

“Yahhhh—” Instead of a demand, he now voiced a taunting cry, screaming his defiance. Some wild madness had been transmitted to him by the winds, the roaring sea, his own pain. Ready to face the worst they could send against him, he tried to hurl that thought back at them as they had struck with their united will at him. No answer came to his challenge, no rise to counter-attack.

Moving away from the rock, Ross began to walk forward toward the burning drift, his torch ready in his hand. “I am here!” he shouted into the wind. “Come out—face me!”

It was then that he saw those who had tracked him. Two tall thin figures, wearing dark clothes, were standing quietly watching him, their eyes dark holes in the white ovals of their faces.

Ross halted. Though they were separated by yards of sand and rock and a burning barrier, he could feel the force they wielded. The nature of that force had changed, however. Once it had struck with a vigorous spear point; now it formed a shield of protection. Ross could not break through that shield, and they dared not drop it. A stalemate existed between them in this strange battle, the like of which Ross's world had not known before.

He watched those expressionless white faces, trying to find some reply to the deadlock. There flashed into his mind the certainty that while he lived and moved, and they lived and moved, this struggle, this unending pursuit, would continue. For some mysterious reason they wanted to have him under their control, but that was never going to happen if they all had to remain here on this strip of water-washed sand until they starved to death! Ross tried to drive that thought across to them.

"Murrddock!" That croaking cry borne out of the sea by the wind might almost have come from the bill of a sea bird.

"Murrddock!"

Ross spun around. Visibility had been drastically curtailed by the lowering clouds and the dashing spray, but he could see a round dark thing bobbing on the waves. The sub? A raft?

Sensing a movement behind him, Ross wheeled about as one of the alien figures leaped the blazing drift, heedless of the flames, and ran light-footedly toward him in what could only be an all-out attempt at capture. The man had ready a weapon like the one that had felled Foscar. Ross threw himself at his opponent in a reckless dive, falling on him with a smashing impact.

In Ross's grasp the alien's body was fragile, but he moved fluidly as Murdock fought to break his grip on the hand weapon and pin him to the sand. Ross was too intent upon his own part of the struggle to heed the sounds of a shot over his head and a thin, wailing cry. He slammed his opponent's hand against a stone, and the white face, inches away from his own, twisted silently with pain.

Fumbling for a better hold, Ross was sent rolling. He came down on his left hand with a force which brought tears to his eyes and stopped him just long enough for the other to regain his feet.

The blue-suited man sprinted back to the body of his fellow where it lay by the drift. He slung his unconscious comrade over the barrier with more ease than Ross would have believed possible and vaulted the barrier after him. Ross, half crouched on the sand, felt unusually light and empty. The strange tie which had drawn and held him to the strangers had been broken.

"Murdock!"

A rubber raft rode in on the waves, two men aboard it. Ross got up, pulling at the studs of his suit with his right hand. He could believe in what he saw now—the sub had not left, after all. The two men running toward him through the dusk were of his own kind.

"Murdock!"

It did not seem at all strange that Kelgarries reached him first. Ross, caught up in this dream, appealed to the major for aid with the studs. If the strangers from the ship did trace him by the suit, they were not going to follow the sub back to the post and serve the project as they had the Reds.

"Got—to—get—this—off—" He pulled the words out one by one, tugging frantically at the stubborn studs. "They can trace this and follow us—"

Kelgarries needed no better explanation. Ripping loose the fastenings, he pulled the clinging fabric from Ross, sending him reeling with pain as he pulled the left sleeve down the younger man's arm.

The wind and spray were ice on his body as they dragged him down to the raft, bundling him aboard. He did not at all remember their arrival on board the sub. He was lying in the vibrating heart of the undersea ship when he opened his eyes to see Kelgarries regarding him intently. Ashe, a coat of bandage about his shoulder and chest, lay on a neighboring bunk. McNeil stood watching a medical corpsman lay out supplies.

"He needs a shot," the medic was saying as Ross blinked at the major.

"You left the suit—back there?" Ross demanded.

"We did. What's this about them tracing you by it? Who was tracing you?"

"Men from the space ship. That's the only way they could have trailed me down the river." He was finding it difficult to talk, and the protesting medic kept waving a needle in his direction, but somehow in bursts of half-finished sentences Ross got out his story—Foscar's death, his own escape from the chief's funeral pyre, and the weird duel of wills back on the beach. Even as he poured it out he thought how unlikely most of it must sound. Yet Kelgarries appeared to accept every word, and there was no expression of disbelief on Ashe's face.

"So that's how you got those burns," said the major slowly when Ross had finished his story. "Deliberately searing your hand in the fire to break their hold—" He crashed his fist against the wall of the tiny cabin and then, when Ross winced at the jar, he hurriedly uncurled those fingers to press Ross's shoulder with a surprisingly warm and gentle touch. "Put him to sleep," he ordered the medic. "He deserves about a month of it, I should judge. I think he has brought us a bigger slice of the future than we had hoped for...."

Ross felt the prick of the needle and then nothing more. Even when he was carried ashore at the post and later when he was transported into his proper time, he did not awaken. He only approached a strange dreamy state in which he ate and drowsed, not caring for the world beyond his own bunk.

But there came a day when he did care, sitting up to demand food with a great deal of his old self-assertion. The doctor looked him over, permitting him to get out of bed and try out his legs. They were exceedingly uncooperative at first, and Ross was glad he had tried to move only from his bunk to a waiting chair.

"Visitors welcome?"

Ross looked up eagerly and then smiled, somewhat hesitatingly, at Ashe. The older man wore his arm in a sling but otherwise seemed his usual imperturbable self.

"Ashe, tell me what happened. Are we back at the main base? What about the Reds? We weren't traced by the ship people, were we?"

Ashe laughed. "Did Doc just wind you up to let you spin, Ross? Yes, this is home, sweet home. As for the rest—well, it is a long story, and we are still picking up pieces of it here and there."

Ross pointed to the bunk in invitation. "Can you tell me what is known?" He was still somewhat at a loss, his old secret awe of Ashe tempering his outward show of eagerness. Ross still feared one of those snubs the other so well knew how to deliver to the bumptious. But Ashe did come in and sit down, none of his old formality now in evidence.

“You have been a surprise package, Murdock.” His observation had some of the ring of the old Ashe, but there was no withdrawal behind the words. “Rather a busy lad, weren’t you, after you were bumped off into that river?”

Ross’s reply was a grimace. “You heard all about that!” He had no time for his own adventures, already receding into a past which made them both dim and unimportant. “What happened to you—and to the project—and——”

“One thing at a time, and don’t rush your fences.” Ashe was surveying him with an odd intentness which Ross could not understand. He continued to explain in his “instructor” voice. “We made it down the river—how, don’t ask me. That was something of a ‘project’ in itself,” he laughed. “The raft came apart piece by piece, and we waded most of the last couple of miles, I think. I’m none too clear on the details; you’ll have to get those out of McNeil, who was still among those present then. Other than that, we cannot compete with your adventures. We built a signal fire and sat by it toasting our shins for a few days, until the sub came to collect us——”

“And took you off.” Ross experienced a fleeting return of that hollow feeling he had known on the shore when the still-warm coals of the signal fire had told him the story of his too-late arrival.

“And took us off. But Kelgarries agreed to spin out our waiting period for another twenty-four hours, in case you did manage to survive that toss you took into the river. Then we sighted your spectacular display of fireworks on the beach, and the rest was easy.”

“The ship people didn’t trace us back to post?”

“Not that we know of. Anyway, we’ve closed down the post on that time level. You might be interested in a very peculiar tale our modern agents have picked up, floating over and under the iron curtain. A blast went off in the Baltic region of this time, wiping some installation clean off the map. The Reds have kept quiet as to the nature of the explosion and the exact place where it occurred.”

“The aliens followed *them* all the way up to this time!”—Ross half rose from the chair—“But why? And why did they trail me?”

“That we can only guess. But I don’t believe that they were moved by any private vengeance for the looting of their derelict. There is some more imperative reason why they don’t want us to find or use anything from one of their cargoes——”

“But they were in power thousands of years ago. Maybe they and their worlds are gone now. Why should things we do today matter to them?”

“Well, it does matter, and in some very important way. And we have to learn that reason.”

“How?” Ross looked down at his left hand, encased in a mitten of bandage under which he very gingerly tried to stretch a finger. Maybe he should have been eager to welcome another meeting with the ship people, but if he were truly honest, he had to admit that he did not. He glanced up, sure that Ashe had read all that hesitation and scorned him for it. But there was no sign that his discomfiture had been noticed.

“By doing some looting of our own,” Ashe answered. “Those tapes we brought back are going to be a big help. More than one derelict was located. We were right in our surmise that the Reds first discovered the remains of one in Siberia, but it was in no condition to be explored. They already had the basic idea of the time traveler, so they applied it to the hunting down of other ships, with several way stops to throw people like us off the scent. So



they found an intact ship, and also several others. At least three are on *this* side of the Atlantic where they couldn't get at them very well. Those we can deal with now——”

“Won't the aliens be waiting for us to try that?”

“As far as we can discover they don't know where any of these ships crashed. Either there were no survivors, or passengers and crew took off in lifeboats while they were still in space. They might never have known of the Reds' activities if you hadn't triggered that communicator on the derelict.”

Ross was reduced to a small boy who badly needed an alibi for some piece of juvenile mischief. “I didn't mean to.” That excuse sounded so feeble that he was surprised into a laugh, only to see Ashe grinning back at him.

“Seeing as how your action also put a very effective spike in the opposition's wheel, you are freely forgiven. Anyway, you have also provided us with a pretty good idea of what we may be up against with the aliens, and we'll be prepared for that next time.”

“Then there will be a next time?”

“We are calling in all time agents, concentrating our forces in the right period. Yes, there will be a next time. We have to learn just what they are trying so hard to protect.”

“What do you think it is?”

“Space!” Ashe spoke the word softly as if he relished the promise it held.

“Space?”

“That ship you explored was a derelict from a galactic fleet, but it was a ship and it used the principle of space flight. Do you understand now? In these lost ships lies the secret which will make us free of all the stars! We must claim it.”

“Can we——?”

“Can *we*?” Ashe was laughing at Ross again with his eyes, though his face remained sober. “Then *you* still want to be counted in on this game?”

Ross looked down again at his bandaged hand and remembered swiftly so many things—the coast of Britain on a misty morning, the excitement of prowling the alien ship, the fight with Ennar, even the long nightmare of his flight down the river, and lastly, the exultation he had tasted when he had faced the alien and had locked wills—to hold steady. He knew that he could not, would not, give up what he had found here in the service of the project as long as it was in his power to cling to it.

“Yes.” It was a very simple answer, but when his eyes met Ashe's, Ross knew that it would serve better than any solemn oath.

## **Storm Over Warlock**

# 1. Disaster

The Throg task force struck the Terran Survey camp a few minutes after dawn, without warning, and with a deadly precision which argued that the aliens had fully reconnoitered and prepared that attack. Eye-searing lances of energy lashed back and forth across the base with methodical accuracy. And a single cowering witness, flattened on a ledge in the heights above, knew that when the last of those yellow-red bolts fell, nothing human would be left alive down there. His teeth closed hard upon the thick stuff of the sleeve covering his thin forearm, and in his throat a scream of terror and rage was stillborn.

More than caution kept him pinned on that narrow shelf of rock. Watching that holocaust below, Shann Lantee could not force himself to move. The sheer ruthlessness of the Throg move-in left him momentarily weak. To listen to a tale of Throgs in action, and to be an eye-witness to such action, were two vastly different things. He shivered in spite of the warmth of the Survey Corps uniform.

As yet he had sighted none of the aliens, only their plate-shaped flyers. They would stay aloft until their long-range weapon cleared out all opposition. But how had they been able to make such a complete annihilation of the Terran force? The last report had placed the nearest Throg nest at least two systems away from Warlock. And a patrol lane had been drawn about the Circe system the minute that Survey had marked its second planet ready for colonization. Somehow the beetles had slipped through that supposedly tight cordon and would now consolidate their gains with their usual speed at rooting. First an energy attack to finish the small Terran force; then they would simply take over.

A month later, or maybe two months, and they could not have done it. The grids would have been up, and any Throg ship venturing into Warlock's amber-tinted sky would abruptly cease to be. In the race for survival as a galactic power, Terra had that one small edge over the swarms of the enemy. They need only stake out their new-found world and get the grids assembled on its surface; then that planet would be locked to the beetles. The critical period was between the first discovery of a suitable colony world and the erection of grid control. Planets in the past had been lost during that time lag, just as Warlock was lost now.

Throgs and Terrans.... For more than a century now, planet time, they had been fighting their queer, twisted war among the stars. Terrans hunted worlds for colonization, the old hunger for land of their own driving men from the over-populated worlds, out of Sol's system to the far stars. And those worlds barren of intelligent native life, open to settlers, were none too many and widely scattered. Perhaps half a dozen were found in a quarter century, and of that six maybe only one was suitable for human life without any costly and lengthy adaption of man or world. Warlock was one of the lucky finds which came so seldom.

Throgs were predators, living on the loot they garnered. As yet, mankind had not been able to discover whether they did indeed swarm from any home world. Perhaps they lived eternally on board their plate ships with no permanent base, forced into a wandering life by the destruction of the planet on which they had originally been spawned. But they were raiders now, laying waste defenseless worlds, picking up the wealth of shattered cities in which no native life remained. And their hidden temporary bases were looped about the galaxy, their need for worlds with an atmosphere similar to Terra's as necessary as that of man. For in spite of their grotesque insectile bodies, their wholly alien minds, the Throgs were warm-blooded, oxygen-breathing creatures.

After the first few clashes the early Terran explorers had endeavored to promote a truce between the species, only to discover that between Throg and man there appeared to be no meeting ground at all—total differences of mental processes producing insurmountable misunderstanding. There was simply no point of communication. So the Terrans had suffered one smarting defeat after another until they perfected the grid. And now their colonies were safe, at least when time worked in their favor.

It had not on Warlock.

A last vivid lash of red cracked over the huddle of domes in the valley. Shann blinked, half blinded by that glare. His jaws ached as he unclenched his teeth. That was the finish. Breathing raggedly, he raised his head, beginning to realize that he was the only one of his kind left alive on a none-too-hospitable world controlled by enemies—without shelter or supplies.

He edged back into the narrow cleft which was the entrance to the ledge. As a representative of his species he was not impressive, and now with those shudders he could not master, shaking his thin body, he looked even smaller and more vulnerable. Shann drew his knees up close under his chin. The hood of his woodsman's jacket was pushed back in spite of the chill of the morning, and he wiped the back of his hand across his lips and chin in an oddly childish gesture.

None of the men below who had been alive only minutes earlier had been close friends of his; Shann had never known anyone but acquaintances in his short, roving life. Most people had ignored him completely except to give orders, and one or two had been actively malicious—like Garth Thorvald. Shann grimaced at a certain recent memory, and then that grimace faded into wonder. If young Thorvald hadn't purposefully tried to get Shann into trouble by opening the wolverines' cage, Shann wouldn't be here now—alive and safe for a time—he'd have been down there with the others.

The wolverines! For the first time since Shann had heard the crackle of the Throg attack he remembered the reason he had been heading into the hills. Of all the men on the Survey team, Shann Lantee had been the least important. The dirty, tedious clean-up jobs, the dull routines which required no technical training but which had to be performed to keep the camp functioning comfortably, those had been his portion. And he had accepted that status willingly, just to have a chance to be included among Survey personnel. Not that he had the slightest hope of climbing up to even an S-E-Three rating in the service.

Part of those menial activities had been to clean the animal cages. And there Shann Lantee had found something new, something so absorbing that most of the tiring dull labor had ceased to exist except as tasks to finish before he could return to the fascination of the animal runs.

Survey teams had early discovered the advantage of using mutated and highly trained Terran animals as assistants in the exploration of strange worlds. From the biological laboratories and breeding farms on Terra came a trickle of specialized aides-de-camp to accompany man into space. Some were fighters, silent, more deadly than weapons a man wore at his belt or carried in his hands. Some were keener eyes, keener noses, keener scouts than the human kind could produce. Bred for intelligence, for size, for adaptability to alien conditions, the animal explorers from Terra were prized.

Wolverines, the ancient "devils" of the northlands on Terra, were being tried for the first time on Warlock. Their caution, a quality highly developed in their breed, made them testers for new territory. Able to tackle in battle an animal three times their size, they should be added

protection for the man they accompanied into the wilderness, and their wide ranging, their ability to climb and swim, and above all, their curiosity were assets.

Shann had begun contact by cleaning their cages; he ended captivated by these miniature bears with long bushy tails. And to his unbounded delight the attraction was mutual. Alone to Taggi and Togi he was a person, an important person. Those teeth, which could tear flesh into ragged strips, nipped gently at his fingers, closed without any pressure on arm, even on nose and chin in what was the ultimate caress of their kind. Since they were escape artists of no mean ability, twice he had had to track and lead them back to camp from forays of their own devising.

But the second time he had been caught by Fadakar, the chief of animal control, before he could lock up the delinquents. And the memory of the resulting interview still had the power to make him flush with impotent anger. Shann's explanation had been contemptuously brushed aside, and he had been delivered an ultimatum. If his carelessness occurred again, he would be sent back on the next supply ship, to be dismissed without an official sign-off on his work record, thus locked out of even the lowest level of Survey for the rest of his life.

That was why Garth Thorvald's act of the night before had made Shann brave the unknown darkness of Warlock alone when he had discovered that the test animals were gone. He had to locate and return them before Fadakar made his morning inspection; Garth Thorvald's attempt to get him into bad trouble had saved his life.

Shann cowered back, striving to make his huddled body as small as possible. One of the Throg flyers appeared silently out of the misty amber of the morning sky, hovering over the silent camp. The aliens were coming in to inspect the site of their victory. And the safest place for any Terran now was as far from the vicinity of those silent domes as he could get. Shann's slight body was an asset as he wedged through the narrow mouth of a cleft and so back into the cliff wall. The climb before him he knew in part, for this was the path the wolverines had followed on their two other escapes. A few moments of tricky scrambling and he was out in a cuplike depression choked with brush covered with the purplish foliage of Warlock. On the other side of that was a small cut to a sloping hillside, giving on another valley, not as wide as that in which the camp stood, but one well provided with cover in the way of trees and high-growing bushes.

A light wind pushed among the trees, and twice Shann heard the harsh, rasping call of a clak-clak—one of the bat-like leather-winged flyers that laired in pits along the cliff walls. That present snap of two-tone complaint suggested that the land was empty of strangers. For the clak-claks vociferously and loudly resented encroachment on their chosen hunting territory.

Shann hesitated. He was driven by the urge to put as much distance between him and the landing Throg ship as he could. But to arouse the attention of inquisitive clak-claks was asking for trouble. Perhaps it would be best to keep on along the top of the cliff, rather than risk a descent to take cover in the valley the flyers patrolled.

A patch of dust, sheltered by a tooth-shaped projection of rock, gave the Terran his first proof that Taggi and his mate had preceded him, for printed firmly there was the familiar paw mark of a wolverine. Shann began to hope that both animals had taken to cover in the wilderness ahead.

He licked dry lips. Having left secretly without any emergency pack, he had no canteen, and now Shann inventoried his scant possessions—a field kit, heavy-duty clothing, a short hooded jacket with attached mittens, the breast marked with the Survey insignia. His belt supported a sheathed stunner and bush knife, and seam pockets held three credit tokens, a twist of wire intended to reinforce the latch of the wolverine cage, a packet of bravo tablets,

two identity and work cards, and a length of cord. No rations—save the bravos—no extra charge for his stunner. But he did have, weighing down a loop on the jacket, a small atomic torch.

The path he followed ended abruptly in a cliff drop, and Shann made a face at the odor rising from below, even though that scent meant he could climb down to the valley floor here without fearing any clak-clak attention. Chemical fumes from a mineral spring funneled against the wall, warding off any nesting in this section.

Shann drew up the hood of his jacket and snapped the transparent face mask into place. He must get away—then find food, water, a hiding place. That will to live which had made Shann Lantee fight innumerable battles in the past was in command, bracing him with a stubborn determination.

The fumes swirled up in a smoke haze about his waist, but he strode on, heading for the open valley and cleaner air. That sickly lavender vegetation bordering the spring deepened in color to the normal purple-green, and then he was in a grove of trees, their branches pointed skyward at sharp angles to the rust-red trunks.

A small skitterer burst from moss-spotted ground covering, giving an alarmed squeak, skimming out of sight as suddenly as it had appeared. Shann squeezed between two trees and then paused. The trunk of the larger was deeply scored with scratches dripping viscid gobs of sap, a sap which was a bright froth of scarlet. Taggi had left his mark here, and not too long ago.

The soft carpet of moss showed no paw marks, but he thought he knew the goal of the animals—a lake down-valley. Shann was beginning to plan now. The Throgs had not blasted the Terran camp out of existence; they had only made sure of the death of its occupiers. Which meant they must have some use for the installations. For the general loot of a Survey field camp would be relatively worthless to those who picked over the treasure of entire cities elsewhere. Why? What did the Throgs want? And would the alien invaders continue to occupy the domes for long?

Shann did not realize what had happened to him since that shock of ruthless attack. From early childhood, when he had been thrown on his own to scratch a living—a borderline existence of a living—on the Dumps of Tyr, he had had to use his wits to keep life in a scrawny and undersized body. However, since he had been eating regularly from Survey rations, he was not quite so scrawny any more.

His formal education was close to zero, his informal and off-center schooling vast. And that particular toughening process which had been working on him for years now aided in his speedy adaption to a new set of facts, formidable ones. He was alone on a strange and perhaps hostile world. Water, food, safe shelter, those were important now. And once again, away from the ordered round of the camp where he had been ruled by the desires and requirements of others, he was thinking, planning in freedom. Later (his hand went to the butt of his stunner) perhaps later he might just find a way of extracting an accounting from the beetle-faces, too.

For the present, he would have to keep away from the Throgs, which meant well away from the camp. A fleck of green showed through the amethyst foliage before him—the lake! Shann wriggled through a last bush barrier and stood to look out over that surface. A sleek brown head bobbed up. Shann put fingers to his mouth and whistled. The head turned, black button eyes regarded him, short legs began to churn water. To his gratification the swimmer was obeying his summons.

Taggi came ashore, pausing on the fine gray sand of the verge to shake himself vigorously. Then the wolverine came upslope at a clumsy gallop to Shann. With an unknown feeling swelling inside him, the Terran went down on both knees, burying both hands in the coarse brown fur, warming to the uproarious welcome Taggi gave him.

“Togi?” Shann asked as if the other could answer. He gazed back to the lake, but Taggi’s mate was nowhere in sight.

The blunt head under his hand swung around, black button nose pointed north. Shann had never been sure just how intelligent, as mankind measured intelligence, the wolverines were. He had come to suspect that Fadakar and the other experts had underrated them and that both beasts understood more than they were given credit for. Now he followed an experiment of his own, one he had had a chance to try only a few times before and never at length. Pressing his palm flat on Taggi’s head, Shann thought of Throgs and of their attack, trying to arouse in the animal a corresponding reaction to his own horror and anger.

And Taggi responded. A mutter became a growl, teeth gleamed—those cruel teeth of a carnivore to whom they were weapons of aggression. Danger... Shann thought “danger.” Then he raised his hand, and the wolverine shuffled off, heading north. The man followed.

They discovered Togi busy in a small cove where a jagged tangle of drift made a mat dating from the last high-water period. She was finishing a hearty breakfast, the remains of a water rat being buried thriftily against future need after the instincts of her kind. When she was done she came to Shann, inquiry plain to read in her eyes.

There was water here, and good hunting. But the site was too close to the Throgs. Let one of their exploring flyers sight them, and the little group was finished. Better cover, that’s what the three fugitives must have. Shann scowled, not at Togi, but at the landscape. He was tired and hungry, but he must keep on going.

A stream fed into the cove from the west, a guide of sorts. With very little knowledge of the countryside, Shann was inclined to follow that.

Overhead the sun made its usual golden haze of the sky. A flight of vivid green streaks marked a flock of lake ducks coming for a morning feeding. Lake duck was good eating, but Shann had no time to hunt one now. Togi started down the bank of the stream, Taggi behind her. Either they had caught his choice subtly through some undefined mental contact, or they had already picked that road on their own.

Shann’s attention was caught by a piece of the drift. He twisted the length free and had his first weapon of his own manufacture, a club. Using it to hold back a low sweeping branch, he followed the wolverines.

Within the half hour he had breakfast, too. A pair of limp skitterers, their long hind feet lashed together with a thong of grass, hung from his belt. They were not particularly good eating, but they were meat and acceptable.

The three, man and wolverines, made their way up the stream to the valley wall and through a feeder ravine into the larger space beyond. There, where the stream was born at the foot of a falls, they made their first camp. Judging that the morning haze would veil any smoke, Shann built a pocket-size fire. He seared rather than roasted the skitterers after he had made an awkward and messy business of skinning them, and tore the meat from the delicate bones in greedy mouthfuls. The wolverines lay side by side on the gravel, now and again raising a head alertly to test the scent on the air, or gaze into the distance.

Taggi made a warning sound deep in the throat. Shann tossed handfuls of sand over the dying fire. He had only time to fling himself face-down, hoping the drab and weathered cloth of his uniform faded into the color of the earth on which he lay, every muscle tense.

A shadow swung across the hillside. Shann's shoulders hunched, and he cowered again. That terror he had known on the ledge was back in full force as he waited for the beam to lick at him as it had earlier at his fellows. The Throgs were on the hunt....



## 2. Death Of A Ship

That sigh of displaced air was not as loud as a breeze, but it echoed monstrously in Shann's ears. He could not believe in his luck as that sound grew fainter, drew away into the valley he had just left. With infinite caution he raised his head from his arm, still hardly able to accept the fact that he had not been sighted, that the Throgs and their flyer were gone.

But that black plate was spinning out into the sun haze. One of the beetles might have suspected that there were Terran fugitives and ordered a routine patrol. After all, how could the aliens know that they had caught all but one of the Survey party in camp? Though with all the Terran scout flitters grounded on the field, the men dead in their bunks, the surprise would seem to be complete.

As Shann moved, Taggi and Togi came to life also. They had gone to earth with speed, and the man was sure that both beasts had sensed danger. Not for the first time he knew a burning desire for the formal education he had never had. In camp he had listened, dragging out routine jobs in order to overhear reports and the small talk of specialists keen on their own particular hobbies. But so much of the information Shann had thus picked up to store in a retentive memory he had not understood and could not fit together. It had been as if he were trying to solve some highly important puzzle with at least a quarter of the necessary pieces missing, or with unrelated bits from others intermixed. How much control did a trained animal scout have over his furred or feathered assistants? And was part of that mastery a mental rapport built up between man and animal?

How well would the wolverines obey him now, especially when they would not return to camp where cages stood waiting as symbols of human authority? Wouldn't a trek into the wilderness bring about a revolt for complete freedom? If Shann could depend upon the animals, it would mean a great deal. Not only would their superior hunting ability provide all three with food, but their scouting senses, so much keener than his, might erect a slender wall between life and death.

Few large native beasts had been discovered on Warlock by the Terran explorers. And of those four or five different species, none had proved hostile if unprovoked. But that did not mean that somewhere back in the wild lands into which Shann was heading there were no heretofore unknowns, perhaps slyer and as vicious as the wolverines when they were aroused to rage.

Then there were the "dreams," which had afforded the prime source of camp discussion and dispute. Shann brushed coarse sand from his boots and thought about the dreams. Did they or did they not exist? You could start an argument any time by making a definite statement for or against the peculiar sort of dreaming reported by the first scout to set ship on this world.

The Circe system, of which Warlock was the second of three planets, had first been scouted four years ago by one of those explorers traveling solo in Survey service. Everyone knew that the First-In Scouts were a weird breed, almost a mutation of Terran stock—their reports were rife with strange observations.

So an alarming one concerning Circe (a yellow sun such as Sol) and her three planets was not so rare. Witch, the world nearest in orbit to Circe, was too hot for human occupancy without drastic and too costly world-changing. Wizard, the third out from the sun, was mostly bare rock and highly poisonous water. But Warlock, swinging through space between two forbidding neighbors, seemed to be just what the settlement board ordered.

Then the Survey scout, even in the cocoon safety of his well-armed ship, began to dream. And from those dreams a horror of the apparently empty world developed, until he fled the planet to preserve his sanity. There had been a second visit to Warlock in check; worlds so well adapted to human emigration could not be lightly thrown away. And this time there was a negative report, no trace of dreams, no registration of any outside influence on the delicate and complicated equipment the ship carried. So the Survey team had been dispatched to prepare for the coming of the first pioneers, and none of them had dreamed either—at least, no more than the ordinary dreams all men accepted.

Only there were those who pointed out that the seasons had changed between the first and second visits to Warlock. That first scout had planeted in summer; his successors had come in fall and winter. They argued that the final release of the world for settlement should not be given until the full year on Warlock had been sampled.

But the pressure of Emigrant Control had forced their hands, that and the fear of just what had eventually happened—an attack from the Throgs. So they had speeded up the process of declaring Warlock open. Only Ragnar Thorvald had protested that decision up to the last and had gone back to headquarters on the supply ship a month ago to make a last appeal for a more careful study.

Shann stopped brushing the sand from the tough fabric above his knee. Ragnar Thorvald.... He remembered back to the port landing apron on another world, remembered with a sense of loss he could not define. That had been about the second biggest day of his short life; the biggest had come earlier when they had actually allowed him to sign on for Survey duty.

He had tumbled off the cross-continent cargo carrier, his kit—a very meager kit—slung over his thin shoulder, a hot eagerness expanding inside him until he thought that he could not continue to throttle down that wild happiness. There was a waiting starship. And he—Shann Lantee from the Dumps of Tyr, without any influence or schooling—was going to blast off in her, wearing the brown-green uniform of Survey!

Then he had hesitated uncertainly, had not quite dared cross the few feet of apron lying between him and that compact group wearing the same uniform—with a slight difference, that of service bars and completion badges and rank insignia—with the unconscious self-assurance of men who had done this many times before.

But after a moment that whole group had become in his own shy appraisal just a background for one man. Shann had never before known in his pinched and limited childhood, his lost boyhood, anyone who aroused in him hero worship. And he could not have put a name to the new emotion that added so suddenly to his burning desire to make good, not only to hold the small niche in Survey which he had already so painfully achieved, but to climb, until he could stand so in such a group talking easily to that tall man, his uncovered head bronze-yellow in the sunlight, his cool gray eyes pale in his brown face.

Not that any of those wild dreams born in that minute or two had been realized in the ensuing months. Probably those dreams had always been as wild as the ones reported by the first scout on Warlock. Shann grinned wryly now at the short period of childish hope and half-confidence that he could do big things. Only one Thorvald had ever noticed Shann's existence in the Survey camp, and that had been Garth.

Garth Thorvald, a far less impressive—one could say “smudged”—copy of his brother. Swaggering with an arrogance Ragnar never showed, Garth was a cadet on his first mission, intent upon making Shann realize the unbridgeable gulf between a labor hand and an officer-to-be. He had appeared to know right from their first meeting just how to make Shann's life a misery.

Now, in this slit of valley well away from the domes, Shann's fists balled. He pounded them against the earth in a way he had so often hoped to plant them on Garth's smoothly handsome face, his well-muscled body. One didn't survive the Dumps of Tyr without learning how to use fists, and boots, and a list of tricks they didn't teach in any academy. He had always been sure that he could take Garth if they mixed it up. But if he had loosed the tight rein he had kept on his temper and offered that challenge, he would have lost his chance with Survey. Garth had proved himself able to talk his way out of any scrape, even minor derelictions of duty, and he far out-ranked Shann. The laborer from Tyr had had to swallow all that the other could dish out and hope that on his next assignment he would not be a member of young Thorvald's team. Though, because of Garth Thorvald, Shann's toll of black record marks had mounted dangerously high and each day the chance for any more duty tours had grown dimmer.

Shann laughed, and the sound was ugly. That was one thing he didn't have to worry about any longer. There would be no other assignments for him, the Throgs had seen to that. And Garth ... well, there would never be a showdown between them now. He stood up. The Throg ship had disappeared; they could push on.

He found a break in the cliff wall which was climbable, and he coaxed the wolverines after him. When they stood on the heights from which the falls tumbled, Taggi and Togi rubbed against him, cried for his attention. They, too, appeared to need the reassurance they got from contact with him, for they were also fugitives on this alien world, the only representatives of their kind.

Since he did not have any definite goal in view, Shann continued to be guided by the stream, following its wanderings across a plateau. The sun was warm, so he carried his jacket slung across one shoulder. Taggi and Togi ranged ahead, twice catching skitterers, which they devoured voraciously. A shadow on a sun-baked rock sent the Terran skidding for cover until he saw that it was cast by one of the questing falcons from the upper peaks. But that shook his confidence, so he again sought cover, ashamed at his own carelessness.

In the late afternoon he reached the far end of the plateau, faced a climb to peaks which still bore cones of snow, now tinted a soft peach by the sun. Shann studied that possible path and distrusted his own powers to take it without proper equipment or supplies. He must turn either north or south, though he would then have to abandon a sure water supply in the stream. Tonight he would camp where he was. He had not realized how tired he was until he found a likely half-cave in the mountain wall and crawled in. There was too much danger in fire here; he would have to do without that first comfort of his kind.

Luckily, the wolverines squeezed in beside him to fill the hole. With their warm furred bodies sandwiching him, Shann dozed, awoke, and dozed again, listening to night sounds—the screams, cries, hunting calls, of the Warlock wilds. Now and again one of the wolverines whined and moved uneasily.

Fingers of sun picked at Shann through a shaft among the rocks, striking his eyes. He moved, blinked blearily awake, unable for the first few seconds to understand why the smooth plasta wall of his bunk had become rough red stone. Then he remembered. He was alone and he threw himself frantically out of the cave, afraid the wolverines had wandered off. Only both animals were busy clawing under a boulder with a steady persistence which argued there was a purpose behind that effort.

A sharp sting on the back of one hand made that purpose only too clear to Shann, and he retreated hurriedly from the vicinity of the excavation. They had found an earth-wasp's

burrow and were hunting grubs, naturally arousing the rightful inhabitants to bitter resentment.

Shann faced the problem of his own breakfast. He had had the immunity shots given to all members of the team, and he had eaten game brought in by exploring parties and labeled "safe." But how long he could keep to the varieties of native food he knew was uncertain. Sooner or later he must experiment for himself. Already he drank the stream water without the aid of purifiers, and so far there had been no ill results from that necessary recklessness. Now the stream suggested fish. But instead he chanced upon another water inhabitant which had crawled up on land for some obscure purpose of its own. It was a sluggish scaled thing, an easy victim to his club, with thin, weak legs it could project at will from a finned and armor-plated body.

Shann offered the head and guts to Togi, who had abandoned the wasp nest. She sniffed in careful investigation and then gulped. Shann built a small fire and seared the firm greenish flesh. The taste was flat, lacking salt, but the food eased his emptiness. Enheartened, he started south, hoping to find water sometime during the morning.

By noon he had his optimism justified with the discovery of a spring, and the wolverines had brought down a slender-legged animal whose coat was close in shade to the dusky purple of the vegetation. Smaller than a Terran deer, its head bore, not horns, but a ridge of stiffened hair rising in a point some twelve inches about the skull dome. Shann haggled off some ragged steaks while the wolverines feasted in earnest, carefully burying the head afterward.

It was when Shann knelt by the spring pool to wash that he caught the clamor of the clak-claks. He had seen or heard nothing of the flyers since he had left the lake valley. But from the noise now rising in an earsplitting volume, he thought there was a sizable colony near-by and that the inhabitants were thoroughly aroused.

He crept on his hands and knees to near-by brush cover, heading toward the source of that outburst. If the claks were announcing a Throg scouting party, he wanted to know it.

Lying flat, with branches forming a screen over him, the Terran gazed out on a stretch of grassland which sloped at a fairly steep angle to the south and which must lead to a portion of countryside well below the level he was now traversing.

The clak-claks were skimming back and forth, shrieking their staccato war cries. Following the erratic dashes of their flight formation, Shann decided that whatever they railed against was on the lower level, out of his sight from that point. Should he simply withdraw, since the disturbance was not near him? Prudence dictated that; yet still he hesitated.

He had no desire to travel north, or to try and scale the mountains. No, south was his best path, and he should be very sure that route was closed before he retreated.

Since any additional fuss the clak-claks might make on sighting him would be undistinguished in their now general clamor, the Terran crawled on to where tall grass provided a screen at the top of the slope. There he stopped short, his hands digging into the earth in sudden braking action.

Below, the ground steamed from a rocket flare-back, grasses burned away from the fins of a small scoutship. But even as Shann rose to one knee, his shout of welcome choked in his throat. One of those fins sank, canting the ship crookedly, preventing any new take-off. And over the crown of a low hill to the west swung the ominous black plate of a Throg flyer.

The Throg ship came up in a burst of speed, and Shann waited tensely for some countermove from the scout. Those small speedy Terran ships were prudently provided with weapons

triply deadly in proportion to their size. He was sure that the Terran ship could hold its own against the Throg, even eliminate the enemy. But there was no fire from the slanting pencil of the scout. The Throg circled warily, obviously expecting a trap. Twice it darted back in the direction from which it had come. As it returned from its second retreat, another of its kind showed, a black coin dot against the amber of the sky.

Shann felt sick inside. Now the Terran scout had lost any advantage and perhaps all hope. The Throgs could box the other in, cut the downed ship to pieces with their energy beams. He wanted to crawl away and not witness this last disaster for his kind. But some stubborn core of will kept him where he was.

The Throgs began to circle while beneath them the flock of clak-claks screamed and dived at the slanting nose of the Terran ship. Then that same slashing energy he had watched quarter the camp snapped from the far plate across the stricken scout. The man who had piloted her, if not dead already (which might account for the lack of defense), must have fallen victim to that. But the Throg was going to make very sure. The second flyer halted, remaining poised long enough to unleash a second bolt—dazzling any watching eyes and broadcasting a vibration to make Shann's skin crawl when the last faint ripple reached his lookout post.

What happened then the overconfident Throg was not prepared to take. Shann cried out, burying his face on his arm, as pinwheels of scarlet light blotted out normal sight. There was an explosion, a deafening blast. He cowered, blind, unable to hear. Then, rubbing at his eyes, he tried to see what had happened.

Through watery blurs he made out the Throg ship, not swinging now in serene indifference to Warlock's gravity, but whirling end over end across the sky as might a leaf tossed in a gust of wind. Its rim caught against a rust-red cliff, it rebounded and crumpled. Then it came down, smashing perhaps half a mile away from the smoking crater in which lay the mangled wreckage of the Terran ship. The disabled scout pilot must have played a last desperate game, making of his ship bait for a trap.

The Terran had taken one Throg with him. Shann rubbed again at his eyes, just barely able to catch a glimpse of the second ship flashing away westward. Perhaps it was only his impaired sight, but it appeared to him that the Throg followed an erratic path, either as if the pilot feared to be caught by a second shot, or because that ship had also suffered some injury.

Acid smoke wreathed up from the valley making Shann retch and cough. There could be no survivor from the Terran scout, and he did not believe that any Throg had lived to crawl free of the crumpled plate. But there would be other beetles swarming here soon. They would not dare to leave the scene unsearched. He wondered about that scout. Had the pilot been aiming for the Survey camp, the absence of any rider beam from there warning him off so that he made the detour which brought him here? Or had the Throgs tried to blast the Terran ship in the upper atmosphere, crippling it, making this a forced landing? But at least this battle had cost the Throgs, settling a small portion of the Terran debt for the lost camp.

The length of time between Shann's sighting of the grounded ship and the attack by the Throgs had been so short that he had not really developed any strong hope of rescue to be destroyed by the end of the crippled ship. On the other hand, seeing the Throgs take a beating had exploded his subconscious acceptance of their superiority. He might not have even the resources of a damaged scout at his command. But he did have Taggi, Togi, and his own brain. Since he was fated to permanent exile on Warlock, there might just be some way to make the beetles pay for that.

He licked his lips. Real action against the aliens would take a lot of planning. Shann would have to know more about what made a Throg a Throg, more than all the wild stories he had

heard over the years. There *had* to be some way a Terran could move effectively against a beetle-head. And he had a lot of time, maybe the rest of his life to work out a few answers. That Throg ship lying wrecked at the foot of the cliff ... perhaps he could do a little investigating before any rescue squad arrived. Shann decided such a move was worth the try and whistled to the wolverines.

### 3. To Close Ranks

Shann made his way at an angle to avoid the smoking pit cradling the wreckage of the Terran ship. There were no signs of life about the Throg plate as he approached. A quarter of its bulk was telescoped back into the rest, and surely none of the aliens could have survived such a smash, tough as they were reputed to be with those horny carapaces serving them in place of more vulnerable human skin.

He sniffed. There was a nauseous odor heavy on the morning air, one which would make a lasting impression on any human nose. The port door in the black ship stood open, perhaps having burst in the impact against the cliff. Shann had almost reached it when a crackle of chain lightning beat across the ground before him, turning the edge of the buckled entrance panel red.

Shann dropped to the ground, drawing his stunner, knowing at the same moment that such a weapon was about as much use in meeting a blaster as a straw wand would be to ward off a blazing coal. A chill numbness held him as he waited for a second blast to charr the flesh between his shoulders. So there had been a Throg survivor, after all.

But as moments passed and the Throg did not move in to make an easy kill, Shann collected his wits. Only one shot! Was the beetle injured, unable to make sure of even an almost defenseless prey? The Throgs seldom took prisoners. When they did....

The Terran's lips tightened. He worked his hand under his prone body, feeling for the hilt of his knife. With that he could speedily remove himself from the status of Throg prisoner, and he would do it gladly if there was no hope of escape. Had there been only one charge left in that blaster? Shann could make half a dozen guesses as to why the other had made no move, but that shot had come from behind him, and he dared not turn his head or otherwise make an effort to see what the other might be doing.

Was it only his imagination, or had that stench grown stronger during the last few seconds? Could the Throg be creeping up on him? Shann strained his ears, trying to catch some sound he could interpret. The few clak-claks that had survived the blast about the ship were shrieking overhead, and Shann made one attempt at counterattack.

He whistled the wolverines' call. The pair had not been too willing to follow him down into this valley, and they had avoided the crater at a very wide circle. But if they would obey him now, he just might have a chance.

There! That *had* been a sound, and the smell *was* stronger. The Throg must be coming to him. Again Shann whistled, holding in his mind his hatred for the beetle-head, the need for finishing off that alien. If the animals could pick either thoughts or emotions out of their human companion, this was the time for him to get those unspoken half-orders across.

Shann slammed his hand hard against the ground, sent his body rolling, his stunner up and ready.

And now he could see that grotesque thing, swaying weakly back and forth on its thin legs, yet holding a blaster, bringing that weapon up to center it on him. The Throg was hunched over and perhaps to Taggi presented the outline of some four-footed creature to be hunted. For the wolverine male sprang for the horn-shelled shoulders.

Under that impact that Throg sagged forward. But Taggi, outraged at the nature of creature he had attacked, squalled and retreated. Shann had had his precious seconds of distraction. He fired, the core of the stun beam striking full into the flat dish of the alien's "face."

That bolt, which would have shocked a mammal into insensibility, only slowed the Throg. Shann rolled again, gaining a temporary cover behind the wrecked ship. He squirmed under metal hot enough to scorch his jacket and saw the reflection of a second blaster shot which had been fired seconds late.

Now the Throg had him tied down. But to get at the Terran the alien would have to show himself, and Shann had one chance in fifty, which was better than that of three minutes ago—when the odds had been set at one in a hundred. He knew that he could not press the wolverines in again. Taggi's distaste was too manifest; Shann had been lucky that the animal had made one abortive attack.

Perhaps the Terran's escape and Taggi's action had made the alien reckless. Shann had no clue to the thinking processes of the non-human, but now the Throg staggered around the end of the plate, his digits, which were closer to claws than fingers, fumbling with his weapon. The Terran snapped another shot from his stunner, hoping to slow the enemy down. But he was trapped. If he turned to climb the cliff at his back, the beetle-head could easily pick him off.

A rock hurtled from the heights above, striking with deadly accuracy on the domed, hairless head of the Throg. His armored body crashed forward, struck against the ship, and rebounded to the ground. Shann darted forward to seize the blaster, kicking loose the claws which still grasped it, before he flattened back to the cliff, the strange weapon over his arm, his heart beating wildly.

That rock had not bounded down the mountainside by chance; it had been hurled with intent and aimed carefully at its target. And no Throg would kill one of his fellows. Or would he? Suppose orders had been issued to take a Terran prisoner and the Throg by the ship had disobeyed? Then, why a rock and not a blaster bolt?

Shann edged along until the upslanted, broken side of the Throg flyer provided him with protection from any overhead attack. Under that shelter he waited for the next move from his unknown rescuer.

The clak-claks wheeled closer to earth. One lit boldly on the carapace of the inert Throg, shuffling ungainly along that horny ridge. Cradling the blaster, the Terran continued to wait. His patience was rewarded when that investigating clak-clak took off uttering an enraged snap or two. He heard what might be the scrape of boots across rock, but that might also have come from horny skin meeting stone.

Then the other must have lost his footing not too far above. Accompanied by a miniature landslide of stones and earth, a figure slid down several yards away. Shann waited in a half-crouch, his looted blaster covering the man now getting to his feet. There was no mistaking the familiar uniform, or even the man. How Ragnar Thorvald had reached that particular spot on Warlock or why, Shann could not know. But that he was there, there was no denying.

Shann hurried forward. It had been when he caught his first sight of Thorvald that he realized just how deep his unacknowledged loneliness had bit. There were two Terrans on Warlock now, and he did not need to know why. But Thorvald was staring back at him with the blankness of non-recognition.

"Who are you?" The demand held something close to suspicion.



That note in the other's voice wiped away a measure of Shann's confidence, threatened something which had flowered in him since he had struck into the wilderness on his own. Three words had reduced him again to Lantee, unskilled laborer.

"Lantee. I'm from the camp..."

Thorvald's eagerness was plain in his next question: "How many of you got away? Where are the rest?" He gazed past Shann up the plateau slope as if he expected to see the personnel of the camp sprout out of the cloak of grass along the verge.

"Just me and the wolverines," Shann answered in a colorless voice. He cradled the blaster on his hip, turned a little away from the officer.

"You ... and the wolverines?" Thorvald was plainly startled. "But ... where? How?"

"The Throgs hit very early yesterday morning. They caught the rest in camp. The wolverines had escaped from their cage, and I was out hunting them...." He told his story baldly.

"You're sure about the rest?" Thorvald had a thin steel of rage edging his voice. Almost, Shann thought, as if he could turn that blade of rage against one Shann Lantee for being yet alive when more important men had not survived.

"I saw the attack from an upper ridge," the younger man said, having been put on the defensive. Yet he had a right to be alive, hadn't he? Or did Thorvald believe that he should have gone running down to meet the beetle-heads with his useless stunner? "They used energy beams ... didn't land until it was all over."

"I knew there was something wrong when the camp didn't answer our enter-atmosphere signal," Thorvald said absently. "Then one of those platters jumped us on braking orbit, and my pilot was killed. When we set down on the automatics here I had just time to rig a surprise for any trackers before I took to the hills——"

"The blast got one of them," Shann pointed out.

"Yes, they'd nicked the booster rocket; she wouldn't climb again. But they'll be back here to pick over the remains."

Shann looked at the dead Throg. "Thanks for taking a hand." His tone was as chill as the other's this time. "I'm heading south...."

And, he added silently, I intend to keep on that way. The Throg attack had dissolved the pattern of the Survey team. He didn't owe Thorvald any allegiance. And he had been successfully on his own here since the camp had been overrun.

"South," Thorvald repeated. "Well, that's as good a direction as any right now."

But they were not united. Shann found the wolverines and patiently coaxed and wheedled them into coming with him over a circuitous route which kept them away from both ships. Thorvald went up the cliff, swung down again, a supply bag slung over one shoulder. He stood watching as Shann brought the animals in.

Then Thorvald's arm swept out, his fingers closing possessively about the barrel of the blaster. Shann's own hold on the weapon tightened, and the force of the other's pull dragged him partly around.

"Let's have that——"

"Why?" Shann supposed that because it had been the other's well-aimed rock which had put the Throg out of commission permanently, the officer was going to claim their only spoils of war as personal booty, and a hot resentment flowered in the younger man.

“We don’t take that away from here.” Thorvald made the weapon his with a quick twist.

To Shann’s utter astonishment, the Survey officer walked back to kneel beside the dead Throg. He worked the grip of the blaster under the alien’s lax claws and inspected the result with the care of one arranging a special and highly important display. Shann’s protest became vocal. “We’ll need that!”

“It’ll do us far more good right where it is....” Thorvald paused and then added, with impatience roughening his voice as if he disliked the need for making any explanations, “There is no reason for us to advertise our being alive. If the Throgs found a blaster missing, they’d start thinking and looking around. I want to have a breathing spell before I have to play quarry in one of their hunts.”

Put that way, his action did make sense. But Shann regretted the loss of an arm so superior to their own weapons. Now they could not loot the plateship either. In silence he turned and started to trudge southward, without waiting for Thorvald to catch up with him.

Once away from the blasted area, the wolverines ranged ahead at their clumsy gallop, which covered ground at a surprising rate of speed. Shann knew that their curiosity made them scouts surpassing any human and that the men who followed would have ample warning of any danger to come. Without reference to his silent trail companion, he sent the animals toward another strip of woodland which would give them cover against the coming of any Throg flyer.

As the hours advanced he began to cast about for a proper night camp. The woods ought to give them a usable site.

“This is a water wood,” Thorvald said, breaking the silence for the first time since they had left the wrecks.

Shann knew that the other had knowledge, not only of the general countryside, but of exploring techniques which he himself did not possess, but to be reminded of that fact was an irritant rather than a reassurance. Without answering, the younger man bored on to locate the water promised.

The wolverines found the small lake first and were splashing along its shore when the Terrans caught up. Thorvald went to work, but to Shann’s surprise he did not unstrap the force-blade ax at his belt. Bending over a sapling, he pounded away with a stone at the green wood a few inches above the root line until he was able to break through the slender trunk. Shann drew his own knife and bent to tackle another treelet when Thorvald stopped him with an order: “Use a stone on that, the way I did.”

Shann could see no reason for such a laborious process. If Thorvald did not want to use his ax, that was no reason that Shann could not put his heavy belt knife to work. He hesitated, ready to set the blade to the outer bark of the tree.

“Look—” again that impatient edge in the officer’s tone, the need for explanation seeming to come very hard to the other—“sooner or later the Throgs might just trace us here and find this camp. If so, they are *not* going to discover any traces to label us Terran——”

“But who else could we be?” protested Shann. “There is no native race on Warlock.”

Thorvald tossed his improvised stone ax from hand to hand.

“But do the Throgs know that?”

The implications, the possibilities, in that idea struck home to Shann. Now he began to understand what Thorvald might be planning.

“Now there is going to be a native race.” Shann made a statement instead of a question and saw that the other was watching him with a new intentness, as if he had at last been recognized as a person instead of rank and file and very low rank at that—Survey personnel.

“There is going to be a native race,” Thorvald affirmed.

Shann resheathed his knife and went to search the pond beach for a suitable stone to use in its place. Even so, he made harder work of the clumsy chopping than Thorvald had. He worried at one sapling after another until his hands were skinned and his breath came in painful gusts from under aching ribs. Thorvald had gone on to another task, ripping the end of a long tough vine from just under the powdery surface of the thick leaf masses fallen in other years.

With this the officer lashed together the tops of the poles, having planted their splintered butts in the ground, so that he achieved a crudely conical erection. Leafy branches were woven back and forth through this framework, with an entrance, through which one might crawl on hands and knees, left facing the lakeside. The shelter they completed was compact and efficient but totally unlike anything Shann had ever seen before, certainly far removed from the domes of the camp. He said so, nursing his raw hands.

“An old form,” Thorvald replied, “native to a primitive race on Terra. Certainly the beetle-heads haven’t come across its like before.”

“Are we going to stay here? Otherwise it is pretty heavy work for one night’s lodging.”

Thorvald tested the shelter with a sharp shake. The matted leaves whispered, but the framework held.

“Stage dressing. No, we won’t linger here. But it’s evidence to support our play. Even a Throg isn’t dense enough to believe that natives would make a cross-country trip without leaving evidence of their passing.”

Shann sat down with a sigh he made no effort to suppress. He had a vision of Thorvald traveling southward, methodically erecting these huts here and there to confound Throgs who might not ever chance upon them. But already the Survey officer was busy with a new problem.

“We need weapons——”

“We have our stunners, a force ax, and our knives,” Shann pointed out. He did not add, as he would have liked that they could have had a blaster.

“Native weapons,” Thorvald countered with his usual snap. He went back to the beach and crawled about there, choosing and rejecting stones picked out of the gravel.

Shann scooped out a small pit just before their hut and set about the making of a pocket-sized fire. He was hungry and looked longingly now and again to the supply bag Thorvald had brought with him. Dared he rummage in that for rations? Surely the other would be carrying concentrates.

“Who taught you how to make a fire that way?” Thorvald was back from the pond, a selection of round stones about the size of his fist resting between his chest and his forearm.

“It’s regulation, isn’t it?” Shann countered defensively.

“It’s regulation,” Thorvald agreed. He set down his stones in a row and then tossed the supply bag over to his companion. “Too late to hunt tonight. But well have to go easy on those rations until we can get more.”

“Where?” Did Thorvald know of some supply cache they could raid?

“From the Throgs,” the other answered matter of factly.

“But they don’t eat our kind of food....”

“All the more reason for them to leave the camp supplies untouched.”

“The camp?”

For the first time Thorvald’s lips curved in a shadow smile which was neither joyous nor warming. “A native raid on an invaders’ camp. What could be more natural? And we’d better make it soon.”

“But how can we?” To Shann what the other proposed was sheer madness.

“There was once an ancient service corps on Terra,” Thorvald answered, “which had a motto something like this: ‘The improbable we do at once; the impossible takes a little longer.’ What did you think we were going to do? Sulk around out here in the bush and let the Throgs claim Warlock for one of their pirate bases without opposition?”

Since that was the only future Shann had visualized, he was ready enough to admit the truth, only some shade of tone in the officer’s voice kept him from saying so aloud.

## 4. Sortie

Five days later they came up from the south so that this time Shann's view of the Terran camp was from a different angle. At first sight there had been little change in the general scene. He wondered if the aliens were using the Terran dome shelters themselves. Even in the twilight it was easy to pick out such landmarks as the com dome with the shaft of a broadcaster spearing from its top and the greater bulk of the supply warehouse.

"Two of their small flyers down on the landing field...." Thorvald materialized from the shadow, his voice a thread of whisper.

By Shann's side the wolverines were moving restlessly. Since Taggi's attack on the Throg neither beast would venture near any site where they could scent the aliens. This was the nearest point to which the men could urge either animal, which was a disappointment, for the wolverines would have been an excellent addition to the surprise sortie they planned for tonight, halving the danger for the men.

Shann ran his fingers across the coarse fur on the animals' shoulders, exerting a light pressure to signal them to wait. But he was not sure of their obedience. The foray was a crazy idea, and Shann wondered again why he had agreed to it. Yet he had gone along with Thorvald, even suggested a few modifications and additions of his own, such as the contents of the crude leaf sack now resting between his knees.

Thorvald flitted away, seeking his own post to the west. Shann was still waiting for the other's signal when there arose from the camp a sound to chill the flesh of any listener, a wail which could not have come from the throat of any normal living thing, intelligent being or animal. Ululating in ear-torturing intensity, the cry sank to a faint, ominous echo of itself, to waver up the scale again.

The wolverines went mad. Shann had witnessed their quick kills in the wilds, but this stark ferocity of spitting, howling rage was new. They answered that challenge from the camp, streaking out from under his hands. Yet both animals skidded to a stop before they passed the first dome and were lost in the gloom. A spark glowed for an instant to his right; Thorvald was ready to go, so Shann had no time to try and recall the animals.

He fumbled for those balls of soaked moss in his leaf bag. The chemical smell from them blotted out that alien mustiness which the wind brought from the campsite. Shann readied the first sopping mess in his sling, snapped his fire sparker at it, and had the ball awhirl for a toss almost in one continuous movement. The moss burst into fire as it curved out and fell.

To a witness it might have seemed that the missile materialized out of the air, the effect being better than Shann had hoped.

A second ball for the sling—spark ... out ... down. The first had smashed on the ground near the dome of the com station, the force of impact flattening it into a round splatter of now fiercely burning material. And his second, carefully aimed, lit two feet beyond.

Another wail tearing at the nerves. Shann made a third throw, a fourth. He had an audience now. In the light of those pools of fire the Throgs were scuttling back and forth, their hunched bodies casting weird shadows on the dome walls. They were making efforts to douse the fires, but Shann knew from careful experimentation that once ignited the stuff he had skimmed from the lip of one of the hot springs would go on burning as long as a fraction of its viscid substance remained unconsumed.

Now Thorvald had gone into action. A Throg suddenly halted, struggled frantically, and toppled over into the edge of a fire splotch, legs looped together by the coils of the curious weapon Thorvald had put together on their first night of partnership. Three round stones of comparable weight had each been fastened at the end of a vine cord, and those cords united at a center point. Thorvald had demonstrated the effectiveness of his creation by bringing down one of the small “deer” of the grasslands, an animal normally fleet enough to feel safe from both human and animal pursuit. And those weighted ropes now trapped the Throg with the same efficiency.

Having shot his last fireball, Shann ran swiftly to take up a new position, downgrade and to the east of the domes. Here he put into action another of the primitive weapons Thorvald had devised, a spear hurled with a throwing stick, giving it double range and twice as forceful penetration power. The spears themselves were hardly more than crudely shaped lengths of wood, their points charred in the fire. Perhaps these missiles could neither kill nor seriously wound. But more than one thudded home in a satisfactory fashion against the curving back carapace or the softer front parts of a Throg in a manner which certainly shook up and bruised the target. And one of Shann’s victims went to the ground, to lie kicking in a way which suggested he had been more than just bruised.

Fireballs, spears.... Thorvald had moved too. And now down into the somewhat frantic melee of the aroused camp fell a shower of slim weighted reeds, each provided with a clay-ball head. The majority of those balls broke on landing as the Terrans had intended. So, through the beetle smell of the aliens, spread the acrid, throat-parching fumes of the hot spring water. Whether those fumes had the same effect upon Throg breathing apparatus as they did upon Terran, the attackers could not tell, but they hoped such a bombardment would add to the general confusion.

Shann began to space the hurling of his crude spears with more care, trying to place them with all the precision of aim he could muster. There was a limit to their amount of varied ammunition, although they had dedicated every waking moment of the past few days to manufacture and testing. Luckily the enemy had had none of their energy beams at the domes. And so far they had made no move to lift their flyers for retaliation blasts.

But the Throgs were pulling themselves into order. Blaster fire cut the dusk. Most of the aliens were now flat on the ground, sending a creeping line of fire into the perimeter of the camp area. A dark form moved between Shann and the nearest patch of burning moss. The Terran raised a spear to the ready before he caught a whiff of the pungent scent emitted by a wolverine hot with battle rage. He whistled coaxingly. With the Throgs eager to blast any moving thing, the animals were in danger if they prowled about the scene.

That blunt head moved. Shann caught the glint of eyes in a furred mask; it was either Taggi or his mate. Then a puff of mixed Throng and chemical scent from the camp must have reached the wolverine. The animal coughed and fled westward, passing Shann.

Had Thorvald had time and opportunity to make his planned raid on the supply dome? Time during such an embroilment was hard to measure, and Shann could not be sure. He began to count aloud, slowly, as they had agreed. When he reached one hundred he would begin his retreat; on two hundred he was to run for it, his goal the river a half mile from the camp.

The stream would take the fugitives to the sea where fiords cut the coastline into a ragged fringe offering a wealth of hiding places. Throgs seldom explored any territory on foot. For them to venture into that maze would be putting themselves at the mercy of the Terrans they hunted. And their flyers could comb the air above such a rocky wilderness without result.

Shann reached the count of one hundred. Twice a blaster bolt singed ground within distance close enough to make him wince, but most of the fire carried well above his head. All of his spears were gone, save for one he had kept, hoping for a last good target. One of the Throgs who appeared to be directing the fire of the others was facing Shann's position. And on pure chance that he might knock out that leader, Shann chose him for his victim.

The Terran had no illusions concerning his own marksmanship. The most he could hope for, he thought, was to have the primitive weapon thud home painfully on the other's armored hide. Perhaps, if he were very lucky, he could knock the other from his clawed feet. But that chance which hovers over any battlefield turned in Shann's favor. At just the right moment the Throg stretched his head up from the usual hunched position where the carapace extended over his wide shoulders to protect one of the alien's few vulnerable spots, the soft underside of his throat. And the fire-sharpened point of the spear went deep.

Throgs were mute, or at least none of them had ever uttered a vocal sound to be reported by Terrans. This one did not cry out. But he staggered forward, forelimbs up, clawed digits pulling at the wooden pin transfixing his throat just under the mandible-equipped jaw, holding his head at an unnatural angle. Without seeming to notice the others of his kind, the Throg came on at a shambling run, straight at Shann as if he could actually see through the dark and had marked down the Terran for personal vengeance. There was something so uncanny about that forward dash that Shann retreated. As his hand groped for the knife at his belt his boot heel caught in a tangle of weed and he struggled for balance. The wounded Throg, still pulling at the spear shaft protruding above the swelling barrel of his chest, pounded on.

Shann sprawled backward and was caught in the elastic embrace of a bush, so he did not strike the ground. He fought the grip of prickly branches and kicked to gain solid earth under his feet. Then again he heard that piercing wail from the camp, as chilling as it had been the first time. Spurred by that, he won free. But he could not turn his back on the wounded Throg, keeping rather a sidewise retreat.

Already the alien had reached the dark beyond the rim of the camp. His progress now was marked by the crashing through low brush. Two of the Throgs back on the firing line started up after their leader. Shann caught a whiff of their odor as the wounded alien advanced with the single-mindedness of a robot.

It would be best to head for the river. Tall grass twisted about the Terran's legs as he began to run. In spite of the gloom, he hesitated to cross that open space. At night Warlock's peculiar vegetation displayed a very alien attribute—ten ... twenty varieties of grass, plant, and tree emitted a wan phosphorescence, varying in degree, but affording each an aura of light. And the path before Shann now was dotted by splotches of that radiance, not as brilliant as the chemical-born flames the attackers had kindled in the camp, but as quick to betray the unwary who passed within their dim circles. And there had never been any reason to believe that Throg powers of sight were less than human; there was perhaps some evidence to the contrary. Shann crouched, charting the clumps ahead for a zigzag course which would take him to at least momentary safety in the river bed.

Perhaps a mile downstream was the transport the Terrans had cobbled together no earlier than this afternoon, a raft Thorvald had professed to believe would support them to the sea which lay some fifty Terran miles to the west. But now he had to cover that mile.

The wolverines? Thorvald? There was one lure which might draw the animals on to the rendezvous. Taggi had brought down a "deer" just before they had left the raft. And instead

of allowing both beasts to feast at leisure, Shann had lashed the carcass to the shaky platform of wood and brush, putting it out to swing in the current, though still moored to the bank.

Wolverines always cached that part of the kill which they did not consume at the first eating, usually burying it. He had hoped that to leave the carcass in such a way would draw both animals back to the raft when they were hungry. And they had not fed particularly well that day.

Thorvald? Well, the Survey officer had made it very plain during the past five days of what Shann had come to look upon as an uneasy partnership that he considered himself far abler to manage in the field, while he had grave doubts of Shann's efficiency in the direction of survival potential.

The Terran started along the pattern of retreat he had laid out to the river bed. His heart pounded as he ran, not because of the physical effort he was expending, but because again from the camp had come that blood-freezing howl. A lighter line marked the lip of the cut in which the stream was set, something he had not foreseen. He threw himself down to crawl the last few feet, hugging the earth.

That very pale luminescence was easily accounted for by what lay below. Shann licked his lips and tasted the sting of sap smeared on his face during his struggle with the bushes. While the strip of meadow behind him now had been spotted with light plants, the cut below showed an almost solid line of them stringing willow-wise along the water's edge. To go down at this point was simply to spotlight his presence for any Throg on his trail. He could only continue along the upper bank, hoping to finally find an end to the growth of luminescent vegetation below.

Shann was perhaps five yards from the point where he had come to the river, when a commotion behind made him freeze and turn his head cautiously. The camp was half hidden, and the fires there must be dying. But a twisting, struggling mass was rolling across the meadow in his general direction.

Thorvald fighting off an attack? The wolverines? Shann drew his legs under him, ready to erupt into a counter-offensive. He hesitated between drawing stunner or knife. In his brush with the injured Throg at the wreck the stunner had had little impression on the enemy. And now he wondered if his blade, though it was super-steel at its toughest, could pierce any joint in the armored bodies of the aliens.

There was surely a fight in progress. The whole crazily weaving blot collapsed and rolled down upon three bright light plants. Dull sheen of Throg casing was revealed ... no sign of fur, or flesh, or clothing. Two of the aliens battling? But why?

One of those figures got up stiffly, bent over the huddle still on the ground, and pulled at something. The wooden shaft of Shann's spear was wanly visible. And the form on the ground did not stir as that was jerked loose. The Throg leader dead? Shann hoped so. He slid his knife back into the sheath, tapped the hilt to make sure it was firmly in place, and crawled on. The river, twisting here and there, was a promising pool of dusky shadow ahead. The bank of willow-things was coming to an end, and none too soon. For when he glanced back again he saw another Throg run across the meadow, and he watched them lift their fellow, carrying him back to camp.

The Throgs might seem indestructible, but he had put an end to one, aided by luck and a very rough weapon. With that to bolster his self-confidence to a higher notch, Shann dropped by cautious degrees over the bank and down to the water's edge. When his boots splashed into the oily flood he began to tramp downstream, feeling the pull of the water, first ankle high



and then about his calves. This early in the season they did not have to fear floods, and hereabouts the stream was wide and shallow, save in mid-current at the center point.

Twice more he had to skirt patches of light plants, and once a young tree stood bathed in radiance with a pinkish tinge instead of the usual ghostly gray. Within the haze which tented the drooping branches, flitted small glittering, flying things; and the scent of its half-open buds was heavy on the air, neither pleasant nor unpleasant in Shann's nostrils, merely different.

He dared to whistle, a soft call he hoped would carry along the cut between the high banks. But, though he paused and listened until it seemed that every cell in his thin body was occupied in that act, he heard no answering call from the wolverines, nor any suggestion that either the animals or Thorvald were headed in the direction of the raft.

What was he going to do if none of the others joined him downstream? Thorvald had said not to linger there past daylight. Yet Shann knew that unless he actually sighted a Throg patrol splashing after him he would wait until he made sure of the others' fate. Both Taggi and Togi were as important to him as the Survey officer. Perhaps more so, he told himself now, because he understood them to a certain degree and found companionship in their undemanding company which he could not claim from the man.

Why *did* Thorvald insist upon their going on to the seashore? To Shann's mind his own first plan of holing up back in the eastern mountains was better. Those heights had as many hiding places as the fiord country. But Thorvald had suddenly become so set on this westward trek that he had given in. As much as he inwardly rebelled when he took them, he found himself obeying the older man's orders. It was only when he was alone, as now, that he began to question both Thorvald's motives and his authority.

Three sprigs of a light bush set in a triangle. Shann paused and then climbed out on the bank, shaking the water from his boots as Taggi might shake such drops from a furred limb. This was the sign they had set to mark their rendezvous point, but....

Shann whirled, drawing his stunner. The raft was a dark blob on the surface of the water some feet farther on. And now it was bobbing up and down violently. That was not the result of any normal tug of current. He heard an indignant squeal and relaxed with a little laugh. He need not have worried about the wolverines; that bait had drawn them all right. Both of them were now engaged in eating, though they had to conduct their feast on the rather shaky foundation of the makeshift transport.

They paid no attention as he waded out, pulling at the anchor cord as he went. The wind must have carried his familiar scent to them. As the water climbed to his shoulders Shann put one hand on the outmost log of the raft. One of the animals snarled a warning at being disturbed. Or had that been at him?

Shann stood where he was, listening intently. Yes, there was a splashing sound from upstream. Whoever followed his own recent trail was taking no care to keep that pursuit a secret, and the pace of the newcomer was fast enough to spell trouble.

Throgs? Tensely the Terran waited for some reaction from the wolverines. He was sure that if the aliens had followed him, both animals would give warning. Save when they had gone wild upon hearing that strange wail from the camp, they avoided meeting the enemy.

But from all sounds the animals had not stopped feeding. So the other was no beetle-head. On the other hand, why would Thorvald so advertise his coming, unless the need for speed was greater than caution? Shann drew taut the mooring cord, bringing out his knife to saw through that tough length. A figure passed the three-sprig signal, ran onto the raft.

“Lantee?” The call came in a hoarse, demanding whisper.

“Here.”

“Cut loose. We have to get out of here!”

Thorvald flung himself forward, and together the men scrambled up on the raft. The mangled carcass plunged into the water, dislodged by their efforts. But before the wolverines could follow it, the mooring vine snapped, and the river current took them. Feeling the raft sway and begin to spin, the wolverines whined, crouched in the middle of what now seemed a very frail craft.

Behind them, far away but too clear, sounded that eerie howling, topping the sigh of the night wind.

“I saw——” Thorvald gasped, pausing as if to catch full lungfuls of air to back his words, “they have a ‘hound!’ That’s what you hear.”

## 5. Pursuit

As the raft revolved slowly it also slipped downstream at a steadily increasing pace, for the current had them in hold. The wolverines pressed close to Shann until the musky scent of their fur, their animal warmth, enveloped him. One growled deep in its throat, perhaps in answer to that wind-borne wail.

“Hound?” Shann asked.

Beside him in the dark Thorvald was working loose one of the poles they had readied to help control the raft’s voyaging. The current carried them along, but there was a need for those lengths of sapling to fend them free from rocks and water-buried snags.

“What hound?” the younger man demanded more sharply when there came no immediate answer.

“The Throgs’ tracker. But why did they import one?” Thorvald’s puzzlement was plain in his tone. He added a moment later, with some of his usual firmness, “We may be in for bad trouble now. Use of a hound means an attempt to take prisoners——”

“Then they do not know that we are here, as Terrans, I mean?”

Thorvald seemed to be sorting out his thoughts when he replied to that. “They could have brought a hound here just on chance that they might miss one of us in the initial mop-up. Or, if they believe we are natives, they could want a specimen for study.”

“Wouldn’t they just blast down Terrans on sight?”

Shann saw the dark blot which was Thorvald’s head shake in negation.

“They might need a live Terran—badly and soon.”

“Why?”

“To operate the camp call beam.”

Shann’s momentary bewilderment vanished. He knew enough of Survey procedure to guess the reason for such a move on the part of the aliens.

“The settler transport?”

“Yes, the ship. She won’t planet here without the proper signal. And the Throgs can’t give that. If they don’t take her, their time’s run out before they have even made a start here.”

“But how could they know that the transport is nearly due? When we intercept their calls they’re pure gibberish to us. Can they read our codes?”

“The supposition is that they can’t. Only, concerning Throgs, all we know is supposition. Anyway, they do know the routine for establishing a Terran colony, and we can’t alter that procedure except in small nonessentials,” Thorvald said grimly. “If that transport doesn’t pick up the proper signal to set down here on schedule, her captain will call in the patrol escort ... then exit one Throg base. But if the beetle-heads can trick the ship in and take her, then they’ll have a clear five or six more months here to consolidate their own position. After that it would take more than just one patrol cruiser to clear Warlock; it will require a fleet. So the Throgs will have another world to play with, and an important one. This lies on a direct line between the Odin and Kulkulkan systems. A Throg base on such a trade route could eventually cut us right out of this quarter of the galaxy.”

“So you think they want to capture us in order to bring the transport in?”

“By our type of reasoning, that would be a logical move—if they know we are here. They haven’t too many of those hounds, and they don’t risk them on petty jobs. I’d hoped we’d covered our trail well. But we had to risk that attack on the camp.... I needed the map case!” Again Thorvald might have been talking to himself. “Time ... and the right maps—” he brought his fist down on the raft, making the platform tremble—“that’s what I have to have now.”

Another patch of light-willows stretched along the river-banks, and as they sailed through that ribbon of ghostly radiance they could see each other’s faces. Thorvald’s was bleak, hard, his eyes on the stream behind them as if he expected at any moment to see a Throg emerge from the surface of the water.

“Suppose that thing—” Shann pointed upstream with his chin—“follows us? What is it anyway?” Hound suggested Terran dog, but he couldn’t stretch his imagination to believe in a working co-operation between Throg and any mammal.

“A rather spectacular combination of toad and lizard, with a few other grisly touches, is about as close as you can get to a general description. And that won’t be too accurate, because like the Throgs its remote ancestors must have been of the insect family. If the thing follows us, and I think we can be sure that it will, we’ll have to take steps. There is always this advantage—those hounds cannot be controlled from a flyer, and the beetle-heads never take kindly to foot slogging. So we won’t have to expect any speedy chase. If it slips its masters in rough country, we can try to ambush it.” In the dim light Thorvald was frowning. “I flew over the territory ahead on two sweeps, and it is a queer mixture. If we can reach the rough country bordering the sea, we’ll have won the first round. I don’t believe that the Throgs will be in a hurry to track us in there. They’ll try two alternatives to chasing us on foot. One, use their energy beams to rake any suspect valley, and since there are hundreds of valleys all pretty much alike, that will take some time. Or they can attempt to shake us out with a dumdum should they have one here, which I doubt.”

Shann tensed. The stories of the effects of the Throg’s dumdum weapon were anything but pretty.

“And to get a dumdum,” Thorvald continued as if he were discussing a purely theoretical matter and not a threat of something worse than death, “They’ll have to bring in one of their major ships. Which they will hesitate to do with a cruiser near at hand. Our own danger spot now is the section we should strike soon after dawn tomorrow if the rate of this current is what I have timed it. There is a band of desert on this side of the mountains. The river gorge deepens there and the land is bare. Let them send a ship over and we could be as visible as if we were sending up flares——”

“How about taking cover now and going on only at night?” suggested Shann.

“Ordinarily, I’d say yes. But with time pressing us now, no. If we keep straight on, we could reach the foothills in about forty hours, maybe less. And we have to stay with the river. To strike across country there without good supplies and on foot is sheer folly.”

Two days. With perhaps the Throgs unleashing their hound on land, combing from their flyers. With a desert.... Shann put out his hands to the wolverines. The prospect certainly didn’t seem anywhere near as simple as it had the night before when Thorvald had planned this escape. But then the Survey officer had left out quite a few points which were not pertinent. Was he also leaving out other essentials? Shann wanted to ask, but somehow he could not.

After a while he dozed, his head resting on his knees. He awoke, roused out of a vivid dream, a dream so detailed and so deeply impressed in a picture on his mind that he was confused when he blinked at the riverbank visible in the half-light of early dawn.

Instead of that stretch of earth and ragged vegetation now gliding past him as the raft angled along, he should have been fronting a vast skull stark against the sky—a skull whose outlines were oddly inhuman, from whose eyeholes issued and returned flying things while its sharply protruding lower jaw was lapped by water. In color that skull had been a violent clash of blood-red and purple. Shann blinked again at the riverbank, seeing transposed on it still that ghostly haze of bone-bare dome, cavernous eyeholes and nose slit, fanged jaws. That skull was a mountain, or a mountain was a skull—and it was important to him; he must locate it!

He moved stiffly, his legs and arms cramped but not cold. The wolverines stirred on either side of him. Thorvald continued to sleep, curled up beyond, the pole still clasped in his hands. A flat map case was slung by a strap about his neck, its thin envelope between his arm and his body as if for safekeeping. On the smooth flap was the Survey seal, and it was fastened with a finger lock.

Thorvald had lost some of the bright hard surface he had shown at the spaceport where Shann had first sighted him. There were hollows in his cheeks, sending into high relief those bone ridges beneath his eye sockets, giving him a faint resemblance to the skull of Shann's dream. His face was grimed, his field uniform stained and torn. Only his hair was as bright as ever.

Shann smeared the back of his hand across his own face, not doubting that he must present an even more disreputable appearance. He leaned forward cautiously to look into the water, but that surface was not quiet enough to act as a mirror.

Getting to his feet as the raft bobbed under his shift of weight, Shann studied the territory now about them. He could not match Thorvald's inches, just as he must have a third less bulk than the officer, but standing, he could sight something of what now lay beyond the rising banks of the cut. That grass which had been so thick in the meadowlands around the camp had thinned into separate clumps, pale lavender in color. And the scrawniness of stem and blade suggested dehydration and poor soil. The earth showing between those clumps was not of the usual blue, but pallid, too, bleached to gray, while the bushes along the stream's edge were few and smaller. They must have crossed the line into the desert Thorvald had promised.

Shann edged around to face west. There was light enough in the sky to sight tall black pyramids waiting. They had to reach those distant mountains, mountains whose feet on the other side were resting in sea water. He studied them carefully, surveying each peak he could separate from its fellows.

Did the skull lie among them? The conviction that the place he had seen in his dream was real, that it was to be found on Warlock, persisted. Not only was it a definite feature of the landscape somewhere in the wild places of this world, but it was also necessary for him to locate it. Why? Shann puzzled over that, with a growing uneasiness which was not quite fear, not yet, anyway.

Thorvald moved. The raft tilted and the wolverines became growly. Shann sat down, one hand out to the officer's shoulder in warning. Feeling that touch Thorvald shifted, one hand striking out blindly in a blow which Shann was just able to avoid while with the other he pinned the map case yet tighter to him.

"Take it easy!" Shann urged.

The other's eyelids flicked. He looked up, but not as if he saw Shann at all.

“The Cavern of the Veil——” he muttered. “Utgard....” Then his eyes did focus and he sat up, gazing around him with a frown.

“We’re in the desert,” Shann announced.

Thorvald got up, balancing on feet planted a little apart, looking to the faded expanse of the waste spreading from the river cut. He stared at the mountains before he squatted down to fumble with the lock of the map case.

The wolverines were growing restless, though they still did not try to move about too freely on the raft, greeting Shann with vocal complaint. He and Thorvald could satisfy their hunger with a handful of concentrates from the survival kit. But those dry tablets could not serve the animals. Shann studied the terrain with more knowledge than he had possessed a week earlier. This was not hunting land, but there remained the bounty of the river.

“We’ll have to feed Taggi and Togi,” he broke the silence abruptly. “If we don’t, they’ll be into the river and off on their own.”

Thorvald glanced up from one of the tough, thin sheets of map skin, again as if he had been drawn back from some distance. His eyes moved from Shann to the unpromising shore.

“How? With what?” he wanted to know. Then the real urgency of the situation must have penetrated his mental isolation. “You have an idea——?”

“There’s those fish we found them eating back by the mountain stream,” Shann said, recalling an incident of a few days earlier. “Rocks here, too, like those the fish were hiding under. Maybe we can locate some of them here.”

He knew that Thorvald would be reluctant to work the raft in shore, to spare time for such hunting. But there would be no arguing with hungry wolverines, and he did not propose to lose the animals for the officer’s whim.

However, Thorvald did not protest. They poled the raft out of the main pull of the current, sending it in toward the southern shore in the lee of a clump of light-willows. Shann scrambled ashore, the wolverines after him, sniffing along at his heels while he overturned likely looking rocks to unroof some odd underwater dwellings. The fish with the rudimentary legs were present and not agile enough even in their native element to avoid well-clawed paws which scooped them neatly out of the river shallows. There was also a sleek furred creature with a broad flat head and paddle-equipped forepaws, rather like a miniature seal, which Taggi appropriated before Shann had a chance to examine it closely. In fact, the wolverines wrought havoc along a half-mile section of bank before the Terran could coax them back to the raft.

As they hunted, Shann got a better idea of the land about the river. It was sere, the vegetation dwindling except for some rough spikes of things pushing through the parched ground like flayed fingers, their puffed redness in contrast to the usual amethystine coloring of Warlock’s growing things. Under the climbing sun that whole stretch of country was revealed in a stark bareness which at first repelled, and then began to interest him.

He discovered Thorvald standing on the upper bluff, looking out toward the waiting mountains. The officer turned as Shann urged the wolverines to the raft, and when he jumped down the drop to join them, Shann saw he carried a map strip unrolled in his hand.

“The situation is not as good as we hoped,” he told the younger man. “Well have to leave the river to cross the heights.”

“Why?”

“There’re rapids—bending in a falls.” The officer squatted down, spreading out the strip and making stabs at it with a nervous finger tip. “Here we have to leave. This is all rough ground. But lying to the south there’s a gap which may be a pass. This was made from an aerial survey.”

Shann knew enough to realize to what extent such a guide could go wrong. Main features of the landscape would be clear enough from aloft, but there might be unsurmountable difficulties at ground level which were not distinguishable from the air. Yet Thorvald had planned this journey as if he had already explored their escape route and that it was as open and easy as a stroll down Tyr’s main transport way. Why was it so necessary that they try to reach the sea? However, since he had no objection to voice except a dislike for indefinite information, Shann did not question the other’s calm assumption of command, not yet, anyway.

As they embarked and worked back into the current, Shann studied his companion. Thorvald had freely listed the difficulties lying before them. Yet he did not seem in the least worried about their being able to win through to the sea—or if he was, his outer shell of unconcern remained uncracked. Before their first day together had ended, the younger Terran had learned that to Thorvald he was only another tool, to be used by the Survey officer in some project which the other believed of primary importance. And his resentment of the valuation was under control so far. He valued Thorvald’s knowledge, but the other’s attitude chilled and rebuffed his need for something more than a half partnership of work.

Why had Thorvald come back to Warlock in the first place? And why had it been necessary for him to risk his life—perhaps more than his life if their theory was correct concerning the Throgs’ wish to capture a Terran—to get that set of maps from the plundered camp? When he had first talked of that raid, his promised loot had been supplies to fill their daily needs; there had been no mention of maps. By all signs Thorvald was engaged on some mission. And what would happen if he, Shann, suddenly stopped being the other’s obedient underling and demanded a few explanations here and now?

Only Shann knew enough about men to also know that he would not get any information out of Thorvald that the latter was not ready to give, and that such a showdown, coming prematurely, would only end in his own discomfiture. He smiled wryly now, remembering his emotions when he had first seen Ragnar Thorvald months ago. As if the officer ever considered the likes, dislikes—or dreams—of one Shann Lantee. No, reality and dreams seldom approached each other. Dreams....

“On any of those shoreline maps,” he asked suddenly, “do they have marked a mountain shaped like a skull?”

Thorvald thrust with his pole. “Skull?” he repeated, a little absently, as he so often did in answer to Shann’s questions unless they dealt with some currently important matter.

“A queer sort of skull,” Shann said. Just as vividly as when he had first awakened, he could picture that skull mountain with the flying things about its eye sockets. And that, too, was odd; dream impressions usually faded with the passing of waking hours. “It has a protruding lower jaw and the waves wash that ... red-and-purple rock——”

“What?”

He had Thorvald’s complete attention now.

“Where did you hear about it?” That demand followed quickly.

“I didn’t hear about it. I dreamed of it last night. I stood there right in front of it. There were birds—or things flying like birds—going in and out of the eyeholes——”

“What else?” Thorvald leaned across his pole, his eyes alive, avid, as if he would pull the reply he wanted out of Shann by force.

“That was all I remember—the skull mountain.” He did not add his other impression, that he was meant to find that skull, that he *must* find it.

“Nothing...” Thorvald paused, and then spoke slowly, with a visible reluctance. “Nothing else? No cavern with a green veil—a wide green veil—strung across it?”

Shann shook his head. “Just the skull mountain.”

Thorvald looked as if he didn’t quite believe that, but Shann’s expression must have been convincing, for he laughed shortly.

“Well, there goes one nice neat theory up in smoke!” he commented. “No, your skull doesn’t appear on any of our maps, and so probably my cavern does not exist either. They may both be smoke screens——”

“What——?” But Shann never finished that query.

A wind was rising in the desert to blow across the slit which held the river, carrying with it a fine shifting of sand which coasted down into the water as a gray haze, coating men, animals, and raft, and sighing as snow sighs when it falls.

Only that did not drown out another cry, a thin cry, diluted by the miles of land stretching behind them, but yet carrying that long ululating howl they had heard in the Throg camp. Thorvald grinned mirthlessly.

“The hound’s on trail.”

He bent to the pole, using it to aid the pace of the current. Shann, chilled in spite of the sun’s heat, followed his example, wondering if time had ceased to fight on their side.



## 6. The Hound

The sun was a harsh ball of heat baking the ground and then, in some odd manner, drawing back that same fieriness. In the coolness of the eastern mountains Shann would not have believed that Warlock could hold such heat. The men discarded their jackets early as they swung to dip the poles. But they dared not strip off the rest of their clothing lest their skin burn. And again gusts of wind now drove sand over the edge of the cut to blanket the water.

Shann wiped his eyes, pausing in his eternal push-push, to look at the rocks which they were passing in threatening proximity. For the slash which held the river had narrowed. And the rock of its walls was naked of earth, save for sheltered pockets holding the drift of sand dust, while boulders of all sizes cut into the path of the flowing water.

He had not been mistaken; they were going faster, faster even than their efforts with the poles would account for. With the narrowing of the bed of the stream, the current was taking on a new swiftness. Shann said as much and Thorvald nodded.

“We’re approaching the first of the rapids.”

“Where we get off and walk around,” Shann croaked wearily. The dust gritted between his teeth, irritated his eyes. “Do we stay beside the river?”

“As long as we can,” Thorvald replied somberly. “We have no way of transporting water.”

Yes, a man could live on very slim rations of food, continue to beat his way over a bad trail if he had the concentrate tablets they carried. But there was no going without water, and in this heat such an effort would finish them quickly. Always they both listened for another cry from behind, a cry to tell them just how near the Throg hunting party had come.

“No Throg flyers yet,” Shann observed. He had expected one of those black plates to come cruising the moment the hound had pointed the direction for their pursuers.

“Not in a storm such as this.” Thorvald, without releasing his hold on the raft pole, pointed with his chin to the swirling haze cloaking the air above the cut walls. Here the river dug yet deeper into the beginning of a canyon. They could breathe better. The dust still sifted down but not as thickly as a half hour earlier. Though over their heads the sky was now a grayish lid, shutting out the sun, bringing a portion of coolness to the travelers.

The Survey officer glanced from side to side, watching the banks as if hunting for some special mark or sign. At last he used his pole as a pointer to indicate a rough pile of boulders ahead. Some former landslide had quarter dammed the river at that point, and the drift of seasonal floods was caught in and among the rocky pile to form a prickly peninsula.

“In there——”

They brought the raft to shore, fighting the faster current. The wolverines, who had been subdued by the heat and the dust, flung themselves to the rocks with the eagerness of passengers deserting a sinking ship for certain rescue. Thorvald settled the map case more securely between his arm and side before he took the same leap. When they were all ashore he prodded the raft out into the stream again, pushing the platform along until it was sucked by the current past the line of boulders.

“Listen!”

But Shann had already caught that distant rumble of sound. It was steady, beating like some giant drum. Certainly it did not herald a Throg ship in flight and it came from ahead, not from their back trail.

“Rapids ... perhaps even the falls,” Thorvald interpreted that faint thunder. “Now, let’s see what kind of a road we can find here.”

The tongue of boulders, spiked with driftwood, was firmly based against the wall of the cut. But it sloped up to within a few feet of the top of that gap, more than one landslide having contributed to its fashioning. The landing stage paralleled the river for perhaps some fifty feet. Beyond it water splashed a straight wall. They would have to climb and follow the stream along the top of the embankment, maybe being forced well away from the source of the water.

By unspoken consent they both knelt and drank deeply from their cupped hands, splashing more of the liquid over their heads, washing the dust from their skins. Then they began to climb the rough ascent up which the wolverines had already vanished. The murk above them was less solid, but again the fine grit streaked their faces, embedding itself in their hair.

Shann paused to scrape a film of mud from his lips and chin. Then he made the last pull, bracing his slight body against the push of the wind he met there. A palm struck hard between his shoulders, nearly sending him sprawling. He had only wits enough left to recognize that as an order to get on, and he staggered ahead until rock arched over him and the sand drift was shut off.

His shoulder met solid stone, and having rubbed the sand from his eyes, Shann realized he was in a pocket in the cliff walls. Well overhead he caught a glimpse of natural amber sky through a slit, but here was a twilight which thickened into complete darkness.

There was no sign of wolverines. Thorvald moved along the pocket southward, and Shann followed him. Once more they faced a dead end. For the crevice, with the sheer descent to the river on the right, the cliff wall at its back, came to an abrupt stop in a drop which caught at Shann’s stomach when he ventured to look down.

If some battleship of the interstellar fleet had aimed a force beam across the mountains of Warlock, cutting down to what lay under the first envelope of planet-skin, perhaps the resulting wound might have resembled that slash. What had caused such a break between the height on which they stood and the much taller peak beyond, Shann could not guess. But it must have been a cataclysm of spectacular dimensions. There was certainly no descending to the bottom of that cut and reascending the rock face on the other side. The fugitives would either have to return to the river with all its ominous warnings of trouble to come, or find some other path across that gap which now provided such an effective barrier to the west.

“Down!” Just as Thorvald had pushed him out of the murk of the dust storm into the crevice, so now did that officer jerk Shann from his feet, forcing him to the floor of the half cave from which they had partially emerged.

A shadow moved across the bright band of sunlit sky.

“Back!” Thorvald caught at Shann again, his greater strength prevailing as he literally dragged the younger man into the dusk of the crevice. And he did not pause, nor allow Shann to do so, even when they were well undercover again. At last they reached the dark hole in the southern wall which they had passed earlier. And a push from Thorvald sent his companion into that.

Then a blow greater than any the Survey officer had aimed at him struck Shann. He was hurled against a rough wall with impetus enough to explode the air from his lungs, the ensuing pain so great that he feared his ribs had given under that thrust. Before his eyes fire lashed down the slit, searing him into temporary blindness. That flash was the last thing he remembered as thick darkness closed in, shutting him into the nothingness of unconsciousness.

It hurt to breathe; he was slowly aware first of that pain and then the fact that he *was* breathing, that he had to endure the pain for the sake of breath. His whole body was jarred into a dull torment as a weight pressed upon his twisted legs. Then strong animal breath puffed into his face. Shann lifted one hand by will power, touched thick fur, felt the rasp of a tongue laid wetly across his fingers.

Something close to terror engulfed him for a second or two when he knew that he could not see! The black about him was colored by jagged flashes of red which he somehow guessed were actually inside his eyes. He groped through that fire-pierced darkness. An animal whimper from the throat of the shaggy body pressed against him; he answered that movement.

“Taggi?”

The shove against him was almost enough to pin him once more to the wall, a painful crush on his aching ribs, as the wolverine responded to his name. That second nudge from the other side must be Togi’s bid for attention.

But what had happened? Thorvald had hurled him back just after that shadow had swung over the ledge. That shadow! Shann’s wits quickened as he tried to make sense of what he could remember. A Throg ship! Then that fiery lash which had cut after them could only have resulted from one of those energy bolts such as had wiped out the others of his kind at the camp. But he was still alive—!

“Thorvald?” He called through his personal darkness. When there was no answer, Shann called again, more urgently. Then he hunched forward on his hands and knees, pushing Taggi gently aside, running his hands over projecting rocks, uneven flooring.

His fingers touched what could only be cloth, before they met the warmth of flesh. And he half threw himself against the supine body of the Survey officer, groping awkwardly for heartbeat, for some sign that the other was still living.

“What——?” The one word came thickly, but Shann gave something close to a sob of relief as he caught the faint mutter. He squatted back on his heels, pressed his forearm against his aching eyes in a kind of fierce will to see.

Perhaps that pressure did relieve some of the blackout, for when he blinked again, the complete dark and the fiery trails had faded to gray, and he was sure he saw dimly a source of light to his left.

The Throg ship had fired upon them. But the aliens could not have used the full force of their weapon or neither of the Terrans would still be alive. Which meant, Shann’s thoughts began to make sense—sense which brought apprehension—the Throgs probably intended to disable rather than kill. They wanted prisoners, just as Thorvald had warned.

How long did the Terrans have before the aliens would come to collect them? There was no fit landing place hereabouts for their flyer. The beetle-heads would have to set down at the edge of the desert land and climb the mountains on foot. And the Throgs were not good at that. So, the fugitives still had a measure of time.

Time to do what? The country itself held them securely captive. That drop to the southwest was one barrier. To retreat eastward would mean running straight into the hands of the hunters. To descend again to the river, their raft gone, was worse than useless. There was only this side pocket in which they sheltered. And once the Throgs arrived, they could scoop the Terrans out at their leisure, perhaps while stunned by a controlling energy beam.

“Taggi? Togi?” Shann was suddenly aware that he had not heard the wolverines for some time.

He was answered by a weirdly muffled call—from the south! Had the animals found a new exit? Was this niche more than just a niche? A cave of some length, or even a passage running back into the interior of the peaks? With that faint hope spurring him, Shann bent again over Thorvald, able now to make out the other’s huddled form. Then he drew the torch from the inner loop of his coat and pressed the lowest stud.

His eyes smarted in answer to that light, watered until tears patterned the grime and dust on his cheeks. But he could make out what lay before them, a hole leading into the cliff face, the hole which might furnish the door to escape.

The Survey officer moved, levering himself up, his eyes screwed tightly shut.

“Lantee?”

“Here. And there’s a tunnel—right behind you. The wolverines went that way....”

To his surprise there was a thin ghost of a smile on Thorvald’s usually straight-lipped mouth. “And we’d better be away before visitors arrive?”

So he, too, must have thought his way through the sequence of past action to the same conclusion concerning the Throg movements.

“Can you see, Lantee?” The question was painfully casual, but a note in it, almost a reaching for reassurance, cut for the first time through the wall which had stood between them from their chance meeting by the wrecked ship.

“Better now. I couldn’t when I first came to,” Shann answered quickly.

Thorvald opened his eyes, but Shann guessed that he was as blind as he himself had been, He caught at the officer’s nearer hand, drawing it to rest on his own belt.

“Grab hold!” Shann was giving the orders now. “By the look of that opening we had better try crawling. I’ve a torch on at low——”

“Good enough.” The other’s fingers fumbled on the band about Shann’s slim waist until they gripped tight at his back. He started on into the opening, drawing Thorvald by that hold with him.

Luckily, they did not have to crawl far, for shortly past the entrance the fault or vein they were following became a passage high enough for even the tall Thorvald to travel without stooping. And then only a little later he released his hold on Shann, reporting he could now see well enough to manage on his own.

The torch beam caught on a wall and awoke from there a glitter which hurt their eyes—a green-gold cluster of crystals. Several feet on, there was another flash of embedded crystals. Those might promise priceless wealth, but neither Terran paused to examine them more closely or touch their surfaces. From time to time Shann whistled. And always he was answered by the wolverines, their calls coming from ahead. So the men continued to hope that they were not walking into a trap from which the Throgs could extract them.

“Snap off your torch a moment!” Thorvald ordered.

Shann obeyed. The subdued light vanished. Yet there was still light to be seen—ahead and above.

“Front door,” Thorvald observed. “How do we get up?”

The torch showed them that, a narrow ladder of ledges branching off when the passage they followed took a turn to the left and east. Afterward Shann remembered that climb with wonder that they had actually made it, though their advance had been slow, passing the torch from one to another to make sure of their footing.

Shann was top man when a last spurt of effort enabled him to draw himself out into the open, his hands raw, his nails broken and torn. He sat there, stupefied with his own weariness, to stare about.

Thorvald called impatiently, and Shann reached for the torch to hold it for the officer. Then Thorvald crawled out; he, too, looked around in dull surprise.

On either side, peaks cut high into the amber of the sky. But this bowl in which the men had found refuge was rich in growing things. Though the trees were stunted, the grass grew almost as high here as it did on the meadows of the lowlands. Quartering the pocket valley, galloped the wolverines, expressing in that wild activity their delight in this freedom.

“Good campsite.”

Thorvald shook his head. “We can’t stay here.”

And, to underline that gloomy prophesy, there issued from that hole through which they had just come, muffled and broken, but still threatening, the howl of the Throgs’ hound.

The Survey officer caught the torch from Shann’s hold and knelt to flash it into the interior of the passage. As the beam slowly circled that opening, he held out his other arm, measuring the size of the aperture.

“When that thing gets on a hot scent”—he snapped off the beam—“the beetle-heads won’t be able to control it. There will be no reason for them to attempt to. Those hounds obey their first orders: kill—or capture. And I think this one operates on ‘capture.’ So they’ll loose it to run ahead of their party.”

“And we move to knock it out?” Shann relied now on the other’s experience.

Thorvald rose. “It would need a blaster on full power to finish off a hound. No, we can’t kill it. But we can make it a doorkeeper to our advantage.” He trotted down into the valley, Shann beside him without understanding in the least, but aware that Thorvald did have some plan. The officer bent, searched the ground, and began to pull from under the loose surface dirt one of those nets of tough vines which they had used for cords. He thrust a double handful of this hasty harvest into Shann’s hold with a single curt order: “Twist these together and make as thick a rope as you can!”

Shann twisted, discovering to his pleased surprise that under pressure the vines exuded a sticky purple sap which not only coated his hands, but also acted as an adhesive for the vines themselves so that his task was not nearly as formidable as it had first seemed. With his force ax Thorvald cut down two of the stunted trees and stripped them of branches, wedging the poles into the rocks about the entrance of the hole.

They were working against time, but on Thorvald’s part with practiced efficiency. Twice more that cry of the hunter arose from the depths behind them. As the westering sun, almost down now, shone into the valley hollow Thorvald set up the frame of his trap.

“We can’t knock it out, any more than we can knock out a Throg. But a beam from a stunner ought to slow it up long enough for this to work.”

Taggi burst out of the grass, approaching the hole with purpose. And Togi was right at his heels. Both of them stared into that opening, drooling a little, the same eagerness in their pose as they had displayed when hunting. Shann remembered how that first howl of the Throg hound had drawn both animals to the edge of the occupied camp in spite of their marked distaste for its alien masters.

“They’re after it too.” He told Thorvald what he had noted on the night of their sortie.

“Maybe they can keep it occupied,” the other commented. “But we don’t want them to actually mix with it; that might be fatal.”

A clamor broke out in the interior passage. Taggi snarled, backing away a few steps before he uttered his own war cry.

“Ready!” Thorvald jumped to the net slung from the poles; Shann raised his stunner.

Togi underlined her mate’s challenge with a series of snarls rising in volume. There was a tearing, scrambling sound from within. Then Shann fired at the jack-in-the-box appearance of a monstrous head, and Thorvald released the deadfall.

The thing squalled. Ropes beat, growing taut. The wolverines backed from jaws which snapped fruitlessly. To Shann’s relief the Terran animals appeared content to bait the now imprisoned—or collared—horror, without venturing to make any close attack.

But he reckoned that too soon. Perhaps the stunner had slowed up the hound’s reflexes, for those jaws stilled with a last shattering snap, the toad-lizard mask—a head which was against all nature as the Terrans knew it—was quiet in the strangle leash of the rope, the rest of the body serving as a cork to fill the exit hole. Taggi had been waiting only for such a chance. He sprang, claws ready. And Togi went in after her mate to share the battle.

## 7. Unwelcome Guide

There was a small eruption of earth and stone as the hound came alive, fighting to reach its tormentors. The resulting din was deafening. Shann, avoiding by a hand's breadth a snap of jaws with power to crush his leg into bone powder and mangled flesh, cuffed Togi across her nose and buried his hands in the fur about Taggi's throat as he heaved the male wolverine back from the struggling monster. He shouted orders, and to his surprise Togi did obey, leaving him free to yank Taggi away. Perhaps neither wolverine had expected the full fury of the hound.

Though he suffered a slash across the back of one hand, delivered by the over-excited Taggi, in the end Shann was able to get both animals away from the hole, now corked so effectively by the slaving thing. Thorvald was actually laughing as he watched his younger companion in action.

"This ought to slow up the beetles! If they haul their little doggie back, it's apt to take out some of its rage on them, and I'd like to see them dig around it."

Considering that the monstrous head was swinging from side to side in a collar of what seemed to be immovable rocks, Shann thought Thorvald right. He went down on his knees beside the wolverines, soothing them with hand and voice, trying to get them to obey his orders willingly.

"Ha!" Thorvald brought his mud-stained hands together with a clap, the sharp sound attracting the attention of both animals.

Shann scrambled up, swung out his bleeding hand in the simple motion which meant to hunt, being careful to signal down the valley westward. Taggi gave a last reluctant growl at the hound, to be answered by one of its ear-torturing howls, and then trotted off, Togi tagging behind.

Thorvald caught Shann's slashed hand, inspecting the bleeding cut. From the aid packet at his belt he brought out powder and a strip of protecting plasta-flesh to cleanse and bind the wound.

"You'll do," he commented. "But we'd better get out of here before full dark."

The small paradise of the valley was no safe campsite. It could not be so long as that monstrosity on the hillside behind them roared and howled its rage to the darkening sky. Trailing the wolverines, the men caught up with the animals drinking from a small spring and thankfully shared that water. Then they pushed on, not able to forget that somewhere in the peaks about must lurk the Throg flyer ready to attack on sight.

Only darkness could not be held off by the will of men. Here in the open there was no chance to use the torch. As long as they were within the valley boundaries the phosphorescent bushes marked a path. But by the coming of complete darkness they were once more out in a region of bare rock.

The wolverines had killed a brace of skitterers, consuming hide and soft bones as well as the meager flesh which was not enough to satisfy their hunger. However, to Shann's relief, they did not wander too far ahead. And as the men stopped at last on a ledge where a fall of rock gave them some limited shelter both animals crowded in against the humans, adding the heat of their bodies to the slight comfort of that cramped resting place.

From time to time Shann was startled out of a troubled half sleep by the howl of the hound. Luckily that sound never seemed any louder. If the Throgs had caught up with their hunter, and certainly they must have done so by now, they either could not, or would not free it from the trap. Shann dozed again, untroubled by any dreams, to awake hearing the shrieks of clak-claks. But when he studied the sky he was able to sight none of the cliff-dwelling Warlockian bats.

“More likely they are paying attention to our friend back in the valley,” Thorvald said dryly, rightly reading Shann’s glance to the clouds overhead. “Ought to keep them busy.”

Clak-claks were meat eaters, only they preferred their chosen prey weak and easy to attack. The imprisoned hound would certainly attract their kind. And those shrill cries now belling through the mountain heights ought to draw everyone of their species within miles.

“There it is!” Thorvald, pulling himself to his feet by a rock handhold, gazed westward, his gaunt face eager.

Shann, expecting no less than a cruising Throg ship, searched for cover on their perch. Perhaps if they flattened themselves behind the fall of stones, they might be able to escape attention. Yet Thorvald made no move into hiding. And so Shann followed the line of the other’s fixed stare.

Before and below them lay a maze of heights and valleys, sharp drops, and saw-toothed rises. But on the far rim of that section of badlands shone the green of a Warlockian sea rippling on to the only dimly seen horizon. They were now within sight of their goal.

Had they had one of the exploration sky-flitters from the overrun camp, they could have walked its beach sands within the hour. Instead, they fought their way through a Devil-designed country for the next two days. Twice they had narrow escapes from the Throg ship—or ships—which continued to sweep across the rugged line of the coast, and only a quick dive to cover, wasting precious time cowering like trapped animals, saved them from discovery. But at least the hound did not bay again on the tangled trail they left, and they hoped that the trap and the clak-claks had put that monster permanently out of service.

On the third day they came down to one of those fiords which tongued inland, fringing the coast. There had been no lack of hunting in the narrow valleys through which they had threaded, so both men and wolverines were well fed. Though animal fur wore better than the now tattered uniforms of the men.

“Now where?” Shann asked.

Would he now learn the purpose driving Thorvald on to this coastland? Certainly such broken country afforded good hiding, but no better concealment than the mountains of the interior.

The Survey officer turned slowly around on the shingle, studying the heights behind them as well as the angle of the inlet where the wavelets lapped almost at their battered boot tips. Opening his treasured map case, he began a patient checking of landmarks against several of the strips he carried. “We’ll have to get on down to the true coast.”

Shann leaned against the trunk of a conical branched mountain tree, pulling absently at the shreds of wine-colored bark being shed in seasonal change. The chill they had known in the upper valleys was succeeded here by a humid warmth. Spring was becoming a summer such as this northern continent knew. Even the fresh wind, blowing in from the outer sea, had already lost some of the bite they had felt two days before when its salt-laden mistiness had first struck them.

“Then what do we do there?” Shann persisted.



Thorvald brought over the map, his black-rimmed nail tracing a route down one of the fiords, slanting out to indicate a lace of islands extending in a beaded line across the sea.

“We head for these.”

To Shann that made no sense at all. Those islands ... why, they would offer less chance of establishing a safe base than the broken land in which they now stood. Even the survey scouts had given those spots of sea-encircled earth the most cursory examination from the air.

“Why?” he asked bluntly. So far he had followed orders because they had for the most part made sense. But he was not giving obedience to Thorvald as a matter of rank alone.

“Because there is something out there, something which may make all the difference now. Warlock isn’t an empty world.”

Shann jerked free a long thong of loose bark, rolling it between his fingers. Had Thorvald cracked? He knew that the officer had disagreed with the findings of the team and had been an unconvinced minority of one who had refused to subscribe to the report that Warlock had no native intelligent life and therefore was ready and waiting for human settlement because it was technically an empty world. But to continue to cling to that belief without a single concrete proof was certainly a sign of mental imbalance.

And Thorvald was regarding him now with frowning impatience. You were supposed to humor delusions, weren’t you? Only, could you surrender and humor a wild idea which might mean your death? If Thorvald wanted to go island-hopping in chance of discovering what never had existed, Shann need not accompany him. And if the officer tried to use force, well, Shann was armed with a stunner, and had, he believed, more control over the wolverines. Perhaps if he merely gave lip agreement to this project.... Only he didn’t believe, noting the light deep in those gray eyes holding on him, that anybody could talk Thorvald out of this particular obsession.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” The impatience arose hotly in that demand.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Shann tried to temporize. “You’ve had a lot of exploration experience; you should know about such things. I don’t pretend to be any authority.”

Thorvald refolded the map and placed it in the case. Then he pulled at the sealing of his blouse, groping in an inner secret pocket. He uncurled his fingers to display his treasure.

On his palm lay a coin-shaped medallion, bone-white but possessing an odd luster which bone would not normally show. And it was carved. Shann put out a finger, though he had a strange reluctance to touch the object. When he did he experienced a sensation close to the tingle of a mild electric shock. And once he had made that contact, he was also impelled to pick up that disk and examine it more closely.

The carved pattern was very intricate and had been done with great delicacy and skill, though the whorls, oddly shaped knobs, ribbon tracings, made no connected design he could determine. After a moment or two of study, Shann became aware that his eyes, following those twists and twirls, were “fixed,” that it required a distinct effort to look away from the thing. Feeling some of that same alarm as he had known when he first heard the wailing of the Throg hound, he let the disk fall back into Thorvald’s hold, even more disturbed when he discovered that to relinquish his grasp required some exercise of will.

“What is it?”

Thorvald restored the coin to his hiding place.

“You tell me. I can say this much, there is no listing for anything even remotely akin to this in the Archives.”

Shann’s eyes widened. He absently rubbed the fingers which had held the bone coin—if it was a coin—back and forth across the torn front of his blouse. That tingle ... did he still feel it? Or was his imagination at work again? But an object not listed in the exhaustive Survey Archives would mean some totally new civilization, a new stellar race.

“It is definitely a created article,” the Survey officer continued. “And it was found on the beach of one of those sea islands.”

“Throg?” But Shann already knew the answer to that.

“Throg work—*this*?” Thorvald was openly scornful. “Throgs have no conception of such art. You must have seen their metal plates—those are the beetle-heads’ idea of beauty. Have those the slightest resemblance to this?”

“Then who made it?”

“Either Warlock has—or once had—a native race advanced enough in a well-established form of civilization to develop such a sophisticated type of art, or there have been other visitors from space here before us and the Throgs. And the latter possibility I don’t believe—”

“Why?”

“Because this was carved of bone or an allied substance. We haven’t been quite able to identify it in the labs, but it is basically organic material. It was found exposed to the weather and yet it is in perfect condition, could have been carved any time within the past five years. It has been handled, yes, but not roughly. And we have come across evidences of no other star-cruising races or species save ourselves and the Throgs. No, I say this was made here on Warlock, not too long ago, and by intelligent beings of a very high grade of civilization.”

“But they would have cities,” protested Shann. “We’ve been here for months, explored all over this continent. We would have seen them or some traces of them.”

“An old race, maybe,” Thorvald mused, “a very old race, perhaps in decline, reduced to a remnant in numbers with good reason to retire into hiding. No, we’ve discovered no cities, no evidence of a native culture past or present. But this—” he touched the front of his blouse—”was found on the shore of an island. We may have been looking in the wrong place for our natives.”

“The sea....” Shann glanced with new interest at the green water surging in wavelets along the edge of the fiord.

“Just so, the sea!”

“But scouts have been here for more than a year, one team or another. And nobody saw anything or found any traces.”

“All four of our base camps were set inland, our explorations along the coast were mainly carried out by flitter, except for one party—the one which found this. And there may be excellent local reasons why any native never showed himself to us. For that matter, they may not be able to exist on land at all, any more than we could live without artificial aids in the sea.”

“Now——?”

“Now we must make a real attempt to find them if they do exist anywhere near here. A friendly native race could make all the difference in the world in any struggle with the Throgs.”

“Then you did have more than the dreams to back you when you argued with Fenniston!” Shann cut in.

Thorvald’s eyes were on him again. “When did you hear that, Lantee?”

To his great embarrassment, Shann found himself flushing. “I heard you, the day you left for Headquarters,” he admitted, and then added in his own defense, “Probably half the camp did, too.”

Thorvald’s gathering frown flickered away. He gave a snort of laughter. “Yes, I guess we did rather get to the bellowing point that morning. The dreams——” he came back to the subject——“Yes, the dreams were—are—important. We had their warning from the start. Lorry was the First-In Scout who charted Warlock, and he is a good man. I guess I can break secret now to tell you that his ship was equipped with a new experimental device which recorded——well, you might call it an “emanation”——a radiation so faint its source could not be traced. And it registered whenever Lorry had one of those dreams. Unfortunately, the machine was very new, very much in the untested stage, and its performance when checked later in the lab was erratic enough so the powers-that-be questioned all its readings. They produced a half dozen answers to account for that tape, and Lorry only caught the recording as long as he was on a big bay to the south.

“Then when two check flights came in later, carrying perfected machines and getting no recordings, it was all written off as a mistake in the first experiment. A planet such as Warlock is too big a find to throw away when there was no proof of occupancy. And the settlement boys rushed matters right along.”

Shann recalled his own vivid dream of the skull-rock set in the lap of water——this sea? And another small point fell into place to furnish the beginning of a pattern. “I was asleep on the raft when I dreamed about that skullmountain,” he said slowly, wondering if he were making sense.

Thorvald’s head came up with the alert stance of Taggi on a strong game scent.

“Yes, on the raft you dreamed of a skull-rock. And I of a cavern with a green veil. Both of us were on water——water which had an eventual connection with the sea. Could water be a conductor? I wonder....” Once again his hand went into his blouse. He crossed the strip of gravel beach and dipped fingers into the water, letting the drops fall on the carved disk he now held in his other hand.

“What are you doing?” Shann could see no purpose in that.

Thorvald did not answer. He had pressed wet hand to dry now, palm to palm, the coin cupped tightly between them. He turned a quarter circle, to face the still distant open sea.

“That way.” He spoke with a new odd tonelessness.

Shann stared into the other’s face. All the eager alertness of only a moment earlier had been wiped away. Thorvald was no longer the man he had known, but in some frightening way a husk, holding a quite different personality. The younger Terran answered his fear with an attack from the old days of rough in-fighting in the Dumps of Tyr. He brought his right hand down hard in a sharp chop across the officer’s wrists. The bone coin spun to the sand and Thorvald stumbled, staggering forward a step or two. Before he could recover balance Shann had stamped on the medallion.

Thorvald whirled, his stunner drawn with a speed for which Shann gave him high marks. But the younger man's own weapon was already out and ready. And he talked—fast.

“That thing's dangerous! What did you do—what did it do to you?”

His demand got through to a Thorvald who was himself again.

“What was *I* doing?” came a counter demand.

“You were acting like a mind-controlled.”

Thorvald stared at him incredulously, then with a growing spark of interest.

“The minute you dripped water on that thing you changed,” Shann continued.

Thorvald reholstered his stunner. “Yes,” he mused, “why *did* I want to drip water on it? Something prompted me....” He ran his still damp hand up the angle of his jaw, across his forehead as if to relieve some pain there. “What else did I do?”

“Faced to the sea and said ‘that way,’” Shann replied promptly.

“And why did you move in to stop me?”

Shann shrugged. “When I first touched that thing I felt a shock. And I've seen mind-controlled——” He could have bitten his tongue for betraying that. The world of the mind-controlled was very far from the life Thorvald and his kind knew.

“Very interesting,” commented the other. “For one of so few years you seem to have seen a lot, Lantee—and apparently remembered most of it. But I would agree that you are right about this little plaything; it carries a danger with it, being far less innocent than it looks.” He tore off one of the fluttering scraps of rag which now made up his sleeve. “If you'll just remove your foot, we'll put it out of business for now.”

He proceeded to wrap the disk well in his bit of cloth, taking care not to touch it again with his bare fingers while he stowed it away.

“I don't know what we have in this—a key to unlock a door, a trap to catch the unwary. I can't guess how or why it works. But we can be reasonably sure it's not just some carefree maiden's locket, nor the equivalent of a credit to spend in the nearest bar. So it pointed me to the sea, did it? Well, that much I am willing to allow. Maybe we'll be able to return it to the owner, *after* we learn who—or what—that owner is.”

Shann gazed down at the green water, opaque, not to be pierced to the depths by human sight. Anything might lurk there. Suddenly the Throgs became normal when balanced against an unknown living in the murky depths of an aquatic world. Another attack on the Throg-held camp could be well preferred to such exploration as Thorvald had in mind. Yet Shann did not voice any protest as the Survey officer faced again in the same direction as the disk had pointed him moments before.

## 8. Utgard

A wind from the west sprang up an hour before sunset, lashing waves inland until their spray was a salt mist in the air, a mist to sodden clothing, plaster hair to the skull, leaving a brine slime across the skin. Yet Thorvald hunted no shelter, in spite of the promise in the rough shoreline at their backs. The sand in which their boots slipped and slid was coarse stuff, hardly finer than gravel, studded with nests of drift—bone-white or grayed or pale lavender—smoothed and stored by the seasons of low tides and high, seasonal storms and hurricanes. A wild shore and a forbidding one, to arouse Shann’s distrust, perhaps a fitting goal for that disk’s guiding.

Shann had tasted loneliness in the mountains, experienced the strange world of the river at night lighted by the wan radiance of glowing shrubs and plants, forced the starkness of the heights. Yet there had been through all that journeying a general resemblance to his own past on other worlds. A tree was a tree, whether it bore purple foliage or was red-veined. A rock was a rock, a river a river. They were equally hard and wet on Warlock or Tyr.

But now a veil he could not describe, even in his own thoughts, hung between him and the sand over which he walked, between him and the sea which sent spray to wet his torn clothing, between him and that wild wrack of long-ago storms. He could put out his hand and touch sand, drift, spray; yet they were a setting where something lay hidden behind that setting—something watched, calculatingly, with intelligence, and a set of emotions and values he did not, could not share.

“... storm coming.” Thorvald paused in the buffeting of wind and spray, watching the fury of the tossing sea. The sun was still a pale smear just above the horizon. And it gave light enough to make out that trickle of islands melting out to obscurity.

“Utgard——”

“Utgard?” Shann repeated, the strange word holding no meaning for him.

“Legend of my people.” Thorvald smeared spray from his face with one hand. “Utgard, those outermost islands where dwell the giants who are the mortal enemies of the old gods.”

Those dark lumps, most of them bare rock, only a few crowned with stunted vegetation, might well harbor *anything*, Shann decided, giants or the malignant spirits of any race. Perhaps even the Throgs had their tales of evil things in the night, beetle monsters to people wild, unknown lands. He caught at Thorvald’s arm and suggested a practical course of action.

“We’ll need shelter before the storm strikes.” To Shann’s relief the other nodded.

They trailed back across the beach, their backs now to the sea and Utgard. That harsh-sounding name did so well fit the line of islands and islets, Shann repeated it to himself. Here the beach was narrow, a strip of blue sand-gravel walled by wave-worn boulders. And from that barrier of stones piled into a breastwork by chance, interwoven with bone-bare drift, arose the first of the cliffs. Shann studied the terrain with increasing uneasiness. To be caught between a sea, whipped inland by a storm wind, and that cliff would be a risk he did not like to consider, as ignorant of field lore as he was. They must locate some break nearer than the fiord, down which they had come. And they must find it soon, before the daylight was gone and the full fury of bad weather struck.

In the end the wolverines discovered an exit, just as they had found the passage through the mountain. Taggi nosed into a darker line down the face of the cliff and disappeared, Togi duplicating that feat. Shann trailed them, finding the opening a tight squeeze.

He squirmed into dimness, his outstretched hands meeting a rough stone surface sloping upward. After gaining a point about eight feet above the beach he was able to look back and down through the seaward slit. Open to the sky the crevice proved a doorway to a narrow valley, not unlike those which housed the fiords, but provided with a thick growth of vegetation well protected by the high walls.

Working as a now well-rehearsed team, the men set up a shelter of saplings and brush, the back to the slit through which wind was still able to tear a way. Walled in by stone and knowing that no Throg flyer would attempt to fly in the face of the coming storm, they dared make a fire. The warmth was a comfort to their bodies, just as the light of the flames, men's age-old hearth companion, was a comfort to the fugitives' spirits. Those dancing spears of red, for Shann at least, burned away that veil of other-worldliness which had enwrapped the beach, providing in the night an illusion of the home he had never really known.

But the wind and the weather did not keep truce very long. A wailing blast around the upper peaks produced a caterwauling to equal the voices of half a dozen Throg hounds. And in their poor shelter the Terrans not only heard the thunderous boom of surf, but felt the vibration of that beat pounding through the very ground on which they lay. The sea must have long since covered the beach over which they had come and was now trying its strength against the rock of the cliff barrier. They could not talk to each other over that din, although shoulder touched shoulder.

The last flush of amber vanished from the sky with the speed of a dropped curtain. Tonight no period of twilight divided night from day, but their portion of Warlock was plunged abruptly into darkness. The wolverines crowded into their small haven, whining deep in their throats. Shann ran his hands along their furred bodies, trying to give them a reassurance he himself did not feel. Never before when on stable land had he been so aware of the unleashed terrors nature could exert, the forces against which all mankind's controls were as nothing.

Time could no longer be measured by any set of minutes or hours. There was only darkness, the howling winds, and the salty rain which must be in part the breath of the sea driven in upon them. The comforting fire vanished, chill and dankness crept up to cramp their bodies, so that now and again they were forced to their feet, to swing arms, stamp, drive the blood into faster circulation.

Later came a time when the wind died, no longer driving the rain bullet-hard against and through their flimsy shelter. Then they slept in the thick unconsciousness of exhaustion.

A red-purple skull—and from its eye sockets the flying things—kept coming ... going.... Shann trod on an unsteady foundation which dipped under his weight as had the raft of the river voyage. He was drawing nearer to that great head, could see now how waves curled about the angle of the lower jaw, slapping inward between gaps of missing teeth—which were really broken fangs of rock—as if the skull now and then sucked reviving moisture from the water. The aperture marking the nose was closer to a snout, and the hole was dark, dark as the empty eye sockets. Yet that darkness was drawing him past any effort to escape he could summon. And then that on which he rode so perilously was carried forward by the waves, grated against the jawbone, while against his own fighting will his hands arose above his head, reaching for a hold to draw his shrinking body up the stark surface to that snout-passage.

“Lantee!” A hand jerked him back, broke that compulsion—and the dream. Shann opened his eyes with difficulty, his lashes seemed glued to his cheeks.

He might have been surveying a submerged world. Thin streamers of fog twined up from the earth as if they grew from seeds planted by the storm. But there was no wind, no sound from the peaks. Only under his stiff body Shann could still feel that vibration which was the sea battering against the cliff wall.

Thorvald was crouched beside him, his hand still urgent on the younger man’s shoulder. The officer’s face was drawn so finely that his features, sharp under the tanned skin, were akin to the skull Shann still half saw among the ascending pillars of fog.

“Storm’s over.”

Shann shivered as he sat up, hugging his arms to his chest, his tattered uniform soggy under that pressure. He felt as if he would never be warm again. When he moved sluggishly to the pit where they had kindled their handful of fire the night before he realized that the wolverines were missing.

“Taggi——?” His voice sounded rusty in his own ears, as if some of the moisture thick in the air about them had affected his vocal cords.

“Hunting.” Thorvald’s answer was clipped. He was gathering a handful of sticks from the back of their lean-to, where the protection of their own bodies had kept that kindling dry. Shann snapped a length between his hands, dropped it into the pit.

When they did coax a blaze into being they stripped, wringing out their clothing, propping it piece by steaming piece on sticks by the warmth of the flames. The moist air bit at their bodies and they moved briskly, striving to keep warm by exercise. Still the fog curled, undisturbed by any shaft of sun.

“Did you dream?” Thorvald asked abruptly.

“Yes.” Shann did not elaborate. Disturbing as his dream had been, the feeling that it was not to be shared was also strong, as strong as some order.

“And so did I,” Thorvald said bleakly. “You saw your skull-mountain?”

“I was climbing it when you awoke me,” Shann returned unwillingly.

“And I was going through my green veil when Taggi took off and wakened me. You are sure your skull exists?”

“Yes.”

“And so am I that the cavern of the veil is somewhere on this world. But why?” Thorvald stood up, the firelight marking plainly the lines between his tanned arms, his brown face and throat, and the paleness of his lean body. “Why do we dream those particular dreams?”

Shann tested the dryness of a shirt. He had no reason to try and explain the wherefore of those dreams, only was he certain that he would sometime, somewhere, find that skull, and that when he did he would climb to the doorway of the snout, pass behind to depths where the flying things might nest—not because he wanted to make such an expedition, but because he must.

He drew his hands across his ribs, where pressure still brought an aching reminder of the crushing force of the energy whip the Throgs had wielded. There was no extra flesh on his body, yet muscles slid easily under the skin, a darker skin than Thorvald’s, deepening to a warm brown where it had been weathered. His hair, unclipped now for a month, was

beginning to curl about his head in tight dark rings. Since he had always been the youngest or the smallest or the weakest in the world of the Dumps, of the Service, of the Team, Shann had very little personal vanity. He did possess a different type of pride, born of his own stubborn achievement in winning out over a long roster of discouragements, failures, and adverse odds.

“Why do we dream?” he repeated Thorvald’s question. “No answer, sir.” He gave the traditional reply of the Service recruit. And a little to his surprise Thorvald laughed with a tinge of real amusement.

“Where do you come from, Lantee?” He asked as if he were honestly interested.

“Tyr.”

“Caldon mines.” The Survey officer automatically matched planet to product. “How did you come into Survey?”

Shann drew on his shirt. “Signed on as casual labor,” he returned with a spark of defiance. Thorvald had joined the Service the right way as a cadet, then a Team man, finally an officer, climbing that nice even ladder with every rung ready for him when he was prepared to mount it. What did his kind know about the labor Barracks where the dull-minded, the failures, the petty criminals on the run, lived hard under a secret social system of their own? It had taken every bit of physical endurance and energy, every fraction of stubborn will Shann could summon, for him to survive his first three months in those barracks—unbroken and still eager to be Survey. He could still wonder at the unbelievable chance which had rescued him from that merely because Training Center had needed another odd hand to clean cages and feed troughs for the experimental animals.

And from the center he made a Team, because when working in a smaller group his push and attention to duty had been noticed and had paid off. Three years it had taken, but he *had* made Team stature. Not that that meant anything now. Shann pulled his boots on over the legs of rough dried coveralls and glanced up, to find Thorvald watching him with a new, questioning directness the younger man could not understand.

Shann sealed his blouse and stood up, knowing the bite of hunger, dull but persistent. It was a feeling he had had so many times in the past that now he hardly gave it a second thought.

“Supplies?” He brought the subject back to the present and the practical. What did it matter why or how one Shann Lantee had come to Warlock in the first place?

“What we have left of the concentrates we had better keep for emergencies.” Thorvald made no move to open the very shrunken bag he had brought from the scoutship.

He walked over to a rocky outcrop and tugged loose a yellowish tuft of plant, neither moss nor fungi but sharing attributes of both. Shann recognized it without enthusiasm as one of the varieties of native produce which could be safely digested by Terran stomachs. The stuff was almost tasteless and possessed a rather unpleasant odor. Consumed in bulk it would satisfy hunger for a time. Shann hoped that with the wolverines to aid they could go back to hunting soon.

However, Thorvald showed no desire to head inland where they might expect to locate game. He disagreed with Shann’s suggestion for tracking Taggi and Togi when those two emerged from the underbrush obviously well fed and contented after their early morning activity.

When Shann protested with some heat, the other countered: “Didn’t you ever hear of fish, Lantee? After a storm such as last night’s, we ought to discover good pickings along the shore.”



But Shann was also sure that it was not only the thought of food which drew Thorvald back to the sea.

They crawled back through the bolt hole. The beach of gravel-sand had vanished save for a narrow ribbon of land just at the foot of the cliffs, where the water curled in white lace about the barrier of boulders. There was no change in the dullness of the sky; no sun broke through the thick lid of clouds. And the green of the sea was ashened to gray which matched that overcast until one could strain one's eyes trying to find the horizon, unable to mark the dividing line here between air and water.

Utgard was a broken necklace, the outermost island-beads lost, the inner ones more isolated by the rise in water, more forbidding. Shann let out a startled hiss of breath.

The top of a near-by rock detached itself, drew up into a hunched thing of armor-plated scales and heavy wide-jawed head. A tail cracked into the air; a double tail split into equal forks for half-way down its length. A leg lifted as a forefoot, webbed, clawed for a new hold. This sea beast was the most formidable native thing he had sighted on Warlock, approaching in its ugliness the hound of the Throgs.

Breathing in labored gusts, the thing slapped its tail down on the stones with a limpness which suggested that the raising of that appendage had overtaxed its limited supply of strength. The head sank forward, resting across one of the forelimbs. Then Shann sighted the fearsome wound in the side just before one of the larger hind legs, a ragged hole through which pumped with every one of those breaths a dark purplish stream, licked away by the waves as it trickled slickly down the rock.

“What is that?”

Thorvald shook his head. “Not on our records,” he replied absently, studying the dying creature with avid attention. “Must have been driven in by the storm. This proves there is more in the sea than we knew!”

Again the forked tail lifted and fell, the head, raised from the forelimb, stretching up and back until the white underfolds of the throat were exposed as the snout pointed almost vertically to the sky. The jaws opened and from between them came a moaning whistle, a complaint which was drowned out by the wash of the waves. Then, as if that was the last effort, the webbed, clawed feet relaxed their grip of the rock and the scaled body slid sidewise, out of their sight, into the water. There was a feather of spume to mark the plunge and nothing else.

Shann, watching to see if the reptile would surface again, sighted another object, a rounded shape floating on the sea, bobbing lightly as had their river raft.

“Look!”

Thorvald's gaze followed his pointing finger and then before Shann could protest, the officer leaped outward from their perch on the cliff to the broad rock where the scaled sea dweller had lain moments earlier. He stood there, watching that drifting object with the closest attention, as Shann made the same crossing in his wake.

The drifting thing was oval, perhaps some six feet long and three wide, the mid point rising in a curve from the water's edge. As far as Shann could make out in the half-light the color was a reddish-brown, the surface rough. And he thought by the way that it moved that it must be flotsam of the storm, buoyant enough to ride the waves with close to cork resiliency. To Shann's dismay his companion began to strip.

“What are you going to do?”

“Get that.”

Shann surveyed the water about the rock. The forked tail had sunk just there. Was the Survey officer mad enough to think he could swim unmenaced through a sea which might be infested with more such creatures? It seemed that he was, for Thorvald's white body arched out in a dive. Shann waited, half crouched and tense, as though he could in some way attack anything rising from the depths to strike at his companion.

A brown arm flashed above the surface. Thorvald swam strongly toward the floating object. He reached it, his outstretched hand rasping across the surface. And it responded so quickly to that touch that Shann guessed it was even lighter and easier to handle than he had first thought.

Thorvald headed back, herding the thing before him. And when he climbed out on the rock, Shann was pulling up his trophy. They flipped the find over, to discover it hollow. They had, in effect, a ready-made craft not unlike a canoe with blunted bows. But the substance was surely organic: Was it shell? Shann speculated, running his finger tips over the irregular surface.

The Survey officer dressed. “We have our boat,” he commented. “Now for Utgard——”

Use this frail thing to dare the trip to the islands? But Shann did not protest. If the officer determined to try such a voyage, he would do it. And neither did the younger man doubt that he would accompany Thorvald.

## 9. One Alone

Once again the beach was a wide expanse of shingle, drying fast under a sun hotter than any Shann had yet known on Warlock. Summer had taken a big leap forward. The Terrans worked in partial shade below a cliff overhang, not only for the protection against the sun's rays, but also as a precaution against any roving Throg air patrol.

Under Thorvald's direction the curious shell dragged from the sea—if it were a shell, and the texture as well as the general shape suggested that—was equipped with a framework to act as a stabilizing outrigger. What resulted was certainly an odd-looking craft, but one which obeyed the paddles and rode the waves easily.

In the full sunlight the outline of islands was clear-cut—red-and-gray-rock above an aquamarine sea. The Terrans had sighted no more of the sea monsters, and the major evidence of native life along the shore was a new species of clak-claks, roosting in cliff holes and scavenging along the sands, and various queer fish and shelled things stranded in small tide pools—to the delight of the wolverines, who fished eagerly up and down the beach, ready to investigate all debris of the storm.

“That should serve.” Thorvald tightened the last lashing, straightening up, his fists resting on his hips, to regard the craft with a measure of pride.

Shann was not quite so content. He had matched the Survey officer in industry, but the need for haste still eluded him. So the ship—such as it was—was ready. Now they would be off to explore Thorvald's Utgard. But a small and nagging doubt inside the younger man restrained his enthusiasm over such a voyage. Fork-tail had come out of the section of ocean which they must navigate in this very crude transport. And Shann had no desire to meet an uninjured and alert fork-tail in the latter's own territory.

“Which island do we head for?” Shann kept private his personal doubts of their success. The outmost tip of that chain was only a distant smudge lying low on the water.

“The largest ... that one with trees.”

Shann whistled. Since the night of the storm the wolverines were again more amenable to the very light discipline he tried to keep. Perhaps the fury of that elemental burst had tightened the bond between men and animals, both alien to this world. Now Taggi and his mate padded toward him in answer to his summons. But would the wolverines trust the boat? Shann dared not risk their swimming, nor would he agree to leaving them behind.

Thorvald had already stored their few provisions on board. And now Shann steadied the craft against a rock which served them as a wharf, while he coaxed Taggi gently. Though the wolverine protested, he at last scrambled in, to hunch at the bottom of the shell, the picture of apprehension. Togi took longer to make up her mind. And at length Shann picked her up bodily, soothing her with quiet speech and stroking hands, to put her beside her mate.

The shell settled under the weight of the passengers, but Thorvald's foresight concerning the use of the outrigger proved right, for the craft was seaworthy. It answered readily to the dip of their paddles as they headed in a curve, keeping the first of the islands between them and the open sea for a breakwater.

From the air, Thorvald's course would have been a crooked one, for he wove back and forth between the scattered islands of the chain, using their lee calm for the protection of the canoe. About two thirds of the group were barren rock, inhabited only by clak-claks and creatures

closer to true Terran birds in that they wore a body plumage which resembled feathers, though their heads were naked and leathery. And, Shann noted, the clak-claks and the birds did not roost on the same islands, each choosing their own particular home while the other species did not invade that territory.

The first large-sized island they approached was crowned by trees, but it had no beach, no approach from sea level. Perhaps it might be possible to climb to the top of the cliff walls. But Thorvald did not suggest that they try it, heading on toward the next large outcrop of land and rock.

Here white lace patterned in a ring well out from the shore to mark a circle of reefs. They nosed their way patiently around the outer circumference of that threatening barrier, hunting the entrance to the lagoon. Within, there were at least two beaches with climbable ascents to the upper reaches inland. Though Shann noted that the vegetation showing was certainly not luxuriant, the few trees within their range of vision being pallid growths, rather like those they had sighted on the fringe of the desert. Leather-headed flyers wheeled out over their canoe, coasting on outspread wings to peer down at the Terran invaders in a manner which suggested intelligent curiosity.

A full flock gathered to escort them as they continued along the outer line of the reef. Thorvald impatiently dug his paddle deeper. They had explored more than half of the reef now without chancing on an entrance channel.

“Regular fence,” Shann commented. One could begin to believe that the barrier had been deliberately reared to frustrate visitors. Hot sunshine, reflected back from the surface of the waves, burned their exposed skin, so they dared not discard their ragged clothing. And the wolverines were growing increasingly restless. Shann did not know how much longer the animals would consent to their position as passengers without raising active protest.

“How about trying the next one?” he asked, knowing at the same time his companion was not in any mood to accept such a suggestion with good will.

The officer made no reply, but continued to use his steer paddle in a fashion which spelled out his stubborn determination to find a passage. This was a personal thing now, between Ragnar Thorvald of the Terran Survey and a wall of rock, and the man’s will was as strongly rooted as those water-washed stones.

On the southwestern tip of the reef they discovered a possible opening. Shann eyed the narrow space between two fanglike rocks dubiously. To him that width of water lane seemed dangerously limited, the sudden slam of a wave could dash them against either of those pillars, with disastrous results, before they could move to save themselves. But Thorvald pointed their blunt bow toward the passage with seeming confidence, and Shann knew that as far as the officer was concerned, this was their door to the lagoon.

Thorvald might be stubborn, but he was not a fool. And his training and skill in such maneuvers was proved when the canoe rode in a rising swell in and by those rocks to gain the safety, in seconds, of the calm lagoon. Shann sighed with relief, but ventured no comment.

Now they must paddle back along the inner side of the reef to locate the beaches, for fronting them on this side of the well-protected island were cliffs as formidable as those which guarded the first of the chain at which they had aimed.

Shann glanced now and then over the side of the boat, hoping in these shallows to sight the sea bed or some of the inhabitants of these waters. But there was no piercing that green murk. Here and there nodules of rock projected inches or feet above the surface, awash in the wavelets, to be avoided by the voyagers. Shann’s shoulders ached and burned, his muscles

were unaccustomed to the steady swing of the paddles, and the fire of the sun stabbed easily through only two layers of ragged cloth to his skin. He ran a dry tongue over dryer lips and gazed eagerly ahead in search of the first of the beaches.

What was so important about this island that Thorvald *had* to make a landing here? The officer's stories of a native race which they might turn against the Throgs to their own advantage was thin, very thin indeed. Especially now, as Shann weighed an unsupported theory against that ache in his shoulders, the possibility of being marooned on the inhospitable shore ahead, against the fifty probable dangers he could total up with very little expenditure of effort. A small nagging doubt of Thorvald's obsession began to grow in his mind. How could Shann even be sure that that carved disk and Thorvald's hokus-pokus with it had been on the level? On the other hand what motive would the officer have for trying such an act just to impress Shann?

The beach at last! As they headed the canoe in that direction the wolverines nearly brought disaster on them. The animals' restlessness became acute as they sighted and scented the shore and knew that they were close. Taggi reared, plunged over the side of the craft, and Shann had just time to fling his weight in the opposite direction as a counterbalance when Togi followed. They splashed shoreward while Thorvald swore fluently and Shann grabbed to save the precious supply bag. In a shower of gravel the animals made land and humped well up on the strand before pausing to shake themselves and splatter far and wide the burden of moisture transported by their shaggy fur.

Ashore, the canoe became a clumsy burden and, light as the craft was, both of the men sweated to get it up on the beach without snagging the outrigger against stones and brush. With the thought of a Throg patrol in mind they worked swiftly to cover it.

Taggi raised an egg-patterned snout from a hollow and licked at the stippling of greenish yolk matting his fur. The wolverines had wasted no time in sampling the contents of a wealth of nesting places beginning just above the high-water mark, cupping two to four tough-shelled eggs in each. Treading a path among those clutches, the Terrans climbed a red-earthed slope toward the interior of the island.

They found water, not the clear running of a mountain spring, but a stalish pool in a stone-walled depression on the crest of a rise, filled by the bounty of the rain. The warm liquid was brackish, but satisfied in part their thirst, and they drank eagerly.

The outer cliff wall of the island was just that, a wall, for there was an inner slope to match the outer. And at the bottom of it a showing of purple-green foliage where plants and stunted trees fought for living space. But there was nothing else, though they quartered that growing section with the care of men trying to locate an enemy outpost.

That night they camped in the hollow, roasted eggs in a fire, and ate the fishy-tasting contents because it was food, not because they relished what they swallowed. Tonight no cloud bank hung overhead. A man, gazing up, could see the stars. The stars and other things, for over the distant shore of the mainland they sighted the cruising lights of a Throg ship and waited tensely for that circle of small sparkling points to swing out toward their own hiding hole.

"They haven't given up," Shann stated what was obvious to them both.

"The settler transport," Thorvald reminded him. "If they do not take a prisoner to talk her in and allay suspicion, then—" he snapped his fingers—"the Patrol will be on their tails, but quick!"

So just by keeping out of Throg range, they were, in a way, still fighting. Shann settled back, his tender shoulders resting against a tree hole. He tried to count the number of days and

nights lying behind him now since that early morning when he had watched the Terran camp die under the aliens' weapons. But one day faded into another so that he could remember only action parts clearly—the attack on the grounded scoutship, the sortie they had made in turn on the occupied camp, the dust storm on the river, the escape from the Throg ship in the mountain crevice, and their meeting with the hound. Then that storm which had driven them to seek cover after their curious experience with the disk. And now this day when they had safely reached the island.

“Why this island?” he asked suddenly.

“That carved piece was found here on the edge of this valley,” Thorvald returned matter-of-factly.

“But today we found nothing at all——”

“Yet this island supplies us with a starting point.”

A starting point for what? A detailed search of all the islands, great and small, in the chain? And how did they dare continue to paddle openly from one to the next with the Throgs sweeping the skies? They would have provided an excellent target today as they combed that reef for an hour or more. Wearily, Shann spread out his hands in the very faint light of their tiny fire, poked with a finger tip at smarting points which would have been blisters had those hands not known a toughening process in the past. More paddling tomorrow? But that was tomorrow, and at least they need not worry tonight about any Throg attack once they had doused the fire, an action which was now being methodically attended to by Thorvald. Shann pushed down on the bed of leaves he had heaped together. The night was quiet. He could hear only the murmur of the sea, a lulling croon of sound to make one sleep deep, perhaps dreamlessly.

Sun struck down, making a dazzle about him. Shann turned over drowsily in that welcome heat, stretching a little as might a cat at ease. Then he really awoke under the press of memory, and the need for alertness rode him once more. Beaten-down grass, the burnt-out embers of last night's fire were beside him. But of Thorvald and the wolverines there were no signs.

Not only did he now lie alone, but he was possessed by the feeling that he had not been deserted only momentarily, that Taggi, Togi and the Survey officer were indeed gone. Shann sat up, got to his feet, breathing faster, a prickle of uneasiness spreading in him, bringing him to that inner slope, up it to the crest from which he could see that beach where last night they had concealed the canoe.

Those lengths of brush and tufts of grass they had used for a screen were strewn about as if tossed in haste. And not too long before....

For the canoe was out in the calm waters within the reef, the paddle blade wielded by its occupant flashing brightly in the sun. On the shingle below, the wolverines prowled back and forth, whining in bewilderment.

“Thorvald——!”

Shann put the full force of his lungs into that hail, hearing the name ring from one of the small peaks at his back. But the man in the boat did not turn his head; there was no change in the speed of that paddle dip.

Shann leaped down the outer slope to the beach, skidding the last few feet, saving himself from going headfirst into the water only by a painful wrench of his body.

“Thorvald!” He tried calling again. But that head, bright under the sun did not turn; there was no answer. Shann tore at his clothes and kicked off his boots.

He did not think of the possibility of lurking sea monsters as he plunged into the water, swam for the canoe edging along the reef, plainly bound for the sea gate to the southwest. Shann was not a powerful swimmer. His first impetus gave him a good start, but after that he had to fight for each foot he gained, and the fear grew in him that the other would reach the reef passage before he could catch up. He wasted no more time trying to hail Thorvald, putting all his breath and energy into the effort of overtaking the craft.

And he almost made it, his hand actually slipping along the log which furnished the balancing outrigger. As his fingers tightened on the slimy wood he looked up, and loosed that hold again in time perhaps to save his life.

For when he ducked to let the water cover his head in an impromptu half dive, Shann carried with him a vivid picture, a picture so astounding that he was a little dazed.

Thorvald had stopped paddling at last, because that paddle had to be put to another use. Had Shann not released his hold on the log and gone under water, that crudely fashioned piece of wood might, have broken his skull. He saw only too clearly the paddle raised in both hands as an ugly weapon, and Thorvald’s face, convulsed in a spasm of rage which made it as inhuman as a Throg’s.

Sputtering and choking, Shann fought up to the air once more. The paddle was back at the task for which it had been carved, the canoe was underway again, its occupant paying no more attention to what lay behind than if he *had* successfully disposed of the man in the water. To follow would be only to invite another attack, and Shann might not be so lucky next time. He was not good enough a swimmer to try any tricks such as oversetting the canoe, not when Thorvald was an expert who could easily finish off a fumbling opponent.

Shann swam wearily to shore where the wolverines waited, unable yet to make sense of that attack in the lagoon. What had happened to Thorvald? What motive had led the other to leave Shann and the animals on this island, the island Thorvald had called a starting point in his search for the natives of Warlock? Or had every bit of that tall tale been invented by the Survey officer for some obscure purpose of his own, certainly no sane purpose? Against that logic Shann could only set the carved disk, and he had only Thorvald’s word that that had been discovered here.

He dragged himself out of the water on his hands and knees and lay, winded and gasping. Taggi came to lick his face, nuzzle him, making a small, bewildered whimpering. While above, the leather-headed birds called and swooped, fearful and angry for their disturbed nesting place. The Terran retched, coughed up water, and then sat up to look around.

The spread of lagoon was bare. Thorvald must have rounded the south point of land and be very close to the reef passage, perhaps through it by now. Not stopping for his clothes, Shann started up the slope, crawling part of the way on his hands and knees.

He reached the crest again and got to his feet. The sun made an eye-dazzling glitter of the waves. But under the shade of his hands Shann saw the canoe again, beyond the reef, heading on out along the island chain, not back to shore as he had expected. Thorvald was still on the hunt, but for what? A reality which existed, or a dream in his own disturbed brain?

Shann sat down. He was very hungry, for that adventure in the lagoon had sapped his strength. And he was a prisoner along with the wolverines, a prisoner on an island which was half the size of the valley which held the Survey camp. As far as he knew, his only supply of drinkable water was that tank of evil-smelling rain which would be speedily evaporated by a

sun such as the one now beating down on him. And between him and the shore was the sea, a sea which harbored such creatures as the fork-tail he had watched die.

Thorvald was still steadily on course, not to the next island in the chain, a small, bare knob, but to the one beyond that. He could have been hurrying to a meeting. Where and with what?

Shann got to his feet, started down to the beach once more, sure now that the officer had no intention of returning, that he was again on his own with only his wits and strength to keep him alive—alive and somehow free of this water-washed prison.



## 10. A Trap For A Trapper

Shann took up the piece of soft chalklike stone he had found and drew another short white mark on the rust-red of a boulder well above tide level. That made three such marks, three days since Thorvald had marooned him. And he was no nearer the shore now than he had been on that first morning! He sat where he was by the boulder, aware that he should be up, trying to climb to the less accessible nests of the sea birds. The prisoners, man and wolverines, had cleaned out all those they had discovered on beach and cliffs. But at the thought of more eggs, Shann's stomach knotted in pain and he began to retch.

There had been no sign of Thorvald since Shann had watched him steer between the two westward islands. And the younger Terran's faint hope that the officer would return had died. On the shore a few feet away lay his own pitiful attempt to solve the problem of escape.

The force ax had vanished with Thorvald, along with all the rest of the meager supplies which had been the officer's original contribution to their joint equipment. Shann had used his knife on brush and small trees, trying to put together some kind of a raft. But he had not been able to discover here any of those vines necessary for binding, and his best efforts had all come to grief when he tried them in a lagoon launching. So far he had achieved no form of raft which would keep him afloat longer than five minutes, let alone support three of them as far as the next island.

Shann pulled listlessly at the framework of his latest try, fully disheartened. He tried not to think of the unescapable fact that the water in the rain tank had sunk to only an inch or so of muddy scum. Last night he had dug in the heart of the interior valley where the rankness of the vegetation was a promise of moisture, to uncover damp clay and then a brackish ooze. Far too little to satisfy both him and the animals.

There were surely fish somewhere in the lagoon. Shann wondered if the raw flesh of sea dwellers could supply the water they needed. But lacking net, line, or hooks, how did one fish? Yesterday, using his stunner, he had brought down a bird, to discover the carcass so rank even the wolverines, never dainty eaters, refused to gnaw it.

The animals prowled the two beaches, and Shann guessed they hunted shell dwellers, for at times they dug energetically in the gravel. Togi was busied in this way now, the sand flowing from under her pumping legs, her claws raking in good earnest.

And it was Togi's excavation which brought Shann a first ray of hope. Her excitement was so marked that he believed she was in quest of some worthwhile game and he moved across to inspect the pit. A patch of brown, which had been skimmed bare by one raking paw, made him shout.

Taggi shambled downslope, going to work beside his mate with an eagerness as open as hers. Shann hovered at the edge of the pit they were rapidly enlarging. The brown patch was larger, disclosing itself as a hump doming up from the gravel. The Terran did not need to run his hands over that rough surface to recognize the nature of the find. This was another shell such as had come floating in after the storm to form the raw material of their canoe.

However, as fast as the wolverines dug, they did not appear to make correspondingly swift headway in uncovering their find as might reasonably be expected. In fact, a witness could guess that the shell was sinking at a pace only a fraction slower than the burrowers were using to free it. Intrigued by that, Shann went back to the waterline, secured one of the

lengths he had been trying to weave into his failures, and returned to use it as a makeshift shovel.

Now, with three of them at the digging, the brown hump was uncovered, and Shann pried down around its edge, trying to lever it up and over. To his amazement, his tool was caught and held, nearly jerked from his hands. To his retaliating tug the obstruction below-ground gave way, and the Terran sprawled back, the length of wood coming clear, to show the other end smashed and splintered as if it had been caught between mashing gears.

For the first time he understood that they were dealing not with an empty shell casing buried by drift under this small beach, but with a shell still inhabited by the Warlockian to whom it was a natural covering, and that that inhabitant would fight to continue ownership. A moment's examination of that splintered wood also suggested that the shell's present wearer appeared well able to defend itself.

Shann attempted to call off the wolverines, but they were out of control now, digging frantically to get at this new prey. And he knew that if he pulled them away by force, they were apt to turn those punishing claws and snapping jaws on him.

It was for their protection that he returned to digging, though he no longer tried to pry up the shell. Taggi leaped to the top of that dome, sweeping paws downward to clear its surface, while Togi prowled around its circumference, pausing now and then to send dirt and gravel spattering, but treading warily as might one alert for a sudden attack.

They had the creature almost clear now, though the shell still rested firmly on the ground, and they had no notion of what it might protect. It was smaller, perhaps two thirds the size of the one which Thorvald had fashioned into a seagoing craft. But it could provide them with transportation to the mainland if Shann was able to repeat the feat of turning it into an outrigger canoe.

Taggi joined his mate on the ground and both wolverines padded about the dome, obviously baffled. Now and then they assaulted the shell with a testing paw. Claws raked and did not leave any marks but shallow scratches. They could continue that forever, as far as Shann could see, without solving the problem in the least.

He sat back on his heels and studied the scene in detail. The excavation holding the shelled creature was some three yards above the high-water mark, with a few more feet separating that from the point where lazy waves now washed the finer sand. Shann watched the slow inward slip of those waves with growing interest. Where their combined efforts had failed to win this odd battle, perhaps the sea itself could now be pressed into service.

Shann began his own excavation, a trough to lead from the waterline to the pit occupied by the obstinate shell. Of course the thing living in or under that covering might be only too familiar with salt water. But it had placed its burrow, or hiding place, above the reach of the waves and so might be disconcerted by the sudden appearance of water in its bed. However, the scheme was worth trying, and he went to work doggedly, wishing he could make the wolverines understand so they would help him.

They still prowled about their captive, scrapping at the sand about the shell casing. At least their efforts would keep the half-prisoner occupied and prevent its escape. Shann put another piece of his raft to work as a shovel, throwing up a shower of sand and gravel while sweat dampened his tattered blouse and was salt and sticky on his arms and face.

He finished his trench, one which ran at an angle he hoped would feed water into the pit rapidly once he knocked away the last barrier against the waves. And, splashing out into the green water, he did just that.

His calculations proved correct. Waves lapped, then flowed in a rapidly thickening stream, puddling out about the shell as the wolverines drew back, snarling. Shann lashed his knife fast to a stout length of sapling, so equipping himself with a spear. He stood with it ready in his hand, not knowing just what to expect. And when the answer to his water attack came, the move was so sudden that in spite of his preparation he was caught gaping.

For the shell fairly erupted out of the mess of sand and water. A complete fringe of jointed, clawed brown limbs churned in a forward-and-upward dash. But the water worked to frustrate that charge. For one of the pit walls crumbled, over-balancing the creature so that the fore end of the shell lifted from the ground, the legs clawing wildly at the air.

Shann thrust with the spear, feeling the knife point go home so deeply that he could not pull his improvised weapon free. A limb snapped claws only inches away from his leg as he pushed down on the haft with all his strength. That attack along with the initial upset of balance did the job. The shell flopped over, its rounded hump now embedded in the watery sand of the pit while the frantic struggles of the creature to right itself only buried it the deeper.

The Terran stared down upon a segmented under belly where legs were paired in riblike formation. Shann could locate no head, no good target. But he drew his stunner and beamed at either end of the oval, and then, for good measure, in the middle, hoping in one of those three general blasts to contact the thing's central nervous system. He was not to know which of those shots did the trick, but the frantic wiggling of the legs slowed and finally ended, as a clockwork toy might run down for want of winding—and at last projected, at crooked angles, completely still. The shell creature might not be dead, but it was tamed for now.

Taggi had only been waiting for a good chance to do battle. He grabbed one of those legs, worried it, and then leaped to tear at the under body. Unlike the outer shell, this portion of the creature had no proper armor and the wolverine plunged joyfully into the business of the kill, his mate following suit.

The process of butchery was a bloody, even beastly job, and Shann was shaken before it was complete. But he kept at his labors, determined to have that shell, his one chance of escape from the Island. The wolverines feasted on the greenish-white flesh, but he could not bring himself to sample it, climbing to the heights in search of eggs, and making a happy find of a niche filled with the edible moss-fungi.

By late afternoon he had the shell scooped fairly clean and the wolverines had carried away for burial such portions as they had not been able to consume at their first eating. Meanwhile, the leather-headed birds had grown bold enough to snatch up the fragments he tossed out on the water, struggling for that bounty against feeders arising from the depths of the lagoon.

At the coming of dusk Shann hauled the bloodstained, grisly trophy well up the beach and wedged it among the rocks, determined not to lose his treasure. Then he stripped and washed, first his clothing and then himself, rubbing his hands and arms with sand until his skin was tender. He was still exultant at his luck. The drift would supply him with materials for an outrigger. One more day's work—or maybe two—and he could leave. He wrung out his blouse and gazed toward the distant line of the shore. Once he had his new canoe ready he would try to make the trip back in the early morning while the mists were still on the sea. That should give him cover against any Throg flight.

That night Shann slept in the deep fog of bodily exhaustion. There were no dreams, nothing but an unconsciousness which even a Throg attack could not have pierced. He roused in the morning with an odd feeling of guilt. The water hole he had scooped in the valley yielded him some swallows tasting of earth, but he had almost forgotten the flavor of a purer liquid.

Munching on a fistful of moss, he hurried down to the shore, half fearing to find the shell gone, his luck out once again.

Not only was the shell where he had wedged it, but he had done better than he knew when he had left it exposed in the night. Small things scuttled away from it into hiding, and several birds arose—scavengers had been busy lightening his unwelcome task for that morning. And seeing how the clean-up process had gone, Shann had a second inspiration.

Pushing the thing down the beach, he sank it in the shallows with several rocks to anchor it. Within a few seconds the shell was invaded by a whole school of spiny-tailed fish, that ate greedily. Leaving his find to their cleansing, Shann went back to prospect the pile of raft material, choosing pieces which could serve for an outrigger frame. He was handicapped as he had been all along by the absence of the vines one could use for lashings. And he had reached the point of considering a drastic sacrifice of his clothing to get the necessary strips when he saw Taggi dragging behind him one of the jointed legs the wolverines had put in storage the day before.

Now and again Taggi laid his prize on the shingle, holding it firmly pinned with his forepaws as he tried to worry loose a section of flesh. But apparently that feat was beyond even his notable teeth, and at length he left it lying there in disgust while he returned to a cache for more palatable fare. Shann went to examine more closely the triple-jointed limb.

The casing was not as hard as horn or shell, he discovered upon testing; it more resembled tough skin laid over bone. With a knife he tried to loosen the skin—a tedious job requiring a great deal of patience, since the tissue tore if pulled away too fast. But with care he acquired a few thongs perhaps a foot long. Using two of these, he made a trial binding of one stick to another, and experimented farther, soaking the whole construction in sea water and then exposing it to the direct rays of the sun.

When he examined his test piece an hour later, the skin thongs had set into place with such success that the one piece of wood might have been firmly glued to the other. Shann shuffled his feet in a little dance of triumph as he went on to the lagoon to inspect the water-logged shell. The scavengers had done well. One scraping, two at the most, would have the whole thing clean and ready to use.

But that night Shann dreamed. No climbing of a skull-shaped mountain this time. Instead, he was again on the beach, laboring under an overwhelming compulsion, building something for an alien purpose he could not understand. And he worked as hopelessly as a beaten slave, knowing that what he made was to his own undoing. Yet he could not halt the making, because just beyond the limit of his vision there stood a dominant will which held him in bondage.

And he awoke on the beach in the very early dawn, not knowing how he had come there. His body was bathed in sweat, as it had been during his day's labors under the sun, and his muscles ached with fatigue.

But when he saw what lay at his feet he cringed. The framework of the outrigger, close to completion the night before, was dismantled—smashed. All those strips of hide he had so laboriously culled were cut—into inch-long bits which could be of no service.

Shann whirled, ran to the shell he had the night before pulled from the water and stowed in safety. Its rounded dome was dulled where it had been battered, but there was no break in the surface. He ran his hands anxiously over the curve to make sure. Then, very slowly, he came back to the mess of broken wood and snipped hide. And he was sure, only too sure, of one

thing. He, himself, had wrought that destruction. In his dream he had built to satisfy the whim of an enemy; in reality he had destroyed; and that was also, he believed, to satisfy an enemy.

The dream was a part of it. But who or what could set a man dreaming and so take over his body, make him in fact betray himself? But then, what had made Thorvald maroon him here? For the first time, Shann guessed a new, if wild, explanation for the officer's desertion. Dreams—and the disk which had worked so strangely on Thorvald. Suppose everything the other had surmised was the truth! Then that disk *had* been found on this very island, and here somewhere must lie a clue to the riddle.

Shann licked his lips. Suppose that Thorvald had been sent away under just such a strong compulsion as the one which had ruled Shann last night? Why was he left behind if the other had been moved away to protect some secret? Was it that Shann himself was wanted here, wanted so much that when he at last found a means of escape he was set to destroy it? That act might have been forced upon him for two reasons: to keep him here, and to impress upon him how powerless he was.

Powerless! A flicker of stubborn will stirred to respond to that implied challenge. All right, the mysterious *they* had made him do this. But they had underrated him by letting him learn, almost contemptuously, of their presence by that revelation. So warned, he was in a manner armed; he could prepare to fight back.

He squatted by the wreckage as he thought that through, turning over broken pieces. And, Shann realized, he must present at the moment a satisfactory picture of despondency to any spy. A spy, that was it! Someone or something must have him under observation, or his activities of the day before would not have been so summarily countered. And if there was a spy, then there was his answer to the riddle. To trap the trapper. Such action might be a project beyond his resources, but it was his own counterattack.

So now he had to play a role. Not only must he search the island for the trace of his spy, but he must do it in such a fashion that his purpose would not be plain to the enemy he suspected. The wolverines could help. Shann arose, allowed his shoulders to droop, slouching to the slope with all the air of a beaten man which he could assume, whistling for Taggi and Togi.

When they came, his exploration began. Ostensibly he was hunting for lengths of drift or suitable growing saplings to take the place of those he had destroyed under orders. But he kept a careful watch on the animal pair, hoping by their reactions to pick up a clue to any hidden watcher.

The larger of the two beaches marked the point where the Terrans had first landed and where the shell thing had been killed. The smaller was more of a narrow tongue thrust out into the lagoon, much of it choked with sizable boulders. On earlier visits there Taggi and Togi had poked into the hollows among these with their usual curiosity. But now both animals remained upslope, showing no inclination to descend to the water line.

Shann caught hold of Taggi's scruff, pulling him along. The wolverine twisted and whined, but he did not fight for freedom as he would have upon scenting Throg. Not that the Terran had ever believed one of those aliens was responsible for the happenings on the island.

Taggi came down under Shann's urging, but he was plainly ill at ease. And at last he snarled a warning when the man would have drawn him closer to two rocks which met overhead in a crude semblance of an arch. There was a stick of drift protruding from that hollow affording Shann a legitimate excuse to venture closer. He dropped his hold on the wolverines, stooped to gather in the length of wood, and at the same time glanced into the pocket.

Water lay just beyond, making this a doorway to the lagoon. The sun had not yet penetrated into the shadow, if it ever did. Shann reached for the wood, at the same time drawing his finger across the flat rock which would furnish a steppingstone for anything using that door as an entrance to the island.

Wet! Which might mean his visitor had recently arrived, or else merely that a splotch of spray had landed there not too long before. But in his mind Shann was convinced that he had found the spy's entrance. Could he turn it into a trap? He added a piece of drift to his bundle and picked up two more before he returned to the cliff ahead.

A trap.... He revolved in his mind all the traps he knew which could be used here. He already had decided upon the bait—his own work. And if his plans went through—and hope does not die easily—then this time he would not waste his labor either.

So he went back to the same job he had done the day before, making do with skin strips he had considered second-best before, smoothing, cutting. Only the trap occupied his mind, and close to sunset he knew just what he was going to do and how.

Though the Terran did not know the nature of the unseen opponent, he thought he could guess two weaknesses which might deliver the other into his hands. First, the enemy was entirely confident of success in this venture. No being who was able to control Shann as completely and ably as had been done the night before would credit any prey with the power to strike back in force.

Second, such a confident enemy would be unable to resist watching the manipulation of a captive. The Terran was certain that his opponent would be on the scene somewhere when he was led, dreaming, to destroy his work once more.

He might be wrong on both of those counts, but inwardly he didn't believe so. However, he had to wait until the dark to set up his own answer, one so simple he was certain the enemy would not suspect it at all.

## 11. The Witch

There were patches of light in the inner valley marking the phosphorescent plants, some creeping at ground level, others tall as saplings. On other nights Shann had welcomed that wan radiance, but now he lay in as relaxed a position as possible, marking each of those potential betrayers as he tried to counterfeit the attitude of sleep and at the same time plan out his route.

He had purposely settled in a pool of shadow, the wolverines beside him. And he thought that the bulk of the animal's bodies would cover his own withdrawal when the time came to move. One arm lying limply across his middle was in reality clutching to him an intricate arrangement of small hide straps which he had made by sacrificing most of the remainder of his painfully acquired thongs. The trap must be set in place soon!

Now that he had charted a path to the crucial point avoiding all light plants, Shann was ready to move. The Terran pressed his hand on Taggi's head in the one imperative command the wolverine was apt to obey—the order to stay where he was.

Shann sat up and gave the same voiceless instruction to Togi. Then he inched out of the hollow, a worm's progress to that narrow way along the cliff top—the path which anyone or anything coming up from that sea gate on the beach would have to pass in order to witness the shoreline occupied by the half-built outrigger.

So much of his plan was based upon luck and guesses, but those were all Shann had. And as he worked at the stretching of his snare, the Terran's heart pounded, and he tensed at every sound out of the night. Having tested all the anchoring of his net, he tugged at a last knot, and then crouched to listen not only with his ears, but with all his strength of mind and body.

Pound of waves, whistle of wind, the sleepy complaint of some bird.... A regular splashing! One of the fish in the lagoon? Or what he awaited? The Terran retreated as noiselessly as he had come, heading for the hollow where he had bedded down.

He reached there breathless, his heart pumping, his mouth dry as if he had been racing. Taggi stirred and thrust a nose inquiringly against Shann's arm. But the wolverine made no sound, as if he, too, realized that some menace lay beyond the rim of the valley. Would that other come up the path Shann had trapped? Or had he been wrong? Was the enemy already stalking him from the other beach? The grip of his stunner was slippery in his damp hand; he hated this waiting.

The canoe ... his work on it had been a careless botching. Better to have the job done right. Why, it was perfectly clear now how he had been mistaken! His whole work plan was wrong; he could see the right way of doing things laid out as clear as a blueprint in his mind. A picture in his mind!

Shann stood up and both wolverines moved uneasily, though neither made a sound. A picture in his mind! But this time he wasn't asleep; he wasn't dreaming a dream—to be used for his own defeat. Only (that other could not know this) the pressure which had planted the idea of new work to be done in his mind—an idea one part of him accepted as fact—had not taken warning from his move. He was supposed to be under control; the Terran was sure of that. All right, so he would play that part. He must if he would entice the trapper into his trap.

He holstered his stunner, walked out into the open, paying no heed now to the patches of light through which he must pass on his way to the path his own feet had already worn to the boat

beach. As he went, Shann tried to counterfeit what he believed would be the gait of a man under compulsion.

Now he was on the rim fronting the downslope, fighting against his desire to turn and see for himself if anything had climbed behind. The canoe was all wrong, a bad job which he must make better at once so that in the morning he would be free of this island prison.

The pressure of that other's will grew stronger. And the Terran read into that the overconfidence which he believed would be part of the enemy's character. The one who was sending him to destroy his own work had no suspicion that the victim was not entirely malleable, ready to be used as he himself would use a knife or a force ax. Shann strode steadily downslope. With a small spurt of fear he knew that in a way that unseen other was right; the pressure was taking over, even though he was awake this time. The Terran tried to will his hand to his stunner, but his fingers fell instead on the hilt of his knife. He drew the blade as panic seethed in his head, chilling him from within. He had underestimated the other's power....

And that panic flared into open fight, making him forget his careful plans. Now he *must* wrench free from this control. The knife was moving to slash a hide lashing, directed by his hand, but not his will.

A soundless gasp, a flash of dismay rocked him, but neither was his gasp nor his dismay. That pressure snapped off; he was free. But the other wasn't! Knife still in fist, Shann turned and ran upslope, his torch in his other hand. He could see a shape now writhing, fighting, outlined against a light bush. And, fearing that the stranger might win free and disappear, the Terran spotlighted the captive in the beam, reckless of Throg or enemy reinforcements.

The other crouched, plainly startled by the sudden burst of light. Shann stopped abruptly. He had not really built up any mental picture of what he had expected to find in his snare, but this prisoner was as weirdly alien to him as a Throg. The light on the torch was reflected off a skin which glittered as if scaled, glittered with the brilliance of jewels in bands and coils of color spreading from the throat down the chest, spiraling about upper arms, around waist and thighs, as if the stranger wore a treasure house of gems as part of a living body. Except for those patterned loops, coils, and bands, the body had no clothing, though a belt about the slender middle supported a pair of pouches and some odd implements held in loops.

Roughly the figure was more humanoid than the Throgs. The upper limbs were not too unlike Shann's arms, though the hands had four digits of equal length instead of five. But the features were nonhuman, closer to saurian in contour. It had large eyes, blazing yellow in the dazzle of the flash, with vertical slits of green for pupils. A nose united with the jaw to make a snout, and above the domed forehead a sharp V-point of raised spiky growth extended back and down until behind the shoulder blades it widened and expanded to resemble a pair of wings.

The captive no longer struggled, but sat quietly in the tangle of the snare Shann had set, watching the Terran steadily as if there were no difficulty in seeing through the brilliance of the beam to the man who held it. And, oddly enough, Shann experienced no repulsion toward its reptilian appearance as he had upon first sighting the beetle-Throg. On impulse he put down his torch on a rock and walked into the light to face squarely the thing out of the sea.

Still eying Shann, the captive raised one limb and gave an absent-minded tug to the belt it wore. Shann, noting that gesture, was struck by a wild surmise, leading him to study the prisoner more narrowly. Allowing for the alien structure of bone, the nonhuman skin; this creature was delicate, graceful, in its way beautiful, with a fragility of limb which backed up



his suspicions. Moved by no pressure from the other, but by his own will and sense of fitness, Shann stooped to cut the control line of his snare.

The captive continued to watch as Shann sheathed his blade and then held out his hand. Yellow eyes, never blinking since his initial appearance, regarded him, not with any trace of fear or dismay, but with a calm measurement which was curiosity based upon a strong belief in its own superiority. He did not know how he knew, but Shann was certain that the creature out of the sea was still entirely confident, that it made no fight because it did not conceive of any possible danger from him. And again, oddly enough, he was not irritated by this unconscious arrogance; rather he was intrigued and amused.

“Friends?” Shann used the basic galactic speech devised by Survey and the Free Traders, semantics which depended upon the proper inflection of voice and tone to project meaning when the words were foreign.

The other made no sound, and the Terran began to wonder if his captive had any audible form of speech. He withdrew a step or two then pulled at the snare, drawing the cords away from the creature’s slender ankles. Rolling the thongs into a ball, he tossed the crude net back over his shoulder.

“Friends?” he repeated again, showing his empty hands, trying to give that one word the proper inflection, hoping the other could read his peaceful intent in his features if not by his speech.

In one lithe, flowing movement the alien arose. Fully erect, the Warlockian had a frail appearance. Shann, for his breed, was not tall. But the native was still smaller, not more than five feet, that stiff V of head crest just topping Shann’s shoulder. Whether any of those fittings at its belt could be a weapon the Terran had no way of telling. However, the other made no move to draw any of them.

Instead, one of the four-digit hands came up. Shann felt the feather touch of strange finger tips on his chin, across his lips, up his cheek, to at last press firmly on his forehead at a spot just between the eyebrows. What followed was communication of a sort, not in words or in any describable flow of thoughts. There was no feeling of enmity—at least nothing strong enough to be called that. Curiosity, yes, and then a growing doubt, not of the Terran himself, but of the other’s preconceived ideas concerning him. Shann was other than the native had judged him, and the stranger was disturbed, that self-confidence a little ruffled. And also Shann was right in his guess. He smiled, his amusement growing—not aimed at his companion on this cliff top, but at himself. For he was dealing with a woman, a very young woman, and someone as fully feminine in her way as any human girl could be.

“Friends?” he asked for the third time.

But the other still exuded a wariness, a wariness mixed with surprise. And the tenuous message which passed between them then astounded Shann. To this Warlockian out of the night he was not following the proper pattern of male behaviour at all; he should have been in awe of the other merely because of her sex. A diffidence rather than an assumption of equality should have colored his response, judged by her standards. At first, he caught a flash of anger at this preposterous attitude of his; then her curiosity won, but there was still no reply to his question.

The finger tips no longer made contact between them. Stepping back, her hands now reached for one of the pouches at her belt. Shann watched that movement carefully. And because he did not trust her too far, he whistled.

Her head came up. She might be dumb, but plainly she was not deaf. And she gazed down into the hollow as the wolverines answered his summons with growls. Her profile reminded Shann of something for an instant; but it should have been golden-yellow instead of silver with two jeweled patterns ringing the snout. Yes, that small plaque he had seen in the cabin of one of the ship's officers. A very old Terran legend—"Dragon," the officer had named the creature. Only that one had possessed a serpent's body, a lizard's legs and wings.

Shann gave a sudden start, aware his thoughts had made him careless, or had she in some way led him into that bypath of memory for her own purposes? Because now she held some object in the curve of her curled fingers, regarding him with those unblinking yellow eyes. Eyes ... eyes.... Shann dimly heard the alarm cry of the wolverines. He tried to snap draw his stunner, but it was too late.

There was a haze about him hiding the rocks, the island valley with its radiant plants, the night sky, the bright beam of the torch. Now he moved through that haze as one walks through a dream approaching nightmare, striding with an effort as if wading through a deterring flood. Sound, sight—one after another those senses were taken from him. Desperately Shann held to one thing, his own sense of identity. He was Shann Lantee, Terran breed, out of Tyr, of the Survey Service. Some part of him repeated those facts with vast urgency against an almost overwhelming force which strove to defeat that awareness of self, making him nothing but a tool—or a weapon—for another's use.

The Terran fought, soundlessly but fiercely, on a battleground which was within him, knowing in a detached way that his body obeyed another's commands.

"I am Shann—" he cried without audible speech. "I am myself. I have two hands, two legs.... I think for myself! I am a *man*——"

And to that came an answer of sorts, a blow of will striking at his resistance, a will which struggled to drown him before ebbing, leaving behind it a faint suggestion of bewilderment, of a dawn of concern.

"I am a *man*!" he hurled that assertion as he might have thrust deep with one of the crude spears he had used against the Throgs. For against what he faced now his weapons were as crude as spears fronting blasters. "I am Shann Lantee, Terran, man...." Those were facts; no haze could sweep them from his mind or take away that heritage.

And again there was the lightening of the pressure, the slight recoil, which could only be a prelude to another assault upon his last stronghold. He clutched his three facts to him as a shield, groping for others which might have afforded a weapon of rebuttal.

Dreams, these Warlockians dealt in and through dreams. And the opposite of dreams are facts! His name, his breed, his sex—these were facts. And Warlock itself was a fact. The earth under his boots was a fact. The water which washed around the island was a fact. The air he breathed was a fact. Flesh, blood, bones—facts, all of them. Now he was a struggling identity imprisoned in a rebel body. But that body was real. He tried to feel it. Blood pumped from his heart, his lungs filled and emptied; he struggled to feel those processes.

With a terrifying shock, the envelope which had held him vanished. Shann was choking, struggling in water. He flailed out with his arms, kicked his legs. One hand grated painfully against stone. Hardly knowing what he did, but fighting for his life, Shann caught at that rock and drew his head out of water. Coughing and gasping, half drowned, he was weak with the panic of his close brush with death.

For a long moment he could only cling to the rock which had saved him, retching and dazed, as the water washed about his body, a current tugging at his trailing legs. There was light of a

sort here, patches of green which glowed with the same subdued light as the bushes of the outer world, for he was no longer under the night sky. A rock-roof was but inches over his head; he must be in some cave or tunnel under the surface of the sea. Again a gust of panic shook him as he felt trapped.

The water continued to pull at Shann, and in his weakened condition it was a temptation to yield to that pull; the more he fought it the more he was exhausted. At last the Terran turned on his back, trying to float with the stream, sure he could no longer battle it.

Luckily those few inches of space above the surface of the water continued, and he had air to breathe. But the fear of that ending, of being swept under the surface, chewed at his nerves. And his bodily danger burned away the last of the spell which had held him, brought him into this place, wherever it might be.

Was it only his heightened imagination, or had the current grown swifter? Shann tried to gauge the speed of his passage by the way the patches of green light slipped by. Now he turned and began to swim slowly, feeling as if his arms were leaden weights, his ribs a cage to bind his aching lungs.

Another patch of light ... larger ... spreading across the roof over head. Then, he was out! Out of the tunnel into a cavern so vast that its arching roof was like a skydome far above his head. But here the patches of light were brighter, and they were arranged in odd groups which had a familiar look to them.

Only, better than freedom overhead, there was a shore not too distant. Shann swam for that haven, summoning up the last rags of his strength, knowing that if he could not reach it very soon he was finished. Somehow he made it and lay gasping, his cheek resting on sand finer than any of the outer world, his fingers digging into it for purchase to drag his body on. But when he collapsed, his legs were still awash in water.

No footfall could be heard on that sand. But he knew that he was no longer alone. He braced his hands and with painful effort levered up his body. Somehow he made it to his knees, but he could not stand. Instead he half tumbled back, so that he faced them from a sitting position.

*Them*—there were three of them—the dragon-headed ones with their slender, jewel-set bodies glittering even in this subdued light, their yellow eyes fastened on him with a remoteness which did not approach any human emotion, save perhaps that of a cold and limited wonder. But behind them came a fourth, one he knew by the patterns on her body.

Shann clasped his hands about his knees to still the trembling of his body, and eyed them back with all the defiance he could muster. Nor did he doubt that he had been brought here, his body as captive to their will, as had been that of their spy or messenger in his crude snare on the island.

“Well, you have me,” he said hoarsely. “Now what?”

His words boomed weirdly out over the water, were echoed from the dim outer reaches of the cavern. There was no answer. They merely stood watching him. Shann stiffened, determined to hold to his defiance and to that identity which he now knew was his weapon against the powers they used.

The one who had somehow drawn him there moved at last, circling around the other three with a suggestion of diffidence in her manner. Shann jerked back his head as her hand stretched to touch his face. And then, guessing that she sought her peculiar form of

communication, he submitted to her finger tips, though now his skin crawled under that light but firm pressure and he shrank from the contract.

There were no sensations this time. To his amazement a concrete inquiry shaped itself in his brain, as clear as if the question had been asked aloud: "Who are you?"

"Shann...." he began vocally, and then turned words into thoughts. "Shann Lantee, Terran, man." He made his answer the same which had kept him from succumbing to their complete domination.

"Name—Shann Lantee, man—yes." The other accepted those, "Terran?" That was a question.

Did these people have any notion of space travel? Could they understand the concept of another world holding intelligent beings?

"I come from another world...." He tried to make a clean-cut picture in his mind—a globe in space, a ship blasting free....

"Look!" The fingers still rested between his eyebrows, but with her other hand the Warlockian was pointing up to the dome of the cavern.

Shann followed her order. He studied those patches of light which had seemed so vaguely familiar at his first sighting, studying them closely to know them for what they were. A star map! A map of the heavens as they could be seen from the outer crust of Warlock.

"Yes, I come from the stars," he answered, booming with his voice. The fingers dropped from his forehead; the scaled head swung around to exchange glances, which were perhaps some unheard communication with the other three. Then the hand was extended again.

"Come!"

Fingers fell from his head to his right wrist, closing there with surprising strength; and some of that strength together with a new energy flowed from them into him, so that he found and kept his feet as the other drew him up.

## 12. The Veil Of Illusion

Perhaps his status was that of a prisoner, but Shann was too tired to press for an explanation. He was content to be left alone in the unusual circular, but roofless, room of the structure to which they had brought him. There was a thick mat-like pallet in one corner, short for the length of his body, but softer than any bed he had rested on since he had left the Terran camp before the coming of the Throgs. Above him glimmered those patches of light symbolizing the lost stars. He blinked at them until they all ran together in bands like the jeweled coils on Warlockian bodies; then he slept—dreamlessly.

The Terran awoke with all his senses alert; some silent alarm might have triggered that instant awareness of himself and his surroundings. There had been no change in the star pattern still overhead; no one had entered the round chamber. Shann rolled over on his mat bed, conscious that all his aches had vanished. Just as his mind was clearly active, so did his body also respond effortlessly to his demands. He was not aware of any hunger or thirst, though a considerable length of time must have passed since he had made his mysteriously contrived exit from the outer world.

In spite of the humidity of the air, his ragged garments had dried on his body. Shann got to his feet, trying to order the sorry remnants of his uniform, eager to be on the move. Though to where and for what purpose he could not have answered.

The door through which he had entered remained closed, refusing to yield to his push. Shann stepped back, eyeing the distance to the top of the partition between the roofless rooms. The walls were smooth with the gloss of a sea shell's interior, but the exuberant confidence which had been with him since his awakening refused to accept such a minor obstacle.

He made two test leaps, both times his fingers striking the wall well below the top of the partition. Shann gathered himself together as might a cat and tried the third time, putting into that effort every last ounce of strength, determination and will. He made it, though his arms jerked as the weight of his body hung from his hands. Then a scramble, a knee hooked over the top, and he was perched on the wall, able to study the rest of the building.

In shape, the structure was unlike anything he had seen on his home world or reproduced in any of the tri-dee records of Survey accessible to him. The rooms were either circular or oval, each separated from the next by a short passage, so that the overall impression was that of ten strings of beads radiating from a central knot of one large chamber, all with the uniform nacre walls and a limited amount of furnishings.

As he balanced on the narrow perch, Shann could sight no other movement in the nearest line of rooms, those connected by corridors with his own. He got to his feet to walk the tightrope of the upper walls toward that inner chamber which was the heart of the Warlockian—palace? town? apartment dwelling? At least it was the only structure on the island, for he could see the outer rim of that smooth soft sand ringing it about. The island itself was curiously symmetrical, a perfect oval, too perfect to be a natural outcrop of sand and rock.

There was no day or night here in the cavern. The light from the roof patches remained constantly the same, and that flow was abetted within the building by a soft radiation from the walls. Shann reached the next room in line, hunkering down to see within it. To all appearances the chamber was exactly the same as the one he had just left; there were the same unadorned walls, a thick mat bed against the far side, and no indication whether it was in use or had not been entered for days.

He was on the next section of corridor wall when he caught that faint taint in the air, the very familiar scent of wolverines. Now it provided Shann with a guide as well as a promise of allies.

The next bead-room gave him what he wanted. Below him Taggi and Togi paced back and forth. They had already torn to bits the sleeping mat which had been the chamber's single furnishing, and their temper was none too certain. As Shann squatted well above their range of vision, Taggi reared against the opposite wall, his claws finding no hold on the smooth coating of its surface. They were as competently imprisoned as if they had been dropped into a huge fishbowl, and they were not taking to it kindly.

How had the animals been brought here? Down that water tunnel by the same unknown method he himself had been transported until that almost disastrous awakening in the center of the flood? The Terran did not doubt that the doors of the room were as securely fastened as those of his own further down the corridor. For the moment the wolverines were safe; he could not free them. And he was growing increasingly certain that if he found any of his native jailers, it would be at the center of that wheel of rooms and corridors.

Shann made no attempt to attract the animals' attention, but kept on along his tightrope path. He passed two more rooms, both empty, both differing in no way from those he had already inspected; and then he came to the central chamber, four times as big as any of the rest and with a much brighter wall light.

The Terran crouched, one hand on the surface of the partition top as an additional balance, the other gripping his stunner. For some reason his captors had not disarmed him. Perhaps they believed they had no necessity to fear his off-world weapon.

"Have you grown wings?"

The words formed in his brain, bringing with them a sense of calm amusement to reduce all his bold exploration to the level of a child's first staggering steps. Shann fought his first answering flare of pure irritation. To lose even a fraction of control was to open a door for them. He remained where he was as if he had never "heard" that question, surveying the room below with all the impassiveness he could summon.

Here the walls were no smooth barrier, but honeycombed with niches in a regular pattern. And in each of the niches rested a polished skull, a nonhuman skull. Only the outlines of those ranked bones were familiar; for just so had looked the great purple-red rock where the wheeling flyers issued from the eye sockets. A rock island had been fashioned into a skull—by design or nature?

And upon closer observation the Terran could see that there was a difference among these ranked skulls, a mutation of coloring from row to row, a softening of outline, perhaps by the wearing of time.

There was also a table of dull black, rising from the flooring on legs which were not more than a very few inches high, so that from his present perch the board appeared to rest on the pavement itself. Behind the table in a row, as shopkeepers might await a customer, three of the Warlockians, seated cross-legged on mats, their hands folded primly before them. And at the side a fourth, the one whom he had trapped on the island.

Not one of those spiked heads rose to view him. But they knew that he was there; perhaps they had known the very instant he had left the room or cell in which they had shut him. And they were so very sure of themselves.... Once again Shann subdued a spark of anger. That same patience with its core of stubborn determination which had brought him to Warlock backed his moves now. The Terran swung down, landing lightly on his feet, facing the three

behind the table, towering well over them as he stood erect, yet gaining no sense of satisfaction from that merely physical fact.

“You have come.” The words sounded as if they might be a part of some polite formula. So he replied in kind and aloud.

“I have come.” Without waiting for their bidding, he dropped into the same cross-legged pose, fronting them now on a more equal level across their dead black table.

“And why have you come, star voyager?” That thought seemed to be a concentrated effort from all three rather than any individual questioning.

“And why did you bring me?” He hesitated, trying to think of some polite form of address. Those he knew which were appropriate to their sex on other worlds seemed incongruous when applied to the bizarre figures now facing him. “Wise ones,” he finally chose.

Those unblinking yellow eyes conveyed no emotion; certainly his human gaze could detect no change of expression on their nonhuman faces.

“You are a male.”

“I am,” he agreed, not seeing just what that fact had to do with either diplomatic fencing or his experiences of the immediate past.

“Where then is your thoughtguider?”

Shann puzzled over that conception, guessed at its meaning.

“I am my own thoughtguider,” he returned stoutly, with all the conviction he could manage to put into that reply.

Again he met a yellow-green stare, but he sensed a change in them. Some of their complacency had ebbed; his reply had been as a stone dropped into a quiet pool, sending ripples out afar to disturb the customary mirror surface of smooth serenity.

“The star-born one speaks the truth!” That came from the Warlockian who had been his first contact.

“It would appear that he does.” The agreement was measured, and Shann knew that he was meant to “overhear” that.

“It would seem, Readers-of-the-rods”—the middle one of the triumvirate at the table spoke now—“that all living things do not follow our pattern of life. But that is possible. A male who thinks for himself ... unguided, who dreams perhaps! Or who can understand the truth of dreaming! Strange indeed must be his people. Sharers-of-my-visions, let us consult the Old Ones concerning this.” For the first time one of those crested heads moved, the gaze shifted from Shann to the ranks of the skulls, pausing at one.

Shann, ready for any wonder, did not betray his amazement when the ivory inhabitant of that particular niche moved, lifted from its small compartment, and drifted buoyantly through the air to settle at the right-hand corner of the table. Only when it had safely grounded did the eyes of the Warlockian move to another niche on the other side of the curving room, this time bringing up from close to floor level a time-darkened skull to occupy the left corner of the table.

There was a third shifting from the weird storehouse, a last skull to place between the other two. And now the youngest native arose from her mat to bring a bowl of green crystal. One of her seniors took it in both hands, making a gesture of offering it to all three skulls, and then gazed over its rim at the Terran.

“We shall cast the rods, man-who-thinks-without-a-guide. Perhaps then we shall see how strong *your* dreams are—to be bent to your using, or to break you for your impudence.”

Her hands swayed the bowl from side to side, and there was an answering whisper from its interior as if the contents slid loosely there. Then one of her companions reached forward and gave a quick tap to the bottom of that container, spilling out upon the table a shower of brightly colored slivers each an inch or so long.

Shann, staring at the display in bewilderment, saw that in spite of the seeming carelessness of that toss the small needles had spread out on the blank surface to form a design in arrangement and color. And he wondered how that skillful trick had been accomplished.

All three of the Warlockians bent their heads to study the grouping of the tiny sticks, their young subordinate leaning forward also, her eagerness less well controlled than her elders'. And now it was as if a curtain had fallen between the Terran and the aliens, all sense of communication which had been with him since he had entered the skull-lined chamber was summarily cut off.

A hand moved, making the jeweled pattern—braceleting wrist and extending up the arm—flash subdued fire. Fingers swept the sticks back into the bowl; four pairs of yellow eyes raised to regard Shann once more, but the blanket of their withdrawal still held.

The youngest Warlockian took the bowl from the elder who held it, stood for a long moment with it resting between her palms, fixing Shann with an unreadable stare. Then she came toward him. One of those at the table put out a restraining hand.

This time Shann did *not* master his start as he heard the first audible voice which had not been his own. The skull at the left hand on the table, by its yellowed color the oldest of those summoned from the niches, was moving, moving because its jaws gaped and then snapped, emitting a faint bleat which might have been a word or two.

She who would have halted the young Warlockian's advance, withdrew her hand. Then her fingers curled in an unmistakable beckoning gesture. Shann came to the table, but he could not quite force himself near that chattering skull, even though it had stopped its jig of speech.

The bowl of sticks was offered to him. Still no message from mind to mind, but he could guess at what they wanted of him. The crystal substance was not cool to the touch as he had expected; rather it was warm, as living flesh might feel. And the colored sticks filled about two thirds of the interior, lying all mixed together without any order.

Shann concentrated on recalling the ceremony the Warlockian had used before the first toss. She had offered the bowl to the skulls in turn. The skulls! But he was no consulter of skulls. Still holding the bowl close to his chest, Shann looked up over the roofless walls at the star map on the roof of the cavern. There, that was Rama; and to its left, just a little above, was Tyr's system where swung the stark world of his birth, and of which he had only few good memories, but of which he was a part. The Terran raised the bowl to that spot of light which marked Tyr's pale sun.

Smiling with a wry twist, he lowered the bowl, and on impulse of pure defiance he offered it to the skull that had chattered. Immediately he realized that the move had had an electric effect upon the aliens. Slowly at first, and then faster, he began to swing the bowl from side to side, the needles slipping, mixing within. And as he swung it, Shann held it out over the expanse of the table.

The Warlockian who had given him the bowl was the one who struck it on the bottom, causing a rain of splinters. To Shann's astonishment, mixed as they had been in the container,



they once more formed a pattern, and not the same pattern the Warlockians had consulted earlier. The dampening curtain between them vanished; he was in touch mind to mind once again.

“So be it.” The center Warlockian spread out her four-fingered thumbless hands above the scattered needles. “What is read, is read.”

Again a formula. He caught a chorus of answer from the others.

“What is read, is read. To the dreamer the dream. Let the dream be known for what it is, and there is life. Let the dream encompass the dreamer falsely, and all is lost.”

“Who can question the wisdom of the Old Ones?” asked their leader. “We are those who read the messages they send, out of their mercy. This is a strange thing they bid us do, man—open for you our own initiates’ road to the veil of illusion. That way has never been for males, who dream without set purpose and have not the ability to know true from false, have not the courage to face their dreams to the truth. Do so—if you can!” There was a flash of mockery in that, combined with something else—stronger than distaste, not as strong as hatred, but certainly not friendly.

She held out her hands and Shann saw now, lying on a slowly closing palm, a disk such as the one Thorvald had shown him. The Terran had only one moment of fear and then came blackness, more absolute than the dark of any night he had ever known.

Light once more, green light with an odd shimmering quality to it. The skull-lined walls were gone; there were no walls, no building held him. Shann strode forward, and his boots sank in sand, that smooth, satin sand which had ringed the island in the cavern. But he was certain he was no longer on that island, even within that cavern, though far above him there was still a dome of roof.

The source of the green shimmer lay to his left. Somehow he found himself reluctant to turn and face it. That would commit him to action. But Shann turned.

A veil, a veil of rippling green. Material? No, rather mist or light. A veil depending from some source so far over his head that its origin was hidden in the upper gloom, a veil which was a barrier he must cross.

With every nerve protesting, Shann walked forward, unable to keep back. He flung up his arm to protect his face as he marched into that stuff. It was warm, and the gas—if gas it was—left no slick of moisture on his skin in spite of its foggy consistency. And it was no veil or curtain, for although he was already well into the murk, he saw no end to it. Blindly he trudged on, unable to sight anything but the rolling billows of green, pausing now and again to go down on one knee and pat the sand underfoot, reassured at the reality of that footing.

And when he met nothing menacing, Shann began to relax. His heart no longer labored; he made no move to draw the stunner or knife. Where he was and for what purpose, he had no idea. But there *was* a purpose in this and that the Warlockians were behind it, he did not doubt. The “initiates’ road,” the leader had said, and the conviction was steady in his mind that he faced some test of alien devising.

A cavern with a green veil—his memory awoke. Thorvald’s dream! Shann paused, trying to remember how the other had described this place. So he was enacting Thorvald’s dream! And could the Survey officer now be caught in Shann’s dream in turn, climbing up somewhere into the nose slit of a skull-shaped mountain?

Green fog without end, and Shann lost in it. How long had he been here? Shann tried to reckon time, the time since his coming into the water-world of the starred cavern. He realized

that he had not eaten, nor drank, nor desired to do so either—nor did he now. Yet he was not weak; in fact, he had never felt such tireless energy as possessed his spare body.

Was this *all* a dream? His threatened drowning in the underground stream a nightmare? Yet there was a pattern in this, just as there had been a pattern in the needles he had spilled across the table. One even led to another with discernible logic; because he had tossed that particular pattern he had come here.

According to the ambiguous instructions or warnings of the Warlockian witch, his safety in this place would depend upon his ability to tell true dreams from false. But how ... why? So far he had done nothing except walk through a green fog, and for all he knew, he might well be traveling in circles.

Because there was nothing else to do, Shann walked on, his boots pressing sand, rising from each step with a small sucking sound. Then, as he stooped to search for some indication of a path or road which might guide him, his ears caught the slightest of noises—other small sucking whispers. He was not the only wayfarer in this place!

## 13. He Who Dreams....

The mist was not a quiet thing; it billowed and curled until it appeared to half-conceal darker shadows, any one of which could be an enemy. Shann remained hunkered on the sand, every sense abnormally alert, watching the fog. He was still sure he could hear sounds which marked the progress of another. What other? One of the Warlockians tracking him to spy? Or was there some prisoner like himself lost out there in the murk? Could it be Thorvald?

Now the sound had ceased. He was not even sure from what direction it had first come. Perhaps that other was listening now, as intent upon locating him. Shann ran his tongue over dry lips. The impulse to call out, to try and contact any fellow traveler here, was strong. Only hard-learned caution kept him silent. He got to his hands and knees, uncertain as to his previous direction.

Shann crept. Someone expecting a man walking erect might be suitably distracted by the arrival of a half-seen figure on all fours. He halted again to listen.

He had been right! The sound of a very muffled footfall or footfalls, carried to his ears. He was sure that the sound was louder, that the unknown was approaching. Shann stood, his hand close to his stunner. He was almost tempted to spray that beam blindly before him, hoping to hit the unseen by chance.

A shadow—something more swift than a shadow, more than one of the tricks the curling fog played on eyes—was moving with purpose and straight for him. Still, prudence restrained Shann from calling out.

The figure grew clearer. A Terran! It could be Thorvald! But remembering how they had last parted, Shann did not hurry to meet him.

That shadow-shape stretched out a long arm in a sweep as if to pull aside some of the vapor concealing them from each other. Then Shann shivered as if that fog had suddenly turned into the drive of frigid snow. For the mist did roll back so that the two of them stood in an irregular clearing in its midst.

And he did not front Thorvald.

Shann was caught up in the ice grip of an old fear, frozen by it, but somehow clinging to a hope that he did not see the unbelievable.

Those hands drawing the lash of a whip back into striking readiness ... a brutal nose broken askew, a blaster burn puckering across cheek to misshapen ear ... that, evil, gloating grin of anticipation. Flick, flick, the slight dance of the lash in a master's hand as those thick fingers tightened about the stock of the whip. In a moment it would whirl up to lay a ribbon of fire about Shann's defenceless shoulders. Then Logally would laugh and laugh, his sadistic mirth echoed by those other men who played jackals to his rogue lion.

Other men.... Shann shook his head dazedly. But he did not stand again in the Dump-size bar of the Big Strike. And he was no longer a terrorized youngster, fit meat for Logally's amusement. Only the whip rose, the lash curled out, catching Shann just as it had that time years ago, delivering a red slash of pure agony. But Logally was dead, Shann's mind screamed, fighting frantically against the evidence of his eyes, of that pain in his chest and shoulder. The Dump bully had been spaced by off-world miners, now also dead, whose claims he had tried to jump out in the Ajax system.

Logally drew back the lash, preparing to strike again. Shann faced a man five years dead who walked and fought. Or, Shann bit hard upon his lower lip, holding desperately to sane reasoning—did he indeed face anything? Logally was the ancient devil of his boyhood produced anew by the witchery of Warlock. Or had Shann himself been led to recreate both the man and the circumstances of their first meeting with fear as a weapon to pull the creator down? Dream true or false. Logally *was* dead; therefore, this dream was false, it had to be.

The Terran began to walk toward that grinning ogre rising out of his old nightmares. His hand was no longer on the butt of his stunner, but swung loosely at his side. He saw the coming lash, the wicked promise in those small narrowed eyes. This was Logally at the acme of his strength, when he was most to be feared, as he had continued to exist over the years in the depths of a boy-child's memory. But Logally was *not* alive; only in a dream could he be.

For the second time the lash bit at Shann, curling about his body, to dissolve. There was no alteration in Logally's grin, His muscular arm drew back as he aimed a third blow. Shann continued to walk forward, bringing up one hand, not to strike at that sweating, bristly jaw, but as if to push the other out of his path. And in his mind he held one thought: this was not Logally; it could not be. Ten years had passed since they had met. And for five of those years Logally had been dead. Here was Warlockian witchery, to be met by sane Terran reasoning.

Shann was alone. The mist, which had formed walls, enclosed him again. But still there was a smarting brand across his shoulder. Shann drew aside the rags of his uniform blouse to discover a welt, raw and red. And seeing that, his unbelief was shaken.

When he had believed in Logally and in Logally's weapon, the other had had reality enough to strike that blow, make the lash cut deep. But when the Terran had faced the phantom with the truth, then neither Logally nor his lash existed, Shann shivered, trying not to think what might lie before him. Visions out of nightmares which could put on substance! He had dreamed of Logally in the past, many times. And he had had other dreams, just as frightening. Must he front those nightmares, all of them—? Why? To amuse his captors, or to prove their contention that he was a fool to challenge the powers of such mistresses of illusion?

How did they know just what dreams to use in order to break him? Or did he himself furnish the actors and the action, projecting old terrors in this mist as a tri-dee tape projected a story in three dimensions for the amusement of the viewer?

Dream true—was this progress through the mist also a dream? Dreams within dreams.... Shann put his hand to his head, uncertain, badly shaken. But that stubborn core of determination within him was still holding. Next time he would be prepared at once to face down any resurrected memory.

Walking slowly, pausing to listen for the slightest sound which might herald the coming of a new illusion, Shann tried to guess which of his nightmares might come to face him. But he was to learn that there was more than one kind of dream. Steeled against old fears, he was met by another emotion altogether.

There was a fluttering in the air, a little crooning cry which pulled at his heart. Without any conscious thought, Shann held out his hands, whistling on two notes a call which his lips appeared to remember more quickly than his mind. The shape which winged through the fog came straight to his waiting hold, tore at long-walled-away hurt with its once familiar beauty. It flew with a list; one of the delicately tinted wings was injured, had never healed straight. But the seraph nestled into the hollow of Shann's two palms and looked up at him with all the old liquid trust.

“Trav! Trav!” He cradled the tiny creature carefully, regarded with joy its feathered body, the curled plumes on its proudly held head, felt the silken patting of those infinitesimal claws against his protecting fingers.

Shann sat down in the sand, hardly daring to breathe. Trav—again! The wonder of this never-to-be-hoped-for return filled him with a surge of happiness almost too great to bear, which hurt in its way with as great a pain as Logally’s lash; it was a pain rooted in love, not fear and hate.

Logally’s lash....

Shann trembled. Trav raised one of those small claws toward the Terran’s face, crooning a soft caressing cry for recognition, for protection, trying to be a part of Shann’s life once more.

Trav! How could he bear to will Trav into nothingness, to bear to summon up another harsh memory which would sweep Trav away? Trav was the only thing Shann had ever known which he could love wholeheartedly, that had answered his love with a return gift of affection so much greater than the light body he now held.

“Trav!” he whispered softly. Then he made his great effort against this second and far more subtle attack. With the same agony which he had known years earlier, he resolutely summoned a bitter memory, sat nursing once more a broken thing which died in pain he could not ease, aware himself of every moment of that pain. And what was worse, this time there clung that nagging little doubt. What if he had not forced the memory? Perhaps he could have taken Trav with him unhurt, alive, at least for a while.

Shann covered his face with his now empty hands. To see a nightmare flicker out after facing squarely up to its terror, that was no great task. To give up a dream which was part of a lost heaven, that cut cruelly deep. The Terran dragged himself to his feet, drained and weary, stumbling on.

Was there no end to this aimless circling through a world of green smoke? He shambled ahead, moving his feet leadenly. How long had he been here? There was no division in time, just the unchanging light which was a part of the fog through which he plodded.

Then he heard more than any shuffle of foot across sand, any crooning of a long dead seraph, the rising and falling of a voice: a human voice—not quite singing or reciting, but something between the two. Shann paused, searching his memory, a memory which seemed bruised, for the proper answer to match that sound.

But, though he recalled scene after scene out of the years, that voice did not trigger any return from his past. He turned toward its source, dully determined to get over quickly the meeting which lay behind that signal. Only, though he walked on and on, Shann did not appear any closer to the man behind the voice, nor was he able to make out separate words composing that chant, a chant broken now and then by pauses, so that the Terran grew aware of the distress of his fellow prisoner. For the impression that he sought another captive came out of nowhere and grew as he cast wider and wider in his quest.

Then he might have turned some invisible corner in the mist, for the chant broke out anew in stronger volume, and now he was able to distinguish words he knew.

“... where blow the winds between the worlds,

And hang the suns in dark of space.

For Power is given a man to use.

Let him do so well before the last accounting—”

The voice was hoarse, cracked, the words spaced with uneven catches of breath, as if they had been repeated many, many times to provide an anchor against madness, form a tie to reality. And hearing that note, Shann slowed his pace. This was out of no memory of his; he was sure of that.

“... blow the winds between the worlds,  
And hang the suns in ... dark—of—of—”

That harsh croak of voice was running down, as a clock runs down for lack of winding. Shann sped on, reacting to a plea which did not lay in the words themselves.

Once more the mist curled back, provided him with an open space. A man sat on the sand, his fists buried wrist deep in the smooth grains on either side of his body, his eyes set, red-rimmed, glazed, his body rocking back and forth in time to his labored chant.

“... the dark of space—”

“Thorvald!” Shann skidded in the sand, went down on his knees. The manner of their last parting was forgotten as he took in the officer’s condition.

The other did not stop his swaying, but his head turned with a stiff jerk, the gray eyes making a visible effort to focus on Shann. Then some of the strain smoothed out of the gaunt features and Thorvald laughed softly.

“Garth!”

Shann stiffened but had no chance to protest that mistaken identification as the other continued: “So you made class one status, boy! I always knew you could if you’d work for it. A couple of black marks on your record, sure. But those can be rubbed out, boy, when you’re willing to try. Thorvalds always have been Survey. Our father would have been proud.”

Thorvald’s voice flattened, his smile faded, there was a growing spark of some emotion in those gray eyes. Unexpectedly, he hurled himself forward, his hands clawing for Shann’s throat. He bore the younger man down under him to the sand where Lantee found himself fighting desperately for his life against a man who could only be mad.

Shann used a trick learned on the Dumps, and his opponent doubled up with a gasp of agony to let the younger man break free. He planted a knee on the small of Thorvald’s back, digging the officer into the sand, pinning down his arms in spite of the other’s struggles. Regaining his own breath in gulps, Shann tried to appeal to some spark of reason in the other.

“Thorvald! This is Lantee—Lantee——” His name echoed in the mist-walled void like an unhuman wail.

“Lantee——? No, Throg! Lantee—Throg—killed my brother!”

Sand puffed out with the breath, which expelled that indictment. But Thorvald no longer fought, and Shann believed him close to collapse.

Shann relaxed his hold, rolling the other man over. Thorvald obeyed his pull limply, lying face upward, sand in his hair and eyebrows, crusting his slack lips. The younger man brushed the dirt away gently as the other opened his eyes to regard Shann with his old impersonal stare.

“You’re alive,” Thorvald stated bleakly. “Garth’s dead. You ought to be dead too.”

Shann drew back, rubbed sand from his hands, his concern dampened by the other's patent hostility. Only that angry accusation vanished in a blink of those gray eyes. Then there was a warmer recognition in Thorvald's expression.

"Lantee!" The younger man might just have come into sight. "What are you doing here?"

Shann tightened his belt. "Just about what you are." He was still aloof, giving no acknowledgment of difference in rank now. "Running around in this fog hunting the way out."

Thorvald sat up, surveying the billowing walls of the hole which contained them. Then he reached out a hand to draw fingers down Shann's forearm.

"You *are* real," he observed simply, and his voice was warm, welcoming.

"Don't bet on it," Shann snapped. "The unreal can be mighty real—here." His hand went up to the smarting brand on his shoulder.

Thorvald nodded. "Masters of illusion," he murmured.

"Mistresses," Shann corrected. "This place is run by a gang of pretty smart witches."

"Witches? You've seen them? Where? And what—who are they?" Thorvald pounced with a return of his old-time sharpness.

"They're females right enough, and they can make the impossible happen. I'd say that classifies them as witches. One of them tried to take me over back on the island. I set a trap and caught her; then somehow she transported me——" Swiftly he outlined the chain of events leading from his sudden awakening in the river tunnel to his present penetration of this fog-world.

Thorvald listened eagerly. When the story was finished, he rubbed his hands across his drawn face, smearing away the last of the sand. "At least you have some idea of who they are and a suggestion of how you got here. I don't remember that much about my own arrival. As far as I can remember I went to sleep on the Island and woke up here!"

Shann studied him and knew that Thorvald was telling the truth. He could remember nothing of his departure in the outrigger, the way he had fought Shann in the lagoon. The Survey officer must have been under the control of the Warlockians then. Quickly he gave the older man his version of the other's actions in the outer world and Thorvald was clearly astounded, though he did not question the facts Shann presented.

"They just *took* me!" Thorvald said in a husky half whisper. "But why? And why are we here? Is this a prison?"

Shann shook his head. "I think all this"—a wave of his hand encompassed the green wall, what lay beyond it, and in it—"is a test of some kind. This dream business.... A little while ago I got to thinking that I wasn't here at all, that I might be dreaming it all. Then I met you."

Thorvald understood. "Yes, but this *could* be a dream meeting. How can we tell?" He hesitated, almost diffidently, before he asked: "Have you met anyone else here?"

"Yes." Shann had no desire to go into that.

"People out of your past life?"

"Yes." Again he did not elaborate.

“So did I.” Thorvald’s expression was bleak; his encounters in the fog must have proved no more pleasant than Shann’s. “That suggests that we do trigger the hallucinations ourselves. But maybe we can really lick it now.”

“How?”

“Well, if these phantoms are born of our memories there are about only two or three we could see together—maybe a Throg on the rampage, or that hound we left back in the mountains. And if we do sight anything like that, we’ll know what it is. On the other hand, if we stick together and one of us sees something that the other can’t ... well, that fact alone will explode the ghost.”

There was sense in what he said. Shann aided the officer to his feet.

“I must be a better subject for their experiments than you,” the older man remarked ruefully. “They took me over completely at the first.”

“You were carrying that disk,” Shann pointed out. “Maybe that acted as a focusing lens for whatever power they use to make us play trained animals.”

“Could be!” Thorvald brought out the cloth-wrapped bone coin. “I still have it.” But he made no move to pull off the bit of rag about it. “Now”—he gazed at the wall of green—“which way?”

Shann shrugged. Long ago he had lost any idea of keeping a straight course through the murk. He might have turned around any number of times since he first walked blindly into this place. Then he pointed to the packet Thorvald held.

“Why not flip that?” he asked. “Heads, we go that way—” he indicated the direction in which they were facing—“tails, we do a rightabout-face.”

There was an answering grin on Thorvald’s lips. “As good a guide as any we’re likely to find here. We’ll do it.” He pulled away the twist of cloth and with a swift snap, reminiscent of that used by the Warlockian witch to empty the bowl of sticks, he tossed the disk into the air.

It spun, whirled, but—to their open-jawed amazement—it did not fall to the sand. Instead it spun until it looked like a small globe instead of a disk. And it lost its dead white for a glow of green. When that glow became dazzling for Terran eyes the miniature sun swung out, not in orbit but in straight line of flight, heading to their right.

With a muffled cry, Thorvald started in pursuit, Shann running beside him. They were in a tunnel of the fog now, and the pace set by the spinning coin was swift. The Terrans continued to follow it at the best pace they could summon, having no idea of where they were headed, but each with the hope that they finally did have a guide to lead them through this place of confusion and into a sane world where they could face on more equal terms those who had sent them there.



## 14. Escape

“Something ahead!” Thorvald did not slacken the pace set by the brilliant spot of green they trailed. Both of the Terrans feared to fall behind, to lose touch with that guide. Their belief that somehow the traveling disk would bring them to the end of the mist and its attendant illusions had grown firmer with every foot of ground they traversed.

A dark, fixed point, now partly veiled by mist, lay beyond, and it was toward that looming half-shadow that the spinning disk hurtled. Now the mist curled away to display its bulk—larger, blacker and four or five times Thorvald’s height. Both men stopped short, for the disk no longer played pathfinder. It still whirled on its axis in the air, faster and faster, until it appeared to be throwing off sparks, but the sparks faded against a monolith of dark rock unlike the native stone they had seen elsewhere. For it was neither red nor warmly brown, but a dull, dead black. It could have been a huge stone slab, trimmed, smoothed, set up on end as a monument or marker, except that only infinite labor could have accomplished such a task, and there was no valid reason for such toil as far as the Terrans could perceive.

“This is it.” Thorvald moved closer.

By the disk’s action, they deduced that their guide had drawn them to this featureless black steel with the precision of a beam-controlled ship. However, the purpose still eluded them. They had hoped for some exit from the territory of the veil, but now they faced a solid slab of dark stone, neither a conventional exit or entrance, as they proved by circling its base. Beneath their boots was the eternal sand, around them the fog.

“Now what?” Shann asked. They had made their trip about the slab and were back again where the disk whirled with unceasing vigor in a shower of emerald sparks.

Thorvald shook his head, scanning the rock face before them glumly. The eagerness had gone out of his expression, a vast weariness replacing it.

“There must have been some purpose in coming here,” he replied, but his tone had lost the assurance of moments earlier.

“Well, if we strike away from here, we’ll just get right back in again.” Shann waved a hand toward the mist, waiting as if with a hunter’s watch upon them. “And we certainly can’t go down.” He dug a boot toe into the sand to demonstrate the folly of that. “So, what about up?”

He ducked under the spinning disk to lay his hands against the surface of the giant slab. And in so doing he made a discovery, revealed to his touch although hidden from sight. For his fingers, running aimlessly across the cold, slightly uneven surface of the stone, slipped into a hollow, quite a deep hollow.

Excited, half fearing that his sudden guess might be wrong, Shann slid his hand higher in line with that hollow, to discover a second. The first had been level with his chest, the second perhaps eighteen inches or so above. He jumped, to draw his fingers down the rock, with damage to his nails but getting his proof. There *was* a third niche, deep enough to hold more than just the toe of a boot, and a fourth above that...

“We’ve a ladder of sorts here,” he reported. Without waiting for any answer from Thorvald, Shann began to climb. The holds were so well matched in shape and size that he was sure they could not be natural; they had been bored there for use—the use to which he was now putting them—a ladder to the top of the slab. Though what he might find there was beyond his power to imagine.

The disk did not rise. Shann passed that core of light, climbing above it into the greater gloom. But the holes did not fail him; each was waiting in a direct line with its companion. And to an active man the scramble was not difficult. He reached the summit, glanced around, and made a quick grab for a secure handhold.

Waiting for him was no level platform such as he had confidently expected to find. The surface up which he had just made his way fly-fashion was the outer wall of a well or chimney. He looked down now into a pit where black nothingness began within a yard of the top, for the radiance of the mist did not penetrate far into that descent.

Shann fought an attack of giddiness. It would be very easy to lose control, to tumble over and be swallowed up in what might well be a bottomless chasm. And what was the purpose of this well? Was it a trap to entice a prisoner into an unwary climb and then let gravity drag him over? The whole setup was meaningless. Perhaps meaningless only to him, Shann conceded, with a flash of level thinking. The situation could be quite different as far as the natives were concerned. This structure did have a reason, or it would never have been erected in the first place.

“What’s the matter?” Thorvald’s voice was rough with impatience.

“This thing’s a well.” Shann edged about a fraction to call back. “The inside is open and—as far as I can tell—goes clear to the planet’s core.”

“Ladder on the inside too?”

Shann squirmed. That was, of course, a very obvious supposition. He kept a tight hold with his left hand, and with the other, he did some exploring. Yes, here was a hollow right enough, twin to those on the outside. But to swing over that narrow edge of safety and begin a descent into the black of the well was far harder than any action he had taken since the morning the Throgs had raided the camp. The green mist could hold no terrors greater than those with which his imagination peopled the depths now waiting to engulf him. But Shann swung over, fitted his boot into the first hollow, and started down.

The only encouragement he gained during that nightmare ordeal was that those holes were regularly spaced. But somehow his confidence did not feed on that fact. There always remained the nagging fear that when he searched for the next it would not be there and he would cling to his perch lacking the needful strength in aching arms and legs to reascend the inside ladder.

He was fast losing that sense of well being which had been his during his travels through the fog; a fatigue tugged at his arms and weighed leaden on his shoulders. Mechanically he prospected for the next hold, and then the next. Above, the oblong of half-light grew smaller and smaller, sometimes half blotted out by the movements of Thorvald’s body as the other followed him down that interior way.

How far *was* down? Shann giggled lightheadedly at the humor of that, or what seemed to be humor at the moment. He was certain that they were now below the level of the sand floor outside the slab. And yet no end had come to the well hollow.

No break of light down here; he might have been sightless. But just as the blind develop an extra perceptive sense of unseen obstacles, so did Shann now find that he was aware of a change in the nature of the space about him. His weary arms and legs held him against the solidity of a wall, yet the impression that there was no longer another wall at his back grew stronger with every niche which swung him downward. And he was as sure as if he could see it, that he was now in a wide-open space, another cavern; perhaps, but this one totally dark.

Deprived of sight, he relied upon his ears. And there was a sound, faint, distorted perhaps by the acoustics of this place, but keeping up a continuous murmur. Water! Not the wash of waves with their persistent beat, but rather the rippling of a running stream. Water must lie below!

And just as his weariness had grown with his leaving behind the fog, so now did both hunger and thirst gnaw at Shann, all the sharper for the delay. The Terran wanted to reach that water, could picture it in his mind, putting away the possibility—the probability—that it might be sea-born and salt, and so unfit to drink.

The upper opening to the cavern of the fog was now so far above him that he had to strain to see it. And that warmth which had been there was gone. A dank chill wrapped him here, dampened the holds to which he clung until he was afraid of slipping. While the murmur of the water grew louder, until its *slap-slap* sounded within arms' distance. His boot toe skidded from a niche. Shann fought to hold on with numbed fingers. The other foot went. He swung by his hands, kicking vainly to regain a measure of footing.

Then his arms could no longer support him, and he cried out as he fell. Water closed about him with an icy shock which for a moment paralyzed him. He flailed out, fighting the flood to get his head above the surface where he could gasp in precious gulps of air.

There was a current here, a swiftly running one. Shann remembered the one which had carried him into that cavern in which the Warlockians had their strange dwelling. Although there were no clusters of crystals in this tunnel to supply him with light, the Terran began to nourish a faint hope that he was again in that same stream, that those light crystals would appear, and that he might eventually return to the starting point of this meaningless journey.

So he strove only to keep his head above water. Hearing a splashing behind him, he called out: "Thorvald?"

"Lantee?" The answer came back at once; the splashing grew louder as the other swam to catch up.

Shann swallowed a mouthful of the water lapping against his chin. The taste was brackish, but not entirely salt, and though it stung his lips, the liquid relieved a measure of his thirst.

Only no glowing crystals appeared to stud these walls, and Shann's hope that they were on their way to the cavern of the island faded. The current grew swifter, and he had to fight to keep his head above water, his tired body reacting sluggishly to commands.

The murmur of the racing flood drummed louder in his ears, or was that sound the same? He could no longer be sure. Shann only knew that it was close to impossible to snatch the necessary breath as he was rolled over and over in the hurrying flood.

In the end he was ejected into blazing, blinding light, into a suffocation of wild water as the bullet in an ancient Terran rifle might have been fired at no specific target. Gasping, beaten, more than half-drowned, Shann was pummeled by waves, literally driven up on a rocky surface which skinned his body cruelly. He lay there, his arms moving feebly until he contrived to raise himself in time to be wretchedly sick. Somehow he crawled on a few feet farther before he subsided again, blinded by the light, flinching from the heat of the rocks on which he lay, but unable to do more for himself.

His first coherent thought was that his speculation concerning the reality of this experience was at last resolved. This could not possibly be an hallucination; at least this particular sequence of events was not. And he was still hazily considering that when a hand fell on his shoulder, fingers biting into his raw flesh.

Shann snarled, rolled over on his side. Thorvald, water dripping from his rags—or rather steaming from them—his shaggy hair plastered to his skull, sat there.

“You all right?”

Shann sat up in turn, shielding his smarting eyes. He was bruised, battered badly enough, but he could claim no major injuries.

“I think so. Where are we?”

Thorvald’s lips stretched across his teeth in what was more a grimace than a smile. “Right off the map, any map I know. Take a look.”

They were on a scrap of beach—beach which was more like a reef, for it lacked any covering comparable to sand except for some cupfuls of coarse gravel locked in rock depressions. Rocks, red as the rust of dried blood, rose in fantastic water-sculptured shapes around the small semi-level space they had somehow won.

This space was V-shaped, washed by equal streams on either side of the prong of rock by water which spouted from the face of a sheer cliff not too far away, with force enough to spray several feet beyond its exit point. Shann seeing that and guessing at its significance, drew a deep breath, and heard the ghost of an answering chuckle from his companion.

“Yes, that’s where we came out, boy. Like to make a return trip?”

Shann shook his head, and then wished that he had not so rashly made that move, for the world swung in a dizzy whirl. Things had happened too fast. For the moment it was enough that they were out of the underground ways, back under the amber sky, feeling the bite of Warlock’s sun.

Steadying his head with both hands, Shann turned slowly, to survey what might lie at their backs. The water, pouring by on either side, suggested that they were again on an island. Warlock, he thought gloomily, seemed to be for Terrans a succession of islands, all hard to escape.

The tangle of rocks did not encourage any exploration. Just gazing at them added to his weariness. They rose, tier by tier, to a ragged crown against the sky. Shann continued to sit staring at them.

“To climb that....” His voice trailed into the silence of complete discouragement.

“You climb—or swim,” Thorvald stated. But, Shann noted, the Survey officer was not in a hurry to make either move.

Nowhere in that wilderness of rock was there the least relieving bit of purple foliage. Nor did any clak-claks or leather-headed birds tour the sky over their heads. Shann’s thirst might have been partially assuaged, but his hunger remained. And it was that need which forced him at last into action. The barren heights promised nothing in the way of food, but remembering the harvest the wolverines had taken from under the rocks along the river, he got to his feet and lurched out on the reef which had been their salvation, hunting some pool which might hold an edible captive or two.

So it was that Shann made the discovery of a possible path consisting of a ledge running toward the other end of the island, if this were an island where they had taken refuge. The spray of the water drenched that way, feeding small pools in the uneven surface, and strips of yellow weed trailed in slimy ribbons back below the surface of the waves.

He called to Thorvald and gestured to his find. And then, close together, linking hands when the going became hazardous, the men followed the path. Twice they made finds in the pools,

finned or clawed grotesque creatures, which they killed and ate, wolfing down the few fragments of odd-tasting flesh. Then, in a small crevice, which could hardly be dignified by the designation of “cave,” Thorvald chanced upon a quite exciting discovery—a clutch of four greenish eggs, each as large as his doubled fist.

Their outer covering was more like tough membrane than true shell, and the Terrans worried it open with difficulty. Shann shut his eyes, trying not to think of what he mouthed as he sucked his share dry. At least that semi-liquid stayed put in his middle, though he expected disastrous results from the experiment.

More than a little heartened by this piece of luck, they kept on, though the ledge changed from a reasonably level surface to a series of rising, unequal steps, drawing them away from the water. At long last they came to the end of that path. Shann leaned back against a convenient spur of rock.

“Company!” he alerted Thorvald.

The Survey officer joined him to share an outcrop of rock from which they were provided with an excellent view of the scene below, and it was a scene to hold their full attention.

That soft sweep of sand which had floored the cavern of the fog lay here also, a gray-blue carpet sloping gently out of the sea. For Shann had no doubt that the wide stretch of water before them was the western ocean. Walling the beach on either side, and extending well out into the water so that the farthest piles were awash except for their crowns, were pillars of stone, shaped with the same finish as that slab which had provided them a ladder of escape. And because of the regularity of their spacing, Shann did not believe them works of nature.

Grouped between them now were the players of the drama. One of the Warlockian witches, her gem body patterns glittering in the sunlight, was walking backward out of the sea, her hands held palms together, breast high, in a Terran attitude of prayer. And following her something swam in the water, clearly not another of her own species. But her actions suggested that by some invisible means she was drawing that water dweller after her. Waiting on shore were two others of her kind, viewing her actions with close attention, the attention of scholars for an instructor.

“Wyverns!”

Shann looked inquiringly at his companion. Thorvald added a whisper of explanation. “A legend of Terra—they were supposed to have a snake’s tail instead of hind legs, but the heads.... They’re Wyverns!”

Wyverns. Shann liked the sound of that word; to his mind it well fitted the Warlockian witches. And the one they were watching in action continued her steady backward retreat, rolling her bemused captive out of the water. What emerged into the blaze of sunlight was one of those fork-tailed sea dwellers such as the Terrans had seen die after the storm. The thing crawled out of the shallows, its eyes focused in a blind stare on the praying hands of the Wyvern.

She halted, well up on the sand, when the body of her victim or prisoner—Shann was certain that the fork-tail was one or the other—was completely out of the water. Then, with lightning speed, she dropped her hands.

Instantly fork-tail came to life. Fanged jaws snapped. Aroused, the beast was the incarnation of evil rage, a rage which had a measure of intelligence to direct it into deadly action. And facing it, seemingly unarmed and defenseless, were the slender, fragile Wyverns.

Yet none of the small group of natives made any attempt to escape. Shann thought them suicidal in their indifference as fork-tail, short legs sending the fine sand flying in a dust cloud, made a rush toward its enemies.

The Wyvern who had led the beast ashore did not move. But one of her companions swung up a hand, as if negligently waving the monster to a stop. Between her first two digits was a disk. Thorvald caught at Shann's arm.

"See that! It's a copy of the one I had; it must be!"

They were too far away to be sure it was a duplicate, but it was coin-shaped and bone-white. And now the Wyvern swung it back and forth in a metronome sweep. Fork-tail skidded to a stop, its head beginning—reluctantly at first, and then, with increasing speed—to echo that left-right sweep. This Wyvern had the sea beast under control, even as her companion had earlier held it.

Chance dictated what happened next. As had her sister charmer, the Wyvern began a backward withdrawal up the length of the beach, drawing the sea thing in her wake. They were very close to the foot of the drop above which the Terrans stood, fascinated, when the sand betrayed the witch. Her foot slipped into a hole and she was thrown backward, her control disk spinning out of her fingers.

At once the monster she had charmed shot forth its head, snapped at that spinning trifle—and swallowed it. Then the fork-tail hunched in a posture Shann had seen the wolverines use when they were about to spring. The weaponless Wyvern was the prey, and both her companions were too far away to interfere. Why he moved he could not have explained. There was no reason for him to go to the aid of the Warlockian, one of the same breed who had ruled him against his will. But Shann sprang, landing in the sand on his hands and knees. The sea thing whipped around, undecided between two possible victims. Shann had his knife free, was on his feet, his eyes on the beast's, knowing that he had appointed himself dragon slayer for no good reason.

## 15. Dragon Slayer

“Ayeeee!” Sheer defiance, not only of the beast he fronted, but of the Wyverns as well, brought that old rallying cry to his lips—the call used on the Dumps of Tyr to summon gang aid against outsiders. Fork-tail had crouched again for a spring, but that throat-crackling blast appeared to startle it.

Shann, blade ready, took a dancing step to the right. The thing was scaled, perhaps as well armored against frontal attack as was the shell-creature he had fought with the aid of the wolverines. He wished he had the Terran animals now—with Taggi and his mate to tease and feint about the monster, as they had done with the Throg hound—for he would have a better chance. If only the animals were here!

Those eyes—red-pitted eyes in a gargoyle head following his every movement—perhaps those were the only vulnerable points.

Muscles tensed beneath that scaled hide. The Terran readied himself for a sidewise leap, his knife hand raised to rake at those eyes. A brown shape with a V of lighter fur banding its back crossed the far range of Shann’s vision. He could not believe what he saw, not even when a snarling animal, slavering with rage, came at a lumbering gallop to stand beside him, a second animal on its heels.

Uttering his own battle cry, Taggi attacked. The fork-tail’s head swung, imitating the movements of the wolverine as it had earlier mimicked the swaying of the disk in the Wyvern’s hand. Togi came in from the other side. They might have been hounds keeping a bull in play. And never had they shown such perfect team work, almost as if they could sense what Shann desired of them.

That forked tail lashed viciously, a formidable weapon. Bone, muscles, scaled flesh, half buried in the sand, swept up a cloud of grit into the face of the man and the animals. Shann fell back, pawing with his free hand at his eyes. The wolverines circled warily, trying for the attack they favored—the spring to the shoulders, the usually fatal assault on the spine behind the neck. But the armored head of the fork-tail, slung low, warned them off. Again the tail lashed, and this time Taggi was caught and hurled across the beach.

Togi uttered a challenge, made a reckless dash, and raked down the length of the fork-tail’s body, fastening on that tail, weighing it to earth with her own poundage while the sea creature fought to dislodge her. Shann, his eyes watering from the sand, but able to see, watched that battle for a long second, judging that fork-tail was completely engaged in trying to free its best weapon from the grip of the wolverine. The latter clawed and bit with a fury which suggested Togi intended to immobilize that weapon by tearing it to shreds.

Fork-tail wrenched its body, striving to reach its tormentor with fangs or clawed feet. And in that struggle to achieve an impossible position, its head slued far about, uncovering the unprotected area behind the skull base which usually lay under the spiny collar about its shoulders.

Shann went in. With one hand he gripped the edge of that collar—its serrations tearing his flesh—and at the same time he drove his knife blade deep into the soft underfolds, ripping on toward the spinal column. The blade nicked against bone as the fork-tail’s head slammed back, catching Shann’s hand and knife together in a trap. The Terran was jerked from his feet, and flung to one side with the force of the beast’s reaction.

Blood spurted up, his own blood mingled with that of the monster. Only Togi's riding of the tail prevented Shann's being beaten to death. The armored snout pointed skyward as the creature ground the sharp edge of its collar down on the Terran's arm. Shann, frantic with pain, drove his free fist into one of those eyes.

Fork-tail jerked convulsively; its head snapped down again and Shann was free. The Terran threw himself back, keeping his feet with an effort. Fork-tail was writhing, churning up the sand in a cloud. But it could not rid itself of the knife Shann had planted with all his strength, and which the blows of its own armored collar were now driving deeper and deeper into its back.

It howled thinly, with an abnormal shrilling. Shann, nursing his bleeding forearm against his chest, rolled free from the waves of sand it threw about, bringing up against one of the rock pillars. With that to steady him, he somehow found his feet, and stood weaving, trying to see through the rain of dust.

The convulsions which churned up that concealing cloud were growing more feeble. Then Shann heard the triumphant squall from Togi, saw her brown body still on the torn tail just above the forking. The wolverine used her claws to hitch her way up the spine of the sea monster, heading for the mountain of blood spouting from behind the head. Fork-tail fought to raise that head once more; then the massive jaw thudded into the sand, teeth snapping fruitlessly as a flood of grit overrode the tongue, packed into the gaping mouth.

How long had it taken—that frenzy of battle on the bloodstained beach? Shann could have set no limit in clock-ruled time. He pressed his wounded arm tighter to him, lurched past the still twitching sea thing to that splotch of brown fur on the sand, shaping the wolverine's whistle with dry lips. Togi was still busy with the kill, but Taggi lay where that murderous tail had thrown him.

Shann fell on his knees, as the beach around him developed a curious tendency to sway. He put his good hand to the ruffled back fur of the motionless wolverine.

“Taggi!”

A slight quiver answered. Shann tried awkwardly to raise the animal's head with his own hand. As far as he could see, there were no open wounds; but there might be broken bones, internal injuries he did not have the skill to heal.

“Taggi?” He called again gently, striving to bring that heavy head up on his knee.

“The furred one is not dead.”

For a moment Shann was not aware that those words had formed in his mind, had not been heard by his ears. He looked up, eyes blazing at the Wyvern coming toward him in a graceful glide across the crimsoned sand. And in a space of heartbeats his thrust of anger cooled into a stubborn enmity.

“No thanks to you,” he said deliberately aloud. If the Wyvern witch wanted to understand him, let her make the effort; he did not try to touch her thoughts with his.

Taggi stirred again, and Shann glanced down quickly. The wolverine gasped, opened his eyes, shook his miniature bear head, scattering pellets of sand. He sniffed at a dollop of blood, the dark, alien blood, spattered on Shann's breeches, and then his head came up with a reassuring alertness as he looked to where his mate was still worrying the now quiet fork-tail.

With an effort, Taggi got to his feet, Shann aiding him. The man ran his hand down over ribs, seeking any broken bones. Taggi growled a warning once when that examination brought



pain in its wake, but Shann could detect no real damage. As might a cat, the wolverine must have met the shock of that whip-tail stroke relaxed enough to escape serious injury. Taggi had been knocked out, but now he was able to navigate again. He pulled free from Shann's grip, lumbering across the sand to the kill.

Someone else was crossing that strip of beach. Passing the Wyvern as if he did not see them, Thorvald came directly to Shann. A few seconds later he had the torn arm stretched across his own bent knee, examining the still bleeding hurt.

"That's a nasty one," he commented.

Shann heard the words and they made sense, but the instability of his surroundings was increasing, while Thorvald's handling sent sharp stabs of pain up his arm and somehow into his head, where they ended in red bursts to cloud his sight.

Out of the reddish mist which had fogged most of the landscape there emerged a single object, a round white disk. And in Shann's clouded mind a well-rooted apprehension stirred. He struck out with his one hand, and through luck connected. The disk flew out of sight. His vision cleared enough so he could sight the Wyvern who had been leaning over Thorvald's shoulder centering her weird weapon on him. Making a great effort, Shann got out the words, words which he also shaped in his mind as he said them aloud: "You're not taking me over—again!"

There was no emotion to be read on that jewel-banded face or in her unblinking eyes. He caught at Thorvald, determined to get across his warning.

"Don't let them use those disks on us!"

"I'll do my best."

Only the haze had taken Thorvald again. Did one of the Wyverns have a disk focused on them? Were they being pulled into one of those blank periods, to awaken as prisoners once more—say, in the cavern of the veil? The Terran fought with every ounce of will power to escape unconsciousness, but he failed.

This time he did not awaken half-drowning in an underground stream or facing a green mist. And there was an ache in his arm which was somehow reassuring with the very insistence of pain. Before opening his eyes, his fingers crossed the smooth slick of a bandage there, went on to investigate by touch a sleep mat such as he had found in the cavern structure. Was he back in that web of rooms and corridors?

Shann delayed opening his eyes until a kind of shame drove him to it. He first saw an oval opening almost the length of his body as it was stretched only a foot or two below the sill of that window. And through its transparent surface came the golden light of the sun—no green mist, no crystals mocking the stars.

The room in which he lay was small with smooth walls, much like that in which he had been imprisoned on the island. And there were no other furnishings save the mat on which he rested. Over him was a light cover netted of fibers resembling yarn, with feathers knotted into it to provide a downy upper surface. His clothing was gone, but the single covering was too warm and he pushed it away from his shoulders and chest as he wriggled up to see the view beyond the window.

His torn arm came into full view. From wrist to elbow it was encased in an opaque skin sheath, unlike any bandage of his own world. Surely that had not come out of any Survey aid pack. Shann gazed toward the window, but beyond lay only a reach of sky. Except for a lemon cloud or two ruffled high above the horizon, nothing broke that soft amber curtain. He

might be quartered in a tower well above ground level, which did not match his former experience with Wyvern accommodations.

“Back with us again?” Thorvald, one hand lifting a door panel, came in. His ragged uniform was gone, and he wore only breeches of a sleek green material and his own scuffed-and-battered boots.

Shann settled back on the mat. “Where are we?”

“I think you might term this the capital city,” Thorvald answered. “In relation to the mainland, we’re on an island well out to sea—westward.”

“How did we get here?” That climb in the slab, the stream underground.... Had it been an interior river running under the bed of the sea? But Shann was not prepared for the other’s reply.

“By wishing.”

“By *what*?”

Thorvald nodded, his expression serious. “They wished us here. Listen, Lantee, when you jumped down to mix it with that fork-tailed thing, did you wish you had the wolverines with you?”

Shann thought back; his memories of what had occurred before that battle were none too clear. But, yes, he had wished Taggi and Togi present at that moment to distract the enraged beast.

“You mean I wished them?” The whole idea was probably a part of the Wyvern jargon of dreaming and he added, “Or did I just dream everything?” There was the bandage on his arm, the soreness under that bandage. But also there had been Logally’s lash brand back in the cavern, which had bitten into his flesh with the pain of a real blow.

“No, you weren’t dreaming. You happened to be tuned in one of those handy little gadgets our lady friends here use. And, so tuned in, your desire for the wolverines being pretty powerful just then, they came.”

Shann grimaced. This was unbelievable. Yet there were his meetings with Logally and Trav. How could anyone rationally explain them? And how had he, in the beginning, been jumped from the top of the cliff on the island of his marooning into the midst of an underground flood without any conscious memory of an intermediate journey?

“How does it work?” he asked simply.

Thorvald laughed. “You tell me. They have these disks, one to a Wyvern, and they control forces with them. Back there on the beach we interrupted a class in such control; they were the novices learning their trade. We’ve stumbled on something here which can’t be defined or understood by any of our previous standards of comparison. It’s frankly magic, judged by our terms.”

“Are we prisoners?” Shann wanted to know.

“Ask me something I’m sure of. I’ve been free to come and go within limits. No one’s exhibited any signs of hostility; most of them simply ignore me. I’ve had two interviews, via this mind-reading act of theirs, with their rulers, or elders, or chief sorceresses—all three titles seem to apply. They ask questions, I answer as best I can, but sometimes we appear to have no common meeting ground. Then I ask some questions, they evade gracefully, or reply in a kind of unintelligible double-talk, and that’s as far as our communication has progressed so far.”

“Taggi and Togi?”

“Have a run of their own and as far as I can tell are better satisfied with life than I am. Oddly enough, they respond more quickly and more intelligently to orders. Perhaps this business of being shunted around by the disks has conditioned them in some way.”

“What about these Wyverns? Are they all female?”

“No, but their tribal system is strictly matriarchal, which follows a pattern even Terra once knew: the fertile earth mother and her priestesses, who became the witches when the gods overruled the goddesses. The males are few in number and lack the power to activate the disks. In fact,” Thorvald laughed ruefully, “one gathers that in this civilization our opposite numbers have, more or less, the status of pets at the best, and necessary evils at the worst. Which put *us* at a disadvantage from the start.”

“You think that they won’t take us seriously because we are males?”

“Might just work out that way. I’ve tried to get through to them about danger from the Throgs, telling them what it would mean to them to have the beetle-heads settle in here for good. They just brush aside the whole idea.”

“Can’t you argue that the Throgs are males, too? Or aren’t they?”

The Survey officer shook his head. “That’s a point no human can answer. We’ve been sparring with Throgs for years and there have been libraries of reports written about them and their behavior patterns, all of which add up to about two paragraphs of proven facts and hundreds of surmises beginning with the probable and skimming out into the wild fantastic. You can claim anything about a Throg and find a lot of very intelligent souls ready to believe you. But whether those beetle-heads squatting over on the mainland are able to answer to ‘he,’ ‘she,’ or ‘it,’ your solution is just as good as mine. We’ve always considered the ones we fight to be males, but they might just as possibly be amazons. Frankly, these Wyverns couldn’t care less either; at least that’s the impression they give.”

“But anyway,” Shann observed, “it hasn’t come to ‘we’re all girls together’ either.”

Thorvald laughed again. “Not so you can notice. We’re not the only unwilling visitor in the vicinity.”

Shann sat up. “A Throg?”

“A something. Non-Warlockian, or non-Wyvern. And perhaps trouble for us.”

“You haven’t seen this other?”

Thorvald sat down cross-legged. The amber light from the window made red-gold of his hair, added ruddiness to his less-gaunt features.

“No, I haven’t. As far as I can tell, the stranger’s not right here. I caught stray thought beams twice—surprise expressed by newly arrived Wyverns who met me and apparently expected to be fronted by something quite physically different.”

“Another Terran scout?”

“No. I imagine that to the Wyverns we must look a lot alike. Just as we couldn’t tell one of them from her sister if their body patterns didn’t differ. Discovered one thing about those patterns—the more intricate they run, the higher the ‘power,’ not of the immediate wearer, but of her ancestors. They’re marked when they qualify for their disk and presented with the rating of the greatest witch in their family line as an inducement to live up to those deeds and

surpass them if possible. Quite a bit of logic to that. Given the right conditioning, such a system might even work in our service.

That nugget of information was the stuff from which Survey reports were made. But at the moment the information concerning the other captive was of more value to Shann. He steadied his body against the wall with his good hand and got to his feet. Thorvald watched him.

“I take it you have visions of action. Tell me, Lantee, why *did* you take that header off the cliff to mix it with fork-tail?”

Shann wondered himself. He had no reason for that impulsive act. “I don’t know——”

“Chivalry? Fair Wyvern in distress?” the other prodded. “Or did the back lash from one of those disks draw you in?”

“I don’t know——”

“And why did you use your knife instead of your stunner?”

Shann was startled. For the first time he realized that he had fronted the greatest native menace they had discovered on Warlock with the more primitive of his weapons. Why had he not tried the stunner on the beast? He had just never thought of it when he had taken that leap into the role of dragon slayer.

“Not that it would have done you any good to try the ray; it has no effect on fork-tail.”

“You tried it?”

“Naturally. But you didn’t know that, or did you pick up that information earlier?”

“No,” answer Shann slowly. “No, I don’t know why I used the knife. The stunner would have been more natural.” Suddenly he shivered, and the face he turned to Thorvald was very sober.

“How much do they control us?” he asked, his voice dropping to a half whisper as if the walls about them could pick up those words and relay them to other ears. “What can they do?”

“A good question.” Thorvald lost his light tone. “Yes, what can they feed into our minds without our knowing? Perhaps those disks are only window dressing, and they can work without them. A great deal will depend upon the impression we can make on these witches.” He began to smile again, more wryly. “The name we gave this planet is certainly a misnomer. A warlock is a male sorcerer, not a witch.”

“And what are the chances of our becoming warlocks ourselves?”

Again Thorvald’s smile faded, but he gave a curt little nod to Shann as if approving that thought. “That is something we are going to look into, and now! If we have to convince some stubborn females, as well as fight Throgs, well”—he shrugged—“we’ll have a busy, busy, time.”

## 16. Third Prisoner

“Well, it works as good as new.” Shann held his hand and arm out into the full path of the sun. He had just stripped off the skin-case bandage, to show the raw seam of a half-healed scar, but as he flexed muscles, bent and twisted his arm, there was only a small residue of soreness left.

“Now what, or where?” he asked Thorvald with some eagerness. Several days’ imprisonment in this room had made him impatient for the outer world again. Like the officer, he now wore breeches of the green fabric, the only material known to the Wyverns, and his own badly worn boots. Oddly enough, the Terrans’ weapons, stunner and knife, had been left to them, a point which made them uneasy, since it suggested that the Wyverns believed they had nothing to fear from clumsy alien arms.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Thorvald answered that double question. “But it is you they want to see; they insisted upon it, rather emphatically in fact.”

The Wyvern city existed as a series of cell-like hollows in the interior of a rock-walled island. Outside there had been no tampering with the natural rugged features of the escarpment, and within, the silence was almost complete. For all the Terrans could learn, the population of the stone-walled hive might have been several thousand, or just the handful that they had seen with their own eyes along the passages which had been declared open territory for them.

Shann half expected to find again a skull-walled chamber where witches tossed colored sticks to determine his future. But he came with Thorvald into an oval room in which most of the outer wall was a window. And seeing what lay framed in that, Shann halted, again uncertain as to whether he actually saw that, or whether he was willed into visualizing a scene by the choice of his hostesses.

They were lower now than the room in which he had nursed his wound, not far above water level. And this window faced the sea. Across a stretch of green water was his red-purple skull, the waves lapping its lower jaw, spreading their foam in between the gaping rock-fringe which formed its teeth. And from the eye hollows flapped the clak-claks of the sea coast, coming and going as if they carried to some imprisoned brain within that giant bone case messages from the outer world.

“My dream——” Shann said.

“Your dream.” Thorvald had not echoed that; the answer had come in his brain.

Shann turned his head and surveyed the Wyvern awaiting them with a concentration which was close to the rudeness of an outright stare, a stare which held no friendship. For by her skin patterns he knew her for the one who had led that triumvir who had sent him into the cavern of the mist. And with her was the younger witch he had trapped on the night that all this baffling action had begun.

“We meet again,” he said slowly. “To what purpose?”

“To our purpose ... and yours——”

“I do not doubt that it is to yours.” The Terran’s thoughts fell easily now into a formal pattern he would not have used with one of his own kind. “But I do not expect any good to me....”

There was no readable expression on her face; he did not expect to see any. But in their uneven mind touch he caught a fleeting suggestion of bewilderment on her part, as if she found his mental processes as hard to understand as a puzzle with few leading clues.

“We mean you no ill, star voyager. You are far more than we first thought you, for you have dreamed false and have known. Now dream true, and know it also.”

“Yet,” he challenged, “you would set me a task without my consent.”

“We have a task for you, but already it was set in the pattern of your true dreaming. And we do not set such patterns, star man; that is done by the Greatest Power of all. Each lives within her appointed pattern from the First Awakening to the Final Dream. So we do not ask of you any more than that which is already laid for your doing.”

She arose with that languid grace which was a part of their delicate jeweled bodies and came to stand beside him, a child in size, making his Terran flesh and bones awkward, clodlike in contrast. She stretched out her four-digit hand, her slender arm ringed with gemmed circles and bands, measuring it beside his own, bearing that livid scar.

“We are different, star man, yet still are we both dreamers. And dreams hold power. Your dreams brought you across the dark which lies between sun and distant sun. Our dreams carry us on even stranger roads. And yonder”—one of her fingers stiffened to a point, indicating the skull—“there is another who dreams with power, a power which will destroy us all unless the pattern is broken speedily.”

“And I must go to seek this dreamer?” His vision of climbing through that nose hole was to be realized then.

“You go.”

Thorvald stirred and the Wyvern turned her head to him. “Alone,” she added. “For this is your dream only, as it has been from the beginning. There is for each his own dream, and another cannot walk through it to alter the pattern, even to save a life.”

Shann grinned crookedly, without humor. “It seems that I’m elected,” he said as much to himself as to Thorvald. “But what do I do with this other dreamer?”

“What your pattern moves you to do. Save that you do not slay him——”

“Throg!” Thorvald started forward. “You can’t just walk in on a Throg barehanded and be bound by orders such as that!”

The Wyvern must have caught the sense of that vocal protest, for her communication touched them both. “We cannot deal with that one as his mind is closed to us. Yet he is an elder among his kind and his people have been searching land and sea for him since his air rider broke upon the rocks and he entered into hiding over there. Make your peace with him if you can, and also take him hence, for his dreams are not ours, and he brings confusion to the Reachers when they retire to run the Trails of Seeking.”

“Must be an important Throg,” Shann deduced. “They could have an officer of the beetle-heads under wraps over there. Could we use him to bargain with the rest?”

Thorvald’s frown did not lighten. “We’ve never been able to establish any form of contact in the past, though our best qualified minds, reinforced by training, have tried...”

Shann did not take fire at that rather delicate estimate of his own lack of preparation for the carrying out of diplomatic negotiations with the enemy; he knew it was true. But there was one thing he could try—if the Wyverns permitted.

“Will you give a disk of power to this star man?” He pointed to Thorvald. “For he is my Elder One and a Reacher for Knowledge. With such a focus his dream could march with mine when I go to the Throg, and perhaps that can aid in my doing what I could not accomplish alone. For that is the secret of *my* people, Elder One. We link our powers together to make a shield against our enemies, a common tool for the work we must do.”

“And so it is with us also, star voyager. We are not so unlike as the foolish might think. We learned much of you while you both wandered in the Place of False Dreams. But our power disks are our own and can not be given to a stranger while their owners live. However...” She turned again with an abruptness foreign to the usual Wyvern manner and faced the older Terran.

The officer might have been obeying an unvoiced order as he put out his hands and laid them palm to palm on those she held up to him, bending his head so gray eyes met golden ones. The web of communication which had held all three of them snapped. Thorvald and the Wyvern were linked in a tight circuit which excluded Shann.

Then the latter became conscious of movement beside him. The younger Wyvern had joined him to watch the clak-claks in their circling of the bare dome of the skull island.

“Why do they fly so?” Shann asked her.

“Within they nest, care for their young. Also they hunt the rock creatures that swarm in the lower darkness.”

“The rock creatures?” If the skull’s interior was infested by some other native fauna, he wanted to know it.

By some method of her own the young Wyvern conveyed a strong impression of revulsion, which was her personal reaction to the “rock creatures.”

“Yet you imprison the Throg there——” he remarked.

“Not so!” Her denial was instantaneous and vehement. “The other worlder fled into that place in spite of our calling. There he stays in hiding. Once we drew him out to the sea, but he broke the power and fled inside again.”

“Broke free——” Shann pounced upon that. “From disk control?”

“But surely.” Her reply held something of wonder. “Why do you ask, star voyager? Did you not also break free from the power of the disk when I led you by the underground ways, awaking in the river? Do you then rate this other one as less than your own breed that you think him incapable of the same action?”

“Of Throgs I know as much as this...” He held up his hand, measuring off a fraction of space between thumb and forefinger.

“Yet you knew them before you came to this world.”

“My people have known them for long. We have met and fought many times among the stars.”

“And never have you talked mind to mind?”

“Never. We have sought for that, but there has been no communication between us, neither of mind nor of voice.”

“This one you name Throg is truly not as you,” she assented. “And we are not as you, being alien and female. Yet, star man, you and I have shared a dream.”

Shann stared at her, startled, not so much by what she said as the human shading of those words in his mind. Or had that also been illusion?

“In the veil ...that creature which came to you on wings when you remembered that. A good dream, though it came out of the past and so was false in the present. But I have gathered it into my own store: such a fine dream, one that you have cherished.”

“Trav was to be cherished,” he agreed soberly. “I found her in a broken sleep cage at a spaceport when I was a child. We were both cold and hungry, alone and hurt. So I stole and was glad that I stole Trav. For a little space we both were very happy....” Forcibly he stifled memory.

“So, though we are unlike in body and in mind, yet we find beauty together if only in a dream. Therefore, between your people and mine there can *be* a common speech. And I may show you my dream store for your enjoyment, star voyager.”

A flickering of pictures, some weird, some beautiful, all a little distorted—not only by haste, but also by the haze of alienness which was a part of her memory pattern—crossed Shann’s mind.

“Such a sharing would be a rich feast,” he agreed.

“All right!” Those crisp words in his own tongue brought Shann away from the window to Thorvald. The Survey officer was no longer locked hand to hand with the Wyvern witch, but his features were alive with a new eagerness.

“We are going to try your idea, Lantee. They’ll provide me with a new, unmarked disk, show me how to use it. And I’ll do what I can to back you with it. But they insist that you go today.”

“What do they really want me to do? Just rout out that Throg? Or try to talk him into being a go-between with his people? That *does* come under the heading of dreaming!”

“They want him out of there, back with his own kind if possible. Apparently he’s a disruptive influence for them; he causes some kind of a mental foul up which interferes drastically with their ‘power.’ They haven’t been able to get him to make any contact with them. This Elder One is firm about your being the one ordained for the job, and that you’ll know what action to take when you get there.”

“Must have thrown the sticks for me again,” Shann commented.

“Well, they’ve definitely picked you to smoke out the Throg, and they can’t be talked into changing their minds about that.”

“I’ll be the smoked one if he has a blaster.”

“They say he’s unarmed——”

“What do they know about our weapons or a Throg’s?”

“The other one has no arms.” Wyvern words in his mind again. “This fact gives him great fear. That which he has depended upon is broken. And since he has no weapon, he is shut into a prison of his own terrors.”

But an adult Throg, even unarmed, was not to be considered easy meat, Shann thought. Armored with horny skin, armed with claws and those crushing mandibles of the beetle mouth ... a third again as tall as he himself was. No, even unarmed, the Throg had to be considered a menace.



Shann was still thinking along that line as he splashed through the surf which broke about the lower jaw of the skull island, climbed up one of the pointed rocks which masqueraded as a tooth, and reached for a higher hold to lead him to the nose slit, the gateway to the alien's hiding place.

The clak-claks screamed and dived about him, highly resentful of his intrusion. And when they grew so bold as to buffet him with their wings, threaten him with their tearing beaks, he was glad to reach the broken rock edging his chosen door and duck inside. Once there, Shann looked back. There was no sighting the cliff window where Thorvald stood, nor was he aware in any way of mental contact with the Survey officer; their hope of such a linkage might be futile.

Shann was reluctant to venture farther. His eyes had sufficiently adjusted to the limited supply of light, and now the Terran brought out the one aid the Wyverns had granted him, a green crystal such as those which had played the role of stars on the cavern roof. He clipped its simple loop setting to the front of his belt, leaving his hands free. Then, having filled his lungs for the last time with clean, sea-washed air, he started into the dome of the skull.

There was a fetid thickness to this air only a few feet away from the outer world. The odor of clak-clak droppings and refuse from their nests was strong, but there was an added staleness, as if no breeze ever scooped out the old atmosphere to replace it with new. Fragile bones crunched under Shann's boots, but as he drew away from the entrance, the pale glow of the crystal increased its radiance, emitting a light not unlike that of the phosphorescent bushes, so that he was not swallowed up by dark.

The cave behind the nose hole narrowed quickly into a cleft, a narrow cleft which pierced into the bowl of the skull. Shann proceeded with caution, pausing every few steps. There came a murmur rising now and again to a shriek, issuing, he guessed, from the clak-clak rookery above. And the pound of sea waves was also a vibration carrying through the rock. He was listening for something else, at the same time testing the ill-smelling air for that betraying muskiness which spelled Throg.

When a twist in the narrow passage cut off the splotch of daylight, Shann drew his stunner. The strongest bolt from that could not jolt a Throg into complete paralysis, but it would slow up any attack.

Red—pinpoints of red—were edging a break in the rock wall. They were gone in a flash. Eyes? Perhaps of the rock dwellers which the Wyverns hated? More red dots, farther ahead. Shann listened for a sound he could identify.

But smell came before sound. That trace of effluvia which in force could sicken a Terran, was his guide. The cleft ended in a space to which the limited gleam of the crystal could not provide a far wall. But that faint light did show him his quarry.

The Throg was not on his feet, ready for trouble, but hunched close to the wall. And the alien did not move at Shann's coming. Did the beetle-head sight him? Shann wondered. He moved cautiously. And the round head, with its bulbous eyes, turned a fraction; the mandibles about the the ugly mouth opening quivered. Yes, the Throg could see him.

But still the alien made no move to rise out of his crouch, to come at the Terran. Then Shann saw the fall of rock, the stone which pinned a double-kneed leg to the floor. And in a circle about the prisoner were the small, crushed, furred things which had come to prey on the helpless to be slain themselves by the well-aimed stones which were the Throg's only weapons of defense.

Shann sheathed his stunner. It was plain the Throg was helpless and could not reach him. He tried to concentrate mentally on a picture of the scene before him, hoping that Thorvald or one of the Wyverns could pick it up. There was no answer, no direction. Choice of action remained solely his.

The Terran made the oldest friendly gesture of his kind; his empty hands held up, palm out. There was no answering move from the Throg. Neither of the other's upper limbs stirred, their claws still gripping the small rocks in readiness for throwing. All Shann's knowledge of the alien's history argued against an unarmed advance. The Throg's marksmanship, as borne out by the circle of small bodies, was excellent. And one of those rocks might well thud against his own head, with fatal results. Yet he had been sent there to get the Throg free and out of Wyvern territory.

So rank was the beetle smell of the other that Shann coughed. What he needed now was the aid of the wolverines, a diversion to keep the alien busy. But this time there was no disk working to produce Taggi and Togi out of thin air. And he could not continue to just stand there staring at the Throg. There remained the stunner. Life on the Dumps tended to make a man a fast draw, a matter of survival for the fastest and most accurate marksman. And now one of Shann's hands swept down with a speed which, learned early, was never really to be forgotten.

He had the rod out and was spraying on tight beam straight at the Throg's head before the first stone struck his shoulder and his weapon fell from a numbed hand. But a second stone tumbled out of the Throg's claw. The alien tried to reach for it, his movements slow, uncertain.

Shann, his arm dangling, went in fast, bracing his good shoulder against the boulder which pinned the Throg. The alien aimed a blow at the Terran's head, but again so slowly Shann had no difficulty in evading it. The boulder gave, rolled, and Shann cleared out of range, back to the opening of the cleft, pausing only to scoop up his stunner.

For a long moment the Throg made no move; his dazed wits must have been working at very slow speed. Then the alien heaved up his body to stand erect, favoring the leg which had been trapped. Shann tensed, waiting for a rush. What now? Would the Throg refuse to move? If so, what could he do about it?

With the impact of a blow, the message Shann had hoped for struck into his mind. But his initial joy at that contact was wiped out with the same speed.

"Throg ship ... overhead."

The Throg stood away from the wall, limped out, heading for Shann, or perhaps only the cleft in which he stood. Swinging the stunner awkwardly in his left hand, the Terran retreated, mentally trying to contact Thorvald once more. There was no answer. He was well up into the cleft, moving crabwise, unwilling to turn his back on the Throg. The alien was coming as steadily as his injured limb would allow, trying for the exit to the outer world.

A Throg ship overhead.... Had the castaway somehow managed to call his own kind? And what if he, Shann Lantee, were to be trapped between the alien and a landing party from the flyer? He did not expect any assistance from the Wyverns, and what could Thorvald possibly do? From behind him, at the entrance of the nose slit, he heard a sound—a sound which was neither the scolding of a clak-clak nor the eternal growl of the sea.

## 17. Throg Justice

The musty stench was so strong that Shann could no longer fight the demands of his outraged stomach. He rolled on his side, retching violently until the sour smell of his illness battled the foul odor of the ship. His memories of how he had come into this place were vague; his body was a mass of dull pain, as if he had been scorched. Scorched! Had the Throgs used one of their energy whips to subdue him? The last clear thing he could recall was that slow withdrawal down the cleft inside the skull rock, the Throg not too far away—the sound from the entrance.

A Throg prisoner! Through the pain and the sickness the horror of that bit doubly deep. Terrans did not fall alive into Throg hands, not if they had the means of ending their existence within reach. But his hands and arms were caught behind him in an unbreakable lock, some gadget not unlike the Terran force bar used to restrain criminals, he decided groggily.

The cubby in which he lay was black-dark. But the quivering of the deck and the bulkheads about him told Shann that the ship was in flight. And there could be but two destinations, either the camp where the Throg force had taken over the Terran installations or the mother ship of the raiders. If Thorvald's earlier surmise was true and the aliens were hunting a Terran to talk in the transport, then they were heading for the camp.

And because a man who still lives and who is not yet broken can also hope, Shann began to think ahead to the camp—the camp and a faint, thin chance of escape. For on the surface of Warlock there was a thin chance; in the mother ship of the Throgs none at all.

Thorvald—and the Wyverns! Could he hope for any help from them? Shann closed his eyes against the thick darkness and tried to reach out to touch, somewhere, Thorvald with his disk—or perhaps the Wyvern who had talked of Trav and shared dreams. Shann focused his thoughts on the young Wyvern witch, visualizing with all the detail he could summon out of memory the brilliant patterns about her slender arms, her thin, fragile wrists, those other designs overlaying her features. He could see her in his mind, but she was only a puppet, without life, certainly without power.

Thorvald.... Now Shann fought to build a mental picture of the Survey officer, making his stand at that window, grasping his disk, with the sun bringing gold to his hair and showing the bronze of his skin. Those gray eyes which could be ice, that jaw with the tight set of a trap upon occasion....

And Shann made contact! He touched something, a flickering like a badly tuned tri-dee—far more fuzzy than the mind pictures the Wyvern had paraded for him. But he had touched! And Thorvald, too, had been aware of his contact.

Shann fought to find that thread of awareness again. Patiently he once more created his vision of Thorvald, adding every detail he could recall, small things about the other which he had not known that he had noticed—the tiny arrow-shaped scar near the base of the officer's throat, the way his growing hair curled at the ends, the look of one eyebrow slanting abruptly toward his hairline when he was dubious about something. Shann strove to make a figure as vividly as Logally and Trav had been in the mist of the illusion.

“... where?”

This time Shann was prepared; he did not let that mind image dissolve in his excitement at recapturing the link. "Throg ship," he said the words aloud, over and over, but still he held to his picture of Thorvald.

"... will..."

Only that one word! The thread between them snapped again. Only then did Shann become conscious of a change in the ship's vibration. Were they setting down? And where? Let it be at the camp! It must be the camp!

There was no jar at that landing, just that one second the vibration told him the ship was alive and air-borne, and the next a dead quiet testified that they had landed. Shann, his sore body stiff with tension, waited for the next move on the part of his captors.

He continued to lie in the dark, still queasy from the stench of the cell, too keyed up to try to reach Thorvald. There was a dull grating over his head, and he looked up eagerly—to be blinded by a strong beam of light. Claws hooked painfully under his arms and he was manhandled up and out, dragged along a short passage and pitched free of the ship, falling hard upon trodden earth and rolling over gasping as the seared skin of his body was rasped and abraded.

The Terran lay face up now, and as his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw a ring of Throg heads blotting out the sky as they inspected their catch impassively. The mouth mandibles of one moved with a faint clicking. Again claws fastened in his armpits, brought Shann to his feet, holding him erect.

Then the Throg who had given that order moved closer. His hand-claws clasped a small metal plate surmounted by a hoop of thin wire over which was stretched a web of threads glistening in the sun. Holding that hoop on a level with his mouth, the alien clicked his mandibles, and those sounds became barely distinguishable basic galactic words.

"You Throg meat!"

For a moment Shann wondered if the alien meant that statement literally. Or was it a conventional expression for a prisoner among their land.

"Do as told!"

That was clear enough, and for the moment the Terran did not see that he had any choice in the matter. But Shann refused to make any sign of agreement to either of those two limited statements. Perhaps the beetle-heads did not expect any. The alien who had pulled him to his feet continued to hold him erect, but the attention of the Throg with the translator switched elsewhere.

From the alien ship emerged a second party. The Throg in their midst was unarmed and limping. Although to Terran eyes one alien was the exact counterpart of the other, Shann thought that this one was the prisoner in the skull cave. Yet the indications now suggested that he had only changed one captivity for another and was in disgrace among his kind. Why?

The Throg limped up to front the leader with the translator, and his guards fell back. Again mandibles clicked, were answered, though the sense of that exchange eluded Shann. At one point in the report—if report it was—he himself appeared to be under discussion, for the injured Throg waved a hand-claw in the Terran's direction. But the end to the conference came quickly enough and in a manner which Shann found shocking.

Two of the guards stepped forward, caught at the injured Throg's arms and drew him away, leading him out into a space beyond the grounded ship. They dropped their hold on him,

returning at a trot. The officer clicked an order. Blasters were unholstered, and the Throg in the field shriveled under a vicious concentration of cross bolts. Shann gasped. He certainly had no liking for Throgs, but this execution carried overtones of a cold-blooded ferocity which transcended anything he had known, even in the callous brutality of the Dumps.

Limp, and more than a little sick again, he watched the Throg officer turn away. And a moment later he was forced along in the other's wake to the domes of the once Terran camp. Not just to the camp in general, he discovered a minute later, but to that structure which had housed the com unit linking them with ships cruising the solar lanes and with the patrol. So Thorvald had been right; they needed a Terran to broadcast—to cover their tracks here and lay a trap for the transport.

Shann had no idea how much time he had passed among the Wyverns; the transport with its load of unsuspecting settlers might already be in the system of Circe, plotting a landing orbit around Warlock, broadcasting her recognition signal and a demand for a beam to ride her in. Only, this time the Throgs were out of luck. They had picked up one prisoner who could not help them, even if he wanted to do so. The mysteries of the highly technical installations in this dome were just that to Shann Lantee—complete mysteries. He had not the slightest idea of how to activate the machines, let alone broadcast in the proper code.

A cold spot of terror gathered in his middle, spreading outward through his smarting body. For he was certain that the Throgs would not believe that. They would consider his protestations of ignorance as a stubborn refusal to co-operate. And what would happen to him then would be beyond human endurance. Could he bluff—play for time? But what would that time buy him except to delay the inevitable? In the end, that small hope based on his momentary contact with Thorvald made him decide to try that bluff.

There had been changes in the com dome since the capture of the cap. A squat box on the floor sprouted a collection of tubes from its upper surface. Perhaps that was some Throg equivalent of Terran equipment in place on the wide table facing the door.

The Throg leader clicked into his translator: “You call ship!”

Shann was thrust down into the operator's chair, his bound arms still twisted behind him so that he had to lean forward to keep on the seat at all. Then the Throg who had pushed him there, roughly forced a set of com earphones and speech mike onto his head.

“Call ship!” clicked the alien officer.

So time must be running out. Now was the moment to bluff. Shann shook his head, hoping that the gesture of negation was common to both their species.

“I don't know the code,” he said aloud.

The Throg's bulbous eyes gazed, at his moving lips. Then the translator was held before the Terran's mouth. Shann repeated his words, heard them reissue as a series of clicks, and waited. So much depended now on the reaction of the beetle-head officer. Would he summarily apply pressure to enforce his order, or would he realize that it was possible that all Terrans did not know that code, and so he could not produce in a captive's head any knowledge that had never been there—with or without physical coercion?

Apparently the latter logic prevailed for the present. The Throg drew the translator back to his mandibles.

“When ship call—you answer—make lip talk your words! Say bad sickness here—need help. Code man dead—you talk in his place. I listen. You say wrong, you die—you die a long time. Hurt bad all that time——”

Clear enough. So he had been able to buy a little time! But how soon before the incoming ship would call? The Throgs seemed to expect it. Shann licked his blistered lips. He was sure that the Throg officer meant exactly what he said in that last grisly threat. Only, would anyone—Throg or human—live very long in this camp if Shann got his warning through? The transport would have been accompanied on the big jump by a patrol cruiser, especially now with Throgs littering deep space the way they were in this sector. Let Shann alert the ship, and the cruiser would know; swift punitive action would be visited on the camp. Throgs could begin to make their helpless prisoner regret his rashness; then all of them would be blotted out together, prisoner and captors alike, when the cruiser came in.

If that was his last chance, he'd play it that way. The Throgs would kill him anyhow, he hadn't the least doubt of that. They kept no long-term Terran prisoners and never had. And at least he could take this nest of devil beetles along with him. Not that the thought did anything to dampen the fear which made him weak and dizzy. Shann Lantee might be tough enough to fight his way out of the Dumps, but to stand up and defy Throgs face-to-face like a video hero was something else. He knew that he could not do any spectacular act; if he could hold out to the end without cracking he would be satisfied.

Two more Throgs entered the dome. They stalked to the far end of the table which held the com equipment, and frequently pausing to consult a Terran work tape set in a reader, they made adjustments to the spotter beam broadcaster. They worked slowly but competently, testing each circuit. Preparing to draw in the Terran transport, holding the large ship until they had it helpless on the ground. The Terran began to wonder how they proposed to take the ship over once they did have it on planet.

Transports were armed for ground fighting. Although they rode in on a beam broadcast from a camp, they were prepared for unpleasant surprises on a planet's surface; such were certainly not unknown in the history of Survey. Which meant that the Throgs had in turn some assault weapon they believed superior, for they radiated confidence now. But could they handle a patrol cruiser ready to fight?

The Throg technicians made a last check of the beam, reporting in clicks to the officer. The alien gave an order to Shann's guard before following them out. A loop of wire rope dropped over the Terran's head, tightened about his chest, dragging him back against the chair until he grunted with pain. Two more loops made him secure in a most uncomfortable posture, and then he was left alone in the com dome.

An abortive struggle against the wire rope taught him the folly of such an effort. He was in deep freeze as far as any bodily movement was concerned. Shann closed his eyes, settled to that same concentration he had labored to acquire on the Throg ship. If there was any chance of the Wyvern communication working again, here and now was the time for it!

Again he built his mental picture of Thorvald, as detailed as he had made it in the Throg ship. And with that to the forefront of his mind, Shann strove to pick up the thread which could link them. Was the distance between this camp and the seagirt city of the Wyverns too great? Did the Throgs unconsciously dampen out that mental reaching as the Wyverns had said they did when they had sent him to free the captive in the skull?

Drops gathered in the unkempt tight curls on his head, trickled down to sting on his tender skin. He was bathed in the moisture summoned by an effort as prolonged and severe as if he labored physically under a hot sun at the top speed of which his body was capable.

Thorvald—

Thorvald! But not standing by the window in the Wyvern stronghold! Thorvald with the amethyst of heavy Warlockian foliage at his back. So clear was the new picture that Shann might have stood only a few feet away. Thorvald there, with the wolverines at his side. And behind him sun glinted on the gem-patterned skin of more than one Wyvern.

“Where?”

That demand from the Survey officer, curt, clear—so perfect the word might have rung audibly through the dome.

“The camp!” Shann hurled that back, frantic with fear than once again their contact might fail.

“They want me to call in the transport.” He added that.

“How soon?”

“Don’t know. They have the guide beam set. I’m to say there’s illness here; they know I can’t code.”

All he could see now was Thorvald’s face, intent, the officer’s eyes cold sparks of steel, bearing the impress of a will as implacable as a Throg’s. Shann added his own decision.

“I’ll warn the ship off; they’ll send in the patrol.”

There was no change in Thorvald’s expression. “Hold out as long as you can!”

Cold enough, no promise of help, nothing on which to build hope. Yet the fact that Thorvald was on the move, away from the Wyvern city, meant something. And Shann was sure that thick vegetation could be found only on the mainland. Not only was Thorvald ashore, but there were Wyverns with him. Could the officer have persuaded the witches of Warlock to forsake their hands-off policy and join him in an attack on the Throg camp? No promise, not even a suggestion that the party Shann had envisioned was moving in his direction. Yet somehow he believed that they were.

There was a sound from the doorway of the dome. Shann opened his eyes. There were Throgs entering, one to go to the guide beam, two heading for his chair. He closed his eyes again in a last attempt, backed by every remaining ounce of his energy and will.

“Ship’s in range. Throgs here.”

Thorvald’s face, dimmer now, snapped out while a blow on Shann’s jaw rocked his head cruelly, made his ears sing, his eyes water. He saw Throgs—Throgs only. And one held the translator.

“You talk!”

A tri-jointed arm reached across his shoulder, triggered a lever, pressed a button. The head set cramping his ear let out a sudden growl of sound—the com was activated. A claw jammed the mike closer to Shann’s lips, but also slid in range the webbed loop of the translator.

Shann shook his head at the incoming rattle of code. The Throg with the translator was holding the other head set close to his own ear pit. And the claws of the guard came down on Shann’s shoulders in a cruel grip, a threat of future brutality.

The rattle of code continued while Shann thought furiously. This was it! He had to give a warning, and then the aliens would do to him just what the officer had threatened.

Shann could not seem to think clearly. It was as if in his efforts to contact Thorvald, he had exhausted some part of his brain, so that now he was dazed just when he needed quick wits the most!

This whole scene had a weird unreality. He had seen its like a thousand times on fiction tapes—the Terran hero menaced by aliens intent on saving ... saving....

Was it out of one of those fiction tapes he had devoured in the past that Shann recalled that scrap of almost forgotten information?

The Terran began to speak into the mike, for there had come a pause in the rattle of code. He used Terran, not basic, and he shaped the words slowly.

“Warlock calling—trouble—sickness here—com officer dead.”

He was interrupted by another burst of code. The claws of his guard twisted into the naked flesh of his shoulders in vicious warning.

“Warlock calling—” he repeated. “Need help——”

“Who are you?”

The demand came in basic. On board the transport they would have a list of every member of the Survey team.

“Lantee.” Shann drew a deep breath. He was so conscious of those claws on his shoulders, of what would follow.

“This is Mayday!” he said distinctly, hoping desperately that someone in the control cabin of the ship now in orbit would catch the true meaning of that ancient call of complete disaster.

“Mayday—beetles—over and out!”



## 18. Storm's Ending

Shann had no answer from the transport, only the continuing hum of a contact still open between the dome and the control cabin miles above Warlock. The Terran breathed slowly, deeply, felt the claws of the Throg bite his flesh as his chest expanded. Then, as if a knife slashed, the hum of that contact was gone. He had time to know a small flash of triumph. He had done it; he had aroused suspicion in the transport.

When the Throg officer clicked to the alien manning the landing beam, Shann's exultation grew. The beetle-head must have accepted that cut in communication as normal; he was still expecting the Terran ship to drop neatly into his claws.

But Shann's respite was to be very short, only timed by a few breaths. The Throg at the riding beam was watching the indicators. Now he reported to his superior, who swung back to face the prisoner. Although Shann could read no expression on the beetle's face, he did not need any clue to the other's probable emotions. Knowing that his captive had somehow tricked him, the alien would now proceed relentlessly to put into effect the measures he had threatened.

How long before the patrol cruiser would planet? That crew was used to alarms, and their speed was three or four times greater than that of the bulkier transports. If the Throgs didn't scatter now, before they could be caught in one attack....

The wire rope which held Shann clamped to the chair was loosened, and he set his teeth against the pain of restored circulation. This was nothing compared to what he faced; he knew that. They jerked him to his feet, faced him toward the outer door, and propelled him through it with a speed and roughness indicative of their feelings.

The hour was close to dusk and Shann glanced wistfully at promising shadows, though he had given up hope of rescue by now. If he could just get free of his guards, he could at least give the beetle-heads a good run.

He saw that the camp was deserted. There was no sign about the domes that any Throgs sheltered there. In fact, Shann saw no aliens at all except those who had come from the com dome with him. Of course! The rest must be in ambush, waiting for the transport to planet. What about the Throg ship or ships? Those must have been hidden also. And the only hiding place for them would be aloft. There was a chance that the Throgs had so flung away their chance for any quick retreat.

Yes; the aliens could scatter over the countryside and so escape the first blast from the cruiser. But they would simply maroon themselves to be hunted down by patrol landing parties who would comb the territory. The beetles could so prolong their lives for a few hours, maybe a few days, but they were really ended on that moment when the transport cut communication. Shann was sure that the officer, at least, understood that.

The Terran was dragged away from the domes toward the river down which he and Thorvald had once escaped. Moving through the dusk in parallel lines, he caught sight of other Throg squads, well armed, marching in order to suggest that they were not yet alarmed. However, he had been right about the ships—there were no flyers grounded on the improvised field.

Shann made himself as much of a burden as he could. At the best, he could so delay the guards entrusted with his safekeeping; at the worst, he could earn for himself a quick ending by blaster which would be better than the one they had for him. He went limp, falling forward

into the trampled grass. There was an exasperated click from the Throg who had been herding him, and the Terran tried not to flinch from a sharp kick delivered by a clawed foot.

Feigning unconsciousness, the Terran listened to the unintelligible clicks exchanged by Throgs standing over him. His future depended now on how deep lay the alien officer's anger. If the beetle-head wanted to carry out his earlier threats, he would have to order Shann's transportation by the fleeing force. Otherwise his life might well end here and now.

Claws hooked once more on Shann. He was boosted up on the horny carapace of a guard, the bonds on his arms taken off and his numbed hands brought forward, to be held by his captor so that he lay helpless, a cloak over the other's hunched shoulders.

The ghost flares of bushes and plants blooming in the gathering twilight gave a limited light to the scene. There was no way of counting the number of Throgs on the move. But Shann was sure that all the enemy ships must have been emptied except for skeleton crews, and perhaps others had been ferried in from their hidden base somewhere in Circe's system.

He could only see a little from his position on the Throg's back, but ahead a ripple of beetle bodies slipped over the bank of the river cut. The aliens were working their way into cover, fitting into the dapple shadows with a skill which argued a long practice in such elusive maneuvers. Did they plan to try to fight off a cruiser attack? That was pure madness. Or, Shann wondered, did they intend to have the Terrans met by one of their own major ships somewhere well above the surface of Warlock?

His bearer turned away from the stream cut, carrying Shann out into that field which had first served the Terrans as a landing strip, then offered the same service to the Throgs. They passed two more parties of aliens on the move, manhandling with them bulky objects the Terran could not identify. Then he was dumped unceremoniously to the hard earth, only to lie there a few seconds before he was flopped over on a framework which grated unpleasantly against his raw shoulders, his wrists and ankles being made fast so that his body was spread-eagled. There was a click of orders; the frame was raised and dropped with a jarring movement into a base, and he was held erect, once more facing the Throg with the translator. This was it! Shann began to regret every small chance he had had to end more cleanly. If he had attacked one of the guards, even with his hands bound, he might have flustered the Throg into retaliatory blaster fire.

Fear made a thicker fog about him than the green mist of the illusion. Only this was no illusion. Shann stared at the Throg officer with sick eyes, knowing that no one ever quite believes that a last evil will strike at him, that he had clung to a hope which had no existence.

"Lantee!"

The call burst in his head with a painful force. His dazed attention was outwardly on the alien with the translator, but that inner demand had given him a shock.

"Here! Thorvald? Where?"

The other struck in again with an urgent demand singing through Shann's brain.

"Give us a fix point—away from camp but not too far. Quick!"

A fix point—what did the Survey officer mean? A fix point.... For some reason Shann thought of the ledge on which he had lain to watch the first Throg attack. And the picture of it was etched on his mind as clearly as memory could paint it.

"Thorvald——" Again his voice and his mind call were echoes of each other. But this time he had no answer. Had that demand meant Thorvald and the Wyverns were moving in,

putting to use the strange distance-erasing power the witches of Warlock could use by desire? But why had they not come sooner? And what could they hope to accomplish against the now scattered but certainly unbroken enemy forces? The Wyverns had not been able to turn their power against one injured Throg—by their own accounting—how could they possibly cope with well-armed and alert aliens in the field?

“You die—slow——” The Throg officer clicked, and the emotionless, toneless translation was all the more daunting for that lack of color. “Your people come—see——”

So that was the reason they had brought him to the landing field. He was to furnish a grisly warning to the crew of the cruiser. However, there the Throgs were making a bad mistake if they believed that his death by any ingenious method could scare off Terran retaliation.

“I die—you follow——” Shann tried to make that promise emphatic.

Did the Throg officer expect the Terran to beg for his life or a quick death? Again he made his threat—straight into the web, hearing it split into clicks.

“Perhaps,” the Throg returned. “But you die the first.”

“Get to it!” Shann’s voice scaled up. He was close to the ragged edge, and the last push toward the breaking point had not been the Throg speech, but that message from Thorvald. If the Survey officer was going to make any move in the mottled dusk, it would have to be soon.

Mottled dusk.... The Throgs had moved a little away from him. Shann looked beyond them to the perimeter of the cleared field, not really because he expected to see any rescuers break from cover there. And when he did see a change, Shann thought his own sight was at fault.

Those splotches of waxy light which marked certain trees, bushes, and scrubby ground-hugging plants were spreading, running together in pools. And from those center cores of concentrated glow, tendrils of mist lazily curled out, as a many-armed creature of the sea might allow its appendages to float in the water which supported it. Tendrils crossed, met, and thickened. There was a growing river of eerie light which spread, again resembling a sea wave licking out onto the field. And where it touched, unlike the wave, it did not retreat, but lapped on. Was he actually seeing that? Shann could not be sure.

Only the gray light continued to build, faster now, its speed of advance matching its increase in bulk. Shann somehow connected it with the veil of illusion. If it was real, there was a purpose behind it.

There was an aroused clicking from the Throgs. A blaster bolt cracked, its spiteful, sickly yellow slicing into the nearest tongue of gray. But that luminous fog engulfed the blast and was not dispelled. Shann forced his head around against the support which held him. The mist crept across the field from all quarters, walling them in.

Running at the ungainly lope which was their best effort at speed were half a dozen Throgs emerging from the river section. Their attitude suggested panic-stricken flight, and when one tripped on some unseen obstruction and went down—to fall beneath a descending tongue of phosphorescence—he uttered a strange high-pitched squeal, thin and faint, but still a note of complete, mindless terror.

The Throgs surrounding Shann were firing at the fog, first with precision, then raggedly, as their bolts did nothing to cut that opaque curtain drawing in about them. From inside that mist came other sounds—noises, calls, and cries all alien to him, and perhaps also to the Throgs. There were shapes barely to be discerned through the swirls; perhaps some were Throgs in flight. But certainly others were non-Throg in outline. And the Terran was sure that at least

three of those shapes, all different, had been in pursuit of one fleeing Throg, heading him off from that small open area still holding about Shann.

For the Throgs were being herded in from all sides—the handful who had come from the river, the others who had brought Shann there. And the action of the mist was pushing them into a tight knot. Would they eventually turn on him, wanting to make sure of their prisoner before they made a last stand against whatever lurked in the fog? To Shann's continued relief the aliens seemed to have forgotten him. Even when one cowered back against the very edge of the frame on which the Terran was bound, the beetle-head did not look at this helpless prey.

They were firing wildly, with desperation in every heavy thrust of bolt. Then one Throg threw down his blaster, raised his arms over his head, and voicing the same high wail uttered by his comrade-in-arms earlier, he ran straight into the mist where a shape materialized, closed in behind him, cutting him off from his fellows.

That break demoralized the others. The Throg commander burned down two of his company with his blaster, but three more broke past him to the fog. One of the remaining party reversed his blaster, swung the stock against the officer's carapace, beating him to his knees, before the attacker raced on into the billows of the mist. Another threw himself on the ground and lay there, pounding his claws against the baked earth. While a remaining two continued with stolid precision to fire at the lurking shapes which could only be half seen; and a third helped the officer to his feet.

The Throg commander reeled back against the frame, his musky body scent filling Shann's nostrils. But he, too, paid no attention to the Terran, though his horny arms scraped across Shann's. Holding both of his claws to his head, he staggered on, to be engulfed by a new arm of the fog.

Then, as if the swallowing of the officer had given the mist a fresh appetite, the wan light waved in a last vast billow over the clear area about the frame. Shann felt its substance cold, slimy, on his skin. This was a deadly breath of un-life.

He was weakened, sapped of strength, so that he hung in his bounds, his head lolling forward on his breast. Warmth pressed against him, a warm wet touch on his cold skin, a sensation of friendly concern in his mind. Shann gasped, found that he was no longer filling his lungs with that chill staleness which was the breath of the fog. He opened his eyes, struggling to raise his head. The gray light had retreated, but though a Throg blaster lay close to his feet, another only a yard beyond, there was no sign of the aliens.

Instead, standing on their hind feet to press against him in a demand for his attention, were the wolverines. And seeing them, Shann dared to believe that the impossible could be true; somehow he was safe.

He spoke. And Taggi and Togi answered with eager whines. The mist was withdrawing more slowly than it had come. Here and there things lay very still on the ground.

“Lantee!”

This time the call came not into his mind but out of the air. Shann made an effort at reply which was close to a croak.

“Over here!”

A new shape in the fog was moving with purpose toward him. Thorvald strode into the open, sighted Shann, and began to run.

“What did they——?” he began.

Shann wanted to laugh, but the sound which issued from his dry throat was very little like mirth. He struggled helplessly until he managed to get out some words which made sense.

“... hadn’t started in on me yet. You were just in time.”

Thorvald loosened the wires which held the younger man to the frame and stood ready to catch him as he slumped forward. And the officer’s hold wiped away the last clammy residue of the mist. Though he did not seem able to keep on his feet, Shann’s mind was clear.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“The power.” Thorvald was examining him hastily but with attention for every cut and bruise. “The beetle-heads didn’t really get to work on you——”

“Told you that,” Shann said impatiently. “But what brought that fog and got the Throgs?”

Thorvald smiled grimly. The ghostly light was fading as the fog retreated, but Shann could see well enough to note that around the other’s neck hung one of the Wyvern disks.

“It was a variation of the veil of illusion. You faced your memories under the influence of that; so did I. But it would seem that the Throgs had ones worse than either of us could produce. You can’t play the role of thug all over the galaxy and not store up in the subconscious a fine line of private fears and remembered enemies. We provided the means for releasing those, and they simply raised their own devils to order. Neatest justice ever rendered. It seems that the ‘power’ has a big kick—in a different way—when a Terran will manages to spark it.”

“And you did?”

“I made a small beginning. Also I had the full backing of the Elders, and a general staff of Wyverns in support. In a way I helped to provide a channel for their concentration. Alone they can work ‘magic’; with us they can spread out into new fields. Tonight we hunted Throgs as a united team—most successfully.”

“But they wouldn’t go after the one in the skull.”

“No. Direct contact with a Throg mind appears to short-circuit them. I did the contacting; they fed me what I needed. We have the answer to the Throgs now—one answer.” Thorvald looked back over the field where those bodies lay so still. “We can kill Throgs. Maybe someday we can learn another trick—how to live with them.” He returned abruptly to the present. “You did contact the transport?”

Shann explained what had happened in the com dome. “I think when the ship broke contact that way they understood.”

“We’ll take it that they did, and be on the move.” Thorvald helped Shann to his feet. “If a cruiser berths here shortly, I don’t propose to be under its tail flames when it sets down.”

The cruiser came. And a mop-up squad patrolled outward from the reclaimed camp, picked up two living Throgs, both wandering witlessly. But Shann only heard of that later. He slept, so deep and dreamlessly that when he roused he was momentarily dazed.

A Survey uniform—with a cadet’s badges—lay across the wall seat facing his bunk in the barracks he had left ... how many days or weeks before? The garments fitted well enough, but he removed the insignia to which he was not entitled. When he ventured out he saw half a dozen troopers of the patrol, together with Thorvald, watching the cruiser lift again into the morning sky.

Taggi and Togi, trailing leashes, galloped out of nowhere to hurl themselves at him in uproarious welcome. And Thorvald must have heard their eager whines even through the blast of the ship, for he turned and waved Shann to join him.

“Where is the cruiser going?”

“To punch a Throg base out of this system,” Thorvald answered. “They located it—on Witch.”

“But we’re staying on here?”

Thorvald glanced at him oddly. “There won’t be any settlement now. But we have to establish a conditional embassy post. And the patrol has left a guard.”

Embassy post. Shann digested that. Yes, of course, Thorvald, because of his close contact with the Wyverns, would be left here for the present to act as liaison officer-in-charge.

“We don’t propose,” the other was continuing, “to allow to lapse any contact with the one intelligent alien race we have discovered who can furnish us with full-time partnership to our mutual benefit. And there mustn’t be any bungling here!”

Shann nodded. That made sense. As soon as possible Warlock would witness the arrival of another team, one slanted this time to the cultivation of an alien friendship and alliance, rather than preparation for Terran colonists. Would they keep him on? He supposed not; the wolverines’ usefulness was no longer apparent.

“Don’t you know your regulations?” There was a snap in Thorvald’s demand which startled Shann. He glanced up, discovered the other surveying him critically. “You’re not in uniform——”

“No, sir,” he admitted. “I couldn’t find my own kit.”

“Where are your badges?”

Shann’s hand went up to the marks left when he had so carefully ripped off the insignia.

“My badges? I have no rank,” he replied, bewildered.

“Every team carries at least one cadet on strength.”

Shann flushed. There had been one cadet on this team; why did Thorvald want to remember that?

“Also,” the other’s voice sounded remote, “there can be appointments made in the field—for cause. Those appointments are left to the discretion of the officer-in-charge, and they are never questioned. I repeat, you are not in uniform, Lantee. You will make the necessary alteration and report to me at headquarters dome. As sole representatives of Terra here we have a matter of protocol to be discussed with our witches, and they have a right to expect punctuality from a pair of warlocks, so get going!”

Shann still stood, staring incredulously at the officer. Then Thorvald’s official severity vanished in a smile which was warm and real.

“Get going,” he ordered once more, “before I have to log you for inattention to orders.”

Shann turned, nearly stumbling over Taggi, and then ran back to the barracks in quest of some very important bits of braid he hoped he could find in a hurry.

# Star Hunter

## 1.

Nahuatl's larger moon pursued the smaller, greenish globe of its companion across a cloudless sky in which the stars made a speckled pattern like the scales of a huge serpent coiled around a black bowl. Ras Hume paused at the border of scented spike-flowers on the top terrace of the Pleasure House to wonder why he thought of serpents. He understood. Mankind's age-old hatred, brought from his native planet to the distant stars, was evil symbolized by a coil in a twisted, belly-path across the ground. And on Nahuatl, as well as a dozen other worlds, Wass was the serpent.

A night wind was rising, stirring the exotic, half-dozen other worlds' foliage planted cunningly on the terrace to simulate the mystery of an off-world jungle.

"Hume?" The inquiry seemed to come out of thin air over his head.

"Hume," he repeated his own name calmly.

A shaft of light brilliant enough to dazzle the eyes struck through the massed vegetation, revealing a path. Hume lingered for a moment, offering a counterstroke of indifference in what he had always known would be a test of wits. Wass was Veep of a shadowy empire, but that was apart from the world in which Ras Hume moved.

He strode deliberately down the corridor illuminated between leaf and blossom walls. A grotesque lump of crystal leered at him from the heart of a tharsala lilly bed. The intricate carving of a devilish nonhuman set of features was a work of alien art. Tendrils of smoke curled from the thing's flat nostrils, and Hume sniffed the scent of a narcotic he recognized. He smiled. Such measures might soften up the usual civ Wass interviewed here. But a star pilot turned out-hunter was immunized against such mind clouding.

There was a door, the lintel and posts of which had more carving, but this time Terran, Hume thought—old, very old. Perhaps rumor was right, Milfors Wass might be truly native Terran and not second, third, nor fourth generation star stock as most of those who reached Nahuatl were.

The room beyond that elaborately carved entrance was, in contrast, severe. Rust walls were bare of any pattern save an oval disk of cloudy golden shimmer behind the chair at the long table of solid ruby rock from Nahuatl's poisonous sister planet of Xipe. Without a pause he walked to the chair and seated himself without invitation to wait in the empty room.

That clouded oval might be a com device. Hume refused to look at it after his first glance. This interview was to be person to person. If Wass did not appear within a reasonable length of time he would leave.

And Hume hoped to any unseen watcher he presented the appearance of a man not impressed by stage settings. After all he was now in the seller's space boots, and it was a seller's market.

Ras Hume rested his right hand on the table. Against the polished glow of the stone, the substance of it was flesh-tanned brown—a perfect match for his left. And the subtle difference between true flesh and false was no hindrance in the use of those fingers or their strength. Save that it had pushed him out of command of a cargo-cum-liner and hurled him down from the pinnacle of a star pilot. There were bitter brackets about his mouth, set there by that hand as deeply as if carved with a knife.



It had been four years—planet time—since he had lifted the Rigal Rover from the launch pad on Sargon Two. He had suspected it might be a tricky voyage with young Tors Wazalitz, who was a third owner of the Kogan-Bors-Wazalitz line, and a Gratz chewer. But one did not argue with the owners, except when the safety of the ship was concerned. The Rigal Rover had made a crash landing at Alexbut, and a badly injured pilot had brought her in by will, hope and a faith he speedily lost.

He received a plasta-hand, the best the medical center could supply and a pension for life, forced by the public acclaim for a man who had saved ships and lives. Then—the sack because a crazed Tors Wazalitz was dead. They dared not try to stick Hume with a murder charge; the voyage record tapes had been shot straight through to the Patrol Council, and the evidence on those could be neither faked nor tampered with. They could not give him a quick punishment, but they could try to arrange a slow death. The word had gone out that Hume was off pilot boards. They had tried to keep him out of space.

And they might have done it, too, had he been the usual type of pilot, knowing only his trade. But some odd streak of restlessness had always led him to apply for the rim runs, the very first flights to newly opened worlds. Outside of the survey men, there were few qualified pilots of his seniority who possessed such a wide and varied knowledge of the galactic frontiers.

So when he learned that the ships' boards were irrevocably closed to him, Hume had signed up with the Out-Hunters' Guild. There was a vast difference between lifting a liner from a launching pad and guiding civ hunters to worlds surveyed and staked out for their trips into the wild. Hume relished the exploration part—he disliked the leading-by-the-hand of nine-tenths of the Guild's clients.

But if he had not been in the Guild service he would never have made that find on Jumala. That lucky, lucky find! Hume's plasta-flesh fingers curved, their nails drew across the red surface of the table. And where was Wass? He was about to rise and go when the golden oval on the wall smoked, its substance thinning to a mist as a man stepped through to the floor.

The newcomer was small compared to the former pilot, but he had breadth of shoulder which made the upper part of his torso overbalance his thin hips and legs. He was dressed most conservatively except for a jeweled plaque resting on the tightly stretched gray silk of his upper tunic at heart level. Unlike Hume he wore no visible arms belt, but the other did not doubt that there were a number of devices concealed in that room to counter the efforts of any assassin.

The man from the mirror spoke with a flat, toneless voice. His black hair had been shaven well above his ears, the locks left on top of his skull trained into a kind of bird's crest. As Hume, his visible areas of flesh were deeply browned, but by nature rather than exposure to space, the pilot guessed. His features were harsh, with a prominent nose, a back-slanting forehead, eyes dark, long and large, with heavy lids.

"Now—" He spread both his hands, palm down and flat on the table, a gesture Hume found himself for some unknown reason copying. "You have a proposition?"

But the pilot was not to be hurried, any more than he was to be influenced by Wass' stage-settings.

"I have an idea," he corrected.

"There are many ideas." Wass leaned back in his chair, but he did not remove his hands from the table. "Perhaps one in a thousand is the kernel of something useful. For the rest, there is no need to trouble a man."

“Agreed,” Hume returned evenly. “But that one idea in a thousand can also pay off in odds of a million to one, when and if a man has it.”

“And you have such a one?”

“I have such a one.” It was Hume’s role now to impress the other by his unshakable confidence. He had studied all the possibilities. Wass was the right man, perhaps the only partner he could find. But Wass must not know that.

“On Jumala?” Wass returned.

If that stare and statement was intended to rattle Hume it was a wasted shot. To discover that he had just returned from that frontier planet required no ingenuity on the Veep’s part.

“Perhaps.”

“Come, Out-Hunter Hume. We are both busy men, this is no time to play tricks with words and hints. Either you have made a find worth the attention of my organization or you have not. Let me be the judge.”

This was it—the corner of no return. But Wass had his own code. The Veep had established his tight control of his lawless organization by set rules, and one of them was, don’t be greedy. Wass was never greedy, which is why the patrol had never been able to pull him down, and those who dealt with him did not talk. If you had a good thing, and Wass accepted temporary partnership, he kept his side of the bargain rigidly. You did the same—or regretted your stupidity.

“A claimant to the Kogan estate—that good enough for you?”

Wass showed no surprise. “And how would such a claimant be profitable to us?”

Hume appreciated that “us”; he had an in now. “If you supply the claimant, surely you can claim a reward, in more ways than one.”

“True. But one does not produce a claimant out of a Krusha dream. The investigation for any such claim now would be made by a verity lab and no imposture will pass those tests. While a real claimant would not need your help or mine.”

“Depends upon the claimant.”

“One you discovered on Jumala?”

“No.” Hume shook his head slowly. “I found something else on Jumala—an L-B from Largo Drift intact and in good shape. From the evidence now in existence it could have landed there with survivors aboard.”

“And the evidence of such survivors living on—that exists also?”

Hume shrugged, his plasta-flesh fingers flexed slightly. “It has been six planet years, there is a forest where the L-B rests. No, no evidence at present.”

“The Largo Drift,” Wass repeated slowly, “carrying, among others, Gentlefem Tharlee Kogan Brodie.”

“And her son Rynch Brodie, who was at the time of the Largo Drift’s disappearance a boy of fourteen.”

“You have indeed made a find.” Wass gave that simple statement enough emphasis to assure Hume he had won. His one-in-a-thousand idea had been absorbed, was now being examined, amplified, broken down into details he could never have hoped to manage for himself, by the most cunning criminal brain in at least five solar systems.

“Is there any hope of survivors?” Wass attacked the problem straight on.

“No evidence even of there being any passengers when the L-B planeted. Those are automatic and released a certain number of seconds after an accident alarm. For what it’s worth the hatch of this one was open. It could have brought in survivors. But I was on Jumala for three months with a full Guild crew and we found no sign of any castaways.”

“So you propose—?”

“On the basis of my report Jumala has been put up for a safari choice. The L-B could well be innocently discovered by a client. Every one knows the story with the case dragging through the Ten Sector-Terran Courts now. Gentlefem Brodie and her son might not have been news ten years ago. Now, with a third of the Kogan-Bors-Wazalitz control going to them, any find linked with the Largo Drift would gain full galactic coverage.”

“You have a choice of survivor? The Gentlefem?”

Hume shook his head. “The boy. He was bright, according to the stories since, and he would have the survival manual from the ship to study. He could have grown up in the wilds of an unopened planet. To use a woman is too tricky.”

“You are entirely right. But we shall require an extremely clever imposter.”

“I think not.” Hume’s cool glance met Wass’. “We only need a youth of the proper general physical description and the use of a conditioner.”

Wass’ expression did not change, there was no sign that Hume’s hint had struck home. But when he replied there was a slight change in the monotone of his voice.

“You seem to know a great deal.”

“I am a man who listens,” Hume replied, “and I do not always discount rumor as mere fantasy.”

“That is true. As one of the guild you would be interested in the root of fact beneath the plant of fiction,” Wass acknowledged. “You appear to have done some planning on your own.”

“I have waited and watched for just such an opportunity as this,” Hume answered.

“Ah, yes. The Kogan-Bors-Wazalitz combine incurred your displeasure. I see you are also a man who does not forget easily. And that, too, I understand. It is a foible of my own, Out-Hunter. I neither forget nor forgive my enemies, though I may seem to do so and time separates them from their past deeds for a space.”

Hume accepted that warning—both must keep any bargain. Wass was silent for a moment, as if to leave time for the thought to root itself, then he spoke again.

“A youth with the proper physical qualifications. Have you any such in mind?”

“I think so.” Hume was short.

“He will need certain memories; those take time to tape.”

“Those dealing with Jumala, I can supply.”

“Yes. You will have to provide a tape beginning with his arrival on that world. For such family material as is necessary I shall have ready. An interesting project, even apart from its value to us. This is one to intrigue experts.”

Expert psycho-techs—Wass had them. Men who had slipped over the border of the law, had entered Wass’ organization and prospered there. There were some techs crooked enough to

enjoy such a project for its own sake, indulging in forbidden experimentation. For a moment, but only for a moment, something in Hume jibbed at the intent of carrying through his plan. Then he shrugged that tinge aside.

“How soon do you wish to move?”

“How long will preparation take?” Hume asked in return, for the second time battling a taste of concern.

“Three months, maybe four. There’s research to be done and tapes to be made.”

“It will be six months probably before the Guild sets up a safari for Jumala.”

Wass smiled. “That need not worry us. When the time comes for a safari, there shall also be clients, impeccable clients, asking for it to be planned.”

There would be, too, Hume knew. Wass’ influence reached into places where the Veep himself was totally unknown. Yes, he could count on an excellent, well above suspicion, set of clients to discover Rynch Brodie when the time came.

“I can deliver the boy tonight, or early tomorrow morning. Where?”

“You are sure of your selection?”

“He fulfills the requirements, the right age, general appearance. A boy who will not be missed, who has no kin, no ties, and who will drop out of sight without any questions to be asked.”

“Very well. Get him at once. Deliver him here.”

Wass swept one hand across the table surface. On the red of the stone there glowed for seconds an address. Hume noted it, nodded. It was one in the center of the port town, one which could be visited at an odd hour without exciting any curiosity. He rose.

“He will be there.”

“Tomorrow, at your convenience,” Wass added, “you will come to this place.” Again the palm moved and a second address showed on the table.

“There you will begin your tape for our use. It may take several sessions.”

“I’m ready. I still have the long report to make to the Guild, so the material is still available on my note tapes.”

“Excellent. Out-Hunter Hume, I salute a new colleague.” At last Wass’ right hand came up from the table. “May we both have luck equal to our industry.”

“Luck to equal our desires,” Hume corrected him.

“A very telling phrase, Out-Hunter. Luck to equal our desires. Yes, let us both deserve that.”

## 2

The Starfall was a long way down scale from the pleasure houses of the upper town. Here strange vices were also merchandise, but not such exotics as Wass provided. This was strictly for crewmen of the star freighters who could be speedily and expertly separated from a voyage's pay in an evening. The tantalizing scents of Wass' terraces were reduced here to simply smells, the majority of which were not fragrant.

There had already been two fatal duels that evening. A tubeman from a rim ship had challenged a space miner to settle a difference with those vicious whips made from the tail casings of Flangoid flying lizards, an encounter which left both men in ribbons, one dead, one dying. And a scarred, ex-space marine had blaster-flamed one of the Star-and-Comet dealers into charred human ash.

The young man who had been ordered to help clear away the second loser retired to the stinking alley outside to lose the meal which was part of his meager day's pay. Now he crawled back inside, his face greenish, one hand pressed to his middle section.

He was thin, the fine bones of his face tight under the pallid skin, his ribs showing even through the sleazy fabric of the threadbare tunic with its house seal. When he leaned his head back against the grime encrusted wall, raising his face to the light, his hair had the glint of bright chestnut, a gold which was also red. And for his swamper's labor he was almost fastidiously clean.

"You—Lansor!"

He shivered as if an icy wind had found him and opened his eyes. They seemed disproportionately large in his skin and bone face and were of an odd shade, neither green nor blue, but somewhere between.

"Get going, you! Ain't paying out good credits for you to sit there like you was buying on your own!" The Salarkian who loomed above him spoke accentless, idiomatic Basic Space which came strangely from between his yellow lips. A furred hand thrust the handle of a mop-up stick at the young man, a taloned thumb jerked the direction in which to use that evil-smelling object. Vye Lansor levered himself up the wall, took the mop, setting his teeth grimly.

Someone had spilled a mug of Kardo and the deep purple liquid was already patterning the con-stone floor past any hope of cleaning. But he set to work slapping the fringe of the noisome mop back and forth to sop up what he could. The smell of the Kardo uniting with the general effluvia of the room and its inhabitants heightened his queasiness.

Working blindly in a half stupor, he was not aware of the man sitting alone in the booth until his mop spattered the ankle of one of the drinking girls. She struck him sharply across the face with a sputtering curse in the tongue of Altar-Ishtar.

The blow sent him back against the open lattice of the booth. As he tried to steady himself another hand reached up, fingers tightened about his wrist. He flinched, tried to jerk away from that hold, only to discover that he was the other's prisoner.

And looking down at his captor in apprehension, he was aware even then of the different quality of this man. The patron wore the tunic of a crewman, lighter patches where the ship's badges should have been to show that he was not engaged. But, though his tunic was shabby,

dirty, his magnetic boots scuffed and badly worn, he was not like the others now enjoying the pleasures of the Starfall.

“This one—he makes trouble?” The vast bulk of the Vorm-man who was the Starfall’s private law moved through the crowd with serene confidence in his own strength, which no one there, unless blind, deaf, and out-of-the-senses drunk, could dispute. His scaled, six-fingered, claw hand reached out for Lansor and the boy cringed.

“No trouble!” There was the click of authority in the voice of the man in the booth. His face, moments earlier taut and sharp with intelligence, was suddenly slack, his tone slurred as he answered: “Looks like an old shipmate. No trouble, just want a drink with an old shipmate.”

But the grip which had pulled Vye forward, swung him around and down on the other bench in the booth, was anything but slack. The Vorm-man glanced from the patron of the Starfall to its least important employee and then grinned, thrusting his fanged jaws close to Lansor’s.

“If the master wants to drink, you dirt-rat, you drink!”

Vye nodded vigorously, and then put his hand to his mouth, afraid his stomach was about to betray him again. Apprehensive, he watched the Vorm-man turn away. Only when that broad, green-gray back was lost in the smoky far reaches of the room did he expel his breath again.

“Here—” The grip was gone from his wrist, but fingers now put a mug into his hand.

“Drink!”

He tried to protest, knew it was hopeless, and used both hands to get the mug to his lips, mouthing the stinging liquid in dull despair. Only, instead of bringing nausea with it, the stuff settled his stomach, cleared his head, with an after glow with which he managed to relax from the tense state of endurance which filled his hours in the Starfall.

Half of the mug’s contents inside him and he dared to raise his eyes to the man opposite him. Yes, this was no common crewman, nor was he drunk as he had pretended for the Vorm-man. Now he watched the milling crowd with a kind of detachment, though Vye was sure he was aware of every move he himself made.

Vye finished the liquid. For the first time since he had come into this place two months earlier he felt like a real person again. And he had wits enough to guess that the potion he had just swallowed contained some drug. Only now he did not care at all. Anything which could wipe out in moments all the shame, fear, and sick despair the Starfall had planted in him was worth swallowing. Why the other had drugged him was a mystery, but he was content to wait for enlightenment.

Lansor’s companion once more applied that compelling pressure to the younger man’s bony forearm. Linked by that hold they left the Starfall, came into the cooler, far more pleasant atmosphere of the street. They were a block away before Vye’s guide halted, though he did not release his prisoner.

“Forty names of Dugor!” he spat.

Lansor waited, breathing in the air of early morning. The confidence of the drug still held. At the moment he was certain nothing could be as bad as the life behind him, he was willing to face what this strange patron of the Starfall had in mind.

The other slapped his hand down on an air-car call button, stood waiting until one of the city flitters landed on beam before them.

From the seat of the air-car Vye noted they were heading into the respectability of the upper city, away from the stews ringing the launch port. He tried to guess their destination or purpose, not that either mattered much. Then the car descended on a landing stage.

The stranger waved Lansor through a doorway, down a short corridor into a room of private quarters. Vye sat down gingerly on the foam seat extending from the wall as he neared. He stared about. Dimly he could just remember rooms which had this degree of comfort, but so dimly now he could not be sure they did not exist only in his vivid imagination. For Vye's imagination had buoyed him first through the drab existence in a State Child's Crèche, then through a state-found job which he had lost because he could not adapt to the mechanical life of a computer tender, and had been an anchor and an escape when he had sunk through the depths of the port to the last refuge in the Starfall.

Now he pressed both his hands into the soft stuff of the seat and gaped at a small tri-dee on the wall facing him, a miniature scene of life on some other planet wherein a creature enveloped in short black and white striped fur crept belly flat, to stalk long-legged, short-winged birds making blood-red splotches against yellow reed banks under a pale violet sky. He feasted on its color, on the sense of freedom and off-world wonders which it raised in him.

"Who are you?"

The stranger's abrupt question brought him back, not only to the room but to his own precarious position. He moistened his lips, no longer quite so aglow with confidence.

"Vye—Vye Lansor." Then he added his other identification, "S. C. C. 425061."

"State child, eh?" The other had pushed a button for a refresher cup, then was sipping its contents slowly. He did not ring for a second to offer Vye. "Parents?"

Lansor shook his head. "I was brought in after the Five-Hour Fever epidemic. They didn't try to keep records, there were too many of us."

The man was watching him levelly over the rim of that cup. There was something cold in that study, something which curbed Vye's pleasant feeling of only moments earlier. Now the other set down his drink, crossed the room. Cupping his hand under Lansor's chin, he brought up his head in a way which stirred a sullen resentment in the younger man, yet something told him resistance would only bring trouble.

"I'd say Terran stock—not more than second generation." He was talking to himself more than to Vye. He loosed his hold on the boy's chin, but he still stood there surveying him from head to foot. Lansor wanted to squirm, but he fought that impulse, and managed to meet the other's gaze when it reached his face again.

"No—not the usual port-drift. I was right all the way." Now he looked at Vye again as if the younger man did have a brain, emotions, some call on his interest as a personality. "Want a job?"

Lansor pressed his hand deeper into the foam seat. "What—what kind?" He was angry and ashamed at that small betraying break in his voice.

"You have scruples?" The stranger appeared to think that amusing. Vye reddened, but he was also more than a little surprised that the man in the worn space uniform had read hesitancy right. Someone out of the Starfall should not be too particular about employment, and he could not tell why he was.

“Nothing illegal, I assure you.” The man crossed to set his refresher cup in the empty slot. “I am an Out-Hunter.”

Lansor blinked. This had all taken on some of the fantastic aura of a dream. The other was eyeing him impatiently, as if he had expected some reaction.

“You may inspect my credentials if you wish.”

“I believe you,” Vye found his voice.

“I happen to need a gearman.”

But this wasn't happening! Of course, it couldn't happen to him, Vye Lansor, state child, swamper in the Starfall. Things such as this did not happen, except in a thaline dream, and he wasn't a smoke eater! It was the kind of dream a man didn't want to wake from, not if he was port-drift.

“Would you be willing to sign on?”

Vye tried to clutch reality to himself, to remain level-headed. A gearman for an Out-Hunter! Why five men out of six would pay a large premium for a chance at such rating. The chill of doubt cut through the first hazy rosiness. A swamper from a port-side dive simply did not become a gearman for a Guild Hunter.

Again it was as if the stranger read his thoughts. “Look here,” he spoke abruptly. “I had a bad time myself, years ago. You resemble someone to whom I owe a debt. I can't repay him, but I can make the scales a little even this way.”

“Make the scales even.” Vye's fading hope brightened. Then the Out-Hunter was a follower of the Fata Rite. That would explain everything. If you could not repay a good deed to the one you owed, you must balance the Eternal Scales in another fashion. He relaxed again, a great many of his unasked questions so answered.

“You will accept?”

Vye nodded eagerly. “Yes, Out-Hunter.” He still could not believe that this was happening.

The other pressed the refresher button, and this time he handed Lansor the brimming cup. “Drink on the bargain.” His words had the ring of command.

Lansor drank, gulping down the contents of the cup, and suddenly was aware of being tired. He leaned back against the wall, his eyes closed.

Ras Hume took the cup from the lax fingers of the young man. So far, very good. Chance appeared to be playing on his side of the board. It had been chance which had steered him into the Starfall just three nights ago when he had been in quest of his imposter. And Vye Lansor was better than he dared hope to find. The boy had the right coloring, he had been batted around enough to fall for the initial story, he was malleable now. And after Wass' techs worked on him he would be Rynch Brodie—heir to one-third of Kogan-Bors-Wazalitz!

“Come!” He touched Vye on the shoulder. The boy opened his eyes but his gaze did not focus as he got slowly to his feet. Hume glanced at his planet-time watch. It was still very early; the chance he must run in getting Lansor out of this building was small if they went at once. Guiding the younger man with a light hold above the elbow, he walked him out back to the flutter landing stage. The air-car was waiting. Hume's sense of being a gambler facing a run of good luck grew as he shepherded the boy into the flutter, punched a cover destination and took off.



On another street he transferred himself and his charge into a second air-car, set the destination to within a block of the address Wass had given him. Not much later he walked Vye into a small lobby with a discreet list of names posted in its rack. No occupations attached to those colored streamers Hume noted. This meant either that their owners represented luxury trades, where a name signified the profession or service, or that they were covers—perhaps both. Wass' world fringed many different circles, intermingled with some quite surprising professions dedicated to the comfort, pleasure or health of the idle rich, off-world nobility, and the criminal elite.

Hume fingered the right call button, knowing that the thumb pattern he had left on Wass' conference table would have already been relayed as his symbol of admission here. A flicker of light winked below the name, the wall to the right shimmered, and produced a doorway. Steering Vye to it, Hume nodded to the man waiting there. He was a flat-faced Eucorian of the servant caste, and now he reached out to draw Lansor over the threshold.

"I have him, gentlehomo." His voice was as expressionless as his face. There was another shimmer and the door disappeared.

Hume brushed his hand down the outer side of his thigh, wiping flesh against the coarse stuff of the crew uniform. He left the lobby frowning at his own thoughts.

Stupid! A swamper from one of the worst rat holes in the port. Like as not that youngster would have had his brains kicked out in a brawl, or been fried to a crisp when some drunk got wild with a blaster, before the year was out. He'd done him a real kindness, given him a chance at a future less than one man in a billion ever had the power to even dream about. Why, if Vye Lansor had known what was going to happen to him, he would have been so willing to volunteer, that he would have dragged Hume here. There was no reason to have any regrets over the boy, he had never had it so good—never! There was only one small period of risk for Vye to face. Those days he would have to spend alone on Jumala between the time Wass' organization would plant him there and the coming of Hume's party to "discover" him. Hume himself would tape every possible aid to cover that period. All the knowledge of a Guild Out-Hunter, added to the information gathered by the survey, would be used to provide Rynch Brodie with the training necessary for wilderness survival. Hume was already listing the items to be included as he strode down the street, his tread once more assured.

## 3

His head ached dully, of that he was conscious first. As he turned, without opening his eyes, he felt the brush of softness against his cheek, and a pungent odor fill his nostrils.

He opened his eyes, stared up past a rim of broken rock toward the cloudless, blue-green sky. A relay clicked into proper place deep in his mind.

Of course! He had been trying to lure a strong-jaws out of its traphole with hooked bait, then his foot had slipped. Rynch Brodie sat up, flexed his bare thin arms, and moved his long legs experimentally. No broken bones, anyway. But still he frowned. Odd—that dream which jarred with the here and now.

Crawling to the side of the creek, he dipped head and shoulders into the water, letting the chill of the stream flush away some of his waking bewilderment. He shook himself, making the drops fly from his uncovered torso and arms, and then discovered his hunting tackle.

He stood for a moment fingering each piece of his scanty clothing, recalling every piece of labor or battle which had added pouch, belt, strip of fabric to his equipment. Yet—there was still that odd sense of strangeness, as if none of this was really his.

Rynch shook his head, wiped his wet face with his arm. It was all his, that was sure, every bit of it. He'd been lucky, the survival manual on the L-B had furnished him with general directions and this was a world which was not unfriendly—not if one was prepared for trouble.

He climbed up and loosened the net, coiling its folds into one hand, taking the good spear in his other. A bush stirred ahead, against the pull of the light breeze. Rynch froze, then the haft of his spear slid into a new hand grip, the coils of his net spun out. A snarl cut over the purr of water.

The scarlet blot which sprang for his throat was met with the flail of the net. Rynch stabbed twice at the creature he had so swept off balance. A water-cat, this year's cub. Dying, its claws, over-long in proportion to its paws, drew inch deep furrows in the earth and gravel. Its eyes, almost the same shade as its long, burr-entangled body fur, glared up at him in deathly enmity.

As Rynch watched, that feeling that he was studying something strange, utterly alien, came to him once again. Yet he had hunted water-cats for many seasons. Fortunately they were solitary, evil-tempered beasts that marked out a roaming territory to defend it from others of their kind, and not too many were to be encountered in cross-country travel.

He stooped to pull his net from the now still paws. Some definite place he must reach. The compulsion to move on in that sudden flash shook him, raised the dull ache still troubling his temples into a punishing throb. Going down on his knees, Rynch once more turned to the stream water; this time after splashing it onto his face, he drank from his cupped hands.

Rynch swayed, his wet hands over his eyes, digging fingertips into the skin of his forehead to ease that pain bursting in his skull. Sitting in a room, drinking from a cup—it was as if a shadow picture fitted over the reality of the stream, rocks and brush about him. He had sat in a room, had drank from a cup—that action had been important!

A sharp, hot pain made him lose contact with that shadow. He looked down. From the gravel, from under rocks, gathered an army of blue-black, hard-shelled things, their clawed forelimbs

extended, blue sense organs raised on fleshy stalks well above their heads, all turned towards the dead feline.

Rynch slapped out vigorously, stumbled into the water loosening the hold of two vicious scavengers on the torn skin of his ankle when he waded out knee-deep. Already that black tongue of small bodies licked across the red-haired side of the hunter. Within minutes the corpse would be only well-cleaned bones.

Retrieving his spear and net, Rynch immersed both in the water to clean off attackers, and hurried on, splashing through the creek until he was well away from the vicinity of the kill. A little later he flushed a four-footed creature from between two rocks and killed it with one blow from his spear haft. He skinned his kill, feeling the substance of the skin. Was it exceedingly rough hide, or rudimentary scales? And knew a return of that puzzlement.

He felt, he thought painfully as he toasted the dry looking, grayish meat on a sharpened stick, as if a part of him knew very well what manner of animal he had killed. And yet, far inside him, another person he could not understand stood aloof watching in amazement.

He was Rynch Brodie, and he had been traveling on the Largo Drift with his mother.

Memory presented him automatically with a picture of a thin woman with a narrow, rather unhappy face, a twist of elaborately dressed hair in which jeweled lights sparkled. There had been something bad—memory was no longer exact but chaotic. And his head ached as he tried to recall that time with greater clarity. Afterwards the L-B and a man with him in it—  
“Simmons Tait!”

An officer, badly hurt. He had died when the L-B landed here. Rynch had a clear memory of himself piling rocks over Tait’s twisted body. He had been alone then with only the survival manual and some of the L-B supplies. The important thing was that he must never forget he was Rynch Brodie.

He licked grease from his fingers. The ache in his head made him drowsy. He curled up on a patch of sun-warmed sand and slept.

Or did he? His eyes were open again. Now the sky above him was no longer a bowl of light, but rather a muted halo of evening. Rynch sat up, his heart pounding as if he had been racing to outdistance the rising wind now pushing against his half-naked body.

What was he doing here? Where *was* here?

Panic, carried through from that awakening, dried his mouth, roughened his skin, made wet the palms of the hands he dug into the sand on either side of him. Vaguely, a picture projected into his mind—he had sat in a room, and watched a man come to him with a cup. Before that, he had been in a place of garish light and evil smells.

But he was Rynch Brodie, he had come here on an L-B when he was a boy, he had buried the ship’s officer under a pile of rocks, managed to survive by himself because he had applied the aids in the boat to learn how. This morning he had been hunting a strong-jaw, tempting it out of its hiding by a hook and line and a bait of fresh killed skipper.

Rynch’s hands went to his face, he crouched forward on his knees. That all was true, he could prove it—he would prove it! There was the strong-jaw’s den back there, somewhere on the rise where he had left the snapped haft of the spear he had broken in his fall. If he could find the den, then he would be sure of the reality of everything else.

He had only had a very real dream—that was it! Only, why did he continue to dream of that room, that man, and the cup? Of the place of lights and smells, which he hated so much that

the hate was a sour taste in his fright-dried mouth? None of it had ever been a part of Rynch Brodie's world.

Through the dusk he started back up the stream bed, towards the narrow little valley where he had wakened after that fall. Finally, finding shelter within the heart of a bush, he crouched low, listening to the noises of another world which awoke at night to take over the stage from the day dwellers.

As he plodded back, he fought off panic, realizing that some of those noises he could identify with confidence, while others remained mysteries. He bit down hard on the knuckles of his clenched fist, attempting to bend that discovery into evidence. Why did he know at once that that thin, eerie wailing was the flock call of a leather-winged, feathered tree dweller, and that a coughing grunt from downstream was just a noise?

"Rynch Brodie—Largo Drift—Tait." He tasted the blood his teeth drew from his own skin as he recited that formula. Then he scrambled up. His feet tangled in the net, and he went down again, his head cracking on a protruding root.

Nothing tangible reached him in that brush shelter. What did venture out of hiding to investigate was a substance none of his species could have named. It was neither body, nor mind—perhaps it was closest to alien emotion.

Making contact stealthily, but with confidence, it explored after its own fashion. Then, puzzled, it withdrew to report. And since that to which it reported was governed by a set pattern which had not been altered for eons, its only answer was a basic command reaffirmed. Again it made contact, strove to carry out that order fruitlessly. Where it should have found easy passage, a clear channel to carry influence to the sleeper's brain, it found a jumble of impressions, interwoven until they made a protective barrier.

The invader strove to find some pattern, or meaning—withdrew baffled. But its invasion, as ghostly as that had been, loosened a knot here, cleared a passage there.

Rynch awoke at dawn, slowly, dazedly, sorting out sounds, smells, thoughts. There was a room, a man, trouble and fear, then there was he, Rynch Brodie, who had lived in this wilderness on an unmapped frontier world for the passage of many seasons. That world was about him now, he could feel its winds, hear its sounds, taste, smell. It was not a dream—the other was the dream. It had to be!

Prove it. Find the L-B, retrace the trail of yesterday past the point of the fall which had started all this. Right there was the slope down which he must have tumbled. Above, he would find the den he had been exploring when the accident had occurred.

Only—he did not find it. His mind had produced a detailed picture of that rounded depression, at the bottom of which the strong-jaw lurked. But when he reached the crown of the bluff, nowhere did he sight the mounded earth of the pit's rim. He searched carefully for a good length, both north and south. No den—no trace of one. Yet his memory told him that there had been one here yesterday.

Had he fallen elsewhere and stumbled on, dazed, to fall a second time?

Some disputant inside him said no to that. This was where he had regained consciousness yesterday and there was no den!

He faced away from the river, breathing fast. No den—was there also no L-B? If he had passed this way dazed from a former fall, surely he would have left some trace.

There was a crushed, browned plant flattened by weight. He stooped to finger the wilted leaves. Something had come in this direction. He would back-track. Rynch gave a hunter's attention to the ground.

A half-hour later he found nothing but some odd, almost obliterated marks on grass too resilient to hold traces very long. And from them he could make nothing.

He knew where he was, even if he did not know how he got here. The L-B—if it did exist—was to the west. He had a vivid mental picture of the rocket shape, its once silvery sides dulled by exposure, canted crookedly amid trees. And he was going to find it!

Beyond the edge of any conscious sense there was a new stir. He was contacted again, tested. A forest called delicately in its alien way. Rynch had a fleeting thought of trees, was not aware of more than a mild desire to see what lay in their shade.

For the present his own problem held him. That which beckoned was defeated, repulsed by his indifference. While Rynch started at a steady distance to trot towards the east, far away a process akin to a relay clicked into a second set of impulse orders.

\*\*\*\*\*

Well above the planet Hume spun a dial to bring in the image of the wide stretches of continents, the small patches of seas. They would set down on the western land mass. Its climate, geographical features and surface provided the best site. And he had the very important co-ordinates for their camp already taped in the directo.

“That's Jumala.”

He did not glance around to see what effect that screen view had on the other four men in the control cabin of the safari ship. Just now he was striving to master his impatience. The slightest hint could give birth to a suspicion which would blast their whole scheme. Wass might have had a hand in the selection of the three clients, but they would certainly be far from briefed on the truth of any discovery made on Jumala—they had to be for the safety of the whole enterprise.

The fourth man, serving as his gearman for this trip, was Wass' own insurance against any wrong move on Hume's part. And the Out-Hunter respected him as being man enough to be wary of giving any suspicion of going counter to the agreed plan.

Dawn was touching up the main points of the western continent, and he must set this spacer down within a day's journey of the abandoned L-B. Exploration in that direction would be the first logical move for his party. They could not be openly steered to the find, but there were ways of directing a hunt which would do as well.

Two days ago, according to schedule, their castaway had been deposited here with a sub-conscious command to remain in the general area. There had been a slight element of risk in leaving him alone, armed only with the crude weapons he could manipulate, but that was part of the gamble.

They were down—right on the mark. Hume saw to the unpacking and activating of those machines and appliances which would protect and serve his civ clients. He slapped the last inflate valve on a bubble tent, watched it critically as it billowed from a small roll of fabric into a weather resistant, one-room, air-conditioned and heated shelter.

“Ready and waiting for you to move in, Gentlehomo,” he reported to the small man who stood gazing about him with a child's wondering interest in the new and strange.

“Very ingenious, Hunter. Ah—now just what might that be?” His voice was also eager as he pointed a finger to the east.

## 4

Hume glanced up alertly. There was a bare chance that “Brodie” might have witnessed their arrival and might be coming in now to save them all a great amount of time and trouble by acting the overjoyed, rescued castaway.

But he could sight nothing at all in that direction to excite any attention. The distant mountains provided a stark, dark blue background. Up their foothills and lower slopes was a thick furring of trees with foliage of so deep a green as to register black from this distance. And on the level country was the lighter blue-green of the other variety of wood edging the open country about the river. In there rested the L-B.

“I don’t see anything!” he snapped, so sharply the little man stared at him in open surprise. Hume forced a quick smile.

“Just what did you sight, Gentlehomo Starns? There is no large game in the woodlands.”

“This was not an animal, Hunter. Rather a flash of light, just about there.” Again he pointed.

Sun, Hume thought, could have been reflected from some portion of the L-B. He had believed that small spacer so covered with vines and ringed in by trees that it could not have been so sighted. But a storm might have disposed of some of nature’s cloaking. If so Starns’ interest must be fed, he would make an ideal discoverer.

“Odd.” Hume produced his distance glasses. “Just where, Gentlehomo?”

“There.” Starns obligingly pointed a third time.

If there had been anything to see it was gone now. But it did lie in the right direction. For a second or two Hume was uneasy. Things seemed to be working too well; his cynical distrust was triggered by fitting so smoothly.

“Might be the sun,” he observed.

“Reflected from some object you mean, Hunter? But the flash was very bright. And there could be no mirror surface in there, surely there could not be?”

Yes, things were moving too fast. Hume might be overly cautious but he was determined that no hint of any pre-knowledge of the L-B must ever come to these civs. When they would find the Largo Drift’s life boat and locate Brodie, there would be a legal snarl. The castaway’s identity would be challenged by a half dozen distant and unloving relatives, and there would be an intense inquiry. These civs must be the impartial witnesses.

“No, I hardly believe in a mirror in an uninhabited forest, Gentlehomo,” he chuckled. “But we are on a hunting planet and not all its life forms have yet been classified.”

“You are thinking of an intelligent native race, Hunter?” Chambriss, the most demanding of the civ party, strode up to join them.

Hume shook his head. “No native intelligence on a hunting world, Gentlehomo. That is assured before the planet is listed for a safari. However, a bird or flying thing, perhaps with metallic plumage or scales to catch the sunlight, might under the right circumstances seem a flash of light. That has happened before.”

“It was *very* bright,” Starns said doubtfully. “We might look over there later.”

“Nonsense!” Chambriss spoke briskly as one used to overriding the conflicting wishes in any company. “I came here for a water-cat, and a water-cat I’m going to have. You don’t find those in wooded areas.”

“There will be a schedule,” Hume announced. “Each of you has signed up, according to contract, for a different trophy. You for a water-cat, Gentlehomo. And you, Gentlehomo Starns, want to make tri-dees of the pit-dragons. While Gentlehomo Yactisi wishes to try electro fishing in the deep holes. To alternate days is the fair way. And, who knows, each of you may discover your own choice near the other man’s stake out.”

“You are quite right, Hunter,” Starns nodded. “And since my two colleagues have chosen to try for a water creature, perhaps we should start along the river.”

It was two days, then, before they could work their way into the woods. One part of Hume protested, the more cautious section of his mind was appeased. He saw, beyond the three clients now turning over and sorting space bags, Wass’ man glanced at the woods and then back to Starns. And, being acutely aware of all undercurrents here, Hume wondered what the small civ had actually seen.

The camp was complete, a cluster of seven bubble tents not too far from the ship. At least this crowd did not appear to consider that the Hunter was there to do all the serious moving and storing of supplies. All three of the clients pitched in to help, and Wass’ man went down to the river to return with half a dozen silver-fins cleaned and threaded on a reed, ready to broil over the cook unit.

A fire in the night was not needed except to afford the proper stage setting. But it was enjoyed. Hume leaned forward to feed the flames, and Starns pushed some lengths of driftwood closer.

“You have said, Hunter, that hunting worlds never contain intelligent native life. Unless the planet is minutely explored how can your survey teams be sure of that fact?” His voice bordered on the pedantic, but his interest was plain.

“By using the verifier.” Hume sat crosslegged, his plasta-hand resting on one knee. “Fifty years ago, we would have had to keep rather a lengthy watch to be sure of a free world. Now, we plant verifiers at suitable test points. Intelligence means mental activity of some sort—any of which would be recorded on the verifier.”

“Amazing!” Starns extended his plump hands to the flames in the immemorial gesture of a human attracted not only to the warmth of the burning wood, but to its promise of security against the forces of the dark. “No matter how few, or how scattered your native thinkers may be, you record them without missing any?”

Hume shrugged. “Maybe one or two,” he grinned, “might get through such a screening. But we have yet to discover a planet with such a sparse native life as that at the level of intelligence.”

Yactisi juggled a cup in and out of the firelight. “I agree, this is most interesting.” He was a thin man, with scanty drab gray hair and dark skin, perhaps the result of the mingling of several human races. His eyes were slightly sunken, so that it was difficult in this light to read their expression. He was, Hume had already decided, a class one brain and observant to a degree, which could either be a help or a menace. “There have been no cases of failure?”

“None reported,” Hume returned. All his life he had relied on machines operating, of course, under the competent domination of men trained to use them properly. He understood the



process of the verifier, had seen it at work. At the Guild Headquarters there were no records of its failure; he was willing to believe it was infallible.

“A race residing in the sea now—could you be sure your machine would discover its presence?” Starns continued to question.

Hume laughed. “Not to be found on Jumala, you may be sure of that—the seas here are small and shallow. Such, not to be picked up by the verifier, would have to exist at great depths and never venture on land. So we need not fear any surprises here. The Guild takes no chances.”

“As it always continues to assure one,” Yactisi replied. “The hour grows late. I wish you rewarding dreams.” He arose to go to his own bubble tent.

“Yes, indeed!” Starns blinked at the fire and then scrambled up in turn. “We hunt along the river, then, tomorrow?”

“For water-cat,” Hume agreed. Of the three, he believed Chambriss the most impatient. Might as well let him pot his trophy as soon as possible. The ex-pilot deduced there would be little cooperation in exploration from that client until he was satisfied in his own quest.

Rovald, Wass’ man, lingered by the fire until the three civs were safe in their bubbles.

“River range tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yes. We can’t rush the deal.”

“Agreed.” Rovald spoke with a curtness he did not use when the civs were present. “Only don’t delay too long. Remember, our boy’s roaming around out there. He might just be picked off by something before these stumble-footed civs catch up with him.”

“That’s the chance we knew we’d have to take. We don’t dare raise any suspicion. Yactisi, for one, is no fool, neither is Starns. Chambriss just wants to get his water-cat, but he could become nasty if anyone tried to steer him.”

“Too long a wait might run us into trouble. Wass doesn’t like trouble.”

Hume spun around. In the half light of the fire his features were set, his mouth grim. “Neither do I, Rovald, neither do I!” he said softly, but with an icy promise beneath the words.

Rovald was not to be intimidated. He grinned. “Set your fins down, fly-boy. You need Wass—and I’m here to hold his stakes for him. This is a big deal, we won’t want any misses!”

“There won’t be any—not from my side.” Hume stepped away from the fire, approached a post which gleamed with a dull, red line of fire down either side. He pressed a control button. That red line flared into a streak of brilliance. Now encircling the bubble tents and the space ship was a force field: routine protection of a safari camp on a strange world and one Hume had set as a matter of course.

He stood for a long moment staring through that invisible barrier toward the direction of the wood. It was a dark night, there were scudding clouds to hide the stars, which meant rain probably before morning. This was no time to be plagued by uncertain weather.

Somewhere out there Brodie was holed up. He hoped the boy had long ago reached the “camp” so carefully erected and left for his occupancy. The L-B, that stone covered “grave” showing signs of several years’ occupancy, was all assembled and constructed to the last small detail. Far less might have deceived the civs in this safari. But as soon as the story of their find leaked, there would be others on the scene, men trained to assess the signs of a

castaway's fight for survival. His own Guild training and the ability of Wass' renegade techs should bring them through that test.

What had Starns seen? The glint of sun on the tail of the L-B, tilted now to the sky? Hume walked slowly back to the fire, when he saw Rovald going up the ramp into the spacer. He smiled. Did Wass think he was stupid enough not to guess that the Veep's man would be in com touch with his employer? Rovald was about to report along some channel of the shadow world that they had landed and that the play was about to begin. Hume wondered idly how far and through how many relays that message would pass before it reached its destination.

He stretched and yawned, moving to his sleeping pad. Tomorrow they must find Chambriss a water-cat. Hume shoved Brodie into the back of his mind to center his thoughts on the various ways of delivering, to the waiting sportsman, a fair-sized alien feline.

The lights in the bubbles went out one by one. Within the circle barrier of the force field men slept. And by midnight the rain began to fall, streaming down the sides of the bubbles, soaking the ashes of the fire.

Out of the dark crept that which was not thought, not substance, but alien to the off-world men. But the barrier, meant to deter multi-footed creatures, with wings or no visible limbs at all, proved to be a better protection than its creators had hoped. There was no penetration—only a baffled butting of one force against another. And then the probe withdrew as undetected as it had come.

Only, the thing which had no intelligence, as humankind rated intelligence, did possess the ability to fathom the nature of that artificial barrier. The force field was examined, its nature digested. First approach had failed. The second was now ready—ready as it had not been months before when the first coming of these creatures had alerted the very ancient watchdog on Jumala.

Deep in the darker woods on the mountain sides there was a stirring. Things whimpered in their sleep, protested subconsciously commands they could never understand, only obey. With the coming of dawn there would be a marshaling of hosts, a new assault—not on the camp, but on any leaving its protection. And also on the boy now sleeping in a shallow cave formed by the swept roots of a tree—a tree which had crashed when the L-B landed.

Again, fortune favored Hume. With the dawn the rain was over. There was a cloudy sky overhead, but he believed the day would clear. The roily, rushing water of the river would aid Chambriss' quest. Water-cats holed up in the banks, but rising water often forced them out of such dens. A course parallel to the stream bed could well show them the tracks of one of the felines.

They started off in a group, Hume leading, with Chambriss treading briskly behind him, Rovald bringing up the rear in the approved trail technique. Chambriss carried a needler, Starns was unarmed except for a small protection stunner, his tri-dee box slung on his chest by well-worn carrying straps. Yactisi shouldered an electric pole, wore its control belt buckled about his middle, though Hume had warned him that the storm would prevent any deep hole fishing.

Only a short distance from the campsite they came upon the unmistakable marks of a water-cat's broad paws, pressed in so heavy and distinct a pattern that Hume knew the animal could not be far ahead. The indentations were deep, and he measured the distance between them with the length of his hand.

"Big one!" Chambriss exclaimed in satisfaction. "Going away from the river, too."

That point puzzled Hume slightly. The red coated felines might be washed out of their burrows, but they did not willingly head so sharply away from the water. He squatted on his heels and surveyed the stretch of countryside between them and the distant wood with care.

The grass was this season's, still growing, not tall enough to afford cover for an animal with paws as large as these prints. There were two clumps of brush. It could have holed up in either, waiting to attack any trailer—but why? It had not been wounded, nor frightened by their party, there was no reason for it to set an ambush on its back trail.

Starns and Yactisi dropped back, though Starns was fussing with his tri-dee. Rovald caught up. He had drawn his ray tube in answer to Hume's hand wave. Any action foreign to the regular habits of an animal was to be mistrusted.

Getting to his feet Hume paced along the line of marks. They were fresh—hot fresh. And they still led in a straight line for the woods. With another wave of his hand he stopped Chambriss. The civ was trained in spite of his eagerness and obeyed. Hume left the tracks, made a detour which brought him to a point from which he could study those clumps of brush. No sign except that line of prints pointed to the woods. And if the party kept on, they might well come upon the L-B!

He decided to risk it. But when they were less than a couple of yards from the tree fringe his hand shot up to direct Chambriss to fire towards the quivering bush.

Only, that formless half seen thing, hardly to be distinguished in color from the vegetation, was no water-cat. There was a thin, ragged cry. Then the creature plunged backward, was gone.

“What in the name of nine Gods was that?” Chambriss demanded.

“I don't know.” Hume went forward, jerked the needler dart from a tree trunk. “But don't shoot again—not unless you are sure of what you are aiming at!”

## 5

Moisture from the night's rain hung on the tree leaves, clung in globules to Rynch's sweating body. He lay on a wide branch trying to control the heavy panting which supplied his laboring lungs. And he could still hear the echoes of the startled cries which had come from the men who had threaded through the woods to the up-pointed tail fins of the L-B.

Now he tried to reason why he had run. They were his own kind, they would take him out of the loneliness of a world heretofore empty of his species. But that tall man—the one who had led the party into the irregular clearing about the life boat—

Rynch shivered, dug his nails into the wood on which he lay. At the sight of that man, dream and reality had crashed together, sending him into panic-stricken flight. That was the man from the room—the man with the cup!

As his heart quieted he began to think more coherently. First, he had not been able to find the strong-jaws's den. Then the marks on the ground at the point from which he had fallen and the L-B were here, just as he remembered. But not far from the small ship he had discovered something more—a campsite with a shelter fashioned out of spalls and vines, containing possessions a castaway might have accumulated.

That man would come, Rynch was sure of that, but he was too spent to struggle on.

No, the answer to every part of the puzzle lay with that man. To go back to the ship clearing was to risk capture—but he had to know. Rynch looked with more attention at his present surroundings. Deep mold under the trees here would hold tracks. There might just be another way to move. He eyed the spread of limbs on a neighbor tree.

His journey through those heights was awkward and he sweated and cringed when he disturbed vocal treetop dwellers. He was also to discover that close to the site of the L-B crash others waited.

He huddled against the bole of a tree when he made out the curve of a round bulk holding tight to the tree trunk aloft. Though it was balled in upon itself he was sure the creature was fully as large as he, and the menacing claws suggested it was a formidable opponent.

When it made no move to follow him Rynch began to hope it had only been defending its own hiding place, for its present attitude suggested concealment.

Still facing that featureless blob in the tree, the man retreated, alert for the first sign of advance on the part of the creature above. None came, and he dared to slip around the bole of the tree under which he stood, listening intently for any corresponding movement overhead. Now he was facing that survivor's camp.

Another object crouched in the dark of the lean-to shelter, just as its fellow was on sentry duty in the tree! Only this one did not have the self-color of the foliage to disguise it. Four-limbed, its long forearms curved about its bent knees, its general outline almost that of a human—if a human went clothed in a thick fuzz. The head hunched right against the shoulders as if the neck were very short, or totally lacking, was pear-shaped, with the longer end to the back, and the sense organs of eyes and nose squeezed together on the lower quarter of the rounded portion, with a line of wide mouth to split the blunt round of the muzzle. Dark pits for eyes showed no pupil, iris, or cornea. The nose was a black, perfectly rounded tube jutting an inch or so beyond the cheek surface. Grotesque, alien and terrifying, it made no hostile move. And, since it had not turned its head, he could not be sure it had even sighted

him. But it knew he was there, he was certain of that. And was waiting—for what? As the long seconds crawled by Rynch began to believe that it was not waiting for him. Heartened, he pulled at the vine loop, climbed back into the tree.

Minutes later he discovered that there were more than two of the beasts waiting quietly about the camp, and that their sentry line ran between him and the clearing of the L-B. He withdrew farther into the wood, intent upon finding a detour which would bring him out into the open lands. Now he wanted to join forces with his own kind, whether those men were potential enemies or not.

As time passed the beasts closed about the clearing of the camp. Afternoon was fading into evening when he reached a point several miles downstream near the river. Since he had come into the open he had not sighted any of the watchers. He hoped they did not willingly venture out of the trees where the leaves were their protection.

Rynch went flat on the stream bank, made a worm's progress up the slope to crouch behind a bush and survey the land immediately ahead. There stood an off-world spacer, fins down, nose skyward, and grouped not too far from its landing ramp, a collection of bubble tents. A fire burned in their midst and men were moving about it.

Now that he was free from the wood and its watchers and had come so near to his goal, Rynch was curiously reluctant to do the sensible thing, to rise out of concealment and walk up to that fire, to claim rescue by his own kind.

The man he sought stood by the fire, shrugging his arms into a webbing harness which brought a box against his chest. Having made that fast he picked up a needler by its sling. By their gestures the others were arguing with him, but he shook his head, came on, to be a shadow stalking among other shadows. One of the men trailed him, but as they reached a post planted a little beyond the bubble tents he stopped, allowed the explorer to advance alone into the dark.

Rynch went to cover under a bush. The man was heading to the stream bed. Had they somehow learned of his own presence nearby, were they out to find him? But the preparations the tall man had made seemed more suited to going on patrol. The watchers! Was the other out to spy on them? That idea made sense. And in the meantime he would let the other pass him, follow along behind until he was far enough from the camp so that his friends could not interfere—then, they would have a meeting!

Rynch's fingers balled into fists. He would find out what was real, what was a dream in this crazy, mixed up mind of his! That other would know, and would tell him the truth!

Alert as he was, he lost sight of the stranger who melted into the dusky cover of the shadows. Then came a quiet ripple of water close to his own hiding place. The man from the spacer camp was using the stream as his road.

In spite of his caution Rynch was close to betrayal as he edged around a clump of vegetation growing half in, half out of the stream. Only a timely rustle told him that the other had sat down on a drift log.

Waiting for him? Rynch froze, so startled that he could not think clearly for a second. Then he noted that the outline of the other's body was visible, growing brighter by the moment.

Minute particles of pale-greenish radiance were gathering about the other. The dark shadow of an arm flapped, the radiance swirled, broke again into pinpoint sparks.

Rynch glanced down at his own body—the same sparks were drifting in about him, edging his arms, thighs, chest. He pushed back into the bushes while the sparks still flitted, but they

no longer gathered in strength enough to light his presence. Now he could see they drifted about the vegetation, about the log where the man sat, about rocks and reeds. Only they were thicker about the stranger as if his body were a magnet. He continued to keep them whirling by means of waving hand and arm, but there was enough light to show Rynch the fingers of his other hand, busy on the front panel of the box he wore.

That fingering stopped, then Rynch's head came up as he heard a very faint sound. Not a beast's cry—or was it?

Again those fingers moved on the panel. Was the other sending a message by that means? Rynch watched him check the webbing, count the equipment at his belt, settle the needler in the crook of his arm. Then the stranger left the stream, headed towards the woods.

Rynch jumped to his feet, a cry of warning shaping, but not to be uttered. He padded after the other. There was plenty of time to stop the man before he reached the danger which might lurk under the trees.

However the other was as wary of that dark as if he suspected what might lie in wait there. He angled along northward, avoiding clumps of scattered brush, keeping in the open where Rynch dared not tail him too closely.

Their course, parallel to the woods, brought them at last to a second stream, the size of a river, into which the first creek emptied. Here the other settled down between two rocks with every indication of remaining there for a period.

Thankfully Rynch found his own lurking place from which he could keep the other in sight. The light points gathered, hung in a small luminous cloud over the rocks. But Rynch had prudently withdrawn under a bush, and the scent of its aromatic leaves must have discouraged the sparks, for no such crown came to his sentry post.

Drugged with fatigue, the younger man slept, awaking to full day, a fog of bewilderment and disorientation. To open his eyes to this blue-green pocket instead of to four dirty walls, was wrong.

Remembering, he started up and slunk down the slope, angry at his failure. He found the other's track, not turning back as he had half feared, cleanly printed on level spots of wet earth—eastward now. What was the purpose of the other's expedition? Was he going to use the open cut through which the river ran as a way of penetrating the wooded country?

Now Rynch considered the problem from his own angle. The man from the spacer had made no effort to conceal his trail, in fact it would almost seem that he had deliberately gone out of his way to leave boot prints on favorable stretches of ground. Did he guess that Rynch lurked behind, was now leading him on for some purpose of his own? Or were those traces left to guide another party from the camp?

To advance openly up the stream bed was to invite discovery. Rynch surveyed the nearer bank. Clumps of small trees and high growing bushes dotted that expanse, an ideal cover.

He was hardly out of sight of the bush which had sheltered him when he heard the coughing roar of a water-cat. And the feline was attacking an enemy, enraged to the pitch of vocal frenzy. Rynch ran a zigzag course from one clump of bush to the next. That sound of snarling, spitting hate ended in mid-cry as Rynch crawled to the river bank.

The man from the spacer camp had been the focus of a three-prong attack from a female and her cubs. Three red bodies were flat and still on the gravel as the off-worlder leaned back against a rock breathing heavily. As Rynch sighted him, he stooped to recover the needler he

had dropped, lurched away from the rock towards the water, and so blundered straight into another Jumalan trap.

His unsteady foot advancing for another step came down on a slippery surface, and he fell forward as his legs were engulfed in the trap burrow of a strong-jaws. With a startled cry the man dropped the needler again, clawed at the ground about him. Already he was buried to his knees, then his mid-thighs, in the artificial quicksand. But he had not lost his head and was jerking from side to side in an effort to pull free.

Rynch got to his feet, walked with slow deliberation down to the river's brink. The trapped prisoner had shied halfway around, stretching out his arms to find a firmer grip on some rock large and heavy enough to anchor him. After his first startled cry he had made no sound, but now, as he sighted Rynch, his eyes widened and his lips parted.

The box on his chest caught on a stone he had dragged to him in a desperate try for support. There was a spitting of sparks and the stranger worked frantically at the buckle of the webbing harness to loosen it and toss the whole thing from him. The box struck one of the dead water-cats, flashed as fur and flesh were singed.

Rynch watched dispassionately before he caught the needler, jerking it away from the prisoner. The man eyed him steadily, and his expression did not alter even when Rynch swung the off-world weapon to center its sights on the late owner.

"Suppose," Rynch's voice was rusty sounding in his own ears, "we talk now."

The man nodded. "As you wish, Brodie."

## 6

“Brodie?” Rynch squatted on his heels.

Those gray eyes, so light in the other’s deeply tanned face, narrowed the smallest fraction, Rynch noted with an inner surge of triumph.

“Were you looking for me?” he added.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“We found an L-B—we wondered if there were survivors.”

Slowly Rynch shook his head. “No—you knew I was here. Because you brought me!” He fashioned his suspicions into one quick thrust.

This time there was not the slightest hint of self-betrayal from the other.

“You see,” Rynch leaned forward, but still well out of reach from the captive, “I remember!”

Now there was a faint flicker of answer in the man’s eyes. He asked quietly:

“What do you remember, Brodie?”

“Enough to know that I am not Brodie. That I did not get here on the L-B, did not build that camp.”

He ran one hand over the stock of the needler. Whatever motive lay behind this weird game into which he had been unwillingly introduced, he was now sure that it was serious enough to be dangerous.

“You have no cup this time.”

“So you do remember.” The other accepted that calmly. “All right. That need not necessarily spoil our plans. You have nothing to return to on Nahuatl—unless you *liked* the Starfall.” His voice was icy with contempt. “To play our roles will be for your advantage, too.” He paused, his gaze centering on Rynch with the intensity of one willing the desired answer out of his inferior.

Nahuatl. Rynch caught at that. He had been on or in Nahuatl—a planet? a city? If he could make this man believe he remembered everything clearly, more than just the scattered patches that he did...

“You had me planted here, then came back to hunt me. Why? What makes Rynch Brodie so important?”

“Close to a billion credits!” The man from the spacer leaned well back in the hole, his arms spread flat out on either side to keep his body from sinking deeper. “A billion credits,” he repeated softly.

Rynch laughed. “You’ll have to think of a better one than that, fly-boy.”

“The stakes would have to be high, wouldn’t they, for us to go to all this staging? You’ve been conditioned, Brodie, illegally brain-channeled!”



To Rynch the words meant nothing. If they ever had, that was gone, lost in the maze of other things which had been blotted out of his mind by the Brodie past. But he would not give the other the advantage of knowing his uncertainty.

“You need a Brodie for a billion credits. But you don’t have a Brodie now!”

To his surprise the prisoner in the earth trap laughed. “I’ll have a Brodie when he’s needed. Think about a good share of a billion credits, boy, keep thinking of that hard.”

“I will.”

“Thoughts alone won’t work it, you know.” For the first time there was a hint of some emotion in the man’s voice.

“You mean I need you? I don’t think so. I’ve stopped being a plaque for someone to play across the board.” That expression brought another momentary flash of hazy memory—a smoky, crowded room where men slid counters back and forth across tables—not one of Brodie’s edited recalls, but his own.

Rynch stood up, started for the rise of the slope, but before he topped that he glanced back. The damaged com box still smoked where its wearer had flung it. Now the man was already straining forward with both arms, trying to reach a rock just a finger space beyond. Lucky for him the burrow was an old one, uninhabited. In time he should be able to work his way out. Meanwhile there was the whole of a wide countryside in which Rynch could discover a hideout—no one would find him now against his will.

He tried, as he strode along, to piece together more of his memories and the scanty information he had had from the Nahuatl man. So he had been “brain-channeled,” given a set of false memories to fit a Rynch Brodie whose presence on this world meant a billion credits for someone. He could not believe that this was the spaceman’s game alone, for hadn’t he spoken of “we”?

A billion credits! The sum was fantastic, the whole story unbelievable.

There was a hot stab of pain on his instep. Rynch cried out, stamped hard. One of the clawed scavengers was crushed. The man leaped back in time to avoid another step into a swarming mass of them at work on some unidentifiable carrion. Staring down at the welter of scaled, segmented bodies and busy claws, he gasped.

Three dead water-cats were near the man trapped in the pit. Bait to draw these voracious eaters straight to the prisoner. Rynch’s empty stomach heaved. He swung around, ran across the grassy verge of the upper bank, hoping he was not too late.

As he half fell, half slid down to the water, he saw that the man had managed to hook the webbing of the smouldering box to him, was casting it out and dragging it back patiently, aiming at the nearest rock of size, fruitlessly attempting to hitch its straps over the round of stone.

Rynch dashed on, caught at that loop of webbing, and dug his heels into the loose gravel as he began a steady pull. With his aid the other crawled out, lay panting. Rynch grabbed the man’s shoulder, jerked him away from the body of the female water-cat. He was sure he had seen a telltale scurrying around the smaller of the dead cubs.

The man straightened, glanced toward Rynch who was backing off, the needler up and ready between them.

“My turn to ask why?”

Then his gaze followed Rynch's. The smallest cub twitched from side to side. Not with any faint trace of life, but under the attack of the scavengers. More scuttled towards the second cub.

"Thanks!" The stranger was on his feet. "My name is Ras Hume. I don't think I told you that when we last met."

"This doesn't make any difference. I'm not your man, not Brodie!"

Hume shrugged. "You think about it, Brodie, think about it with care. Come back to camp with me and—"

"No!" Rynch interrupted. "You go your way, I go mine from here on."

Again the other laughed. "Not so simple as all that, boy. We've started something which can't just be turned off as easily as you snap down a switch." He took a step or two in Rynch's direction.

The younger man brought up the needler. "Stay right where you are! Your game, Hume? All right, you play it—but not with me."

"And what are you going to do, take to the woods?"

"What I do is my business, Hume."

"No, my business, too, very much so. I'm giving you a warning, boy, in return for your help here." He nodded at the pit. "There's something in that woods—something which didn't show up when the Guild had their survey exploration here."

"The watchers." Rynch retreated step by step, keeping the needler ready. "I saw them."

"You've seen them!" Hume was eager. "What do they look like?"

In spite of his desire to be rid of Hume, Rynch found himself answering that in detail, discovering that on demand he could recall minutely the description of the animal hiding in the tree, the one who had waited in the shelter, and those he had glimpsed drawing in about the L-B clearing.

"No intelligence." Hume turned his head to survey the distant wood. "The verifier reported no intelligence."

"These watchers—you don't know them?"

"No. Nor do I like what you've seen of them, Brodie. So I'm willing to call a truce. The Guild believed Jumala an open planet, our records accredited it so. If that is not true we may be in for bad trouble. As an Out-Hunter I am responsible for the safety of three civs back there in the safari camp."

Hume made sense, much as Rynch disliked admitting it. And the Hunter must have read something of his agreement in his face for now he nodded and added briskly:

"Best place now is the safari camp. We'll head back at once."

Only time had run out. A noise sounded with a metallic ring. Rynch whirled, needler cocked. A glittering ball about the size of his fist rolled away from contact with a boulder, came to rest in the deep depression of one of Hume's boot tracks. Then another flash through the air, a clatter as a second ball spun across a patch of gravel.

The balls seemed to appear out of the air. Displaying rainbow glints they rolled in a semicircle about the two men. Rynch stooped, then Hume's fingers latched about his wrist,

dragging his hand away from the globe. It was only then that he realized that sharp action had detached his attention from that ball he had wanted to take up.

“Don’t touch!” Hume barked. “And don’t look at that too closely! Come along!” He pulled Rynch forward through the yet unclosed arc of the globe circle.

Hume detoured around the feasting scavengers and brought Rynch with him at a trot. They could hear behind them the plop and tinkle of more globes. Glancing back Rynch saw one fall close to the bodies of the water-cats.

“Wait a minute!” He pulled back against Hume’s hold. Here was a chance to see what effect that crystal had on the clawed carrion eater.

There was a change in the crystal: Yellow now, then red—red as the few scraps of fur remaining on the rapidly disappearing body.

“Look!”

The pulsating carpet which had covered the dead feline ceased to move. But towards that spot rolled two more of the globes, approaching the scavengers. Now the clawed things were stirring, dropping away from their prey. They spread out in a patch, moved purposefully forward. Behind them, as guardians might head a flock, rolled three globes, flushing scarlet, then more.

Hume’s hand came up. From the cone tip of the ray tube spat a lance of fire, to strike the middle crystal. The beam was reflected into the block of scavengers. Scaled bodies, twisted, crisped, were ash. But the crystal continued to roll at the same pace.

“Move!” Hume’s other hand hit Rynch’s shoulder, knocked him forward in an impetuous shove which nearly took him off his feet. Both men began to run.

“What—what are those things?” Rynch appealed between panting breaths.

“I don’t know—and I don’t like their looks. They’re between us and the safari camp if we keep to the river—”

“Between us and the river now.” Rynch saw that glittering swoop through the air, marked the landing of a ball near the water’s edge.

“Might be trying to box us in. But that’s not going to work. See—ahead there where that log’s caught between two rocks? Run out on that when we reach there and take to the water. I don’t think those things can float and if they sink to the bottom that ought to fix them as far as we are concerned.”

Rynch ran, still holding the needler. He balanced along the drift log Hume had pointed out and a jump sent him floundering in the brown stream thigh deep. Hume joined him, his face grim.

“Downstream—”

Rynch looked. One shape—two—three—Clearly detailed where matching vegetation gave them no covering camouflage, the watchers had come out of the woods at last. A line of them were walking quietly and upright towards the humans, their blue-green fuzz covering like a mist under the direct rays of the sun. Quiet as they seemed at present, the things out of the Jumalan forest were a picture of sheer brute strength as they moved.

“Let’s get out of here—fast!”

The men kept moving, and always after them padded that silent line of green-blue, pushing them farther and farther away from the safari camp, on towards the rising mountain peaks.

Just as the globes had shaken the scavengers loose from their meal and sent them marching on, so were the humans being herded for some unknown purpose.

At least, once the march of the beasts began, they saw and heard no more of the globes. And as they reached a curve in the river, Hume stopped, swung around, stood studying the line of decorously pacing animals.

“We can pick them off with the needler or the ray.”

The Hunter shook his head. “You don’t kill,” he recited the credo of his Guild, “not until you are sure. There is a method behind this, and method means intelligence.”

Handling of X-tee creatures and peoples was a part of Guild training. In spite of his devious game here on Jumala, Hume was Guild educated and Rynch was willing to leave such decisions to him.

The other held out the ray tube. “Take this, cover me, but don’t use it until I say so. Understand?”

He waited only for Rynch’s nod before he started, at a deliberate pace which matched that of the beasts, back through the river shallows to meet them. But that advancing line halted, stood waiting in silence. Hume’s hands went up, palm out, he spoke slowly in Basic-X-Tee clicks:

“Friend.” This was all Rynch could make out of that sing-song of syllables Rynch knew to be a contact pattern.

The dark eye pits continued to stare. A light breeze ruffled the fuzz covering of wide shoulders, long muscular arms. Not a head moved, not one of those heavy, rounded jaws opened to emit any answering sound. Hume halted. The silence was threatening, a portending atmosphere spread from the alien things as might a tangible wave.

For perhaps two breaths they stood so, man facing alien. Then Hume turned, walked back, his face set. Rynch offered him the ray tube.

“Fight our way out?”

“Too late. Look!”

Moving lines of blue-green coming down to the river. Not five or six now—a dozen—twenty. There was a small trickle of moisture down the side of the Hunter’s brown face.

“We’re penned—except straight ahead.”

“But we’re going to fight!” Rynch protested.

“No. Move on!”

## 7

It was some time before Hume found what he wanted, an islet in midstream lacking any growth and rising to a rough pinnacle. The sides were seamed with crevices and caves which promised protection for one's back in any desperate struggle. And they had discovered it none too soon, for the late afternoon shadows were lengthening.

There had been no attack, just the trailing to herd the men to the northeast. And Rynch had lost the first tight pinch of panic, though he knew the folly of underestimating the unknown.

They climbed with unspoken consent, going clear to the top, where they huddled together on a four-foot tableland. Hume unhooked his distance lenses, but it was toward the rises of the mountains that he aimed them, not along the back trail.

Rynch wriggled about, studied the river and its banks. The beasts there were quiet, blue-green lumps, standing down on the river bank or squatting in the grass.

"Nothing." Hume lowered the lenses, held them before his broad chest as he still watched the peaks.

"What did you expect?" Rynch snapped. He was hungry, but not hungry enough to abandon the islet.

Hume laughed shortly. "I don't know. Only I'm sure they are heading us in that direction."

"Look here," Rynch rounded on him. "You know this planet, you've been here before."

"I was one of the survey team that approved it for the Guild."

"Then you must have combed it pretty thoroughly. How is it that you didn't know about them?" He gestured to their pursuers.

"That is what I would like to ask a few assorted experts right about now," Hume returned. "The verifiers registered no intelligent native life here."

"No native life." Rynch chewed that over, came up with the obvious explanation. "All right—so then maybe our blue-backed friends are imported. Suppose someone's running a private business of his own here and wants to get rid of visitors?"

Hume looked thoughtful. "No." He did not enlarge upon his negative. Sitting down he pulled a cylinder container from a belt loop and shook out four tablets, handing two to Rynch, mouthing the others.

"Vita-blocks—good for twenty-four hours sustenance."

The iron rations depended upon by all exploring services did not have the satisfying taste of real food. However Rynch swallowed them dutifully before he descended with Hume to river level. The Hunter splashed water from the stream into a depression in the rock and dropped a pinch of clarifying powder into it.

"With the dark," he announced, "we might be able to get through their lines."

"You believe that?"

Hume laughed. "No—but one doesn't overlook the factor of sheer luck. Also, I don't care to finish up at the place they may have chosen for us." He tilted his chin to study the sky. "We'll take watches and rest in turn. No use trying anything until it is dark—unless they start to move in. You take the first one?"

As Rynch nodded, Hume edged back into a crevice as a shelled creature withdrawing to natural protection, going to sleep as easily as if he could control that state by will. Rynch, watching him curiously for a second or two before climbing up to a position from which he judged he could see all sides of their refuge, determined not to be surprised.

The watchers were crouched down, waiting with that patience which had impressed him from his first sight of the camp sentries back in the forest. There was no movement, no sound. They were simply there—on guard. And Rynch did not believe that the darkness of night would bring any relaxation of that vigilance.

He leaned back, feeling the grit of the rocky surface against his bare back and shoulders. Under his hand was the most efficient and formidable weapon known to the frontier worlds, from this post he could keep the enemy under surveillance and think.

Hume had had him planted here, in the first place, provided with the memory of Rynch Brodie—the reward for him was to be a billion credits. Too much staff work had gone into his conditioning for just a small stake.

So Rynch Brodie was on Jumala, and Hume had come with witnesses to find him. Another part of his mind stood aloof now, applauding the clearness of his reasoning. Rynch Brodie was to be discovered a castaway on Jumala. Only, matters had not worked out according to Hume's plan. In the first place he was certain he had not been intended to know that he was not Rynch Brodie. For a fleeting second he wondered why that conditioning had not completely worked, then went back to the problem of his relationship with Hume.

No, the Out-Hunter had expected a castaway who would be just what he ordered. Then this affair of the watchers—creatures the Guild men had not found here a few months ago—Rynch felt a small cold chill along his spine. Hume's game was one thing, something he could understand, but the silent beasts were another and somehow far more disturbing threat.

Rynch edged forward, watching the mist on the water, his brain striving to solve this other puzzle as neatly as he thought he had discovered the reason for his scrambled memories and his being on Jumala.

The mist was an added danger. Thick enough and those watchers could move in under its curtain. A needler was efficient, yes, but it could wipe out only an enemy at which it was aimed. Blind cross sweeping with its darts would only exhaust the clip without results, save by lucky chance.

On the other hand, suppose they could turn that same gray haze to their own advantage—use it to blanket their withdrawal? He was about to go to Hume with that suggestion when he sighted the new move in their odd battle with the aliens.

A wink of light—two more—blinking, following the erratic course by the pull of the stream. All bobbing along toward the rugged coastline of the islet. Those had appeared out of nothingness as suddenly as the globes when this chase had begun.

The globes and the winking lights on the water connected in his mind, argued new danger. Rynch took careful aim, fired a dart at one which had grounded on the pointed tip of the rocks where the river current came together after its division about the island. For the first time Rynch realized those things below were moving *against* the current—they had come upstream as if propelled.

He had fired and the light was still there, two more coming in behind it, so that now there was an irregular cluster of them. And there was activity on the water-washed rocks before them. Just as the scavengers had moved ahead of the globes on land, so now aquatic creatures had

come out of the river, were flopping higher on the islet. And those lights were changing color—from white to reddish-yellow.

Rynch scrambled with one hand in a rock crevice, found a stone he had noted earlier. He hurled that at the cluster of lights. There was a puff of brilliant red, one was gone. Something flopping on the rocks gave a mewling cry and somersaulted back into the water. Then a finger of mist drew between Rynch and the lights which were now only faint, glowing patches. He swung down from his perch, shook Hume awake.

The Out-Hunter made that instant return to full consciousness which was another defense for the men who live long on the rim of wild worlds.

“What—?”

Rynch pulled him forward. The mist had thickened, but there were more of those ominous lights at water level, spreading down both sides of the point, forming a wall. Dark forms moved out of the water ahead of them, flopping on the rocks, pressing higher, towards the ledge where the men stood.

“Those globes—I think they’re moving in the river now.” Rynch found another stone, took careful aim, and smashed a second one. “The needler has no effect on them,” he reported. “Stones do—but I don’t know why.”

They searched about them in the crevices for more ammunition, laying up a line of fist-sized rocks, while the lights gathered in, spreading farther and farther down the shores of the islet. Hume cried out suddenly, and aimed his ray tube below. The lance of its blast cut the dark as might a bolt of lightning.

With a shrill squeal, a blot shadow detached from the slope immediately below them. A vile, musky scent, now mingled with the stench of burning flesh, set them coughing.

“Water spider!” Hume identified. “If they are driving those out and up at...”

He fumbled at his equipment belt and then tossed an object downward to disintegrate in a shower of fiery sparks. Wherever those sparks touched rock or ground they flared up in tall thin columns of fire, lighting up the nightmare on the rocks and up the ledges.

Rynch fired the needler, Hume’s ray tube flashed and flashed again. Things squealed, or grunted, or died silently, while clawing to reach the upper ledges. He could not be sure of the nature of some of those things. One, armed and clawed as the scavengers, was nearly as large as a water-cat. And a furry, man-legged creature, with a double-jawed head, bore also a ring of phosphorescent eyes set in a complete circle about its skull. They were alien life routed out of the water.

“The lights—smash the lights!” Hume ordered.

Rynch understood. The lights had driven these attackers out of the river. Put out the lights and the boiling broth of water dwellers might conceivably return to their homes. He dropped the needler, took up stones and set about the business of finishing off as many of the lights as he could.

Hume fired into the crawling mass, pausing only once to send another of those flame bombs crashing to illuminate the scene. The water creatures bewildered, clumsy out of their element, were so far at his mercy. But their numbers, in spite of the piling dead, were still a dangerous threat.

Rynch tore gapping holes in that line of lights. But he could see, through the mist, more floating sparks, gathering to take their places, perhaps herding before them more water things to attack. Except for those few gaps he had wrought, the islet was now completely enveloped.

“Ahhhh—” Hume’s voice arose in a roar of anger and defiance. He stabbed his ray down at a spot just below their ledge. A huge segmented, taloned leg kicked, caught on the edge of the stone at the level of their feet, twisted aloft again and was gone.

“Up!” Hume ordered. “To the top!”

Rynch caught up two handfuls of stones, holding them to his chest with his left arm as he made a last cast to see one light puff out in answer. Then they both scrambled on to that small platform at the top of the islet. By the aid of the burning flame-torches the Hunter had set, they could see that most of the rocky slopes below them now squirmed with a horrible mass of water life.

Where Hume had fired his ray there was fierce activity, as the living feasted on the slain and quarreled over the bounty. But from other quarters the crawling advance pressed on.

“I have only one more flame flare,” Hume stated.

One more flare—then they would be in the dark with the mist hiding the forward-moving enemy.

“I wonder if they are watching out there?” Rynch scowled into the dark.

“They—or what sent them. They know what they are doing.”

“You mean they must have done this before?”

“I think so. That L-B back there—it made a good landing, and there are supplies missing from its lockers.”

“Which you removed—” Rynch countered.

“No. There might have been real castaways landed here. Not that we found any trace of them. Now I can guess why—”

“But you Guild men were here, and you didn’t run into this!”

“I know.” Hume sounded baffled. “Not a sign then.”

Rynch threw the last of his stones, heard it clink harmlessly against a rock. Hume balanced an object on the palm of his hand.

“Last flare!”

“What’s that? Over there?”

Rynch had sighted the flashing out of the dark from the river bank, making a pattern of flickers which bore no relation to the infernal lights at the water’s edge.

Hume’s ray tube pointed skyward as he answered with a series of short bursts.

“Take cover!” The call came weirdly out over the water, the tone dehumanized. Hume cupped his mouth with one hand, shouted back:

“We’re on top—no cover.”

“Then flatten down—we’re blasting!”

They flattened, lay almost in each other’s arms, curled on that narrow space. Even through his closed eyelids Rynch caught the flash of vivid, man-made lightning crashing first on one



side of the islet and then on the other, and sweeping every crawling horror out of life, into odorous ash. The backlash of that blast must have caught the majority of the lights also. For when Rynch and Hume cautiously sat up, they saw only a handful of widely scattered and dulling globes below.

They choked, coughed, rubbed watering eyes as the fumes from the scorched rocks wreathed up about their perch.

“Flitter with life line—above you!”

That voice had come out of what should have been empty air over their heads. A gangling line trailed across their bodies, a line with a safety belt locked to it, and a second was uncoiling in a slow loop as they watched.

In unison they grabbed for those means of escape, buckled the belts about them.

“Haul away!” Hume called. The lines tightened, their bodies swung up clear of the blasted river island, as their unseen transport headed for the eastern shore.

## 8

A subdued but steady light all around him issued from stark gray walls. He lay on his back in an empty cell-room. And he'd better be on the move before Darfu comes to enforce a rising order with a powerful kick or one of these backhanded blows which the Salarkian used to reduce most humans to helpless obedience.

Vye blinked again. But this wasn't his cubby hole at the Starfall, his nose as well as his eyes told him that. There was no hint of uncleanness or corruption here. He sat up stiffly, looked down at his own body in dull wonder. The only covering on his bare, brown self was a wide, scaled belt and a loin cloth. Clumsy sandals shod his feet, and his legs, up to thigh level, were striped with healing scratches and blotched with bruises.

Painfully, with mental processes as stiff as his arms and his legs, he tried to think back. Sluggishly, memory associated one picture with another.

Last night—or yesterday—Rynch Brodie had been locked in here. And “here” was one of the storage compartments of a spacer belonging to a man named Wass. It had been Wass' pilot in the flutter which snaked them from the river islet where the monsters had besieged them.

This was a concealed, fortified camp—Wass' hideout. And he was a prisoner with a very uncertain future, depending upon the will of the Veep and a man named Hume.

Hume, the Out-Hunter, had shown no surprise when Wass stood up in the lamplight to greet the rescued. “I see you have been hunting.” His eyes had moved from Hume to Rynch and back again.

“Yes—but that does not matter!” the Hunter had returned impatiently.

“No? Then what does?”

“This is not a free world, I have to report that. Get my civs off planet before something happens to them!”

“I thought all safari worlds were certified as free,” Wass countered.

“This one isn't. I don't know how or why. But that fact has to be reported and the civs lifted—”

“Not so fast.” Wass' voice had been quiet, almost gentle. “Such a report would interest the Patrol, would it not?”

“Of course—” Hume began and then stopped abruptly.

Wass smiled. “You see—complications already. I do not wish to explain anything to the Patrol. Nor do you either, my young friend, not when you stop to think about what might result from such explanations.”

“There wouldn't have been any trouble if you'd kept away from Jumala.” Hume's control had returned; both voice and manner were under tight rein. “Weren't Rovald's reports explicit enough to satisfy you?”

“I have risked a great deal on this project,” Wass replied. “Also, it is well from time to time for a Veep to check upon his field operatives. Men do not grow careless when personal supervision is ever in mind. And it is well that I did arrive here, is it not, Hunter? Or would you have preferred remaining on that island? Whether any of our project may be salvaged is a

point we must consider. But for the moment we make no moves. No, Hume, your civs will have to take their chances for a time.”

“And if there is trouble?” Hume challenged him. “A report of an alien attack will bring in the Patrol quickly enough.”

“You forget Rovald,” Wass corrected. “The chance that one of your civs can activate and transmit from the spacer is remote, and Rovald will see that it is impossible. You have picked up Brodie, I see.”

“Yes.”

“No!” What had possessed him at that moment to contradict? He had realized the folly of his outburst the moment Wass had looked at him.

“This becomes more interesting,” the Veep had remarked with that deceptive gentleness.

“You are Rynch Brodie, castaway from the Largo Drift, are you not? I trust that Out-Hunter Hume has made plain to you our concern with your welfare, Gentlehomo Brodie.”

“I’m not Brodie.” Having taken the leap into the dangerous truth he was stubborn enough to continue swimming.

“I find this enlightening indeed. If you are not Brodie—then who are you?”

That had been it. At that moment he couldn’t have told Wass who he was, explain that his patchwork of memories had gaping holes.

“And you, Out-Hunter,” Wass’ reptilian regard had moved again to Hume, “perhaps you have an adequate explanation for this discovery.”

“None of his doing,” he burst out, “I remembered—”

Some inexplicable emotion made Rynch defend Hume then.

Hume laughed, and there was a reckless edge to that sound. “Yes, Wass, your techs are not as good as they pretend to be. He didn’t follow the pattern of action they set for him.”

“A pity. But there are always errors when one deals with the human factor. Peake!” One of the other three men moved towards them. “You will escort this young man to the spacer, see him safely stowed for the present. Yes, a pity. Now we must see just how much can be salvaged.”

Then Vye had been brought into the shop, supplied with a ration container, and left to himself within this bare-walled cabin to meditate upon the folly of talking too freely. Why had he been so utterly stupid? Veeps of Wass’ calibre did not swim through the murky channels of the Starfall, but their general breed had smaller but just as vicious representatives there, and he knew the man for what he was, ruthless, powerful and thorough.

A sound, slight, but easily heard in the silent vacuum of the storage cabin, alerted him. The crack of the sliding panel door opened and Vye crouched, his hand cupping the only possible weapon, the ration container. Hume edged through, shut the door behind him. He stood there, his head turned so his ear rested against the wall; obviously he was listening.

“You brain-smoothed idiot!” The Hunter’s voice was a thread of whisper. “Why couldn’t you have kept that swinging jaw of yours closed last night? Now listen and listen good. This is a slim try, but it’s one we have to take.”

“We?” Vye was startled into asking.

“Yes, we! By rights I ought to leave you right here to do the rest of your big, brave speechmaking for Wass’ benefit. If I didn’t need you, that’s just what I would do! If it weren’t for those civs—” His head snapped back, cheek to panel, he was listening again. After a long moment his whisper came once more. “I don’t have time to repeat this. In about five minutes Peake’ll be here with rations. I’ll leave this door unlatched. There’s another storage cabin across the corridor—see if you can hide there, then trick him into getting in here and lock him in. Got it?”

Vye nodded.

“Then—make for the exit port. Here.” He snapped a packet loose from his belt. “This is a flare pak, you saw how they worked on the island. When you get on the ramp beyond the atom lamp, throw this. It should hit the camp force barrier. And the result ought to hold their attention. Then you head for the flutter. Understand?”

“Yes.”

The flutter, yes, that was the perfect escape. With a camp force barrier on, any fugitive could only break out by going straight up.

Hume gazed at him soberly, listened once more, and then went. Vye counted a slow five before he followed. The cabin across the corridor was open, just as Hume had promised. He slipped inside, waited.

Peake was coming now, the metallic plates on his spaceboots clicking in regular pattern of sound. He earned another ration container and crooked it in his arm as he snapped up the lock bar on the other cabin.

There was an exclamation of surprise. Vye went into action. His hand, backed by all the strength of his thrusting arm, thumped between Peake’s shoulders, sending him staggering into the prison compartment. Before the other could recover either his balance or his wits, Vye had the panel shut, the bar locked into place.

He ran down the corridor to the well ladder, swung down its rungs with an agility born of necessity. Then he was in the air lock, getting his bearings. The flutter stood to his left, the flashing atom lamp, where the men were gathered, to his right.

Vye stepped out on the ramp. He wiped his sweating hand across his thigh. There had to be no failures in the tossing of the flare pak.

Choosing a spot, not directly in line with the lamp but near enough to dazzle the men, he hurled it with all the force he could muster. Then he was running down the ramp, forward to the area of the ship.

There was a flash—shouting—Vye curbed the impulse to look back, darted for the flutter. He jerked open the cabin compartment, scrambled into the cramped space behind the pilot’s seat, leaving that free for Hume’s quick entrance. More shouting—now he saw the lines of fire wavering from earth to sky along the barrier.

A black shape put on a burst of speed, was silhouetted against that flaming wall, then passed the spacer, grabbed at the open cockpit, and slid in behind the controls. Hume pulled the levers with flying fingers. They arose vertically at a pace which practically slapped Vye’s stomach up into the lower regions of his throat.

The searing line of at least one blaster reached after them—too slowly, too low. He heard Hume grunt, and they again leaped higher. Then the Hunter spoke:

“Half an hour at the most—”

“The safari camp?”

“Yes.”

They no longer climbed. The flitter was boring forwards on a projectile flight, into the dark of the night.

“What’re those?” Vye suddenly leaned forward.

Had some of the stars across the space void broken free from their fixed orbits? Flecks of light, moving in an arc, headed towards the speeding flitter.

Hume hit a button. Again they arose in a violent leap above those wandering lights. But ahead on this new level more such dots flocked, moving fast to close in on the flyer.

“A straight ram course,” Hume muttered, more to himself than Vye.

Again the flyer drove forward in a rising thrust of speed. Then the smooth purr of the propulsion unit faltered, broke into protesting coughs. Hume worked over the controls, beads of sweat showing on his forehead and cheek in the gleam of the cabin light.

“Deading—deading out!”

He brought the flitter around in a wide circle, the purr smoothed out once more in a steady reassuring beat.

“Out run them!”

But Vye feared they were back again on the losing side of a struggle with the unknown alien power. As they had been herded along the river, so now they were being pushed across the sky, towards the mountains. The enemy had followed them aloft!

Some core of stubborn will in Hume would not yet allow him to admit that. Time and time again he climbed higher—always to meet climbing, twisting, spurting lines of lights which reacted on the engine of the flitter and threatened it with complete failure.

Where they were now in relation to Wass’ camp or that of the safari, Vye had no idea, and he guessed that Hume could not be too certain.

Hume switched on the flitter’s com unit, tried a channel search until he picked up a click of signal—the automatic reply of the safari camp. His fingertip beat out in return the danger warning, then the series of code sounds to give an edited version of what must be guarded against.

“Wass has a man in your camp. His skin is in just as much danger as the rest. He may not relay it to the Patrol, but he’ll keep the force barrier up and the civs inside—anything else would be malicious neglect and a murder charge when the Guild check tape goes in. This call is on the spacer tape now and will be a part of that—he can’t possibly alter such a report and he knows it. This is the best we can do now—”

“We’re close to the mountains, aren’t we?”

“Do you know much about this part of the country?” Vye persisted. Hume’s knowledge might be their only hope.

“Flew over the range twice. Nothing to see.”

“But there has to be something there.”

“If there is, it didn’t show up during our survey.” Hume’s voice was dull with fatigue.

“You’re a Guild man, you’ve dealt with alien life forms before—”

“The Guild doesn’t deal with intelligent aliens. That’s X-Tee Patrol business. We don’t land on any planet with unknown intelligent life forms. Why should we court trouble—couldn’t run a safari in under those conditions. X-Tee certified Jumala as a wild world, our survey confirmed that.”

“Someone or something landed here after you left?”

“I don’t believe so. This is too well organized an action. And since we have a satellite guard in space, any ship landing would be taped and recorded. No such record appeared on the Guild screens. One small spacer—such as Wass’—could slip through by knowing procedure—just as he did. But to land all those beasts and equipment they’d need a regular transport. No—this must be native.” Hume leaned forward again, flipped a switch.

A small red light answered on the central board.

“Radar warn-off,” he explained.

So they wouldn’t end up smeared against some cliff face anyway. Which was only small comfort amid terrifying possibilities.

Hume had taken the precaution just in time. The light blinked faster, and the speed of the flyer was checked as the automatic control triggered by the warn-off came into command. Hume’s hands were still on the board, but a system of relays put safety devices into action with a speed past that which a human pilot could initiate.

They were descending and had to accept that, since the warn-off, operating for the sake of the passengers, had ruled that move best. The directive would glide the flitter to the best available landing. It was only moments before the shock gear did touch surface. Then the engine was silent.

“This is it,” Hume observed.

“What do we do now?” Vye wanted to know.

“Wait—”

“Wait! For what?”

Hume consulted his planet-time watch in the light of the cabin.

“We have about an hour until dawn—if dawn arrives here at the same time it does in the plains. I don’t propose to go out blindly in the dark.”

Which made sense. Except that to sit here, quietly, in their cramped quarters, not knowing what might be waiting outside, was an ordeal Vye found increasingly harder to bear. Maybe Hume guessed his discomfort, maybe he was following routine procedure. But he turned, thumbed open one of the side panels in Vye’s compartment, and dug out the emergency supplies.

## 9

They sorted the crash rations into small packs. A blanket of the water-resistant, feather-heavy Ozakian spider silk was cut into a protective covering for Vye. That piece of tailoring occupied them until the graying sky permitted them a full picture of the pocket in which the flitter had landed. The dark foliage of the mountain growth was broken here by a ledge of dark-blue stone on which the flyer rested.

To the right was a sheer drop, and a land slip had cut away the ledge itself a few feet behind the flitter. There was only a steadily narrowing path ahead, slanting upward.

“Can we take off again?” Vye hoped to be reassured that such a feat was possible.

“Look up!”

Vye backed against the cliff wall, stared up at the sky. Well above them those globes still swam in unwearied circles, commanding the air lanes.

Hume had cautiously approached the outer rim of the ledge, was using his distance glasses to scan what might lie below.

“No sign yet.”

Vye knew what he meant. The globes were overhead, but the blue beasts, or any other fauna those balls might summon, had not yet appeared.

Shouldering their packs they started along the ledge. Hume had his ray tube, but Vye was weaponless, unless somewhere along their route he could pick up some defensive and offensive arm. Stones had burst the lights of the islet, they might prove as effective against the blue beasts. He kept watch for any of the proper size and weight.

The ledge narrowed, one shoulder scraped the cliff now as they rounded a pinnacle to lose sight of the flitter. But the globes continued to hover over them.

“We are still traveling in the direction they want,” Vye speculated.

Hume had gone to hands and knees to negotiate an ascent so steep he had to search for head and toe holds. When they were safely past that point they took a breather, and Vye glanced aloft again. Now the sky was empty.

“We may have arrived, or are about to do so,” said Hume.

“Where?”

Hume shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. And both of us can be wrong.”

The steep ascent did not quite reach the top of the cliff around the face of which the ledge curled. Instead their path now leveled off and began to widen out so that they could walk with more confidence. Then it threaded into a crevice between two towering rock walls and sloped downward.

A path unnaturally smooth, Vye thought, as if shaped to funnel wayfarers on. And they came out on the rim of a valley, a valley centered with a wood-encircled lake. They stepped from the rock of the passage onto a springy turf which gave elastically to their tread.

Vye’s sandal struck a round stone. It started from its bed in the black-green vegetation, turned over so that round pits stared eyelessly up at him. He was faced by the fleshless grin of a human skull.

Hume went down on one knee, examined the ground growth, gingerly lifted the lace of vertebrae forming a spine. That ended in a crushed break which he studied briefly before he laid the bones gently back into the concealing cover of the mossy stuff.

“That was done by teeth!”

The cup of green valley had not changed, it was the same as it had been when they had emerged from the crevice. But now every clump of trees, every wind-rippled mound of brush promised cover.

Vye moistened his lips, diverted his eyes from the skull.

“Weathered,” Hume said slowly, “must have been here for seasons, maybe planet years.”

“A survivor from the L-B?” Yet this spot lay days of travel from that clearing back in the plains.

“How did he get here?”

“Probably the same way we would have, had we not holed up on that river island.”

Driven! Perhaps the lone human on Jumala herded up into this dead-end valley by the globes or the blue beasts. “This process must have been in action for some time.”

“Why?”

“I can give you two reasons.” Hume studied the nearest trees narrowly. “First—for some purpose, whatever we are up against wants all interlopers moved out of the lowlands into this section, either to imprison them, or to keep them under surveillance. Second—” He hesitated.

Vye’s own imagination supplied a second reason, a revolting one he tried to deny to himself even as he put it into words:

“That broken spine—food...” Vye wanted Hume to contradict him, but the Hunter only glanced around, his expression already sufficient answer.

“Let’s get out of here!” Vye was fighting down panic with every ounce of control he could summon, trying not to bolt for the crevice. But he knew he could not force himself any farther into that sinister valley.

“If we can!” Hume’s words lingered direly in his ears.

Stones had smashed the globes by the river. If they still waited out there Vye was willing to try and break them with his bare hands, should escape demand such action. Hume must have agreed with those thoughts, he was already taking long strides back to the cliff entrance.

But that door was closed. Hume’s foot, raised for the last step toward the crevice corridor, struck an invisible obstruction. He reeled back, clutching at Vye’s shoulder.

“Something’s there!”

The younger man put out his hand questingly. What his fingers flattened against was not a tight, solid surface, but rather an unseen elastic curtain which gave a little under his prodding and then drew taut again.

Together they explored by touch what they could not see. The crevice through which they had entered was now closed with a curtain they could not pierce or break. Hume tried his ray tube. They watched thin flame run up and down that invisible barrier, but not destroy it.

Hume relooped the tube. “Their trap is sprung.”



“There may be another way out!” But Vye was already despondently sure there was not. Those who had rigged this trap would leave no bolt holes. But because they were human and refused to accept the inevitable without a fight, the captives set off, not down into the curve of the cup, but along its slope.

Tongues of brush and tree clumps brought about detours which forced them slowly downward. They were well away from the crevice when Hume halted, flung up a hand in silent warning. Vye listened, trying to pick up the sound which had alarmed his companion.

It was as Vye strained to catch a betraying noise that he was first conscious of what he did not hear. In the plains there had been squeaking, humming, chitterings, the vocalizing of myriad grass dwellers. Here, except for the sighing of the wind and a few insect sounds—nothing. All inhabitants bigger than a Jumalan fly might have long ago been routed out of the land.

“To the left.” Hume faced about.

There was a heavy thicket there, too stoutly grown for anything to be within its shadow. Whatever moved must be behind it.

Vye looked about him frantically for anything he could use as a weapon. Then he grabbed at the long bush knife in Hume’s belt sheath. Eighteen inches of tri-fold steel gleamed wickedly, its hilt fitting neatly into his fist as he held it point up, ready.

Hume advanced on the bush in small steps, and Vye circled to his left a few paces behind. The Hunter was an expert with ray tube; that, too, was part of the necessary skill of a safari leader. But Vye could offer other help.

He shrugged out of the blanket pack he had been carrying on his back, tossed that burden ahead.

Out of cover charged a streak of red, to land on the bait. Hume blasted, was answered by a water-cat’s high-pitched scream. The feline writhed out of its life in a stench of scorched fur and flesh. As Vye retrieved his clawed pack Hume stood over the dead animal.

“Odd.” He reached down to grasp a still twitching foreleg, stretched the body out with a sudden jerk.

It was a giant of its species, a male, larger than any he had seen. But a second look showed him those ribs starting through mangy fur in visible hoops, the skin tight over the skull, far too tight. The water-cat had been close to death by starvation; its attack on the men probably had been sparked by sheer desperation. A starving carnivore in a land lacking the normal sounds of small birds and animal life, in a valley used as a trap.

“No way out and no food.” Vye fitted one thought to another out loud.

“Yes. Pin the enemy up, let them finish off one another.”

“But why?” Vye demanded.

“Least trouble that way.”

“There are plenty of water-cats down on the plains. All of them couldn’t be herded up here to finish each other off; it would take years—centuries.”

“This one’s capture may have been only incidental, or done for the purpose of keeping some type of machinery in working order,” Hume replied. “I don’t believe this was arranged just to dispose of water-cats.”

“Suppose this was started a long time ago, and those who did it are gone, so now it goes on working without any real intelligence behind it. That could be the answer, couldn’t it?”

“Some process triggers into action when a ship sets down on this portion of Jumala, maybe when one planet’s under certain conditions only? Yes, that makes sense. Only why wasn’t the first Patrol explorer flaming in here caught? And the survey team—we were here for months, cataloguing, mapping, not a whisper of any such trouble.”

“That dead man—he’s been here a long time. And when did the Largo Drift disappear?”

“Five—six years ago. But I can’t give you any answers. I have none.”

\*\*\*\*\*

It began as a low hum, hardly to be distinguished from the distant howling of the wind. Then it slid up scale until the thin wail became an ululating scream torturing the ears, dragging out of hiding those fears of a man confronting the unknown in the dark.

Hume tugged at Vye, drew the other by force back into the brush. Scratched, laced raw by the whip of branches, they stood in a small hollow with the drift of leaves high about their ankles. And the Hunter pulled into place the portions of growth they had dislodged in their passage into the thicket’s heart. Through gaps they could see the opening where lay the body of the water-cat.

The wail was cut off short, that cessation in itself a warning. Vye’s body, touching earth with knee and hand as he crouched, picked up a vibration. Whatever came towards them walked heavily.

Did the smell of death draw it now? Or had it trailed them from the closed gate? Hume’s breath hissed lightly between his teeth. He was sighting the ray tube through a leaf gap.

A snuffling, heavier than a man’s panting. A vast blot, which was neither clearly paw nor hand, swept aside leaves and branches on the other side of the small clearing, tearing them casually from the shrubs.

What shuffled into the open might be a cousin of the blue beasts. But where they had given only an impression of brutal menace, this was savagery incarnate. Taller than Hume, but hunched forward in its neckless outline, the thing was a monster. And over the round of the lower jaw, tusks protruded in ugly promise.

Being carnivorous and hungry, it scooped up the body of the water-cat and fed without any prolonged ceremony. Vye, remembering the crushed spine of the human skeleton, was sickened.

Done, it reared on hind feet once again, the pear-shaped head swung in their direction. Vye was half certain he had seen that tube-nose expand to test the air and scent them.

Hume pressed the button of the ray tube. That soundless spear of death struck in midsection of that barrel body. The thing howled, threw itself in a mad forward rush at their bush. Hume snapped a second blast at the head, and the fuzz covering it blackened.

Missing them by a precious foot, the creature crashed straight on through the thicket, coming to its knees, writhing in a rising chorus of howls. The men broke out of cover, raced into the open where they took refuge behind a chimney of rock half detached from the parent cliff. Down the slope the bushes were still wildly agitated.

“What was that?” Vye got out between sobbing breaths.

“Maybe a guardian, or a patrol stationed to dispose of any catch. Probably not alone, either.” Hume fingered his ray tube. “And I am down to one full charge—just one.”

Vye turned the knife he held around in his fingers, tried to imagine how one could face up to one of those tusked monsters with only this for a weapon. But if that thing had companions, none were coming in answer to its dying wails. And after it had been quiet for a while Hume motioned them out of hiding.

“From now on we’ll keep to the open, better see trouble like that before it arrives. And I want to find a place to hole up for the night.”

They trailed along the steep upper slope and in time found a place where a now dried stream had once formed a falls. The empty watercourse provided an overhang, not quite a cave, but shelter. Gathering brush and stones, they made a barricade and settled behind it to eat sparingly of their rations.

“Water—a whole lake of it down there. The worst of it is that a water supply in a dry country is just where hunters congregate. That lake’s entirely walled in by woodland and provides cover for a thousand ambushes.”

“We might find a way out before our water bulbs fail,” Vye offered.

Hume did not answer directly. “A man can live for quite a while on very thin rations, and we have tablets from the flitter emergency supplies. But he can’t live long without water. We have two bulbs. With stretching that is enough for two days—maybe three.”

“We ought to get completely around the cliffs in another day.”

“And if we do find a way out, which I doubt, we’re still going to need water for the trek out. It’s right down there waiting until our need is greater than either our fear or our cunning.”

Vye moved impatiently, his blanket-clad shoulders scraping the rock at their backs. “You don’t think we have a chance!”

“We aren’t dead. And as long as a man is breathing, and on his feet, with all his wits in his skull, he always has a chance. I’ve blasted off-world with odds stacked high on the other side of the board.”

He flexed that plasta-flesh hand which was so nearly human and yet not by the fraction which had changed the course of his life.

“I’ve lived on the edge of the big blackout for a long time now—after a while you can get used to anything.”

“One thing I would like—to get at the one who set this trap,” commented Vye.

Hume laughed with dry humor. “After me, boy, after me. But I think we might have to wait a long time for that meeting.”

## 10

Vye crawled weakly from the area of a rock outcrop. The sun, reflected from the cliff side, was a lash of fire across his emaciated body. His swollen tongue moved a pebble back and forth in his dry mouth. He stared dimly down the slope to that beckoning platter of water open under the sun, rimmed with the deadly woodland.

What had happened? They had gone to sleep that first night under the ledge of the dried waterfall. And all of the next day was only a haze to him now. They must have moved on, though he could remember nothing, save Hume's odd behavior—dull-eyed silence while stumbling on as a brainless servio-robot, incoherent speech wherein all the words came fast, running together unintelligibly. And for himself—patches of blackout.

At some time they had come to the cave and Hume had collapsed, not rousing in answer to any of Vye's struggles to awaken him. How long they had been there Vye could not tell now. He had the fear of being left alone in this place. With water perhaps Hume could be returned to consciousness, but that was all gone.

Vye believed he could scent the lake, that every breeze up slope brought its compelling enticement. Just in case Hume might awake to a state of semi-consciousness and wander off, Vye tethered him with blanket bonds.

Vye fingered Hume's knife, which had been painstakingly lashed to a trimmed shaft of wood. Since he had emerged from that clouding of mind which still gripped the Hunter, he had done what he could to prepare for another attack from any roving beast. And he also had Hume's ray tube—its single charge to be used only in dire need.

Water! His cracked lips moved, ejected the pebble. Their four empty water bulbs were in the front of his blanket tunic, pressing against his ribs. It was now—or die, because soon he would be too weak to make the attempt at all. He darted for the first stand of bush downhill.

As the brooding silence of the valley continued, he reached the edge of the wood unhindered, intent on his mission with a concentration which shut out everything save his need and the manner of satisfying it.

He squatted in the bush, eyeing the length of woodland ahead. Then he tried the only action he had been able to think out. That beast Hume had killed had been too heavy to swing up in trees. But Vye's own weight now did not prohibit that form of travel.

With spear and ray tube firmly attached to him, Vye climbed into the first tree. A slim chance—but his only defense against a possible ambush. A wild outward swing brought him, heart-thudding, to the next set of limbs. Then he had a piece of luck, a looped vine tied together a whole group of branches from one treetop to the next.

Hand grips, balance, sometimes a walk along a branch—he threaded towards the lake. Then he came to a gap. With hands laced into tendrils, Vye hunched to look down on a beaten ribbon of gray earth—a trail well used by the evidence of its pounded surface.

That area had to be crossed on foot, but his passage through the brush below would leave traces. Only—there was no other way. Vye checked the lashings of his weapons again before leaping. Almost in the same instant his sandals hit the packed earth he was running. His palms skinned raw on rough bark as he somehow scrambled aloft once more.

No more vines, but broad limbs shooting well out. He dropped from one to another—stopped for breath—listened.

The dark gloom of the wood was broken by sunlight. He was at the final ring of trees. To get to the water he must descend again. A dead trunk extended over the water. If he could run out on that and lower the bulb, it could work.

Eerie silence. No flying things, no tree dwelling reptiles or animals, no disturbance of any water creature on the unruffled surface of the lake. Yet the sensation of life, inimical life, lurking in the depths of the wood, under the water, bore in upon him.

Vye made the light leap to the bole of the dead tree, balanced out on it over the water, moving slowly as the trunk settled a little under his weight. He hunkered down, brought out the first bulb tied fast to a blanket string.

The water of the river had been brown, opaque. But here the liquid was not so cloudy. He could see snags of dead branches below its surface.

And something else!

Down in those turgid depths he made out a straight ridge running with a trueness of line which could not be nature's unassisted product. That ridge joined another in a squared corner. He leaned over, strained his eyes to follow through the murk the farther extent of those two ridges. Looked along both pointed protuberances aimed at the surfaces of the lake, like fangs in an open jaw. Down there was something—something artificially fashioned which might be the answer to all their questions. But to venture into the lake himself—he could not do it! If he could bring the Out-Hunter to his senses the other might find the solution to this puzzle.

Vye filled his bulbs, working speedily, but still studying what he could see of the strange erection under the lake. He thought it was curiously free of silt, and its color, as far as he could distinguish, allowing for the dark hue of the water, was light gray—perhaps even white. He lowered his last bulb.

Down in the bleached forest of dead branches, well to one side of the mysterious walls, there was movement, a slow rolling of a shadow so hidden by a stirring of bottom mud that Vye could not make out its true form. But it was rising to the bulb.

Vye hated to lose a single precious drop. Once he might have the luck to make this journey unmolested, a second time the odds could be too high.

A flash—the slowly rising shadow was transformed into a whizzing spear of attack. Vye snapped the bulb out of the water just as a nightmarish, armored head arose on a whiplash of coiled, scaled neck, and a blunt nose thudded against the tree trunk with a hollow boom. Vye clung to his perch as the thing flopped back into deeper water from a froth of beaten foam, leaving a patch of odorous scum and slime to bracelet the waterlogged wood.

He ran for the shelter of the trees to get away. This time there was no rear, no thump of feet in warning. Out of the ground itself, or so it seemed to Vye's startled terror, reared one of the tusked beasts. To reach his tree and its dubious safety he had to wind past that chimera. And the creature waited with a semblance of ease for him to come to it.

Vye brought around his spear. The length of the haft might afford him a fighting chance if he could send the point home in some vulnerable spot. Yet he knew that the beasts were hard to kill.

The mouth opened in a wide grin of menace. Vye noted a telltale tightening of shoulder muscles. It was going to rush for him now with those clawed forepaws out to rip.

To wait was to court disaster. Vye shouted, his battle cry piercing the silence of the lake and wood. He sprang, aiming the spear point at the beast's protuberant belly, and then swerved to the side as the knife bit home, raking his weapon to open a gaping wound.

The spear was jerked from Vye's hold as both those taloned paws closed on it. Then the creature pulled it free, snapped the haft in two. Vye fired a short blast from the ray tube before it could turn on him, saw fur-fuzz afire, as he ran for the tree.

Beneath its branches he looked back. The beast was pawing at the burning fur on its head, and he had perhaps a second or two. He jumped and his fingers caught on the low hanging branch, then he made a superhuman effort, was up out of the path of the thing which rushed blindly for the tree, shrieking in frenzied complaint.

The huge body crashed against the trunk with force which nearly shook Vye from his hold. As the giant forepaws belabored the wood, strove to lift the body from the ground, Vye worked his way out on another branch. In the end it was the shaking of that limb under him which aided his swing to the next tree. And from there he traveled recklessly, intent only on getting out of the woods as fast as he could.

By the noise the beast was still assaulting the tree, and Vye marveled at its vitality, for the belly wound would long ago have killed any creature he knew. Whether it could trace his flight aloft, or whether its howls would bring more of its kind, he could not guess, but every second he could gain was all important now.

At the gap over the trail he hesitated. That path ran in the direction of the open, and to go on foot meant the possibility of greater speed. Vye slipped from the bough, hit the ground, and ran. His ragged lungful of air came in great gasps and he doubted if he could take the exertion of more tree travel now. He raced down the path.

Those mewling cries were louder, he was sure of it. Now he heard the thump of the beast's blundering pursuit behind him. But its bulk and hurts slowed it. In the open he could find cover behind a rock, use the ray again.

The trees began to thin. Vye summoned power for a last burst of speed, came out of the shadow of the wood as might a dart expelled from a needler. Before him, up slope, was the closed door of the valley. And moving in from the left was another of the blue beasts.

He could not retreat to the trees. But the newcomer was moving with the same ponderous self-confidence its fellow had shown earlier. Vye dodged right, headed for the rocks by the gap. As he pulled himself into that temporary fortification, the wounded beast dragged out of the woods below. He thought it was blind, yet some instinct drove it after him.

Shaking from fatigue, Vye steadied his forearm on the top of the rock, brought up the ray tube. Less than two yards away now was the deceptively open mouth of the gap. If he threw himself at that, would the elasticity of the unseen curtain hurl him back into the claws of the enemy?

He fired his blast at the head of the unwounded beast. It screeched, threw out its arms, and one of those paws struck against its wounded fellow. With a cry, that one flung itself at its companion in the hunt, and they tangled in a body-to-body battle terrible in its utter ferocity. Vye edged along the cliff determined to reach the cave and Hume. And the two blue things seemed intent on finishing each other off.

The one from the wood was done, the fangs of the other ripping out its throat. Tearing viciously the victor made sure of its kill, then its seared head came up, swung about to face Vye. He guessed it was aware of his movements whether it could see or not.

But he was not prepared for the speed of its attacking lunge. Heretofore the creatures had given the impression of brute strength rather than agility. And he had been almost fatally deceived. He jumped backwards, knowing he must elude that attack, for he could not survive hand-to-hand combat with the alien thing.

There was a moment of dazed disorientation, a weird sensation of falling through unstable space in which there had never been and never would be firm footing again. He was rolling across rock—outside the curtain of the gap.

He sat up, the feeling of being adrift in unmeasurable nothingness making him sick, to watch mistily as the blue beast came to a halt. Whimpering it turned, but before it reached the level of the woods, it sagged to its knees, fell face forward and was still, a destructive machine no longer controlled by life.

Vye tried to understand what had happened. He had somehow broken through that barrier which made the valley a prison. For a moment all that mattered was his freedom. Then he looked apprehensively behind him along the road to the open, more than half expecting to see a gathering of the globes, or of the less impressive lowland beasts that acted as herders. But there was nothing.

Freedom! He dragged himself to his feet. Free to go! He slipped Hume's ray tube back into his belt. Hume was still in the valley!

Vye rubbed his shaking hands across his face. Through the barrier and free—but Hume was back there, without a weapon, defenseless against any questing beast able to nose him out. Sickly, without water and protection, he was a dead man even while he still breathed.

Keeping one hand against the wall of the gap in support, Vye started to walk, not out of the gap towards the distant lowlands, but back into the valley, forcing himself to that by his will alone and screaming inside against such suicidal folly. He put out his hand tentatively when he reached the two points of rock where that curtain had hung. There was no obstruction—the barrier was down! He must get back to Hume.

Still keeping his wall hold, Vye lurched through the gate, was once more in the valley. He stood swaying, listening. But once again there was silence, not even the wind moved through trees or bushes. Placing one foot carefully before the other he went on towards Hume's cave. The haze which had clouded his thinking processes since that first morning's awakening in this bowl was gone now. Except for the physical weakness that weighted his body, he felt once more entirely alive and alert.

Wriggling in the cave's entrance was the Hunter. He had freed the bonds Vye had put on his legs, but his hands were still tied. His face, grimy, sweat-covered, was turned up to the sunlight, and his eyes were again bright with reason.

Vye found the strength to run the last few feet between them. He was fumbling with those ties about Hume's wrists as he blurted out the news. The barrier was out—they could go.

Then he was bringing one of those precious bulbs, raising it to Hume's eager mouth, squeezing a portion of its contents between the man's cracked and bleeding lips.

Somehow they made that trip back to the valley gate. When they saw their goal, Hume broke from Vye's hold, tottered forward with a cry not far removed from a sob. He rebounded to slip full length to the ground and lie there. Sobbing dryly, his gaunt face, eyes closed, turned up to the sky. The trap had snapped shut once again.

"Why—why?" Vye found he was repeating the same words over and over, his gaze blank, unfocussed, yet turned to the woods of the lake.

“Tell me what happened again.”

Vye’s head came around. Hume had pulled himself up so that his shoulders rested against the rock wall. His plasta-hand was out-flung, slipping up and down what seemed empty air, but which was the barrier against freedom. And now his eyes seemed entirely sane.

Slowly, hesitating between words, Vye went over the full account of his visit to the lake, his retreat before the beasts, his fortunate stumble through the gap.

“But you came back.”

Vye flushed. He was not going to try to explain that. Instead he said:

“If it went away once, it can again.”

Hume did not press the subject of his return. Rather he fastened upon the end of that action with the wounded beast, made Vye go through it verbally a third time.

“There is just this,” he said when the other was done. “When you fell you were not thinking of the barrier at all—and your wits were working again. You had come out of the daze we both had.”

Vye tried to remember, decided that the Hunter was correct. He had been trying to elude the charge of the beast, only, fear and that desperate desire had occupied his mind at that moment. But what did that signify?

To test just what he did not know, he crawled now to Hume’s side, put up his own hand to the space where the plasta-flesh palm slid back and forth on nothingness. But he almost fell on his face, forward into the gap. Where he had been expecting the resistance of the unseen curtain there had been nothing at all! He turned to Hume with the expression of a man who had been stunned by an unexpected blow.



## 11

“It is open for you!” Hume broke the quiet first. His eyes were very bleak in his bony face.

Vye stood up, took one step and was on the other side of the curtain where Hume’s hand still found substance. He came back with the same lack of hindrance. Yes, to him there was no longer a barrier. But why—why him when Hume was still a prisoner?

The Hunter raised his head so his eyes could meet Vye’s with the authority of an order. “Go, get away while you can!”

Instead Vye dropped down beside the other. “Why?” he asked baldly. And then the most obvious of all answers came.

He glanced at Hume. The Hunter’s head lolled back against the rock which supported him, his eyes were closed now, and he had the look of a man who had been driven to the edge of endurance and was now willing to relinquish his grip and let go.

Deliberately Vye brought up his right hand, balled his fingers into a fist. And just as deliberately he struck home, square on the point of that defenseless chin. Hume sagged, would have slipped down the surface of the rock had Vye’s hands not caught in his armpits.

Since he had not the strength left to get to his feet with such a burden, Vye crawled, dragging the inert body of the Hunter with him. And this time, as he had hoped, there was no resistance at the gap. Unconscious, Hume was able to cross the barrier. Vye stretched him as comfortably flat as he could, used a portion of their water on his face until he moaned, muttered, and raised his hand feebly to his head.

Then those gray eyes opened, focussed on Vye.

“What—”

“We’re both through now, both of us!” The younger man saw Hume glance around him with waking belief.

“But how—?”

“I knocked you out, that’s how,” Vye returned.

“Knocked me out? I crossed when I was unconscious!” Hume’s voice steadied, strengthened. “Let me see!” He rolled over on his side, threw out his arm, and this time the hand found no wall. For him, too, the barrier was gone.

“Once through, you are free,” he added wonderingly. “Maybe they never foresaw any escapes.” He struggled up, sitting with his hands hanging loosely between his knees.

Vye turned his head, looked down the trail. The length of distance lying between them and the safari camp now faced them with a new problem. Neither of them could make that trek on foot.

“We’re out, but we aren’t back—yet,” Hume echoed his thought.

“I was wondering, if *this* door is open—” Vye began.

“The flutter!” Again Hume’s mind matched his. “Yes, if those globes aren’t hanging around just waiting for us to try.”

“They might act only to get us here, not to keep us once we’re in.” That might be wishful thinking, they wouldn’t know until they tried to prove it.

“Give me a hand.” Hume held out his own, let Vye pull him to his feet. Weak as he was, he was clear-eyed, plainly clear-headed once more. “Let’s go!”

Together they went back through the gap, then tested the absence of the barrier once more, to make sure. Hume laughed. “At least the front door remains open, even if we find the back one closed.”

Vye left him sitting by that entrance while he made a quick trip to the cave to pick up the small pack of supplies left them. When he returned they crammed tablets into their mouths, drank feverishly of the lake water, and, with the stimulation of the new energy, set off along the cliff face.

“This wall in the lake,” Hume asked suddenly, “you are sure it is artificial?”

“Runs too straight to be anything else, and those projections are evenly spaced. I don’t see how it could be natural.”

“We’ll have to be sure.”

Vye thought of that attacking water creature. “No diving in there,” he protested. Hume smiled, a stretch of skin far too tight over his jaw now.

“Not us, at least not us now,” he agreed. “But the Guild will send another survey.”

“What could be the reason for all this?” Vye helped his companion over the loose debris of a cliff slide.

“Information.”

“What?”

“Someone—or something—picked our brains while we were out of our heads. Or—” Hume paused suddenly, looked directly at Vye. “I have a vague feeling that you were able to keep going a lot better than I was. That so?”

“Some of the time,” Vye admitted.

“That checks. Part of me knew what was going on, but was helpless while that other thing,” his smile of moments earlier was wiped away, there was a chill edge in his voice, “picked over my brains, sorted out what it wanted.”

Vye shook his head. “I didn’t feel that way. Just thick-headed—as if I were sleep walking and yet awake.”

“So it took me over, but didn’t go all the way with you. Why? Another question for our list.”

“Maybe—maybe Wass’ techs fixed it so I couldn’t be brain-picked, as you call it,” Vye offered.

Hume nodded. “Could be—would well be. Come on.” He pressed the pace now.

Vye turned to look down the slope suspiciously. Had Hume another warning of menace out of the wood? He could sight no movement there. And from this distance the lake was a topaz sheet of calm which could hide anything. Hume was already several paces ahead, scrambling as if the valley monsters were again on their track.

“What’s the matter?” Vye demanded, as he caught up.

“Night coming.” Which was true. Then Hume added, “If we can reach the flitter before sunset, we’ll have a chance to fly over the lake down there, to make a taping of it before we go.”

The energy of the tablets strengthened them so that by the time they reached the crevice door they were moving with their former agility. For a single second Hume hesitated before that slit, almost as if he feared the test he must make. Then he stepped forward and this time into freedom.

They reached the ledge where the flitter perched just as they had seen it last. How long ago that had been they could not have told, but they suspected that days of haze hung in between. Vye searched the sky. No globes winking there—just the flyer alone.

He took his old seat behind the pilot, watched Hume test the relays and responses in the quick run down of a man who has done this chore many times before. But the other gave a little sigh of relief when he finished.

“She’s all right, we can lift.”

Again they both looked aloft, half fearing to see those malignant herders wink into being to forbid flight. But the sky was as serenely clear of even a drifting cloud as they could hope. Hume pressed a button and they arose vertically with an even progress totally unlike the leap which had taken them out of Wass’ camp.

Well above the cliff wall they hovered, and were able to see below the round bowl of the valley prison. Hume touched controls, the flitter descended slowly just above the center of the lake. And from this position they were able to sight the other peculiarity of that body of water, that it was perfectly oval in shape, far too perfect to be an undeveloped product of nature. Hume took a round disk from his equipment belt, fitted it carefully into a slot on the control board and pressed the button below. Then he sent the flitter in a weaving zigzag course well above the surface of the water, so that eventually the flyer passed over every foot of its surface.

And from above, in spite of the turgid quality of the liquid, they could see what did rest on the bottom of that oval. The wall with its sharp corner which Vye had noted from shore level was only part of a water covered erection. It made a design when seen from overhead, a six-pointed star surrounding an oval and in the midst of that oval a black blot which they could not identify.

Hume brought the flitter over in one last sweep. “That’s it. We have a full taping.”

“What do you think it is?”

“A device set there by an intelligent being, and set a long time ago. This valley wasn’t arranged over night, six months ago—or even a year ago. We’ll have to let the experts tell us when and for what reason. Now, let’s head for home!”

He brought the flitter up and over the valley wall, flying southwest so that they passed over the gap which was the main entrance to the trap. And now he tried the com unit, endeavoring to pick up a signal on which they could beam in for a safe ride.

“That’s odd.” Under Hume’s control the direction finder passed back and forth without bringing any answering code click from the mike. “We may be too far in the mountains to pick up the beam. I wonder....” He swept the needle in another direction, slightly to the left.

A crackle spat from the mike. Vye could not read code but the very fury and intensity of that sound suggested panic—even terror.

“What’s that?”

Hume spoke without looking away from the control board. “Alarm.”

“From the safari?”

“No. Wass.” For a long second Hume sat very still, his fingers quiet. The flitter was on the automatic course, taking them out of the mountains, and Vye thought that their air speed was such they were already well removed from that sinister valley.

Hume made a slight adjustment to a dial, and the flitter banked, coming around on another course. Once more he spun the finder of the com. This time he was answered with a series of well-spaced clicks which lacked the urgency of that other call. Hume listened until the code rattled into silence again.

“They’re all right at the safari camp.”

“But Wass is in trouble. So what does that matter?” Vye wanted to know.

“It matters this much.” Hume spoke slowly as if he must convince himself as well as Vye.

“I’m the Guild man on Jumala, and the Guild man is responsible for all civs.”

“You can’t call him your client!”

Hume shook his head. “No, he’s no client. But he’s human.”

It narrowed down to that when a man was on the frontier worlds—humans stood together. Vye wanted to deny it, but his own emotions, as well as the centuries of age-old tradition, argued him down. Wass was a Veep, one of the criminal parasites dabbling in human misery along more than one solar lane. But he was also human and, as one of their own species, had his claim on them.

Vye watched Hume take over the controls, felt the flitter answer another change of course, then heard the frantic yammer of the distress call as they leveled off to ride its beam in to the hidden camp.

“Automatic.” Hume had turned down the volume of the receiver so that the clicks in the mike no longer were so strident. “Set on maximum and left that way.”

“They had a force barrier around the camp and they knew about the globes and the watchers.” Vye tried to imagine what had happened in that woods clearing.

“The barrier might have shorted. And without the flitter they would have been pinned.”

“Could have taken off in the spacer.”

“Wass doesn’t have the reputation of letting any project get out of his hands.”

Vye remembered. “Oh—your billion credit deal.”

To his surprise Hume laughed. “Seems all very far and out of orbit now, doesn’t it, Lansor? Yes, our billion credit deal—but that was thought out before we knew there were more players around the table than we counted. I wonder...”

But what he wondered he did not put into words and a moment later he added over his shoulder, “Better try to get some rest, boy. We’ve some time to a set-down.”

Vye did sleep, deeply, dreamlessly. And he roused after a gentle shaking to see a beam of light in the sky ahead, though around them was the solid darkness of night.

“That’s a warning,” Hume explained. “And I can’t raise any reply from the camp except a repeat of the distress call. If there is anyone there now, he can’t or won’t answer.”

Against that column of light they could make out the sky-pointed taper of the spacer and the auto-pilot landed them beside that ship in the middle of an area well lighted by the steady shaft of light from the tripod standing where the atom lamp had been on the night they had made their escape from camp.

Climbing stiffly from the small flyer they advanced with caution. A very few minutes later Hume slid his ray tube back into its belt loop.

“Unless they’ve holed up in the spacer—and I can’t see why they’d do that—this camp’s deserted. And they haven’t taken any equipment with them except maybe a few items they could back-pack.”

The ship proved as empty of life as the campsite. A wall seat pulled out too hastily so that it was jammed awry, the com cabin suggested that the leave-taking, when and for what reason, had been a matter of some emergency. Hume did not touch the tape set to keep on broadcasting the call for assistance.

“What now?” Vye wanted to know as they completed the search.

“The safari camp first—and a call for the Patrol.”

“Look here,” Vye set down the ration container he had found, was emptying it with vast satisfaction of one who had been too long on tablets, “if you beam the Patrol you’ll have to talk, won’t you?”

Hume went on fitting new charges into his ray tube. “The Patrol has to have a full report. There’s no way of bypassing that. Yes, we’ll have to give all the story. You needn’t worry.” He snapped closed the load chamber. “I can clear you all the way. You’re the victim, remember.”

“I wasn’t thinking about that.”

“Boy.” Hume tossed the tube up in the air, caught it in his plasta-hand. “I went into this deal with my eyes wide open—why doesn’t matter very much now. In fact,” he stared beyond Vye out into the empty, lighted camp, “I’ve begun to wonder about a lot of things—maybe too late. No—we’ll call the Patrol and we’ll do it not because it is Wass and his men out there, but because we’re human and they’re human, and there’s a nasty set-up here which has already sucked in other humans for its own purposes.”

The skeleton in the valley! And how very close they had been themselves to joining that unknown in his permanent residence.

“So now we make time—back to the safari camp. Get our message off to the Patrol and then we’ll try to trace Wass and see what we can do. Jumala is off a regular route. The Patrol won’t be here tomorrow at sunrise, no matter how much we wish a scouter would planet then.”

Vye was quiet as he stowed in the flitter again. As Hume had said, events moved fast. A little while ago he had wanted to settle with this Out-Hunter, wring out of him not only an explanation for his being here, but claim satisfaction for the humiliation of being moved about to suit some others’ purposes. Now he was willing to defeat Wass, bring in the Patrol, go up against whatever hid in that lake up there, providing Hume was not the loser. He tried to think why that was so and could not, he only knew it was the truth.

They were both silent as they took off from Wass’ deserted camp, sped away over the black blot of the woodland towards the safari headquarters on the plains. There were stars above

again but no globes. Just as they had won their freedom from the valley, so they moved without escort on the plains.

But the lights were there—not impinging on the flutter, or patrolling along its line of flight. No, they hung in a glowing cluster ahead when in the dawn the flutter shot away from the woods, headed for the landmark of the safari camp. A crown of lights circled over the camp site, as if those below were in a state of siege.

Hume aimed straight for them and this time the bobbing circle split wide open, broke to left and right. Vye looked below. Though the grayness of the morning was still hardly more than dusk he could not miss those humps spaced at intervals on the land, just beyond the unseen line of the force barrier. The lights above, the beasts below, the safari camp was under guard.

## 12

“There is only one way they could be moving—toward the mountains.” Hume stood in the open space among the bubble tents, facing him the four men of the camp, the three civs and Rovald. “You say it’s been seven days, planet time, since I left here. They may have been five days on that trail. If possible we have to stop them before they reach that valley.”

“A fantastic story.” Chambriss wore the affronted expression of a man who expected no interference with his own concerns. Then catching Hume’s eye he added, “Not that we doubt you, Hunter. We have the evidence in those dumb brutes waiting out there. However, by your own story, this Wass is an outside-the-law Veep, on this planet secretly for criminal purposes. Surely there is no reason for us to risk our safety in his behalf. Are you certain he is in any danger at all? You and this young man here have, by your testimony, been into the enemies’ territory and have been able to get out again.”

“Through a series of fortunate chances which might never occur again.” Hume was patient, too patient, Rovald seemed to think. His hand moved, he was holding a ray tube so that a simple movement of the wrist could send a crisping blast across all the rest of the party.

“I say, stop this yapping and get out there and pick up the Veep!”

“I intend to—after I call the Patrol.”

Rovald’s tube was now aimed directly at Hume. “No Patrol!” he ordered.

“This wrangling has gone far enough.” It was Yactisi who spoke with an authority which startled them all. And as their attention swung to him, he was already in action.

Rovald cried out, the weapon spun from his fingers, fingers which were slowly reddening. Yactisi nodded with satisfaction and he held his electro pole ready for a second attack. Vye scooped up the tube which had whirled across the ground to strike against his borrowed boot.

“I’ll set the call for the Patrol, then I’ll try to locate Wass,” Hume stated.

“Sensible procedure,” Yactisi approved in his dry voice. “You believe that you are now immune to whatever force this alien installation controls?”

“It would seem so.”

“Then, of course, you must go.”

“Why?” Chambriss countered for the second time. “Suppose he isn’t so immune after all? Suppose he gets out there and is captured again? He’s our pilot—do you want to be planet bound *here*?”

“This man is also a pilot.” Starns indicated Rovald, who was nursing his numb hand.

“Since he, too, is one of these criminals, he’s not to be trusted!” Chambriss shot back.

“Hunter, I demand that you take us off planet at once! And it is only fair to inform you that I also intend to prefer charges against you and against the Guild. Empty world! Just how empty have we found this world?”

“But, Gentlehomo,” Starns showed no signs of any emotion but eager curiosity, “to be here at this time is a privilege we could not hope to equal except by good fortune! The T-Casts will be avid for our stories.”

What had that to do with the matter, puzzled Vye. But he saw Starns' reminder produce a quick change in Chambriss.

"The T-Casts," he repeated, his expression of anger smoothing away. "Yes, of course, this is, in a manner of speaking, a truly historic occasion. We are in a unique position!"

Had Yactisi smiled? That change of lip line had been so slight Vye could not call it a smile. But Starns appeared to have found the right way to handle Chambriss. And it was the same little man who offered his services in another way when he said, diffidently to Hume:

"I have some experience with coms, Hunter. Do you wish me to send your message and take over the unit until you return? I gather," he added with a certain delicacy, "that it will not be expedient for your gearman to engage in that duty now."

So it was that Starns was installed in the com cabin of the spacer, sending out the request for Patrol aid, while Rovald was locked in the storage compartment of the same ship, pending arrival of those same authorities. As Hume sorted out supplies and Vye loaded them into the waiting flitter, Yactisi approached the Hunter.

"You have a definite plan of search?"

"Just to cast north from their camp. If they've been gone long enough to hit the foothills we may be able to sight them climbing. Otherwise, we'll go all the way up to the valley, wait for them there."

"You don't believe that they will be released after they have been—processed?"

Hume shook his head. "I don't think we would have been free, Gentlehomo, if it hadn't been for a series of fortunate accidents."

"Yes, though you didn't give us many details about that, Hunter."

Hume put down the needler he had been charging. He studied Yactisi across that weapon.

"Who are you?" His voice was soft but carried a snap.

For the first time Vye saw the tall, lean civ really smile.

"A man of many interests, Hunter—shall we let it go at that for the present? Though I assure you that Wass is not one of them in the way you might believe."

Gray eyes met brown, held so straightly. Then Hume spoke. "I believe you. But I have told you the truth."

"I have never doubted that—only the amount of it. There must be more talking later on—you understand that?"

"I never thought otherwise." Hume set the needler inside the flitter. The civ smiled again, this time including Vye in that evidence of good will before he walked away.

Hume made no comment. "That does it," he told his companion. "Still want to go?"

"If you do—and you can't do it alone." No man could take on the valley and Wass and his men.

Hume made no comment. They had rested briefly after their return to the safari camp, and Vye had been supplied with clothing from Hume's bags, so that now he wore the uniform of the Guild. He went armed, too, with the equipment belt taken from Rovald and that other's weapons, needler and tube. At least they started on their dubious rescue mission with every aid the safari camp could muster.



It was mid-afternoon when the flutter took to the air once again, scattering the hovering globes. There was no alteration in the ranks of the blue watchers waiting—for the barrier to go down, or someone in the camp to step beyond that protection?

“They’re stupid,” Vye said.

“Not stupid, just geared to one set of actions,” Hume returned.

“Which could mean that what sends them here can’t change its orders.”

“Good guess. I’d say that they were governed by something akin to our tapes. No provision made for any innovations.”

“So the guiding intelligence could be long gone.”

“I think it has been.” Hume then changed the subject sharply.

“How did you get into service at the Starfall?”

It was hard now to think back to Nahuatl—as if the Vye Lansor who had been swamper in that den of the port town was a different person altogether. In that patch of memories into which Rynch Brodie still intruded he hunted for the proper answer.

“I couldn’t hold the state jobs. And once you get the habit of eating, you don’t starve willingly.”

“Why not the state jobs?”

“Without premium they’re all low-rung tenders’ places. I tried hard enough. But to sit pressing buttons when a light flashed, hour after hour—” Vye shook his head. “They said I was too erratic and gave me the shove. One more move on and it would have been compulsive conditioning. I turned port-drift instead.”

“Ever thought of trying for a loan premium?”

Vye laughed shortly. “Loan premium? That’s a true fantasy if you’ve been job hopping. None of the companies will take a chance on a man with an in and out record. Oh, I tried....” That memory arose to the surface, clear and very chilling. Yes, he had tried to break out of the net the law and custom had put around him from the day he had been made a state child. “No—it was conditioning, or port-drift.”

“And you chose port-drift?”

“I was still me—as long as I stayed away from conditioning.”

“Then you became Rynch Brodie in spite of your flight.”

“No—well, maybe, for a while. But I’m still Vye Lansor here.”

“Yes, here. And I don’t think you’ll have to worry about raising a premium to get a new start. You can claim victim compensation, you know.”

Vye was silent, but Hume did not let him remain so.

“When the Patrol arrives, you put in your claim. I’ll back you.”

“You can’t.”

“That’s where you’re mistaken,” Hume told him crisply. “I’ve already taped a full story back at the spacer—it’s on record now.”

Vye frowned. The Hunter seemed determined to ask for the worst the Patrol—or the planet police back on Nahuatl—could deal out. A case of illegal conditioning was about as serious as you could get.

They shot along the diagonal of the triangle made by three points, the mountain valley, Wass' camp, and the safari headquarters, heading to the slopes up which the men must be herded if the beasts were shepherding them to the mountain valley. Vye, surveying the forest thick below, began to doubt they would ever be able to pick them up before they reached the valley gate.

Hume took a weaving course, zigzagging back and forth, while they both watched intently for a glint from one of the globes, any movement which would betray that trail. And it was on one of the upper slopes that the flitter passed over two of the blue beasts lumbering along. Neither of the creatures paid any attention to the flyer, they moved with purpose on some mission of their own.

"Maybe the tail end of the hunting pack," Hume commented.

He sent the flyer hovering over a stunted line of trees and brush. Beyond that was bare rock. But though they hung for moments, nothing moved into that open.

"Wrong scent somehow." Hume brought the flitter around. He had it on manual control now, keeping it answering to the quick changes of his will.

A longer sweep supplied the answer—a vegetation roofed slit running back into the uplands, in a way resembling the crevice through which they had originally found their way into this country. Hume brought the flyer along that. But if the men they sought were pushing their way through below they could not be sighted from the air. At last, with evening drawing in, Hume was forced to admit failure.

"Wait by the gap?" Vye asked.

"Have to now." Hume glanced about. "I'd say maybe tomorrow—mid-morning before they make it that far—if they are here. We'll have plenty of time."

Time for what? To make ready for a pitched battle with Wass—or with the beasts herding him? To try in the space of hours to solve the mystery of the lake?

"Do you think we could blast that thing in the lake?" Vye asked.

"We might be able to, just might. But that must be the last resort. We want that in working order for the X-Tee men to study. No, we'd better plan to hold Wass at the gate, wait for the Patrol to come in."

Less than an hour later after a soaring approach, Hume brought the flitter down with neat skill on the top of one of the cliffs which helped to form the portal of the gap. There was no difference in the scene below, save that where the two bodies of the blue beasts had lain there were now only clean and shining bones.

Darkness spread out from the lake woods like a growing stain of evil promise as the sun fell behind the peaks. Night came earlier here than in the plains.

"Watch!" Vye had been gazing down the gap; he was the first to note that movement in the cloaking bush.

Out of the cover trotted a four-footed, antlered animal he had not seen before.

"Syken deer," Hume identified. "But why in the mountains? It's a long way from its home range."

The deer did not pause, but headed directly for the gap and, as it neared, Vye saw that its brown coat was roughed with patches of white froth, while more dripped from the pale pink tongue protruding from its open jaws, and its shrunken sides heaved.

“Driven!” Hume picked up a stone, hurled it to strike the ground ahead of the deer.

The creature did not start, nor show any sign of seeing the rock fall. It trotted on at the same wearied pace, passed the portal rocks into the valley. Then it stood still, wedge-shaped head up, black horns displayed, while the nose flaps expanded, testing the air, until it bounded toward the lake, disappearing in the woods.

Though they shared watches during the night there were no other signs of life, nor did the deer reappear from the woods. With the mid-morning there was a sudden sound to warn them—a wild cry which must have come from a human throat. Hume tossed one of the needlers to Vye, took the other, and they scrambled down to the floor of the gap passage.

Wass did not lead his men, he came behind the reeling trio as if he had joined the blasts as driver. And while his men wavered, staggered, gave the appearance of nearly complete exhaustion, he still walked with a steady tread, in command of his wits, his fears, and the company.

As the first of the men blundered on, a fresh trickle of red running down his bruised face, Hume called:

“Wass!”

The Veep stopped short. He made no move to unsling the needler he carried, its barrel pointing skyward over his shoulder, but his round head with its upstanding comb of hair swung slightly from side to side.

“Stop—Wass—this is a trap!”

His three men kept on. Vye moved, for Peake leading that wavering group, stumbled, would have fallen had not the younger man advanced from the shadows to steady him.

“Vye!” Hume made his name a warning.

He had only time to glance around. Wass, his broad face impassive except for the eyes—those burning madman’s eyes—was aiming a ray tube.

Broken free of his hold, Peake fell to the right, came up against Hume. As Vye went down he saw Wass dart forward at a speed he wouldn’t have believed a driven man could summon. The Veep lunged, escaping the shot the Hunter had no time to aim, rolled, and came up with the needler Vye had dropped.

Then Hume, hampered by Peake’s feeble clawing, met head on the swinging barrel of that weapon. He gave a startled grunt and smashed back against the cliff, a wave of scarlet blood streaming down the side of his head.

The momentum of Wass’ charge carried him on. He collided with his men, and the last thing Vye saw, was the huddle of all four of them, flailing arms and legs, spinning on through the gate into the valley with Wass’ hoarse, wordless shouting, bringing echoes from the cliffs.

## 13

He lay against a rock, and it was quiet again, except for a small whimpering sound which hurt, joined with the eating pain in his side. Vye turned his head, smelled burned cloth and flesh. Cautiously he tried to move, bring his hand across his body to the belt at his waist. One small part of his mind was very clear—if he could get his fingers to the packet there, and the contents of that packet to his mouth, the pain would go away, and maybe he could slip back into the darkness again.

Somehow he did it, pulled the packet out of its container pouch, worked the fingers of his one usable hand until he shredded open the end of the covering. The tablets inside, spilled out. But he had three or four of them in his grasp. Laboriously he brought his hand up, mouthed them all together, chewing their bitterness, swallowing them as best he could without water.

Water—the lake! For a moment he was back in time, feeling for the water bulbs he should be carrying. Then the incautious movement of his questing fingers brought a sudden stab of raw, red agony and he moaned.

The tablets worked. But he did not slide back into unconsciousness again as the throbbing torture became something remote and untroubling. With his good arm he braced himself against the cliff, managed to sit up.

Sun flashed on the metal barrel of a needler which lay in the trampled dust between him and another figure, still very still, with a pool of blood about the head. Vye waited for a steadying breath or two, then started the infinitely long journey of several feet which separated him from Hume.

He was panting heavily when he crawled close enough to touch the Hunter. Hume's face, cheek down in the now sodden dust, was dabbled with congealing blood. As Vye turned the hunter's head, it rolled limply. The other side was a mass of blood and dust, too thick to afford Vye any idea of how serious a hurt Hume had taken. But he was still alive.

With his good hand Vye thrust his numb and useless left one into the front of his belt. Then, awkwardly he tried to tend Hume. After a close inspection he thought that the mass of blood had come from a ragged tear in the scalp above the temple and the bone beneath had escaped damage. From Hume's own first-aid pack he crushed tablets into the other's slack mouth, hoping they would dissolve if the Hunter could not swallow. Then he relaxed against the cliff to wait—for what he could not have said.

Wass' party had gone on into the valley. When Vye turned his head to look down the slope he could see nothing of them. They must have tried to push on to the lake. The flitter was at the top of the cliff, as far out of his reach now as if it were in planetary orbit. There was only the hope that a rescue party from the safari camp might come. Hume had set the directional beam on the flyer, when he had brought her down, to serve as a beacon for the Patrol, if and when Stars was lucky enough to contact a cruiser.

"Hmmm..." Hume's mouth moved, cracked the drying bloody mask on his lips and chin. His eyes blinked open and he lay staring up at the sky.

"Hume—" Vye was startled at the sound of his own voice, so thready and weak, and by the fact that he found it difficult to speak at all.

The other's head turned; now the eyes were on him and there was a spark of awareness in them.

“Wass?” The whisper was as strained as his own had been.

“In there.” Vye’s hand lifted from Hume’s chest indicating the valley.

“Not good.” Hume blinked again. “How bad?” His attention was not for his own hurt; his eyes searched Vye. And the latter glanced down at his side.

By some chance, perhaps because of his struggle with Peake, Wass’ beam had not struck true, the main core of the bolt passing between his arm and his side, burning both. How deeply he could not tell, in fact he did not want to find out. It was enough that the tablets had banished the pain now.

“Seared a little,” he said. “You’ve a bad cut on your head.”

Hume frowned. “Can we make the flutter?”

Vye moved, then relaxed quickly into his former position. “Not now,” he evaded, knowing that neither of them would be able to take that climb.

“Beam on?” Hume repeated Vye’s thoughts of moments before. “Patrol coming?”

Yes, eventually the Patrol would come—but when? Hours—days? Time was their enemy now. He did not have to say any of that, they both knew.

“Needler—” Hume’s head had turned in the other direction; now his hand pointed waveringly to the weapon in the dust.

“They won’t be back,” Vye stated the obvious. Those others had been caught in the trap, the odds on their return without aid were very high.

“Needler!” Hume repeated more firmly, and tried to sit up, falling back with a sharp intake of breath.

Vye edged around, stretched out his leg and scraped the toe of his boot into the loop of the carrying sling, drawing the weapon up to where he could get his hand on it. As he steadied it across his knee Hume spoke again:

“Watch for trouble!”

“They all went in,” Vye protested.

But Hume’s eyes had closed again. “Trouble—maybe...” His voice trailed off. Vye rested his hand on the stock of the needler.

“Hoooooo!”

That beast wail—as they had heard it in the valley! Somewhere from the wood. Vye brought the needler around, so that the sights pointed in that direction. There death might be hunting, but there was nothing he could do.

A scream, filled with all the agony of a man in torment, caught up on the echoes of that other cry. Vye sighted a wild waving of bushes. A figure, very small and far away, crawled into the open on hands and knees and then crumpled into only a shadowy blot on the moss. Again the beast’s cry, and a shouting!

Vye watched a second man back out of the trees, still facing whatever pursued him. He caught the glint of sun on what must be a ray tube. Leaves crisped into a black hole, curls of smoke arose along the path of that blast.

The man kept on backing, passed the inert body of his companion, glancing now and then over his shoulder at the slope up which he was making a slow but steady way. He no longer

rayed the bush, but there was the crackle of a small fire outlining the ragged hole his beam had cut.

Back two strides, three. Then he turned, made a quick dash, again facing around after he had gained some yards in the open. Vye saw now it was Wass.

Another dash and an about face. But this time to confront the enemy. There were three of them, as monstrous as those Vye and Hume had fought in the same place. And one of them was wounded, swinging a charred forepaw before it, and giving voice to a wild frenzy of roars.

Wass leveled the ray tube, centered sights on the beast nearest to him. The man hammered at the firing button with the flat of his other hand, and almost paid for that second of distraction with his life, for the creature made one of those lightning swift dashes Vye had so luckily escaped. The clawed forepaw tore a strip from the shoulder of Wass' tunic, left sprouting red furrows behind. But the man had thrown the useless tube into its face, was now running for the gap.

Vye held the needler braced against his knee to fire. He saw the dart quiver in the upper arm of the beast, and it halted to pull out that sliver of dangerously poisoned metal, crumpled it into a tight twist. Vye continued to fire, never sure of his aim, but seeing those slivers go home in thick legs, in outstretched forelimbs, in wide, pendulous bellies. Then there were three blue shapes lying on the slope behind the man running straight for the gap.

Wass hit the invisible barrier full force, was hurled back, to lie gasping on the turf, but already raising himself to crawl again to the gateway he saw and could not believe was barred. Vye closed his eyes. He was very tired now—tired and sleepy—maybe the pain pills were bringing the secondary form of relief. But he could hear, just beyond, the man who beat at that unseen curtain, first in anger and fear, and then just in fear, until the fear was a lonesome crying that went on and on until even that last feeble assault on the barrier failed.

\*\*\*\*\*

“We have here the tape report of Ras Hume, Out-Hunter of the Guild.”

Vye watched the officer in the black and silver of the Patrol, a black and silver modified with the small, green, eye badge of X-Tee, with level and hostile gaze.

“Then you know the story.” He was going to make no additions nor explanations. Maybe Hume had cleared him. All right, that was all he would ask, to be free to go his way and forget about Jumala—and Ras Hume.

He had not seen the Hunter since they had both been loaded into the Patrol flitter in the gap. Wass had come out of the valley a witless, dazed creature, still under the mental influence of whoever, or whatever, had set that trap. As far as Vye knew the Veep had not yet recovered his full senses, he might never do so. And if Hume had not dictated that confession to damn himself before the Patrol, he might have escaped. They could suspect—but they would have had no proof.

“You continue to refuse to tape?” The officer favored him with one of the closed-jaw looks Vye had often seen on the face of authority.

“I have my rights.”

“You have the right to claim victim compensation—a good compensation, Lansor.”

Vye shrugged and then winced at a warning from the tender skin over ribs.

“I make no claim, and no tape,” he repeated. And he intended to go on saying that as long as they asked him. This was the second visit in two days and he was getting a little tired of it all. Perhaps he should do as prudence dictated and demand to be returned to Nahuatl. Only his odd, unexplainable desire to at least see Hume kept him from making the request they would have to honor.

“You had better reconsider.” Authority resumed.

“Rights of person—” Vye almost grinned as he recited that. For the first time in his pushed-around life he could use that particular phrase and make it stick. He thought there was a sour twist to the officer’s mouth, but the other still retained his impersonal tone as he spoke into the intership com:

“He refused to make a tape.”

Vye waited for the other’s next move. This should mark the end of their interview. But instead the officer appeared to relax the restraint of his official manner. He brought a viv-root case from an inner pocket, offered a choice of contents to Vye, who gave an instant and suspicious refusal by shake of head. The officer selected one of the small tubes, snapped off the protecto-nib, and set it between his lips for a satisfying and lengthy pull. Then the panel of the cabin door pushed open, and Vye sat up with a jerk as Ras Hume, his head banded with a skin-core covering, entered.

The officer waved his hand at Vye with the air of one turning over a problem. “You were entirely right. And he’s all yours, Hume.”

Vye looked from one to the other. With Hume’s tape in official hands why wasn’t the Hunter under restraint? Unless, because they were aboard the Patrol cruiser, the officers didn’t think a closer confinement was necessary. Yet the Hunter wasn’t acting the role of prisoner very well. In fact he perched on a wall-flip seat with the ease of one completely at home, accepted the viv-root Vye had refused.

“So you won’t make a tape,” he asked cheerfully.

“You act as if you want me to!” Vye was so completely baffled by this odd turn of action that his voice came out almost plaintively.

“Seeing as how a great deal of time and effort went into placing you in the position where you *could* give us that tape, I must admit some disappointment.”

“Give *us*?” Vye echoed.

The officer removed the viv-root from between his lips. “Tell him the whole sad story, Hume.”

But Vye began to guess. Life in the Starfall, or as port-drift, either sharpened the wits or deadened them. Vye’s had suffered the burnishing process. “A set-up?”

“A set-up,” Hume agreed. Then he glanced at the Patrol officer a little defensively. “I might as well tell the whole truth—this didn’t quite begin on the right side of the law. I had my reasons for wanting to make trouble for the Kogan estate, only not because of the credits involved.” He moved his plasta-flesh hand. “When I found that L-B from the Largo Drift and saw the possibilities, did a little day dreaming—I worked out this scheme. But I’m a Guild man and as it happens, I want to stay one. So I reported to one of the Masters and told him the whole story—why I hadn’t taped on the records my discovery on Jumala.

“When he passed along the news of the L-B to the Patrol, he also suggested that there might be room for fraud along the way I had thought it out. That started a chain reaction. It

happened that the Patrol wanted Wass. But he was too big and slick to be caught in a case which couldn't be broken in court. They thought that here was just the bait he might snap at, and I was the one to offer it to him. He could check on me, learn that I had excellent reason to do what I said I was doing. So I went to him with my story and he liked it. We made the plan work just as I had outlined it. And he planted Rovald on me as a check. But I didn't know Yactisi was a plant, also."

The Patrol officer smiled. "Insurance," he waved the viv-root, "just insurance."

"What we didn't foresee was this complicating alien trouble. You were to be collected as the castaway, brought back to the Center and then, once Wass was firmly enmeshed, the Patrol would blow the thing wide open. Now we do have Wass, with your tape we'll have him for good, subject to complete reconditioning. But we also have an X-Tee puzzle which will keep the services busy for some time. And we would like your tape."

Vye watched Hume narrowly. "Then you're an agent?"

Hume shook his head. "No, just what I said I am, an Out-Hunter who happened to come into some knowledge that will assist in straightening out a few crooked quirks in several systems. I have no love for the Kogan clan, but to help bring down a Veep of Wass' measure does aid in reinstating one's self-esteem."

"This victim compensation—I *could* claim it, even though the deal was a set-up?"

"You'll have first call on Wass' assets. He has plenty invested in legitimate enterprises, though we'll probably never locate all his hidden funds. But everything we can get open title to will be impounded. Have something to do with your share?" inquired the officer.

"Yes."

Hume was smiling subtly. He was a different man from the one Vye had known on Jumala.

"Premium for the Guild is one thousand credits down, two thousand for training and say another for about the best field outfit you can buy. That'll give you maybe another two or three thousand to save for your honorable retirement."

"How did you know?" Vye began and then had to laugh in spite of himself as Hume replied:

"I didn't. Good guess, eh? Well, zoom out your recorder, Commander. I think you are going to have some very free speech now." He got to his feet. "You know, the Guild has a stake in this alien discovery. We may just find that we haven't seen the last of that valley after all, recruit."

He was gone and Vye, eager to have the past done with, and the future beginning, reached for the dictation mike.



# Star Born

# 1. Shooting Star

The travelers had sighted the cove from the sea—a narrow bite into the land, the first break in the cliff wall which protected the interior of this continent from the pounding of the ocean. And, although it was still but midafternoon, Dalgard pointed the outrigger into the promised shelter, the dip of his steering paddle swinging in harmony with that wielded by Sssuri in the bow of their narrow, wave-riding craft.

The two voyagers were neither of the same race nor of the same species, yet they worked together without words, as if they had established some bond which gave them a rapport transcending the need for speech.

Dalgard Nordis was a son of the Colony; his kind had not originated on this planet. He was not as tall nor as heavily built as those Terran outlaw ancestors who had fled political enemies across the Galaxy to establish a foothold on Astra, and there were other subtle differences between his generation and the parent stock.

Thin and wiry, his skin was brown from the gentle toasting of the summer sun, making the fairness of his closely cropped hair even more noticeable. At his side was his long bow, carefully wrapped in water-resistant flying-dragon skin, and from the belt which supported his short breeches of tanned duocorn hide swung a two-foot blade—half wood-knife, half sword. To the eyes of his Terran forefathers he would have presented a barbaric picture. In his own mind he was amply clad and armed for the man-journey which was both his duty and his heritage to make before he took his place as a full adult in the Council of Free Men.

In contrast to Dalgard's smooth skin, Sssuri was covered with a fluffy pelt of rainbow-tipped gray fur. In place of the human's steel blade, he wore one of bone, barbed and ugly, as menacing as the spear now resting in the bottom of the outrigger. And his round eyes watched the sea with the familiarity of one whose natural home was beneath those same waters.

The mouth of the cove was narrow, but after they negotiated it they found themselves in a pocket of bay, sheltered and calm, into which trickled a lazy stream. The gray-blue of the seashore sand was only a fringe beyond which was turf and green stuff. Sssuri's nostril flaps expanded as he tested the warm breeze, and Dalgard was busy cataloguing scents as they dragged their craft ashore. They could not have found a more perfect place for a camp site.

Once the canoe was safely beached, Sssuri picked up his spear and, without a word or backward glance, waded out into the sea, disappearing into the depths, while his companion set about his share of camp tasks. It was still early in the summer—too early to expect to find ripe fruit. But Dalgard rummaged in his voyager's bag and brought out a half-dozen crystal beads. He laid these out on a flat-topped stone by the stream, seating himself cross-legged beside it.

To the onlooker it would appear that the traveler was meditating. A wide-winged living splotch of color fanned by overhead; there was a distant yap of sound. Dalgard neither looked nor listened. But perhaps a minute later what he awaited arrived. A hopper, its red-brown fur sleek and gleaming in the sun, its eternal curiosity drawing it, peered cautiously from the bushes. Dalgard made mind touch. The hoppers did not really think—at least not on the levels where communication was possible for the colonists—but sensations of friendship and good will could be broadcast, primitive ideas exchanged.

The small animal, its humanlike front pawhands dangling over its creamy vest, came out fully into the open, black eyes flicking from the motionless Dalgard to the bright beads on the rock. But when one of those paws shot out to snatch the treasure, the traveler's hand was already cupped protectingly over the hoard. Dalgard formed a mental picture and beamed it at the twenty-inch creature before him. The hopper's ears twitched nervously, its blunt nose wrinkled, and then it bounded back into the brush, a weaving line of moving grass marking its retreat.

Dalgard withdrew his hand from the beads. Through the years the Astran colonists had come to recognize the virtues of patience. Perhaps the mutation had begun before they left their native world. Or perhaps the change in temperament and nature had occurred in the minds and bodies of that determined handful of refugees as they rested in the frozen cold sleep while their ship bore them through the wide, uncharted reaches of deep space for centuries of Terran time. How long that sleep had lasted the survivors had never known. But those who had awakened on Astra were different.

And their sons and daughters, and the sons and daughters of two more generations were warmed by a new sun, nourished by food grown in alien soil, taught the mind contact by the amphibian mermen with whom the space voyagers had made an early friendship—each succeeding child more attuned to the new home, less tied to the far-off world he had never seen or would see. The colonists were not of the same breed as their fathers, their grandfathers, or great-grandfathers. So, with other gifts, they had also a vast, time-consuming patience, which could be a weapon or a tool, as they pleased—not forgetting the instantaneous call to action which was their older heritage.

The hopper returned. On the rock beside the shining things it coveted, it dropped dried and shriveled fruit. Dalgard's fingers separated two of the gleaming marbles, rolled them toward the animal, who scooped them up with a chirp of delight. But it did not leave. Instead it peered intently at the rest of the beads. Hoppers had their own form of intelligence, though it might not compare with that of humans. And this one was enterprising. In the end it delivered three more loads of fruit from its burrow and took away all the beads, both parties well pleased with their bargains.

Sssuri splashed out of the sea with as little ado as he had entered. On the end of his spear twisted a fish. His fur, slicked flat to his strongly muscled body, began to dry in the air and fluff out while the sun awoke prismatic lights on the scales which covered his hands and feet. He dispatched the fish and cleaned it neatly, tossing the offal back into the water, where some shadowy things arose to tear at the unusual bounty.

“This is not hunting ground.” His message formed in Dalgard's mind. “That finned one had no fear of me.”

“We were right then in heading north; this is new land.” Dalgard got to his feet.

On either side, the cliffs, with their alternate bands of red, blue, yellow, and white strata, walled in this pocket. They would make far better time keeping to the sea lanes, where it was not necessary to climb. And it was Dalgard's cherished plan to add more than just an inch or two to the explorers' map in the Council Hall.

Each of the colony males was expected to make his man-journey of discovery sometimes between his eighteenth and twentieth year. He went alone or, if he formed an attachment with one of the mermen near his own age, accompanied only by his knife brother. And from knowledge so gained the still-small group of exiles added to and expanded their information about their new home.

Caution was drilled into them. For they were not the first masters of Astra, nor were they the masters now. There were the ruins left by Those Others, the race who had populated this planet until their own wars had completed their downfall. And the mermen, with their traditions of slavery and dark beginnings in the experimental pens of the older race, continued to insist that across the sea—on the unknown western continent—Those Others still held onto the remnants of a degenerate civilization. Thus the explorers from Homeport went out by ones and twos and used the fauna of the land as a means of gathering information.

Hoppers could remember yesterday only dimly, and instinct took care of tomorrow. But what happened today sped from hopper to hopper and could warn by mind touch both merman and human. If one of the dread snake-devils of the interior was on the hunting trail, the hoppers sped the warning. Their vast curiosity brought them to the fringe of any disturbance, and they passed the reason for it along. Dalgard knew there were a thousand eyes at his service whenever he wanted them. There was little chance of being taken by surprise, no matter how dangerous this journey north might be.

“The city—” He formed the words in his mind even as he spoke them aloud. “How far are we from it?”

The merman hunched his slim shoulders in the shrug of his race. “Three days’ travel, maybe five. And it”—though his furred face displayed no readable emotion, the sensation of distaste was plain—“was one of the accursed ones. To such we have not returned since the days of falling fire—”

Dalgard was well acquainted with the ruins which lay not many miles from Homeport. And he knew that that sprawling, devastated metropolis was not taboo to the merman. But this other mysterious settlement he had recently heard of was still shunned by the sea people. Only Sssuri and a few others of youthful years would consider a journey to explore the long-forbidden section their traditions labeled as dangerous land.

The belief that he was about to venture into questionable territory had made Dalgard evasive when he reported his plans to the Elders three days earlier. But since such trips were, by tradition, always thrusts into the unknown, they had not questioned him too much. All in all, Dalgard thought, watching Sssuri flake the firm pink flesh from the fish, he might deem himself lucky and this quest ordained. He went off to hack out armloads of grass and fashion the sleep mats for the sun-warmed ground.

They had eaten and were lounging in content on the soft sand just beyond the curl of the waves when Sssuri lifted his head from his folded arms as if he listened. Like all those of his species, his vestigial ears were hidden deep in his fur and no longer served any real purpose; the mind touch served him in their stead. Dalgard caught his thought, though what had aroused his companion was too rare a thread to trouble his less acute senses.

“Runners in the dark—”

Dalgard frowned. “It is still sun time. What disturbs them?”

To the eye Sssuri was still listening to that which his friend could not hear.

“They come from afar. They are on the move to find new hunting grounds.”

Dalgard sat up. To each and every scout from Homeport the unusual was a warning, a signal to alert mind and body. The runners in the night—that furred monkey race of hunters who combed the moonless dark of Astra when most of the higher fauna were asleep—were very distantly related to Sssuri’s species, though the gap between them was that between highly

civilized man and the jungle ape. The runners were harmless and shy, but they were noted also for clinging stubbornly to one particular district generation after generation. To find such a clan on the move into new territory was to be fronted with a puzzle it might be well to investigate.

“A snake-devil—” he suggested tentatively, forming a mind picture of the vicious reptilian danger which the colonists tried to kill on sight whenever and wherever encountered. His hand went to the knife at his belt. One met with weapons only that hissing hatred motivated by a brainless ferocity which did not know fear.

But Sssuri did not accept that explanation. He was sitting up, facing inland where the thread of valley met the cliff wall. And seeing his absorption, Dalgard asked no distracting questions.

“No, no snake-devil—” after long moments came the answer. He got to his feet, shuffling through the sand in the curious little half dance which betrayed his agitation more strongly than his thoughts had done.

“The hoppers have no news,” Dalgard said.

Sssuri gestured impatiently with one outflung hand. “Do the hoppers wander far from their own nest mounds? Somewhere there—” he pointed to the left and north, “there is trouble, bad trouble. Tonight we shall speak with the runners and discover what it may be.”

Dalgard glanced about the camp with regret. But he made no protest as he reached for his bow and stripped off its protective casing. With the quiver of heavy-duty arrows slung across his shoulder he was ready to go, following Sssuri inland.

The easy valley path ended less than a quarter of a mile from the sea, and they were fronted by a wall of rock with no other option than to climb. But the westering sun made plain every possible hand and foot hold on its surface.

When they stood at last on the heights and looked ahead, it was across a broken stretch of bare rock with the green of vegetation beckoning from at least a mile beyond. Sssuri hesitated for only a moment or two, his round, almost featureless head turning slowly, until he fixed on a northeasterly course—striking out unerringly as if he could already sight the goal. Dalgard fell in behind, looking over the country with a wary eye. This was just the type of land to harbor flying dragons. And while those pests were small, their lightning-swift attack from above made them foes not to be disregarded. But all the flying things he saw were two moth birds of delicate hues engaging far over the sun-baked rock in one of their graceful winged dances.

They crossed the heights and came to the inland slope, a drop toward the central interior plains of the continent. As they plowed through the high grasses Dalgard knew they were under observation. Hoppers watched them. And once through a break in a line of trees he saw a small herd of duocorns race into the shelter of a wood. The presence of those two-horned creatures, so like the pictures he had seen of Terran horses, was insurance that the snake-devils did not hunt in this district, for the swift-footed duocorns were never found within a day’s journey of their archenemies.

Late afternoon faded into the long summer twilight and still Sssuri kept on. As yet they had come across no traces of Those Others. Here were none of the domed farm buildings, the monorail tracks, the other relics one could find about Homeport. This wide-open land could have been always a wilderness, left to the animals of Astra for their own. Dalgard speculated upon that, his busy imagination supplying various reasons for such tract. Then the voiceless communication of his companion provided an explanation.

“This was barrier land.”

“What?”

Sssuri turned his head. His round eyes which blinked so seldom stared into Dalgard’s as if by the intensity of that gaze he could drive home deeper his point.

“What lies to the north was protected in the days before the falling fire. Even *Those*”—the distorted mermen symbol for Those Others was sharpened by the very hatred of all Sssuri’s kind, which had not paled during the generations since their escape from slavery to Astra’s one-time masters—”could not venture into some of their own private places without special leave. It is perhaps true that the city we are seeking is one of those restricted ones and that this wilderness is a boundary for it.”

Dalgard’s pace slowed. To venture into a section of land which had been used as a barrier to protect some secret of Those Others was a highly risky affair. The first expedition sent out from Homeport after the landing of the Terran refugee ship had been shot down by robot-controlled guns still set against some long-dead invader. Would this territory be so guarded? If so they had better go carefully now—

Sssuri suddenly struck off at an angle, heading not northeast now, but directly north. The brush lands along the foot of the cliffs gave way to open fields, bare except for the grass rippled by the wind. It was not the type of country to attract the night runners, and Dalgard wondered a little. They should discover water, preferably a shallow stream, if they wanted to find what the monkey creatures liked best.

Within a quarter-hour he knew that Sssuri was not going wrong. Cradled in a sudden dip in the land was the stream Dalgard had been looking for. A hopper lifted a dripping muzzle from the shore ripples and stared at them. Dalgard contacted the animal. It was its usual curious self, nothing had alarmed or excited its interest. And he did not try to establish more than a casual contact as they made their way down the bank to the edge of the stream, Sssuri splashing in ankle-deep for the sheer pleasure of feeling liquid curl about his feet and legs once more.

Water dwellers fled from their passing and insects buzzed and hovered. Otherwise they moved through a deserted world. The stream bed widened and small islands of gravel, swept together in untidy piles by the spring floods, arose dry topped, some already showing the green of venturesome plants.

“Here—” Sssuri stopped, thrusting the butt of his spear into the shore of one such islet. He dropped cross-legged on his choice, there to remain patiently until those he sought would come with the dark. Dalgard withdrew a little way downstream and took up a similar post. The runners were shy, not easy to approach. And they would come more readily if Sssuri were alone.

Here the murmur of the stream was loud, rising above the rustle of the wind-driven grass. And the night was coming fast as the sun, hidden by the cliff wall, sank into the sea. Dalgard, knowing that his night sight was far inferior to that of the native Astran fauna, resignedly settled himself for an all-night stay, not without a second regretful memory of the snug camp by the shore.

Twilight and then night. How long before the runners would make their appearance? He could pick up the sparks of thought which marked the coming and going of hoppers, most hurrying off to their mud-plastered nests, and sometimes a flicker from the mind of some other night creature. Once he was sure he touched the avid, raging hunger which marked a flying dragon, though they were not naturally hunters by darkness.

Dalgard made no move to contact Sssuri. The merman must be left undisturbed in his mental quest for the runners.

The scout lay back on his miniature island and stared up into the sky, trying to sort out all the myriad impressions of life about him. It was then that he saw it...

An arrow of fire streaking across the black bowl of Astra's night sky. A light so vivid, so alien, that it brought him to his feet with a chill prickle of apprehension along his spine. In all his years as a scout and woodsman, in all the stories of his fellows and his elders at Homeport—he had never seen, never heard of the like of that!

And through his own wonder and alert alarm, he caught Sssuri's added puzzlement.

"Danger—" The merman's verdict fed his own unease.

Danger had crossed the night, from east to west. And to the west lay what they had always feared. What was going to happen now?

## 2. Planetfall

Raf Kurbi, flitter pilot and techneer, lay on the padded shock cushion of his assigned bunk and stared with wide, disillusioned eyes at the stretch of stark, gray metal directly overhead. He tried to close his ears to the mutter of meaningless words coming from across the narrow cabin. Raf had known from the moment his name had been drawn as crew member that the whole trip would be a gamble, a wild gamble with the odds all against them. *RS 10*—those very numbers on the nose of the ship told part of the story. Ten exploring fingers thrust in turn out into the blackness of space. *RS 3*'s fate was known—she had blossomed into a pinpoint of flame within the orbit of Mars. And *RS 7* had clearly gone out of control while instruments on Terra could still pick up her broadcasts. Of the rest—well, none had returned.

But the ships were built, manned by lot from the trainees, and sent out, one every five years, with all that had been learned from the previous job, each refinement the engineers could discover incorporated into the latest to rise from the launching cradle.

*RS 10*—Raf closed his eyes with weary distaste. After months of being trapped inside her ever-vibrating shell, he felt that he knew each and every rivet, seam, and plate in her only too well. And there was no reason yet to believe that the voyage would ever end. They would just go on and on through empty space until dead men manned a drifting hulk—

There—to picture that was a danger signal. Whenever his thoughts reached that particular point, Raf tried to think of something else, to break the chain of dismal foreboding. How? By joining in Wonstead's monologue of complaint and regret? Raf had heard the same words over and over so often that they no longer had any meaning—except as a series of sounds he might miss if the man who shared this pocket were suddenly stricken dumb.

“Should never have put in for training—” Wonstead's whine went up the scale.

That was unoriginal enough. They had all had that idea the minute after the sorter had plucked their names for crew inclusion. No matter what motive had led them into the stiff course of training—the fabulous pay, a real interest in the project, the exploring fever—Raf did not believe that there was a single man whose heart had not sunk when he had been selected for flight. Even he, who had dreamed all his life of the stars and the wonders which might lie just beyond the big jump, had been honestly sick on the day he had shouldered his bag aboard and had first taken his place on this mat and waited, dry mouthed and shivering, for blast-off.

One lost all sense of time out here. They ate sparingly, slept when they could, tried to while away the endless hours artificially divided into set periods. But still weeks might be months, or months weeks. They could have been years in space—or only days. All they knew was the unending monotony which dragged upon a man until he either lapsed into a dreamy rejection of his surroundings, as had Hamp and Floy, or flew into murderous rages, such as kept Morris in solitary confinement at present. And no foreseeable end to the flight—

Raf breathed shallowly. The air was stale, he could almost taste it. It was difficult now to remember being in the open air under a sky, with fresh winds blowing about one. He tried to picture on that dull strip of metal overhead a stretch of green grass, a tree, even the blue sky and floating white clouds. But the patch remained stubbornly gray, the murmur of Wonstead went on and on, a drone in his aching ears, the throb of the ship's life beat through his own thin body.



What had it been like on those legendary early flights, when the secret of the overdrive had not yet been discovered, when any who dared the path between star and star had surrendered to sleep, perhaps to wake again generations later, perhaps never to rouse again? He had seen the few documents discovered four or five hundred years ago in the raided headquarters of the scientific outlaws who had fled the regimented world government of Pax and dared space on the single hope of surviving such a journey in cold sleep, the secret of which had been lost. At least, Raf thought, they had escaped the actual discomfort of the voyage.

Had they found their new world or worlds? The end of their ventures had been debated thousands of times since those documents had been made public, after the downfall of Pax and the coming into power of the Federation of Free Men.

In fact it was the publication of the papers which had given the additional spur to the building of the *RS* armada. What man had dared once he could dare anew. And the pursuit of knowledge which had been so long forbidden under Pax was heady excitement for the world. Research and discovery became feverish avenues of endeavor. Even the slim hope of a successful star voyage and the return to Terra with such rich spoils of information was enough to harness three quarters of the planet's energy for close to a hundred years. And if the *RS 10* was not successful, there would be *11*, *12*, more—flaming into the sky and out into the void, unless some newer and more intriguing experiment developed to center public imagination in another direction.

Raf's eyes closed wearily. Soon the gong would sound and this period of rest would be officially ended. But it was hardly worth rising. He was not in the least hungry for the concentrated food. He could repeat the information tapes they carried dull word for dull word.

"Nothing to see—nothing but these blasted walls!" Again Wonstead's voice arose in querulous protest.

Yes, while in overdrive there was nothing to see. The ports of the ship would be sealed until they were in normal space once more. That is, if it worked and they were not caught up forever within this thick trap where there was no time, light, or distance.

The gong sounded, but Raf made no move to rise. He heard Wonstead move, saw from the corner of his eye the other's bulk heave up obediently from the pad.

"Hey—mess gong!" He pointed out the obvious to Raf.

With a sigh the other levered himself up on his elbows. If he did not move, Wonstead was capable of reporting him to the captain for strange behavior, and they were all too alert to a divagation which might mean trouble. He had no desire to end in confinement with Morris.

"I'm coming," Raf said sullenly. But he remained sitting on the edge of the pad until Wonstead left the cabin, and he followed as slowly as he could.

So he was not with the others when a new sound tore through the constant vibrating hum which filled the narrow corridors of the ship. Raf stiffened, the icy touch of fear tensing his muscles. Was that the red alarm of disaster?

His eyes went to the light at the end of the short passage. But no blink of warning red shown there. Not danger—then what—?

It took him a full moment to realize what he had heard, not the signal of doom, but the sound which was to herald the accomplishment of their mission—the sound which unconsciously they had all given up any hope of ever hearing. They had made it!

The pilot leaned weakly against the wall, and his eyes smarted, his hands were trembling. In that moment he knew that he had never really, honestly, believed that they would succeed. But they had! *RS 10* had reached the stars!

“Strap down for turnout—strap down for turnout—!” The disembodied voice screaming through the ship’s speaker was that of Captain Hobart, but it was almost unrecognizable with emotion. Raf turned and stumbled back to his cabin, staggered to throw himself once more on his pad as he fumbled with the straps he must buckle over him.

He heard rather than saw Wonstead blunder in to follow his example, and for the first time in months the other was dumb, not uttering a word as he stowed away for the breakthrough which should take them back into normal space and the star worlds. Raf tore a nail on a fastening, muttered.

“Condition red—condition red—Strap down for breakthrough—” Hobart chanted at them from the walls. “One, two, three”—the count swung on numeral by numeral; then—”ten—Stand by—”

Raf had forgotten what breakthrough was like. He had gone through it the first time when still under take-off sedation. But this was worse than he remembered, so much worse. He tried to scream out his protest against the torture which twisted mind and body, but he could not utter even a weak cry. This, this was unbearable—a man could go mad or die—die—die....

He aroused with the flat sweetness of blood on his tongue, a splitting pain behind the eyes he tried to focus on the too familiar scrap of wall. A voice boomed, receded, and boomed again, filling the air and at last making sense, in it a ring of wild triumph!

“Made it! This is it, men, we’ve made it; Sol-class sun—three planets. We’ll set an orbit in—”

Raf licked his lips. It was still too much to swallow in one mental gulp. So, they had made it—half of their venture was accomplished. They had broken out of their own solar system, made the big jump, and before them lay the unknown. Now it was within their reach.

“D’you hear that, kid?” demanded Wonstead, his voice no longer an accusing whine, more steady than Raf ever remembered hearing it. “We got through! We’ll hit dirt again! Dirt—” his words trailed away as if he were sinking into some blissful daydream.

There was a different feeling to the ship herself. The steady drone which had ached in their ears, their bones, as she bored her way through the alien hyper-space had changed to a purr as if she, too, were rejoicing at the success of their desperate try. For the first time in weary weeks Raf remembered his own duties which would begin when the *RS 10* came in to a flame-cushioned landing on a new world. He was to assemble and ready the small exploration flyer, to man its controls and take it up and out. Frowning, he began to run over in his mind each step in the preparations he must make as soon as they planeted.

Information came down from control, where now the ports were open on normal space and the engines were under control of the spacer’s pilot. Their goal was to be the third planet, one which showed signs of atmosphere, of water and earth ready and waiting.

Those who were not on flight duty crowded into the tiny central cabin, where they elbowed each other before the viewer. The ball of alien earth grew from a pinpoint to the size of an orange. They forgot time in the wonder which none had ever thought in his heart he would see on the screen. Raf knew that in control every second of this was being recorded as they

began to establish a braking orbit, which with luck would bring them down on the surface of the new world.

“Cities—those must be cities!” Those in the cabin studied the plate with awe as the information filtered through the crew. Labet, their xenobiologist, sat with his fingers rigid on the lower bar of the visa plate, so intent that nothing could break his vigil, while the rest speculated wildly. Had they really seen cities?

Raf went down the corridor to the door of the sealed compartment that held the machine and the supplies for which he was responsible. These last hours of waiting were worse with their nagging suspense than all the time which had gone before. If they could only set down!

He had, on training trips which now seemed very far in the past, trod the rust-red desert country of Mars, waddled in a bulky protective suit across the peaked ranges of the dead Moon, known something of the larger asteroids. But how would it feel to tread ground warmed by the rays of another sun? Imagination with which his superiors did not credit him began to stir. Traits inherited from a mixture of races were there to be summoned. Raf retreated once more into his cabin and sat on his bunk pad, staring down at his own capable mechanic’s hands without seeing them, picturing instead all the wonders which might lie just beyond the next few hours’ imprisonment in this metallic shell he had grown to hate with a dull but abiding hatred.

Although he knew that Hobart must be fully as eager as any of them to land, it seemed to Raf, and the other impatient crew members, that they were very long in entering the atmosphere of the chosen world. It was only when the order came to strap down for deceleration that they were in a measure satisfied. Pull of gravity, ship beaming in at an angle which swept it from night to day or night again as it encircled that unknown globe. They could not watch their objective any longer. The future depended entirely upon the skill of the three men in control—and last of all upon Hobart’s judgment and skill.

The captain brought them down, riding the flaming counter-blasts from the ship’s tail to set her on her fins in an expert point landing, so that the *RS 10* was a finger of light into the sky, amid wisps of smoke from brush ignited by her landing.

There was another wait which seemed endless to the restless men within, a wait until the air was analyzed, the countryside surveyed. But when the go-ahead signal was given and the ramp swung out, those first at the hatch still hesitated for an instant or so, though the way before them was open.

Beyond the burnt ground about the ship was a rolling plain covered with tall grass which rippled under the wind. And the freshness of that wind cleansed their lungs of the taint of the ship.

Raf pulled off his helmet, held his head high in that breeze. It was like bathing in air, washing away the smog of those long days of imprisonment. He ran down the ramp, past the little group of those who had preceded him, and fell on his knees in the grass, catching at it with his hands, a little over-awed at the wonder of it all.

The wide sweep of sky above them was not entirely blue, he noted. There was the faintest suggestion of green, and across it moved clouds of silver. But, save for the grass, they might be in a dead and empty world. Where were the cities? Or had those been born of imagination?

After a while, when the wonder of this landing had somewhat worn away, Hobart summoned them back to the prosaic business of setting up base. And Raf went to work at his own task. The sealed storeroom was opened, the supplies slung by crane down from the ship. The compact assembly, streamlined for this purpose, was all ready for the morrow.

They spent the night within the ship, much against their will. After the taste of freedom they had been given, the cramped interior weighed upon them, closing like a prison. Raf lay on his pad unable to sleep. It seemed to him that he could hear, even through the heavy plates, the sigh of that refreshing wind, the call of the open world lying ready for them. Step by step in his mind, he went through the process for which he would be responsible the next day. The uncrating of the small flyer, the assembling of frame and motor. And sometime in the midst of that survey he did fall asleep, so deeply that Wonstead had to shake him awake in the morning.

He bolted his food and was out at his job before it was far past dawn. But eager as he was to get to work, he paused just to look at the earth scuffed up by his boots, to stare for a long moment at a stalk of tough grass and remember with a thrill which never lessened that this was not native earth or grass, that he stood where none of his race, or even of his kind, had stood before—on a new planet in a new solar system.

Raf's expert training and instruction paid off. By evening he had the flitter assembled save for the motor which still reposed on the turning block. One party had gone questing out into the grass and returned with the story of a stream hidden in a gash in the plain, and Wonstead carried the limp body of a rabbit-sized furred creature he had knocked over at the waterside.

"Acted tame." Wonstead was proud of his kill. "Stupid thing just stood and watched me while I let fly with a stone."

Raf picked up the little body. Its fur was red-brown, plush-thick, and very soft to the touch. The breast was creamy white and the forepaws curiously short with an uncanny resemblance to his own hands. Suddenly he wished that Wonstead had not killed it, though he supposed that Chou, their biologist, would be grateful. But the animal looked particularly defenseless. It would have been better not to mark their first day on this new world with a killing—even if it were the knocking over of a stupid rabbit thing. The pilot was glad when Chou bore it off and he no longer had to look at it.

It was after the evening meal that Raf was called into consultation by the officers to receive his orders. When he reported that the flitter, barring unexpected accidents, would be air-borne by the following afternoon, he was shown an enlarged picture from the records made during the descent of the *RS 10*.

There was a city, right enough—showing up well from the air. Hobart stabbed a finger down into the heart of it.

"This lies south from here. We'll cruise in that direction."

Raf would have liked to ask some questions of his own. The city photographed was a sizable one. Why then this deserted land here? Why hadn't the inhabitants been out to investigate the puzzle of the space ship's landing? He said slowly, "I've mounted one gun, sir. Do you want the other installed? It will mean that the flitter can only carry three instead of four—"

Hobart pulled his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger. He glanced at his lieutenant then to Lablet, sitting quietly to one side. It was the latter who spoke first.

"I'd say this shows definite traces of retrogression." He touched the photograph. "The place may even be only a ruin."

"Very well. Leave off the other gun," Hobart ordered crisply. "And be ready to fly at dawn day after tomorrow with full field kit. You're sure she'll have at least a thousand-mile cruising radius?"

Raf suppressed a shrug. How could you tell what any machine would do under new conditions? The flitter had been put through every possible test in his home world. Whether she would perform as perfectly here was another matter.

“They thought she would, sir,” he replied. “I’ll take her up for a shakedown run tomorrow after the motor is installed.”

Captain Hobart dismissed him with a nod, and Raf was glad to clatter down ladders into the cool of the evening once more. Flying high in a formation of two lanes were some distant birds, at least he supposed they were birds. But he did not call attention to them. Instead he watched them out of sight, lingering alone with no desire to join those crew members who had built a campfire a little distance from the ship. The flames were familiar and cheerful, a portion, somehow, of their native world transported to the new.

Raf could hear the murmur of voices. But he turned and went to the flitter. Taking his hand torch, he checked the work he had done during the day. To-morrow—tomorrow he could take her up into the blue-green sky, circle out over the sea of grass for a short testing flight. That much he wanted to do.

But the thought of the cruise south, of venturing toward that sprawling splotch Hobart and Lablet identified as a city was somehow distasteful, and he was reluctant to think about it.

### 3. Snake-Devil's Trail

Dalgard drew the waterproof covering back over his brow, making a cheerful job of it, preparatory to their pushing out to sea once more. But he was as intent upon what Sssuri had to tell as he was on his occupation of the moment.

"But that is not even a hopper rumor," he was protesting, breaking into his companion's flow of thought.

"No. But, remember, to the runners yesterday is very far away. One night is like another; they do not reckon time as we do, nor lay up memories for future guidance. They left their native hunting grounds and are drifting south. And only a very great peril would lead the runners into such a break. It is against all their instincts!"

"So, long ago—which may be months, weeks, or just days—there came death out of the sea, and those who lived past its coming fled—" Dalgard repeated the scanty information Sssuri had won for them the night before by patient hour-long coaxing. "What kind of death?"

Sssuri's great eyes, somber and a little tired, met his. "To us there is only one kind of death to be greatly feared."

"But there are the snake-devils—" protested the colony scout.

"To be hunted down by snake-devils is death, yes. But it is a quick death, a death which can come to any living thing that is not swift or wary enough. For to the snake-devils all things that live and move are merely meat to fill the aching pit in their swollen bellies. But there were in the old days other deaths, far worse than what one meets under a snake-devil's claws and fangs. And those are the deaths we fear." He was running the smooth haft of his spear back and forth through his fingers as if testing the balance of the weapon because the time was not far away when he must rely upon it.

"Those Others!" Dalgard shaped the words with his lips as well as in his mind.

"Just so." Sssuri did not nod, but his thought was in complete agreement.

"Yet they have not come before—not since the ship of my fathers landed here," Dalgard protested, not against Sssuri's judgment but against the whole idea.

The merman got to his feet, sweeping his arm to indicate not only the cove where they now sheltered but the continent behind it.

"Once they held all this. Then they warred and killed, until but a handful lay in cover to lick their wounds and wait. It has been many threes of seasons since they left that cover. But now they come again—to loot their place of secrets—Perhaps in the time past they have forgotten much so that now they must renew their knowledge."

Dalgard stowed the bow in the bottom of the outrigger. "I think we had better go and see," he commented, "so that we may report true tidings to our Elders—something more than rumors learned from night runners."

"That is so."

They paddled out to sea and turned the prow of the light craft north. The character of the land did not change. Cliffs still walled the coast, in some places rising sheer from the water, in others broken by a footing of coarse beach. Only flying things were to be sighted over their rocky crowns.

But by midday there was an abrupt alteration in the scene. A wide river cut through the heights and gave birth to a fan-shaped delta thickly covered with vegetation. Half hidden by the riot of growing things was a building of the dome shape Dalgard knew so well. Its windowless, doorless surface reflected the sunlight with a glassy sheen, and to casual inspection it was as untouched as it had been on the day its masters had either died within it or left it for the last time, perhaps centuries before.

“This is one way into the forbidden city,” Sssuri announced. “Once they stationed guards here.”

Dalgard had been about to suggest a closer inspection of the dome but that remark made him hesitate. If it had been one of the fortifications rimming in a forbidden ground, there was more than an even chance that unwary invaders, even this long after, might stumble into some trap still working automatically.

“Do we go upriver?” He left it to Sssuri, who had the traditions of his people to guide him, to make the decision.

The merman looked at the dome; it was evident from his attitude that he had no wish to examine it more closely. “They had machines which fought for them, and sometimes those machines still fight. This river is the natural entrance for an enemy. Therefore it would have been well defended.”

Under the sun the green reach of the delta had a most peaceful appearance. There was a family of duck-dogs fishing from the beach, scooping their broad bills into the mud to locate water worms. And moth birds danced in the air currents overhead. Yet Dalgard was ready to agree with his companion—beware the easy way. They dipped their paddles deep and cut across the river current toward the cliffs to the north.

Two days of steady coastwise traveling brought them to a great bay. And Dalgard gasped as the full sight of the port confronting them burst into view.

Tiers of ledges had been cut and blasted in the native rock, extending from the sea back into the land in a series of giant steps. Each of them was covered with buildings, and here the ancient war had left its mark. The rock itself had been brought to a bubbling boil and sent in now-frozen rivers down that stairway in a half-dozen places, overwhelming all structures in its path, and leaving crystallized streams to reflect the sun blindingly.

“So this is your secret city!”

But Sssuri shook his round head. “This is but the sea entrance to the country,” he corrected. “Here struck the day of fire, and we need not fear the machines which doubtless lie in wait elsewhere.”

They beached the outrigger and hid it in the shell of one of the ruined buildings on the lowest level. Dalgard sent out a questing thought, hoping to contact a hopper or even a duck-dog. But seemingly the ruins were bare of animal life, as was true in most of the other towns and cities he had explored in the past. The fauna of Astra was shy of any holding built by Those Others, no matter how long it may have been left to the wind, and cleansing rain.

With difficulty and detours to avoid the rivers of once-molten rock, they made their way slowly from ledge to ledge up that giant’s staircase, not stopping to explore any of the buildings as they passed. There was a taint of alien age about the city which repelled Dalgard, and he was eager to get out of it into the clean countryside once more. Sssuri sped on silent feet, his shoulders hunched, his distaste for the structures to be read in every line of his supple body.

When they reached the top, Dalgard turned to gaze down to the restless sea. What a prospect! Perhaps Those Others had built thus for reasons of defense, but surely they, too, must have paused now and then to be proud of such a feat. It was the most impressive site he had yet seen, and his report of it would be a worthy addition to the Homeport records.

A road ran straight from the top of the stair, stabbing inland without taking any notice of the difficulties of the terrain, after the usual arrogant manner of the alien engineers. But Sssuri did not follow it. Instead he struck off to the left, avoiding that easy path, choosing to cross through tangles which had once been gardens or through open fields.

They were well out of the sight of the city before they flushed their first hopper, a full-grown adult with oddly pale fur. Instead of displaying the usual fearless interest in strangers, the animal took one swift look at them and fled as if a snake-devil had snorted at its thumping heels. And Dalgard received a sharp impression of terror, as if the hopper saw in him some frightening menace.

“What—?” Honestly astounded, he looked to Sssuri for enlightenment.

The hoppers could be pests. They stole any small bright object which aroused their interest. But they could also be persuaded to trade, and they usually had no fear of either colonist or merman.

Sssuri’s furred face might not convey much emotion, but by all the signs Dalgard *could* read he knew that the merman was as startled as he by the strange behavior of the grass dweller.

“He is afraid of those who walk erect as we do,” he made answer.

*Those who walk erect*—Dalgard was quick to interpret that.

He knew that Those Others were biped, quasi-human in form, closer in physical appearance to the colonists than to the mermen. And since none of Dalgard’s people had penetrated this far to the north, nor had the mermen invaded this taboo territory until Sssuri had agreed to come, that left only the aliens. Those strange people whom the colonists feared without knowing why they feared them, whom the mermen hated with a hatred which had not lessened with the years of freedom. The faint rumor carried by the migrating runners must be true, for here was a hopper afraid of bipeds. And it must have been recently provided with a reason for such fear, since hoppers’ memories were very short and such terror would have faded from its mind in a matter of weeks.

Sssuri halted in a patch of grass which reached to his waist belt. “It is best to wait until the hours of dark.”

But Dalgard could not agree. “Better for you with your night sight,” he objected, “but I do not have your eyes in my head.”

Sssuri had to admit the justice of that. He could travel under the moonless sky as sure-footed as under broad sunlight. But to guide a blundering Dalgard through unknown country was not practical. However, they could take to cover and that they did as speedily as possible, using a zigzag tactic which delayed their advance but took them from one bit of protecting brush or grove of trees to the next, keeping to the fields well away from the road.

They camped that night without fire in a pocket near a spring. And while Dalgard was alert to all about them, he knew that Sssuri was mind questing in a far wider circle, trying to contact a hopper, a runner, any animal that could answer in part the inquiries they had. When Dalgard could no longer hold open weary eyes, his last waking memory was that of his companion sitting statue-still, his spear across his knees, his head leaning a trifle forward as if what he listened to was as vocal as the hum of night insects.



When the colony scout roused in the morning, his companion was stretched full length on the other side of the spring, but his head came up as Dalgard moved.

“We may go forward without fear,” he shaped the assurance. “What has troubled this land has gone.”

“A long time ago?”

Dalgard was not surprised at Sssuri’s negative answer. “Within days *they* have been here. But they have gone once more. It will be wise for us to learn what they wanted here.”

“Have they come to establish a base here once more?” Dalgard brought into the open the one threat which had hung over his own clan since they first learned that a few of Those Others still lived—even if overseas.

“If that is their plan, they have not yet done it.” Sssuri rolled over on his back and stretched. He had lost that tenseness of a hound in leash which had marked him the night before. “This was one of their secret places, holding much of their knowledge. They may return here on quest for that learning.”

All at once Dalgard was conscious of a sense of urgency. Suppose that what Sssuri suggested was the truth, that Those Others were attempting to recover the skills which had brought on the devastating war that had turned this whole eastern continent into a wilderness? Equipped with even the crumbs of such discoveries, they would be enemies against which the Terran colonists could not hope to stand. The few weapons their outlaw ancestors had brought with them on their desperate flight to the stars were long since useless, and they had had no way of duplicating them. Since childhood Dalgard had seen no arms except the bows and the sword-knives carried by all venturing away from Homeport. And what use would a bow or a foot or two of sharpened metal be against things which could kill from a distance or turn rock itself into a flowing, molten river?

He was impatient to move on, to reach this city of forgotten knowledge which Sssuri was sure lay before them. Perhaps the colonists could draw upon what was stored there as well as Those Others could.

Then he remembered—not only remembered but was corrected by Sssuri. “Think not of taking *their* weapons into your hands.” Sssuri did not look up as he gave that warning. “Long ago your fathers’ fathers knew that the knowledge of Those Others was not for their taking.”

A dimly remembered story, a warning impressed upon him during his first guided trips into the ruins near Homeport flashed into Dalgard’s mind. Yes, he knew that some things had been forbidden to his kind. For one, it was best not to examine too closely the bands of color patterns which served Those Others as a means of written record. Tapes of the aliens’ records had been found and stored at Homeport. But not one of the colonists had ventured to try to break the color code and learn what lay locked in those bands. Once long ago such an experiment had led to the brink of disaster, and such delvings were now considered too dangerous to be allowed.

But there was no harm in visiting this city, and certainly he must make some report to the Council about what might be taking place here, especially if Those Others were in residence or visited the site.

Sssuri still kept to the fields, avoiding the highway, until mid-morning, and then he made an abrupt turn and brought them out on the soil-drifted surface of the road. The land here was seemingly deserted. No moth birds performed their air ballets overhead, and they did not see a single hopper. That is, they did not until the road dipped before them and they started down

into a cupped hollow filled with buildings. The river, whose delta they had earlier seen, made a half loop about the city, lacing it in. And here were no signs of the warfare which had ruined the port.

But in the middle of the road lay a bloody bunch of fur and splintered bone, insects busy about it. Sssuri used the point of his spear to straighten out the small corpse, displaying its headlessness. And before they reached the outer buildings of the city they found four more hoppers all mangled.

“Not a snake-devil,” Dalgard deduced. As far as he knew only the huge reptiles or their smaller flying-dragon cousins preyed upon animals. But a snake-devil would have left no remains of anything as small as a hopper, one mouthful which could not satisfy its gnawing hunger. And a flying dragon would have picked the bones clean.

“*Them!*” Sssuri’s reply was clipped. “They hunt for sport.”

Dalgard felt a little sick. To his mind, hoppers were to be treated with friendship. Only against the snake-devils and the flying dragons were the colonists ever at war. No wonder that hopper had run from them back on the plain during yesterday’s journey!

The buildings before them were not the rounded domes of the isolated farms, but a series of upward-pointing shafts. They walked through a tall gap which must have supported a now-disappeared barrier gate, and their passing was signaled by a whispering sound as they shuffled through the loose sand and soil drifted there in a miniature dune.

This city was in a better state of preservation than any Dalgard had previously visited. But he had no desire to enter any of the gaping doorways. It was as if the city rejected him and his kind, as if to the past that brooded here he was no more than a curious hopper or a fluttering, short-lived moth bird.

“Old—old and with wisdom hidden in it—” he caught the trail of thought from Sssuri. And he was certain that the merman was no more at ease here than he himself was.

As the street they followed brought them into an open space surrounded by more imposing buildings, they made another discovery which blotted out all thoughts of forbidden knowledge and awakened them to a more normal and everyday danger.

A fountain, which no longer played but gave birth to a crooked stream of water, was in the center. And in the muddy verge of the stream, pressed deep, was the fresh track of a snake-devil. Almost full grown, Dalgard estimated, measuring the print with his fingers. Sssuri pivoted slowly, studying the circle of buildings about them.

“An hour—maybe two—” Dalgard gave a hunter’s verdict on the age of the print. He, too, eyed those buildings. To meet a snake-devil in the open was one thing, to play hide-and-seek with the cunning monster in a warren such as this was something else again. He hoped that the reptile had been heading for the open, but he doubted it. This mass of buildings would provide just the type of shelter which would appeal to it for a lair. And snake-devils did not den alone!

“Try by the river,” Sssuri gave advice. Like Dalgard, he accepted the necessity of the chase. No intelligent creature ever lost the chance to kill a snake-devil when fortune offered it. And he and the scout had hunted together on such trails before. Now they slipped into familiar roles from long practice.

They took a route which should lead them to the river, and within a matter of yards, came across evidence proving that the merman had guessed correctly; a second claw print was pressed deep in a patch of drifted soil.

Here the buildings were of a new type, windowless, perhaps storehouses. But what pleased Dalgard most was the fact that most of them showed tightly closed doors. There was no chance for their prey to lurk in wait.

“We should smell it.” Sssuri picked that worry out of the scout’s mind and had a ready answer for it.

Sure—they should smell the lair; nothing could cloak the horrible odor of a snake-devil’s home. Dalgard sniffed vigorously as he padded along. Though odd smells clung to the strange buildings none of them were actively obnoxious—yet.

“River—”

There was the river at the end of the way they had been following, a way which ended in a wharf built out over the oily flow of water. Blank walls were on either side. If the snake-devil had come this way, he had found no hiding place.

“Across the river—”

Dalgard gave a resigned grunt. For some reason he disliked the thought of swimming that stream, of having his skin laved by the turgid water with its brown sheen.

“There is no need to swim.”

Dalgard’s gaze followed Sssuri’s pointing finger. But what he saw bobbing up and down, pulled a little downstream by the current, did not particularly reassure him. It was manifestly a boat, but the form was as alien as the city around them.

## 4. Civilization

Raf surveyed the wide sweep of prairie where dawn gave a gray tinge to soften the distance and mark the rounded billows of the ever-rippling grass. He tried to analyze what it was about this world which made it seem so untouched, so fresh and new. There were large sections of his own Terra which had been abandoned after the Big Burn-Off and the atomic wars, or later after the counterrevolution which had defeated the empire of Pax, during which mankind had slipped far back on the road to civilization. But he had never experienced this same feeling when he had ventured into those wildernesses. Almost he could believe that the records Hobart had showed him were false, that this world had never known intelligent life herding together in cities.

He walked slowly down the ramp, drawing deep breaths of the crisp air. The day would grow warmer with the rising sun. But now it was just the sort of morning which led him to be glad he was alive—and young! Maybe part of it was because he was free of the ship and at last not just excess baggage but a man with a definite job before him.

Spacemen tended to be young. But until this moment Raf had never felt the real careless freedom of youth. Now he was moved by a desire to disobey orders—to take the flutter up by himself and head off into the blue of the brightening sky for more than just a test flight, not to explore Hobart's city but to cruise over the vast sea of grass and find out its wonders for himself.

But the discipline which had shaped him almost since birth sent him now to check the flyer and wait, inwardly impatient, for Hobart, Lablet, and Soriki, the com-tech, to join him.

The wait was not a long one since the three others, with equipment hung about, tramped down the ramp as Raf settled himself behind the control board of the flyer. He triggered the shield which snapped over them for a windbreak and brought the flutter up into the spreading color of the morning. Beside him Hobart pressed the button of the automatic recorder, and in the seat behind, Soriki had the headset of the com clamped over his ears. They were not only making a record of their trip, they were continuing in constant communication with the ship—now already a silver pencil far to the rear.

It was some two hours later that they discovered what was perhaps one reason for the isolation of the district in which the *RS 10* had set down. Rolling foothills rose beneath them and miles ahead the white-capped peaks of a mountain range made a broken outline against the turquoise sky. The broken lands would be a formidable barrier for any foot travelers: there were no easy roads through that series of sharp lifts and narrow valleys. And the one stream they followed for a short space descended from the heights in spectacular falls. Twice they skimmed thick growths of trees, so tightly packed that from the air they resembled a matted carpet of green-blue. And to cut through such a forest would be an impossible task.

The four in the flutter seldom spoke. Raf kept his attention on the controls. Sudden currents of air were tricky here, and he had to be constantly alert to hold the small flyer on an even keel. His glimpses of what lay below were only snatched ones.

At last it was necessary to zoom far above the vegetation of the lower slopes, to reach an altitude safe enough to clear the peaks ahead. Since the air supply within the windshield was constant they need not fear lack of oxygen. But Raf was privately convinced, as they soared, that the range might well compare in height with those Asian mountains which dominated all the upflung reaches of his native world.

When they were over the sharp points of that chain disaster almost overtook them. A freakish air current caught the flitter as if in a giant hand, and Raf fought for control as they lost altitude past the margin of safety. Had he not allowed for just such a happening they might have been smashed against one of the rock tips over which they skimmed to a precarious safety. Raf, his mouth dry, his hands sweating on the controls, took them up—higher than was necessary—to coast above the last of that rocky spine to see below the beginning of the downslopes leading to the plains the range cut in half. He heard Hobart draw a hissing breath.

“That was a close call.” Lablet’s precise, lecturer’s voice cut through the drone of the motor.

“Yeah,” Soriki echoed, “looked like we might be sandwich meat there for a while. The kid knows his stuff after all.”

Raf grinned a little sourly, but he did not answer that. He *ought* to know his trade. Why else would he be along? They were each specialists in one or two fields. But he had good sense enough to keep his mouth shut. That way the less one had to regret minutes—or hours—later.

The land on the south side of the mountains was different in character to the wild northern plains.

“Fields!”

It did not require that identification from Lablet to point out what they had already seen. The section below was artificially divided into long narrow strips. But the vegetation growing on those strips was no different from the northern grass they had seen about the spacer.

“Not cultivated now,” the scientist amended his first report. “It’s reverting to grassland—”

Raf brought the flitter closer to the ground so that when a domed structure arose out of a tangle of overgrown shrubs and trees they were not more than fifty feet above it. There was no sign of life about the dwelling, if dwelling it was, and the unkempt straggle of growing things suggested that it had been left to itself through more than one season. Lablet wanted to set down and explore, but the captain was intent upon reaching the city. A solitary farm was of little value compared with what they might learn from a metropolis. So, rather to Raf’s relief, he was ordered on.

He could not have explained why he shrank from such investigation. Where earlier that morning he had wanted to take the flitter and go off by himself to explore the world which seemed so bright and new, now he was glad that he was only the pilot of the flyer and that the others were not only in his company but ready to make the decisions. He had a queer distaste for the countryside, a disinclination to land near that dome.

Beyond the first of the deserted farms they came to the highway and, since the buckled and half-buried roadway ran south, Hobart suggested that they use it as a visible guide. More isolated dome houses showed in the course of an hour. And their fields were easy to map from the air. But nowhere did the Terrans see any indication that those fields were in use. Nor were there any signs of animal or bird life. The weird desolation of the landscape began to work its spell on the men in the flitter. There was something unnatural about the country, and with every mile the flyer clocked off, Raf longed to be heading in the opposite direction.

The domes drew closer together, made a cluster at crossroads, gathered into a town in which all the buildings were the same shape and size, like the cells of a wasp nest. Raf wondered if those who had built them had not been humanoid at all, but perhaps insects with a hive mind. And because that thought was unpleasant he resolutely turned his attention to the machine he piloted.

They passed over four such towns, all marking intersections of roads running east and west, north and south, with precise exactness. The sun was at noon or a little past that mark when Captain Hobart gave the order to set down so that they could break out rations and eat.

Raf brought the flitter down on the cracked surface of the road, mistrusting what might lie hidden in the field grass. They got out and walked for a space along pavement which had once been smooth.

“High-powered traffic—” That was Lablet. He had gone down on one knee and was tracing a finger along the substance.

“Straight—” Soriki squinted against the sun. “Nothing stopped them, did it? We want a road here and we’ll get it! That sort of thing. Must have been master engineers.”

To Raf the straight highways suggested something else. Master engineering, certainly. But a ruthlessness too, as if the builders, who refused to accept any modifications of their original plans from nature, might be as arrogant and self-assured in other ways. He did not admire this relic of civilization; in fact it added to his vague uneasiness.

The land was so still, under the whisper of the wind. He discovered that he was listening—listening for the buzz of an insect, the squeak of some grass dweller, anything which would mean that there was life about them. As he chewed on the ration concentrate and drank sparingly from his canteen, Raf continued to listen. Without result.

Hobart and Lablet were engrossed in speculation about what might lie ahead. Soriki had gone back to the flitter to make his report to the ship. The pilot sat where he was, content to be forgotten, but eager to see an animal peering at him from cover, a bird winging through the air.

“—if we don’t hit it by nightfall—But we can’t be that far away! I’ll stay out and try tomorrow.” That was Hobart. And since he was captain what he said was probably what they would do. Raf shied away from the thought of spending the night in this haunted land. Though, on the other hand, he would be utterly opposed to lifting the flitter over those mountains again except in broad daylight.

But the problem did not arise, for they found their city in the midafternoon, the road bringing them straight to an amazing collection of buildings, which appeared doubly alien to their eyes since it did not include any of the low domes they had seen heretofore.

Here were towers of needle slimness, solid blocks of almost windowless masonry looking twice as bulky beside those same towers, archways stringing at dizzy heights above the ground from one skyscraper to the next. And here time and nature had been at work. Some of the towers were broken off, a causeway displayed a gap—Once it had been a breathtaking feat of engineering, far more impressive than the highway, now it was a slowly collapsing ruin.

But before they had time to take it all in Soriki gave an exclamation. “Something coming through on our wave band, sir!” He leaned forward to dig fingers into Hobart’s shoulder. “Message of some kind—I’d swear to it!”

Hobart snapped into action. “Kurbi—set down—there!”

His choice of a landing place was the flat top of a near-by building, one which stood a little apart from its neighbors and, as Raf could see, was not overlooked except by a ruined tower. He circled the flitter. The machine had been specially designed to land and take off in confined spaces, and he knew all there was possible to learn about its handling on his home world. But he had never tried to bring it down on a roof, and he was very sure that now he

had no margin for error left him, not with Hobart breathing impatiently beside him, his hands moving as if, as a pilot of a spacer, he could well take over the controls here.

Raf circled twice, eyeing the surface of the roof in search of any break which could mean a crack-up at landing. And then, though he refused to be hurried by the urgency of the men with him, he came in, cutting speed, bringing them down with only a slight jar.

Hobart twisted around to face Soriki. "Still getting it?"

The other, cupping his earphones to his head with his hands, nodded. "Give me a minute or two," he told them, "and I'll have a fix. They're excited about something—the way this jabber-jabber is coming through—"

"About us," Raf thought. The ruined tower topped them to the south. And to the east and west there were buildings as high as the one they were perched on. But the town he had seen as he maneuvered for a landing had held no signs of life. Around them were only signs of decay.

Lablet got out of the flitter and walked to the edge of the roof, leaning against the parapet to focus his vision glasses on what lay below. After a moment Raf followed his example.

Silence and desolation, windows like the eye pits in bone-picked skulls. There were even some small patches of vegetation rooted and growing in pockets erosion had carved in the walls. To the pilot's uninformed eyes the city looked wholly dead.

"Got it!" Soriki's exultant cry brought them back to the flitter. As if his body was the indicator, he had pivoted until his outstretched hand pointed southwest. "About a quarter of a mile that way."

They shielded their eyes against the westering sun. A block of solid masonry loomed high in the sky, dwarfing not only the building they were standing on but all the towers around it. Its imposing lines made clear its one-time importance.

"Palace," mused Lablet, "or capitol. I'd say it was just about the heart of the city."

He dropped his glasses to swing on their cord, his eyes glistening as he spoke directly to Raf.

"Can you set us down on that?"

The pilot measured the curving roof of the structure. A crazy fool might try to make a landing there. But he was no crazy fool. "Not on that roof!" he spoke with decision.

To his relief the captain confirmed his verdict with a slow nod. "Better find out more first." Hobart could be cautious when he wanted to. "Are they still broadcasting, Soriki?"

The com-tech had stripped the earphones from his head and was rubbing one ear. "Are they!" he exploded. "I'd think you could hear them clear over there, sir!"

And they could. The gabble-gabble which bore no resemblance to any language Terra knew boiled out of the phones.

"Someone's excited," Lablet commented in his usual mild tone.

"Maybe they've discovered us." Hobart's hand went to the weapon at his belt. "We must make peaceful contact—if we can."

Lablet took off his helmet and ran his fingers through the scrappy ginger-and-gray fringe receding from his forehead. "Yes—contact will be necessary—" he said thoughtfully.

Well, he was supposed to be their expert on that. Raf watched the older man with something akin to amusement. The pilot had a suspicion that none of the other three, Lablet included, was in any great hurry to push through contact with unknown aliens. It was a case of dancing

along on shore before having to plunge into the chill of autumn sea waves. Terrans had explored their own solar system, and they had speculated learnedly for generations on the problem of intelligent alien life. There had been all kinds of reports by experts and would-be experts. But the stark fact remained that heretofore mankind as born on the third planet of Sol had *not* encountered intelligent alien life. And just how far did speculations, reports, and arguments go when one was faced with the problem to be solved practically—and speedily?

Raf's own solution would have been to proceed with caution and yet more caution. Under his technical training he had far more imagination than any of his officers had ever realized. And now he was certain that the best course of action was swift retreat until they knew more about what was to be faced.

But in the end the decision was taken out of their hands. A muffled exclamation from Lablet brought them all around to see that distant curving roof crack wide open. From the shadows within, a flyer spiraled up into the late afternoon sky.

Raf reached the flitter in two leaps. Without orders he had the spray gun ready for action, on point and aimed at the bobbing machine heading toward them. From the earphones Soriki had left on the seat the gabble had risen to a screech and one part of Raf's brain noted that the sounds were repetitious: was an order to surrender being broadcast? His thumb was firm on the firing button of the gun and he was about to send a warning burst to the right of the alien when an order from Hobart stopped him cold.

"Take it easy, Kurbi."

Soriki said something about a "gun-happy flitter pilot," but, Raf noted with bleak eyes, the com-tech kept his own hand close to his belt arm. Only Lablet stood watching the oncoming alien ship with placidity. But then, as Raf had learned through the long voyage of the spacer, a period of time which had left few character traits of any of the crew hidden from their fellows, the xenobiologist was a fatalist and strictly averse to personal combat.

The pilot did not leave his seat at the gun. But within seconds he knew that they had lost the initial advantage. As the tongue-shaped stranger thrust at them and then swept on to glide above their heads so that the weird shadow of the ship licked them from light to dark and then to light again, Raf was certain that his superiors had made the wrong decision. They should have left the city as soon as they picked up those signals—if they could have gone then. He studied the other flyer. Its lines suggested speed as well as mobility, and he began to doubt if they *could* have escaped with that craft trailing them.

Well, what would they do now? The alien flyer could not land here, not without coming down flat upon the flitter. Maybe it would cruise overhead as a warning threat until the city dwellers were able to reach the Terrans in some other manner. Tense, the four spacemen stood watching the graceful movements of the flyer. There were no visible portholes or openings anywhere along its ovoid sides. It might be a robot-controlled ship, it might be anything, Raf thought, even a bomb of sorts. If it was being flown by some human—or nonhuman—flyer, he was a master pilot.

"I don't understand," Soriki moved impatiently. "They're just shuttling around up there. What do we do now?"

Lablet turned his head. He was smiling faintly. "We wait," he told the com-tech. "I should imagine it takes time to climb twenty flights of stairs—if they have stairs—"

Soriki's attention fell from the flyer hovering over their heads to the surface of the roof. Raf had already looked that over without seeing any opening. But he did not doubt the truth of



Lablet's surmise. Sooner or later the aliens were going to reappear. And it did not greatly matter to the marooned Terrans whether they would drop from the sky or rise from below.

## 5. Banded Devil

Familiar only with the wave-riding outriggers, Dalgard took his seat in the alien craft with misgivings. And oddly enough it also bothered him to occupy a post which earlier had served not a nonhuman such as Sssuri, whom he admired, but a humanoid whom he had been taught from childhood to avoid—if not fear. The skiff was rounded at bow and stern with very shallow sides and displayed a tendency to whirl about in the current, until Sssuri, with his instinctive knowledge of watercraft, used one of the queerly shaped paddles tucked away in the bottom to both steer and propel them. They did not strike directly across the river but allowed the current to carry them in a diagonal path so that they came out on the opposite bank some distance to the west.

Sssuri brought them ashore with masterly skill where a strip of sod angled down to the edge of the water, marking, Dalgard decided, what had once been a garden. The buildings on this side of the river were not set so closely together. Each, standing some two or three stories high, was encircled by green, as if this had been a section of private dwellings.

They pulled the light boat out of the water and Sssuri pointed at the open door of the nearest house. “In there—”

Dalgard agreed that it might be well to hide the craft against the return. Although as yet they had found no physical evidence, other than the dead hoppers, that they might not be alone in the city, he wanted a means of escape ready if such a flight would be necessary. In the meantime there was the snake-devil to track, and that wily creature, if it had swum the river, might be lurking at present in the next silent street—or miles away.

Sssuri, spear ready, was trotting along the paved lane, his head up as he thought-quested for any hint of life about them. Dalgard tried to follow that lead. But he knew that it would be Sssuri’s stronger power which would warn them first.

They cast east from where they had landed, studying the soil of each garden spot, hunting for the unmistakable spoor of the giant reptile. And within a matter of minutes they found it, the mud still moist as Dalgard proved with an exploring fingertip. At the same time Sssuri twirled his spear significantly. Before them the lane ran on between two walls without any breaks. Dalgard uncased his bow and strung it. From his quiver he chose one of the powerful arrows, the points of which were kept capped until use.

A snake-devil, with its nervous system controlled not from the tiny, brainless head but from a series of auxiliary “brains” at points along its powerful spine, could and would go on fighting even after that head was shorn away, as the first colonists had discovered when they depended on the deadly ray guns fatal to any Terran life. But the poison-tipped arrow Dalgard now handled, with confidence in its complete efficiency, paralyzed within moments and killed in a quarter-hour one of the scaled monstrosities.

“Lair—”

Dalgard did not need that warning thought from his companion. There was no mistaking that sickly sweet stench born of decaying animal matter, which was the betraying effluvium of a snake-devil’s lair. He turned to the right-hand wall and with a running leap reached its broad top. The lane curved to end in an archway cut through another wall, which was higher than Dalgard’s head even when he stood on his present elevation. But bands of ornamental patterning ran along the taller barrier, and he was certain that it could be climbed. He lowered a hand to Sssuri and hoisted the merman up to join him.

But Sssuri stood for a long moment looking ahead, and Dalgard knew that the merman was disturbed, that the wall before them had some terrifying meaning for the native Astran. So vivid was the impression of what could only be termed horror—that Dalgard dared to ask a question:

“What is it?”

The merman’s yellow eyes turned from the wall to his companion. Behind his hatred of this place there was another emotion Dalgard could not read.

“This is the place of sorrow, the place of separation. But *they* paid—oh, how they paid—after that day when the fire fell from the sky.” His scaled and taloned feet moved in a little shuffling war dance, and his spear spun and quivered in the sunlight, as Dalgard had seen the spears of the mer-warriors move in the mock combats of their unexplained, and to his kind unexplainable, rituals. “Then did our spears drink, and knives eat!” Sssuri’s fingers brushed the hilt of the wicked blade swinging from his belt. “Then did the People make separations and sorrows for *them*! And it was accomplished that we went forth into the sea to be no longer bond but free. And *they* went down into the darkness and were no more—” In Dalgard’s head the chant of his friend skirled up in a paean of exultation. Sssuri shook his spear at the wall.

“No more the beast and the death,” his thoughts swelled, a shout of victory. “For where are *they* who sat and watched many deaths? *They* are gone as the wave smashes itself upon the coast rocks and is no more. But the People are free and never more shall Those Others put bonds upon them! Therefore do I say that this is a place of nothing, where evil has turned in upon itself and come to nothing. Just as Those Others will come to nothing since their own evil will in the end eat them up!”

He strode forward along the wall until he came to the barrier, seemingly oblivious of the carrion reek which told of a snake-devil’s den somewhere about. And he raised his arm high, bringing the point of his spear gratingly along the carved surface. Nor did it seem to Dalgard a futile gesture, for Sssuri lived and breathed, stood free and armed in the city of his enemies—and the city was dead.

Together they climbed the barrier, and then Dalgard discovered that it was the rim of an arena which must have seated close to a thousand in the days of its use. It was a perfect oval in shape with tiers of seats now forming a staircase down to the center, where was a section ringed about by a series of archways. A high stone grille walled this portion away from the seats as if to protect the spectators from what might enter through those portals.

Dalgard noted all this only in passing, for the arena was occupied, very much occupied. And he knew the occupiers only too well.

Three full-grown snake-devils were stretched at pulpy ease, their filled bellies obscenely round, their long necks crowned with their tiny heads flat on the sand as they napped. A pair of half-grown monsters, not yet past the six-foot stage, tore at some indescribable remnants of their elders’ feasting, hissing at each other and aiming vicious blows whenever they came within possible fighting distance. Three more, not long out of their mothers’ pouches scabbled in the earth about the sleeping adults.

“A good catch,” Dalgard signaled Sssuri, and the merman nodded.

They climbed down from seat to seat. This could not rightfully be termed hunting when the quarry might be picked off so easily without risk to the archer. But as Dalgard notched his first arrow, he sighted something so surprising that he did not let the poisoned dart fly.

The nearest sleeping reptile which he had selected as his mark stretched lazily without raising its head or opening its small eyes. And the sun caught on a glistening band about its short foreleg just beneath the joint of the taloned pawhands. No natural scales could reflect the light with such a brilliant glare. It could be only one thing—metal! A metal bracelet about the tearing arm of a snake-devil! Dalgard looked at the other two sleepers. One was lying on its belly with its forearms gathered under it so that he could not see if it, also, were so equipped. But the other—yes, it was banded!

Sssuri stood at the grille, one hand on its stone divisions. His surprise equaled Dalgard's. It was not in his experience either that the untamed snake-devils, regarded by merman and human alike as so dangerous as to be killed on sight, could be banded—as if they were personal pets!

For a moment or two a wild idea crossed Dalgard's mind. How long was the natural life span of a snake-devil? Until the coming of the colonists they had been the undisputed rulers of the deserted continent, stupid as they were, simply because of their strength and ferocity. A twelve-foot, scale-armored monster, that could tear apart a duocorn with ease, might not be successfully vanquished by any of the fauna of Astra. And since the monsters did not venture into the sea, contact between them and the mermen had been limited to casual encounters at rare intervals. So, how long did a snake-devil live? Were these creatures sprawled here in sleep ones that had known the domination of Those Others—though the fall of the master race of Astra must have occurred generations, hundreds of years in the past?

“No,” Sssuri's denial cut through that. “The smaller one is not yet full-grown. It lacks the second neck ring. Yet it is banded.”

The merman was right. That unpleasant wattle of armored flesh which necklaced the serpent throat of the devil Dalgard had picked as his target was thin, not the thick roll of fat such as distinguished its two companions. It was not fully adult, yet the band was plain to see on the foreleg now stretched to its full length as the sun bored down to supply the heavy heat the snake-devils relished next to food.

“Then—” Dalgard did not like to think of what might be the answer to that “then.”

Sssuri shrugged. “It is plain that these are not wild roamers. They are here for a purpose. And that purpose—” Suddenly his arm shot out so that his fingers protruded through the slits in the stone grille. “See?”

Dalgard had already seen, in seeing he knew hot and terrible anger. Out of the filthy mess in which the snake-devils wallowed, something had rolled, perhaps thrown about in play by the unspeakable offspring. A skull, dried scraps of fur and flesh still clinging to it, stared hollow-eyed up at them. At least one merman had fallen prey to the nightmares who ruled the arena.

Sssuri hissed and the red rage in his mind was plain to Dalgard. “Once more they deal death here—” His eyes went from the skull to the monsters. “Kill!” The command was imperative and sharp.

Dalgard had qualified as a master Bowman before he had first gone roving. And the killing of snake-devils was a task which had been set every colonist since their first brush with the creatures.

He snapped the cap off the glass splinter point, designed to pin and then break off in the hide so that any clawing foot which tore out an arrow could not rid the victim of the poisonous head. The archer's mark was under the throat where the scales were soft and there was a chance of piercing the skin with the first shot.

The growls of the two feeding youngsters covered the snap of the bow cord as Dalgard shot. And he did not miss. The brilliant scarlet feather of the arrow quivered in the baggy roll of flesh.

With a scream which tore at the human's eardrums, the snake-devil reared to its hind feet. It made a tearing motion with the banded forearm which scraped across the back of one of its companions. And then it fell back to the blood-stained sand, limp, a greenish foam drooling from its fangs.

As the monster that the dead devil had raked roused, Dalgard had his chance for another good mark. And the second scarlet shaft sped straight to the target.

But the third creature which had been sleeping belly down on the sand presented only its armored back, a hopeless surface for an arrow to pierce. It had opened its eyes and was watching the now motionless bodies of its fellows. But it showed no disposition to move. It was almost as if it somehow understood that as long as it remained in its present position it was safe.

“The small ones—”

Dalgard needed no prompting. He picked off easily enough the two half-grown ones. The infants were another problem. Far less sluggish than their huge elders they sensed that they were in danger and fled. One took refuge in the pouch of its now-dead parent, and the others moved so fast that Dalgard found them difficult targets. He killed one which had almost reached an archway and at length nicked the second in the foot, knowing that, while the poison would be slower in acting, it would be as sure.

Through all of this the third adult devil continued to lie motionless, only its wicked eyes giving any indication that it was alive. Dalgard watched it impatiently. Unless it would move, allow him a chance to aim at the soft underparts, there was little chance of killing it.

What followed startled both hunters, versed as they were in the usual mechanics of killing snake-devils. It had been an accepted premise, through the years since the colonists had known of the monsters, that the creatures were relatively brainless, mere machines which fought, ate, and killed, incapable of any intelligent reasoning, and therefore only dangerous when one was surprised by them or when the hunter was forced to face them inadequately armed.

This snake-devil was different, as it became increasingly plain to the two behind the grille. It had remained safe during the slaughter of its companions because it had not moved, almost as if it had wit enough *not* to move. And now, when it did change position, its maneuvers, simple as they were, underlined the fact that this one creature appeared to have thought out a solution to its situation—as rational a solution as Dalgard might have produced had it been his problem.

Still keeping its soft underparts covered, it edged about in the sand until its back, with the impenetrable armor plates, was facing the grille behind which the hunters stood. Retracting its neck between its shoulders and hunching its powerful back limbs under it, it rushed from that point of danger straight for one of the archways.

Dalgard sent an arrow after it. Only to see the shaft scrape along the heavy scales and bounce to the sand. Then the snake-devil was gone.

“Banded—” The word reached Dalgard. Sssuri had been cool enough to note that while the human hunter had been only bewildered by the untypical actions of his quarry.

“It must be intelligent.” The scout's statement was more than half protest.

“Where *they* are concerned, one may expect many evil wonders.”

“We’ve got to get that devil!” Dalgard was determined on that. Though to run down, through this maze of deserted city, an enraged snake-devil—above all, a snake-devil which appeared to have some reasoning powers—was not a prospect to arouse any emotion except grim devotion to duty.

“It goes for help.”

Dalgard, startled, stared at his companion. Sssuri was still by the grille, watching that archway through which the devil had disappeared.

“What kind of help?” For a moment Dalgard pictured the monster returning at the head of a regiment of its kind, able to tear out this grille and get at their soft-fleshed enemies behind it.

“Safety—protection,” Sssuri told him. “And I think that the place to which it now flees is one we should know.”

“Those Others?” The sun had not clouded, it still streamed down in the torrid heat of early afternoon, warm on their heads and shoulders. Yet Dalgard felt as chill as if some autumn wind had laid its lash across the small of his back.

“*They* are not here. But they have been—and it is possible that they return. The devil goes to where it expects to find them.”

Sssuri was already on his way, running about the arena’s curve to reach the point above the archway through which the snake-devil had raced. Dalgard padded after him, bow in hand. He trusted Sssuri implicitly when it came to tracking. If the merman said that the snake-devil had a definite goal in view, he was right. But the scout was still a little bemused by a monster who was able to have any goal except the hunting and devouring of meat. Either the one who fled was a freak among its kind or—There were several possibilities which could answer that “or,” and none of them were very pleasant to consider.

They reached the section above the archway and climbed the tiers of seat benches to the top of the wall. Only to see no exit below them. In fact nothing but a wide sweep of crushed brown tangle which had once been vegetation. It was apparent that there was no door below.

Sssuri sped down again. He climbed the grille and was on his way to the sand when Dalgard caught up with him. Together they ventured into the underground passage which the snake-devil had chosen.

The stench of the lair was thick about them. Dalgard coughed, sickened by the foul odor. He was reluctant to advance. But, to his growing relief, he discovered that it was not entirely dark. Set in the roof at intervals were plates which gave out a violet light, making a dim twilight which was better than total darkness.

It was a straight passage without any turns or openings. But the horrible odor was constant, and Dalgard began to think that they might be running head-on into another lair, perhaps one as well populated as that they had left behind them. It was against nature for the snake-devils he had known to lair under cover; they preferred narrow rocky places where they could bask in the sun. But then the devil they now pursued was no ordinary one.

Sssuri reassured him. “There is no lair, only the smell because they have come this way for many years.”

The passage opened into a wide room and here the violet light was stronger, bright enough to make plain the fact that alcoves opened off it, each and every one with a barred grille for a door. There was no mistaking that once this had been a prison of sorts.

Sssuri did no exploring but crossed the room at his shuffling trot, which Dalgard matched. The way leading out on the opposite side slanted up, and he judged it might bring them out at ground level.

“The devil waits,” Sssuri warned, “because it fears. It will turn on us when we come. Be ready—”

They were at another door, and before them was a long corridor with tall window openings near the ceiling which gave admittance to the sunlight. After the gloom of the tunnel, Dalgard blinked. But he was aware of movement at the far end, just as he heard the hissing scream of the monster they trailed.

## 6. Treasure Hunt

Raf, squatting on a small, padded platform raised some six inches from the floor, tried to study the inhabitants of the room without staring offensively. At the first glance, in spite of their strange clothing and their odd habit of painting their faces with weird designs, the city people might have been of his own species. Until one saw their too slender hands with the three equal-length fingers and thumb, or caught a glimpse, under the elaborate head coverings, of the stiff, spiky substance which served them for hair.

At least they did not appear to be antagonistic. When they had reached the roof top where the Terrans had landed their flitter, they had come with empty hands, making gestures of good will and welcome. And they had had no difficulty in persuading at least three of the exploring party to accompany them to their own quarters, though Raf had been separated from the flyer only by the direct order of Captain Hobart, an order he still resented and wanted to disobey.

The Terrans had been offered refreshment—food and drink. But knowing the first rule of stellar exploration, they had refused, which did not mean that the hosts must abstain. In fact, Raf thought, watching the aliens about him, they ate as if such a feast were novel. His two neighbors had quickly divided his portion between them and made it disappear as fast, if not faster, than their own small servings.

At the other end of the room Lablet and Hobart were trying to communicate with the nobles about them, while Soriki, a small palm recorder in his hand, was making a tape strip of the proceedings.

Raf glanced from one of his neighbors to the other. The one on his right had chosen to wear a sight-torturing shade of crimson, and the material was wound in strips about his body as if he were engulfed in an endless bandage. Only his fluttering hands, his three-toed feet and his head were free of the supple rolls. Having selected red for his clothing, he had picked a brilliant yellow paint for his facial makeup, and it was difficult for the uninitiated to trace what must be his normal features under that thick coating of stuff which fashioned a masklike strip across his eyes and a series of circles outlining his mouth, circles which almost completely covered his beardless cheeks. More twists of woven fabric, opalescent and changing color as his head moved, made a turban for his head.

Most of the aliens about the room wore some variation of the same bandage dress, face paint, and turban. An exception, one of three such, was the feaster on Raf's left.

His face paint was confined to a conservative set of bars on each cheek, those a stark black and white. His sinewy arms were bare to the shoulder, and he wore a shell of some metallic substance as a breast-and back-plate, not unlike the very ancient body armor of Raf's own world. The rest of his body was covered by the bandage strips, but they were of a dead black, which, because of the natural thinness of his limbs, gave him a rather unpleasant resemblance to a spider. Various sheaths and pockets hung from a belt pulled tight about his wasp middle, and a helmet of the metal covered his head. Soldier? Raf was sure that his guess was correct.

The officer, if officer he was, caught Raf's gaze. His small round mouth gaped, and then his hands, with a few quick movements which Raf followed, fascinated, pantomimed a flyer in the air. With those talking fingers, he was able to make plain a question: was Raf the pilot of the flitter?

The pilot nodded. Then he pointed to the officer and forced as inquiring an expression as he could command.



The answer was sketched quickly and readably: the alien, too, was either a pilot or had some authority over flyers. For the first time since he had entered this building, Raf knew a slight degree of relaxation.

The wrinkleless, too smooth skin of the alien was a darkish yellow. His painted face was a mask to frighten any sensible Terran child; his general appearance was not attractive. But he was a flyer, and he wanted to talk shop, as well as they could with no common speech. Since the scarlet-wound nobleman on Raf's right was completely engrossed in the feast, pursuing a few scraps avidly about the dish, the Terran gave all his attention to the officer.

Twittering words poured in a stream from the warrior's lips. Raf shook his head regretfully, and the other jerked his shoulders in almost human impatience. Somehow that heartened Raf.

With many guesses to cover gaps, probably more than half of which were wrong, Raf gathered that the officer was one of a very few who still retained the almost forgotten knowledge of how to pilot the remaining airworthy craft in this crumbling city. On their way to the building with the curved roof, Raf had noted the evidences that the inhabitants of this metropolis could not be reckoned as more than a handful and that most of these now lived either within the central building or close to it. A pitiful collection of survivors lingering on in the ruins of their past greatness.

Yet he was impressed now by no feeling that the officer, eagerly trying to make contact, was a degenerate member of a dying race. In fact, as Raf glanced at the aliens about the room, he was conscious of an alertness, of a suppressed energy which suggested a young and vigorous people.

The officer was now urging him to go some place, and Raf, his dislike for being in the heart of the strangers' territory once more aroused, was about to shake his head in a firm negative when a second idea stopped him. He had resisted separation from the flitter. Perhaps he could persuade the alien, under the excuse of inspecting a strange machine, to take him back to the flyer. Once there he would stay. He did not know what Captain Hobart and Lablet thought they could accomplish here. But, as for himself, Raf was sure that he was not going to feel easy again until he was across the northern mountain chain and coming in for a landing close by the *RS 10*.

It was as if the alien officer had read his thoughts, for the warrior uncrossed his black legs and got nimbly to his feet with a lithe movement, which Raf, cramped by sitting in the unfamiliar posture, could not emulate. No one appeared to notice their withdrawal. And when Raf hesitated, trying to catch Hobart's eye and make some explanation, the alien touched his arm lightly and motioned toward one of the curtained doorways. Conscious that he could not withdraw from the venture now, Raf reluctantly went out.

They were in a hall where bold bands of color interwove in patterns impossible for Terran eyes to study. Raf lowered his gaze hurriedly to the gray floor under his boots. He had discovered earlier that to try to trace any thread of that wild splashing did weird things to his eyesight and awakened inside him a sick panic. His space boots, with the metal, magnetic plates set in the soles, clicked loudly on the pavement where his companion's bare feet made no whisper of sound.

The hall gave upon a ramp leading down, and Raf recognized this. His confidence arose. They were on their way out of the building. Here the murals were missing so that he could look about him for reference points.

He was sure that the banquet hall was some ten stories above street level. But they did not go down ten ramps now. At the foot of the third the officer turned abruptly to the left, beckoning

Raf along. When the Terran remained stubbornly where he was, pointing in the direction which, to him, meant return to the flitter, the other made gestures describing an aircraft in flight. His own probably.

Raf sighed. He could see no way out unless he cut and ran. And long before he reached the street from this warren they could pick him up. Also, in spite of all the precautions he had taken to memorize their way here, he was not sure he could find his path back to the flyer, even if he were free to go. Giving in, he went after the officer.

Their way led out on one of the spider-web bridges which tied building and tower into the complicated web which was the city. Raf, as a pilot of flitter, had always believed that he had no fear of heights. But he discovered that to coast above the ground in a flyer was far different than to hurry at the pace his companion now set across one of these narrow bridges suspended high above the street. And he was sure that the surface under them vibrated as if the slightest extra poundage would separate it from its supports and send it, and them, crashing down.

Luckily the distance they had to cover was relatively short, but Raf swallowed a sigh of relief as they reached the door at the other end. They were now in a tower which, unluckily, proved to be only a way station before another swing out over empty space on a span which sloped down! Raf clutched at the guide rail, the presence of which suggested that not all the users of this road were as nonchalant as the officer who tripped lightly ahead. This must explain the other's bare feet—on such paths they were infinitely safer than his own boots.

The downward sloping bridge brought them to a square building which somehow had an inhabited look which those crowding around it lacked. Raf gained its door to become aware of a hum, a vibration in the wall he touched to steady himself, hinting at the drive of motors, the throb of machinery inside the structure. But within, the officer passed along a corridor to a ramp which brought them out, after what was for Raf a steep climb, upon the roof. Here was not one of the tongue-shaped craft such as had first met them in the city, but a gleaming globe. The officer stopped, his eyes moving from the Terran to the machine, as if inviting Raf to share in his own pride. To the pilot's mind it bore little resemblance to any form of aircraft past or present with which he had had experience in his own world. But he did not doubt that it was the present acme of alien construction, and he was eager to see it perform.

He followed the officer through a hatch at the bottom of the globe, only to be confronted by a ladder he thought at first he could not climb, for the steps were merely toe holds made to accommodate the long, bare feet of the crew. By snapping on the magnetic power of his space boots, Raf was able to get up, although at a far slower speed than his guide. They passed several levels of cabins before coming out in what was clearly the control cabin of the craft.

To Raf the bank of unfamiliar levers and buttons had no meaning, but he paid strict attention to the gestures of his companion. This was not a space ship he gathered. And he doubted whether the aliens had ever lifted from their own planet to their neighbors in this solar system. But it was a long-range ship with greater cruising power than the other flyer he had seen. And it was being readied now for a voyage of some length.

The Terran pilot squatted down on the small stool before the controls. Before him a visa plate provided a clear view of the sky without and the gathering clouds of evening. Raf shifted uncomfortably. That signal of the passing of time triggered his impatience to be away—back to the *RS 10*. He did not want to spend the night in this city. Somehow he must get the officer to take him back to the flitter—to be there would be better than shut up in one of the alien dwellings.

Meanwhile he studied the scene on the visa plate, trying to find the roof on which they had left the flitter. But there was no point he was able to recognize.

Raf turned to the officer and tried to make clear the idea of returning to his own ship. Either he was not as clever at the sign language as the other, or the alien did not wish to understand. For when they left the control cabin, it was only to make an inspection tour of the other parts of the globe, including the space which held the motors of the craft and which, at another time, would have kept Raf fascinated for hours.

In the end the Terran broke away and climbed down the thread of ladder to stand on the roof under the twilight sky. Slowly he walked about the broad expanse of the platform, attempting to pick out some landmark. The central building of the city loomed high, and there were any number of towers about it. But which was the one that guarded the roof where the flitter rested? Raf's determination to get back to his ship was a driving force.

The alien officer had watched him, and now a three-fingered hand was laid on Raf's sleeve while its owner looked into Raf's face and mouthed a trilling question.

Without much hope the pilot sketched the set of gestures he had used before. And he was surprised when the other led the way down into the building. This time they did not go back to the bridge, which had brought them across the canyons of streets, but kept on down ramps within the building.

There was a hum of activity in the place. Aliens, all in tight black wrappings and burnished metal breastplates, their faces barred with black and white paint, went on errands through the halls or labored at tasks Raf could not understand. It now seemed as if his guide were eager to get him away.

It was when they reached the street level that the officer did pause by one door, beckoning Raf imperiously to join him. The Terran obeyed reluctantly—and was almost sick.

He was staring down at a dead, very dead body. By the stained rags still clinging to it, it was one of the aliens, a noble, not one of the black-clad warriors. The gaping wounds which had almost torn the unfortunate apart were like nothing Raf had ever seen.

With a guttural sound which expressed his feelings as well as any words, the officer picked up from the floor a broken spear, the barbed head of which was dyed the same reddish yellow as the blood still seeping from the torn body. Swinging the weapon so close to Raf that the Terran was forced to retreat a step or two to escape contact with the grisly relic, the officer burst into an impassioned speech. Then he went back to the gestures which were easier for the spaceman to understand.

This was the work of a deadly enemy, Raf gathered. And such a fate awaited any one of them who ventured beyond certain bounds of safety. Unless this enemy were destroyed, the city—life itself—was no longer theirs—

Seeing those savage wounds which suggested that an insane fury had driven the attacker, Raf could believe that. But surely a primitive spear was no equal to the weapons his guide could command.

When he tried to suggest that, the other shook his head as if despairing of making plain his real message, and again beckoned Raf to come with him. They were out on the littered street, heading away from the central building where the rest of the Terran party must still be. And Raf, seeing the lengthening shadows, the pools of dusk gathering, and remembering that spear, could not resist glancing back over his shoulder now and then. He wondered if the metallic click of his boot soles on the pavement might not draw attention to them, attention

they would not care to meet. His hand was on his stun gun. But the officer gave no sign of being worried; he walked along with the assurance of one who has nothing to fear.

Then Raf caught sight of a patch of color he had seen before and relaxed. They *were* on their way back to the flitter! He had come down this very street earlier. And he did not mind the long climb back, ramp by steep ramp, which brought him out at last beside the flyer. His relief was so great that he put out his hand to draw it along the sleek side of the craft as he might have caressed a well-loved pet.

“Kurbi?”

At Hobart’s bark he stiffened. “Yes, sir!”

“We camp here tonight. Have to make some plans.”

“Yes, sir.” He agreed with that. To attempt passage of the mountains in the dark was a suicide mission which he would have refused. On the other hand, to his mind, they would sleep more soundly if they were out of the city. He speculated whether he dared suggest that they use the few remaining moments of twilight to head into the open and establish a camp somewhere in the countryside.

The alien officer made some comment in his slurred speech and faded away into the shadows. Raf saw that the others had already dragged out their blanket rolls and were spreading them in the shelter of the flitter while Soriki busied himself at the com, sending back a message to the *RS 10*.

“... should not be too difficult to establish a common speech form,” Lablet was saying as Raf climbed into the flitter to tug loose his own roll. “Color and pitch both seem to carry meaning. But the basic pattern is there to study. And with the scanner to sort out those record strips—did you adjust them, Soriki?”

“They’re all ready for you to push the button. If the scanner can read them, it will. I got all that speech the chief, or king, or whatever he was, made just before we left.”

“Good, very good!” In the light of the portable lamp by Soriki’s com, Lablet settled down, plugged the scanner tubes in his ears, absently accepting a ration bar the captain handed him to chew on while he listened to the playback of the record the com-tech had made that afternoon.

Hobart turned to Raf. “You went off with that officer. What did he have to show you?”

The pilot described the globe and the body he had been shown and then added what he had deduced from the sketchy explanations he had been given. The captain nodded.

“Yes, they have aircraft, have been using them, too. But I think that there’s only one of the big ones. And they’re fighting a war all right. We didn’t see the whole colony, but I’ll wager that there are only a handful of them left. They’re holed up here, and they need help or the barbarians will finish them off. They talked a lot about that.”

Lablet pulled the ear plugs from his ears. In the lamplight there was an excited expression on his face. “You were entirely right, Captain! They were offering us a bargain there at the last! They are offering us the accumulated scientific knowledge of this world!”

“What?” Hobart sounded bewildered.

“Over there”—Lablet made a sweep with his arm which might indicate any point to the east—“there is a storehouse of the original learning of their race. It’s in the heart of the enemy country. But the enemy as yet do not know of it. They’ve made two trips over to bring

back material and their ship can only go once more. They offer us an equal share if we'll make the next trip in their company and help them clean out the storage place—”

Hobart's answer was a whistle. There was an avid hunger on Lablet's lean face. No more potent bribe could have been devised to entice him. But Raf, remembering the spear-torn body, wondered.

*In the heart of the enemy country*, he repeated to himself.

Lablet added another piece of information. “After all, the enemy they face is only dangerous because of superior numbers. They are only animals—”

“Animals don't carry spears!” Raf protested.

“Experimental animals that escaped during a world-wide war generations ago,” reported the other. “It seems that the species have evolved to a semi-intelligent level. I must see them!”

Hobart was not to be hurried. “We'll think it over,” he decided. “This needs a little time for consideration.”

## 7. Many Eyes, Many Ears

This was not the first time Dalgard had faced the raging fury of a snake-devil thirsting for a kill. The slaying he had done in the arena was an exception to the rule, not the usual hunter's luck. And now that he saw the creature crouched at the far end of the hall he was ready. Sssuri, also, followed their familiar pattern, separating from his companion and slipping along the wall toward the monster, ready to attract its attention at the proper moment.

Only one doubt remained in Dalgard's mind. This devil had not acted in the normal brainless fashion of its kin. What if it was able to assess the very simple maneuvers, which always before had completely baffled its species, and attacked not the moving merman but the waiting archer?

It was backed against another door, a closed one, as if it had fled for refuge to some aid it had expected and did not find. But as Sssuri moved, its long neck straightened until it was almost at right angles with its narrow shoulders, and from its snake's jaws proceeded a horrific hissing which arose to a scream as its leg muscles tensed for a spring.

At just the right moment Sssuri's arm went back, his spear sang through the air. And the snake-devil, with an incredible twist of its neck, caught the haft of the weapon between its teeth, crunching the iron-hard substance into powder. But with that move it exposed its throat, and the arrow from Dalgard's bow was buried head-deep in the soft inner flesh.

The snake-devil spat out the spear and tried to raise its head. But the muscles were already weakening. It fought the poison long enough to take a single step forward, its small red eyes alight with brainless hate. Then it crashed and lay twisting. Dalgard lowered his bow. There was no need for a second shot.

Sssuri regarded the remains of his spear unhappily. Not only was it the product of long hours of work, but no merman ever felt fully equipped to face the world without such a weapon to hand. He salvaged the barbed head and broke it free of the shred of haft the snake-devil had left. Knotting it at his belt he turned to Dalgard.

"Shall we see what lies beyond?"

Dalgard crossed the hall to test the door. It did not yield to an inward push, but rolled far enough into the wall to allow them through.

On the other side was a room which amazed the scout. The colonists had their laboratory, their workshops, in which they experimented and tried to preserve the remnants of knowledge their forefathers had brought across space, as well as to discover new. But the extent of this storehouse with its bewildering mass of odd machines, tanks, bales, and stocked shelves and tables, was too much to be taken in without a careful and minute examination.

"We are not the first to walk here." Sssuri had given little attention to what was stacked about him. Instead he bent over the disturbed dust in one aisle. Dalgard noted as he went to join the merman that there were gaps on those tables which ran the full length of the room, lines left in the grimy deposit of years which told of things recently moved. And then he saw what had interested Sssuri: tracks, some resembling those which his own bare feet might leave, except that there were only three toes!

"*They.*"

Dalgard who had been a hunter and a tracker before he was an explorer crouched for a clearer view. Yes, they were recent, yet not made today or even yesterday; there was a thin film of dust resettled in each.

“Some days ago. They are not in the city now,” the merman declared with certainty. “But they will come again.”

“How do you know that?”

Sssuri’s hand swept about to include the wealth around them. “They have taken some, perhaps to them the most needful. But they will not be able to resist gathering the rest. Surely they will return, perhaps not once but many times. Until—”

“Until they come to stay.” Dalgard was grim as he completed that sentence for the other.

“That is what they will work for. This land was once under their mastery. This world was theirs before they threw it away warring among themselves. Yes, they dream of holding all once more. But”—Sssuri’s yellow eyes took on some of the fire which had shone in those of the snake-devil during its last seconds of life—“that must not be so!”

“If they take the land, you have the sea,” Dalgard pointed out. The mermen had a means of escape. But what of his own clansmen? Large families were unknown among the Terran colonists. In the little more than a century they had been on this planet their numbers, from the forty-five survivors of the voyage, had grown to only some two hundred and fifty, of which only a hundred and twenty were old enough or young enough to fight. And for them there was no retreat or hiding place.

“We do not go back to the depths!” There was stern determination in that declaration from Sssuri. His tribe had been long hunted, and it wasn’t until they had made a loose alliance with the Terran colonists that they had dared to leave the dangerous ocean depths, where they were the prey of monsters more ferocious and cunning than any snake-devil, to house their families in the coast caves and on the small islands off-shore, to increase in numbers and develop new skills of civilization. No, knowing the stubbornness which was bred into their small, furry bodies, Dalgard did not believe that many of the sea people would willingly go back into the sunless depths. They would not surrender tamely to the rulership of the loathed race.

“I don’t see,” Dalgard spoke aloud, half to himself, as he studied the tables closely packed, the machines standing on bases about the walls, the wealth of alien technology, “what we can do to stop them.”

The restriction drilled into him from early childhood, that the knowledge of Those Others was not for his race and in some way dangerous, gave him an uneasy feeling of guilt just to be standing there. Danger, danger which was far worse than physical, lurked there. And he could bring it to life by merely putting out his hand and picking up any one of those fascinating objects which lay only inches away. For the pull of curiosity was warring inside him against the stern warnings of his Elders.

Once when Dalgard had been very small he had raided his father’s trip bag after the next to the last exploring journey the elder Nordis had made. And he had found a clear block of some kind of greenish crystal, in the heart of which threadlike lines of color wove patterns which were utterly strange. When he had turned the block in his hand, those lines had whirled and changed to form new and intricate designs. And when he had watched them intently it had seemed that something happened inside his mind and he knew, here and there, a word, a fragment of alien thought—just as he normally communicated with the cub who was Sssuri or the hoppers of the field. And his surprise had been so great that he had gone running to his father with the cube and the story of what happened when one watched it.

But there had been no praise for his discovery. Instead he had been hurried off to the chamber where an old, old man, the son of the Great Man who had planned to bring them across space, lay in his bed. And Forken Kordov himself had talked to Dalgard in his old voice, a voice as withered and thin as the hands crossed helplessly on his shrunken body, explaining in simple, kindly words that the knowledge which lay in the cubes, in the oddly shaped books which the Terrans sometimes came across in the ruins, was not for them. That his own great-grandfather Dard Nordis, who had been one of the first of the mutant line of sensitives, had discovered that. And Dalgard, impressed by Forken, by his father's concern, and by all the circumstances of that day, had never forgotten nor lost that warning.

"*We* cannot hope to stop them," Sssuri pointed out. "But we must learn when they will come again and be waiting for them—with your people and mine. For I tell you now, brother of the knife, they must not be allowed to rise once more!"

"And how can we foretell their coming?" Dalgard wanted to know.

"Perhaps that alone we cannot do. But when they come they will not leave speedily. They have stayed here before without harm, and their distrust has been lulled. When next they come, it will be only according to their natures that they will wish to stay longer. Not snatching up the closest to hand of these treasures of theirs, but choosing out with care those things which will give them the best results. Therefore they may make a camp, and we can summon others to aid us."

"To return to Homeport will take several days even if we push," pointed out the scout.

"Word can pass swifter than man," the merman returned, with confidence in his own plan of action. "We shall put other eyes, other ears, many eyes, many ears, to service for us. Be assured we are not the only ones to fear the return of Those Others from overseas."

Dalgard caught his meaning. Yes, it would not be the first time the hoppers and other small animals living in the grasslands, the runners and even the moth birds that only the mermen could mind touch, would relay a message across the land. It might not be an accurate message—to transmit that by small animal brains was impossible—but the meaning would reach both merman and colony Elders: trouble in the north, help needed there. And since Dalgard was the only explorer at present who had chosen the northern trails, his people would know that he had sent that warning and would act upon it, as Sssuri's message would in turn be heeded by the warriors of his tribe.

Yes, it could be done. But what of the traces they had left here—the slaughtered snake-devils—?

Sssuri had an answer for that also. "Let them believe that one of my race came here, or that a party of us ventured to explore inland. We can make it appear that way. But they must not know of you. I do not believe that they ever learned of you or how your fathers came from the sky. And so that may swing the battle in our favor if it comes to open warfare."

What the merman said was sensible enough, and Dalgard was willing to obey orders. As he left the storehouse, Sssuri trailed him, scuffing each dusty print the scout left. Perhaps a master of trailcraft could unravel that spoor, but the colonist was ready to believe that no such master existed in the ranks of Those Others.

In the outer hall the merman approached the now dead snake-devil and jerked from its loose skin the arrow which had killed it. Loosing the head of his ruined spear from his belt, he dug and gouged at the small wound, tearing it so that its original nature was concealed forever. Then they retraced their way through the underground passages until they reached the sanded arena. Already insects buzzed hungrily about the hulks of the dead monsters.



There was a shrill squeal as the remaining infant reptile fled from the pouch where it had hidden. Sssuri hurled his knife, and the blade caught the small devil above the shoulder line, half cutting, half snapping its tender neck, so that it bounded aimlessly on to crash against the wall and fall back squirming feebly.

They collected the darts which had killed the others. Dalgard took the opportunity to study those bands on the forearms of the adults. To his touch they had the slick smoothness of metal, yet he was unfamiliar with the material. It possessed the ruddy fire of copper, but through it ran small black veins. He would have liked to have taken one with him for investigation, but it was out of the question to pry it off that scaled limb.

Sssuri straightened up from his last gruesome bit of stage-setting with a sigh of relief. "Go ahead." He pointed to one of the other archways. "I will confuse the trail."

Dalgard obeyed, treading as lightly as he could, avoiding all stretches in which he could leave a clear print. Sssuri ran lightly back and forth mixing the few impressions to the best of his ability.

They backtracked to the river, retrieved the boat and recrossed, to leave the city behind and strike into the open country beyond its sinister walls. Night was falling, and Dalgard was very glad that he was not to spend the time of darkness within those haunted buildings. But he knew that it was more than a dislike for being shut up in the alien dwellings which had brought Sssuri out into the fields. The second part of their plan must be put into operation.

While Dalgard willed his body motionless, the merman lay relaxed upon the ground before him as he might have floated upon his beloved waves in some secluded cove. His brilliant eyes were closed. Yet Dalgard knew that Sssuri was far from asleep, and with all his own power he tried to join in the broadcast: that urgency which should send some hopper, some night runner, on to spread the rumor that there was trouble in the north, that danger existed and must be investigated. They had already met one colony of runners ranging southward to escape. But if they could send another such tribe traveling, arouse and aim south a hopper exodus, the story would spread until the fringe would reach the animals who lived in peace within touch of Homeport.

The sun was gone, the dark gathered fast. Dalgard could not even see the clustered buildings of the city now. And since he lacked Sssuri's range and staying power, he had no idea whether their efforts had met with even a shadow of success. He shivered in the bite of the wind and dared to lay his hand on Sssuri's shoulder, feeling anew the electric shock of warmth and bursting life which was always there.

Having so broken the other's absorption he asked a question: "Would it not be well, brother of the knife, if with the rising sun you returned to the sea and struck out to join your tribesmen, leaving me here to watch until you return?"

Sssuri's answer came with a speed which suggested that he, too, had been considering that problem. "We shall see what happens with the sun's rising. It is true that in the sea I can travel with greater speed, that there are hunting parties of my people striking into these waters. But they will not come to this city without good reason. It is an accursed place."

With the early morning the city drew them once more. Dalgard's curiosity pulled him to that storehouse. He could not stifle the hope that with luck he might find something there which would solve their problem for them. If there could only be a way to avoid open conflict with Those Others, some solution whereby the aliens need never know of the existence of the Colony. For so many generations, even centuries, the aliens had been confined, or had confined themselves, safely overseas on the western continent. Perhaps if now they were

faced by some new catastrophe, they would never attempt to come east again. He had visions of discovering and activating some trap set to protect their treasures which could be turned against them. But he realized that he lacked the technical knowledge which would have aided him in the search for such a weapon.

The remnants of Terran science and mechanics, which the outlaws had brought with them from their native world, had been handed on; the experiments they had managed since with crude equipment had been carefully recorded, and he was acquainted with the outlines of most of them. But the few destructive arms they had imported were long since worn out or lacked charges, and they had not been able to duplicate them. Just as they had torn asunder the ship in which they had crossed space, to use its parts for the building of Homeport, so had they hoarded all else they had brought. But they were limited by lack of materials on Astra, and their fear of the knowledge of the aliens had kept them from experimenting with things found in the ruins.

There might be hundreds of objects on the shelves of that storage place, which, properly used, would reduce not only just the room and its contents to glowing slag, but take half the city with it. But he had no idea which, or which combination, would do it.

And here Sssuri could be no help. The mermen had made great strides forward in biological and mental sciences, but mechanics was a closed section of learning because of their enforced habitat under the sea, and of machines they knew less than the colonists.

“I have been thinking—” Sssuri broke into his companion’s chain of reasoning, “of what we may do. And perhaps there is a way to reach the sea more swiftly than by returning overland.”

“Downriver? But you said that way may have its watching devices.”

“Which would be centered on objects coming upstream, not down. But in this city there should be yet another way—”

He did not enlarge upon that, but since he apparently knew what he was doing, Dalgard let him play guide once more. They recrossed the sluggish river, the scout looking into its murky depths with little relish for it as a means of transportation. Though it had an oily, flowing current, there was a suggestion of stagnant water with unpleasant surprises waiting beneath its turgid surface.

For the second time they entered the arena. Avoiding the bodies, Sssuri made a circuit of the sanded floor. He did not turn in at the archway which led to the storage place, but paused before another as if there lay what he had been searching for.

Dalgard’s less sensitive nostrils picked up a new scent, the not-to-be-missed fetor of damp underground ways where water stood. The merman edged around a barred gate as Dalgard sniffed again. The smell of damp was crossed by other and even less appetizing odors, but he did not catch the stench of the snake-devils. And, relying on Sssuri’s judgment, he followed the merman into the dark.

Once again patches of violet light glimmered over their heads as the passage narrowed and sloped downward. Dalgard tried to remember the general geography of the section which was above them now. He had assumed that this way with its dank chill must give on the river. But when they had pattered on for a long distance, he knew that either they had passed beneath the stream or that he was totally lost as to direction.

As their eyes adjusted to the gloom of the passage the violet light grew stronger. So Dalgard saw clearly when Sssuri whirled and faced back along the way they had come, his body in a half crouch, his knife ready in his hand.

Dalgard, his bow useless in the damp, drew his own sword-knife. But, though his mind probed and he listened, he could sense or hear nothing on their trail.

## 8. Airlift

They were air-borne once more, but Raf was not pleased. In the seat beside him, which Captain Hobart should be occupying, there now squirmed an alien warrior who apparently was uncomfortable in the chair-like depression so different from the low stools he was accustomed to. Soriki was still in the second passenger place, but he, too, shared that with another of the men from the city who rested across bony knees a strange weapon rather like a Terran rifle.

No, the spacemen were not prisoners. According to the official statement they were allies. But, Raf wondered, as against his will he followed the globe in a northeastern course, how long would that fiction last if they refused to fall in with any suggestions the aliens might make? He did not doubt that there was on board the globe some surprise which could shoot the flitter out of the air, if, for example, he adjusted the controls before him and bore west toward the mountains and the safety of the space ship. Either of the aliens he now transported could bring him under control by using those weapons, which might do anything from boiling a man in some unknown ray to smothering him in gas. He had not seen the arms in action, and he did not want to.

Yet Hobart and Lablet did not, as far as he could tell, share his suspicions. Lablet was eager to see the mysterious storehouse, and the captain was either moved by the same desire or else had long since deduced the folly of trying to make a break for it. Thus they were now heading seaward with the captain and Lablet sharing quarters with the leaders of the expedition on board the globe, and Raf and the com-tech, with companions—or guards—bringing up the rear. The aliens had even insisted on stripping the flitter of much of its Terran equipment before they left the city, pointing out that the cleared storage space would be filled with salvage when they made the return voyage.

The globe had been trailing along the coastline, and now it angled out to glide over a long finger of cape, rocky and waterworn, which pointed at almost a right angle into the sea. This dwindled into a reef of rock, like the nail on a finger. The sea ahead was no unbroken expanse. Instead there was a series of islands, some merely tops of reefs over which the waves broke, others more substantial, rising well above the threatening water, and one or two showing the green of vegetation.

The chain of islets extended so far out that when the flitter passed over the last one the main continent was out of sight. Now only water stretched beneath them. The globe skidded on as if its pilot had given it an extra burst of power, and Raf accelerated in turn, having no desire to lose his guide. But they were not to make the ocean-wide trip in one jump.

At midday he saw again a break in the smooth carpet of waves, another island, or perhaps the southern tip of a northern continent for the land swept in that direction as far as he could see. The globe spiraled down to make a neat landing on a flat plateau, and Raf prepared to join it. When the undercarriage of the flitter jarred lightly on the rock, he saw signs that this was a man-or alien-fashioned place which must have had much use in the dim past when his new companions ruled all their native world.

The rock had been smoothed off to a flat surface, and at its perimeter were several small domed buildings. Yet, as there had been in the countryside and in the city, except at its very heart, there was an aura of desertion at the site.

Both his alien passengers jumped out of the flitter, as if only too pleased at their release from the Terran flyer. For the first time Raf was shaken out of his own preoccupation with his dislike for the aliens to wonder if they could be moved by a similar distaste for Terrans. Labet might be interested in that as a scientific problem—the pilot only knew how he felt and that was not comfortable.

Soriki got out and walked across the rock, stretching. But for a long moment Raf remained where he was, behind the controls of the flyer. He was as cramped and tired of travel as the com-tech, perhaps even more so since the responsibility of the flight had been his. And had they landed in open country he would have liked to have thrown himself down on the ground, taking off his helmet and unhooking his tunic collar to let the fresh wind blow through his hair and across his skin. Perhaps that would take away the arid dust of centuries, which, to his mind, had grimed him since their hours in the city. But here was no open country, only a landing space which reminded him too much of the roof of the building in the metropolis.

A half-dozen of the breastplated warriors filed out of the globe and went to the nearest dome, returning with heavy boxes. Fuel—supplies—Raf shrugged off the problem. The pilot was secretly relieved when Captain Hobart dropped out of the hatch in the globe and made his way over to the flitter.

“Everything running smoothly?” he asked with a glance at the two aliens who were Raf’s passengers.

“Yes, sir. Any idea how much farther—?” Raf questioned.

Hobart shrugged. “Until we work out basic language difficulties,” he muttered, “who knows anything? There is at least one more of these way stations. They don’t run on atomics, need some kind of fuel, and they have to have new supplies every so often. Their head man can’t understand why it isn’t necessary for us to do the same.”

“Has he suggested that his techneers want a look at our motors, sir?”

Hobart unbent a little. It was as if in that question he had read something which pleased him. “So far we’ve managed not to understand that. And if anyone tries it on his own, refer him to me—understand?”

“Yes, sir!” Some of the relief in Raf’s tone came through, and he saw that the captain was watching him narrowly.

“You don’t like these people, Kurbi?”

The pilot replied with the truth. “I don’t feel easy with them, sir. Not that they’ve shown any unfriendliness. Maybe it’s because they’re alien—”

He had said the wrong thing and knew it immediately.

“That sounds like prejudice, Kurbi!” Hobart’s voice carried the snap of a reprimand.

“Yes, sir,” Raf said woodenly. That had done it as far as the captain was concerned. The fierce racial and economical prejudices which had been the keystones of the structure of Pax had left their shadow on Terra’s thinking. Nowadays a man would better be condemned for murder than for prejudice against another—it was the unforgivable crime. And in that unconsidered answer Raf had rendered unreliable in the eyes of authority any future report on the aliens which he might be forced to make.

Silently cursing his lack of judgment, Raf made a careful check of the flyer, which might not be necessary but going through the motions of doing his duty gave him some relief. Once the

idea struck him of claiming some trouble that would take them back to the spacer for repairs. But Hobart was too good a mechanic himself not to see through that.

They covered the second stage of their flight by evening, this time putting down on an island where, by some ancient and titanic feat of labor, the top had been sheared off a central mountain to make a base. A ring of reefs cut off the land from the action of the waves. At once a party of aliens left the main company and made their way down the mountain to prowl along the shore. They made a discovery of sorts, for Raf saw them ring in some object they had pulled up on the sand. What it was and what meaning it had for them they did not try to explain to the Terrans.

The party spent the night there, the four spacemen wrapped in their sleeping rolls by the flitter, the aliens in their globe ship. The Terrans did not miss the fact that the others had unobtrusively posted guards at the only two places where the mountain could be climbed. And each of those guards cradled in the crook of his arm one of the rifle weapons.

They were aroused shortly after dawn. As far as Raf could see the island was barren of life, or else any creature native to it kept prudently out of the way while the flyers were there. They took off, the globe rising like a balloon into the morning sky, the flitter waiting until it was air-borne before scaling after it.

The mountainous island where they had based was the sea sentinel of an archipelago, which they saw spread out below them as if someone had flung a handful of pebbles into a shallow pool. Most of the islands were merely rocky crags. But there were two which showed the green of small open fields, and Raf thought he caught a glimpse of a dome house on the last.

They were now over a region thick with islands, the first collection giving way to a second and then a third. Raf, expecting no sudden move on the part of the globe he trailed, was startled when the alien ship made a downward swoop. At the same time the warrior seated beside him tugged at the sleeve of his tunic and jabbed a finger toward the ground, clearly an order to follow. Raf cut speed and cautiously lost altitude, determined that he was not going to be rushed into any move for which he did not know the reason.

The globe was hovering over a small island set a little apart from the others. A moment later Soriki's excited voice drew Raf's attention from his controls to what was going on below.

"There's, people down there! Look at them run!"

They were too far away to be sure of the nature of the brown-gray things so close to the color of the sea-washed rock that they could only be detected when they moved. But it was evident that they were alive, and as Raf brought the flitter closer, he was also certain that they ran on their two hind feet instead of on an animal's four pads.

From the under part of the globe ship licked a tongue of fire. With the force of a whiplash it coursed across the rock and in its passing embrace, the creatures below writhed and withered to charred heaps. They had no chance under that methodical blasting. The alien beside Raf signaled again for a drop. He patted the weapon that he held and motioned for Raf to release the covering of the windshield. But the pilot shook his head firmly.

This might be war. The aliens could have a very good reason for their deadly attack on the creatures surprised below. But he wanted no part of it, nor did he want to get any closer to the scene of slaughter. And he made an emphatic gesture that the windshield could not be opened while the flitter was air-borne.

But as he did so they glided down, and he caught a single good look at what was going on on the rock—a look which remained to haunt his dreams for long years to come. For now he saw

clearly the creatures who ran fruitlessly for safety. Some reached the edge of the cliff and leaped to what was an easier death in the sea. But too many others could not make it and died in flaming agony. And they were not all of one size!

Children! There was no mistaking the infant in its mother's arms, the two small ones who fled hand in hand until one stumbled and the burning lash caught them both as the other strove to pull the fallen to its feet. Raf gagged. He triggered the controls and soared up and away, fighting the heaving in his middle, shaking off with one savage jerk the insistent pawing hand of the alien who wanted to join in the fun.

"Did you see that?" he demanded of Soriki.

For once the com-tech sounded subdued. "Yes," he replied shortly.

"Those were children," Raf hammered home the point.

"Young ones anyway," the com-tech conceded. "Maybe they aren't people. They had fur all over them—"

Raf grinned mirthlessly. Should he now accuse Soriki of prejudice? What did it matter if a thinking creature was clothed in a space suit, silken bandages, or natural fur—it was still a thinking creature. And he was sure that those had been intelligent creatures he had just seen blasted without a chance to fight back. If these were the enemy the aliens feared, he could understand the vicious cruelty of the attack which had killed the man he had been shown back in the city. Fire against primitive spears was not equal, and when the spears got their chance they must make up for much to balance the scales of justice.

He did not even wonder why his emotions were so wholeheartedly enlisted upon the side of the furred people. Nor did he try to analyze his feelings. He was only sure that more than ever he wanted to be free of the aliens and out of this whole venture.

The warrior sharing his seat was sulking now, twisting about to look back at the island as Raf circled in ever-widening glides to get away from the site and yet not lose track of the globe when it would have finished its dirty business and take once more to the air. But the alien ship was in no hurry to leave.

"They are making sure," Soriki reported. "Giving the whole island a fire bath. I wonder what that stuff is—"

"I'd just as soon not know," Raf returned from between set teeth. "If that is one of their pieces of precious knowledge, we're as well off without it—" he stopped short. Perhaps he had said too much. But Terra had been racked by the torrid horror of atomic war, until all his kind had been so revolted that it was bred into them not to meddle again with such weapons. And war by fire aroused in them that old horror. Surely Soriki must feel it too, and when the com-tech did not comment, Raf was sure of that. He hoped that the slaughter had made some impression on the captain and on Lablet into the bargain.

But when, as if sated with killing, the globe rose again from its position over the island, moving almost sluggishly into the fresh sky, he had to follow it on. More islands were below, and he feared that each one might show some sign of life and tempt the killers to a second hunting.

Luckily that did not happen. The chains of islands became a cape as they had on the coast of the western continent. And now the globe swung to the south, trailing the shore line. Forests made green splotches with bluish overtones running from the sea cliffs back to carpet the land. So far no signs of civilization were to be seen. This land was as untouched as that where the spacer had landed.

Then they saw the bay, stretching out wide arms to engulf the sea. It could have harbored a whole fleet. And marching down to its waters were broad levels of buildings, a giant's staircase leading from sea to cliff tops.

"They had it here—!"

Raf saw what Soriki meant by that outburst. Destruction had struck. He had seen the atomic ruins of his own world, those which were free enough from radiation to explore. But he had never seen anything like these chilling scars. In long strips the very stone which provided foundation for the tiered city had been churned and boiled, had run in rivulets of lava down to the sea, enclosing narrow tongues of still untouched structures. The fire whip the globe had used, magnified to some infinitely greater extent—? It could be.

The alien at his side pressed tightly against the windshield gazing down at the ruins. And now he mouthed a gabble of words which was echoed by his fellow sitting with Soriki. Their excitement must mean that this was their goal. Raf slacked speed, waiting for the globe to point a way to a landing.

But to his surprise the alien ship shot forward inland. The long day was almost over as they came to a second city with a river knotting a ribbon through its middle. Here were no traces of the fury which had laded the seaport with havoc. This collection of buildings seemed whole and perfect.

There was, oddly enough, no landing strip within the city. The globe coasted over the rough oval and came down in open fields to the west. It was a maneuver which Raf copied, though he first dropped a flare as a precaution and brought the flier down in its red glare, with the warrior expressing shrill disapproval.

"I don't think they like fireworks," Soriki remarked.

Raf snorted. "So they don't like fireworks! Well, I don't like crack-ups, and I'm the pilot!" But he didn't believe that the com-tech was really protesting. Soriki had been very quiet since they had witnessed the attack on the island.

"Grim-looking place," was his second comment as they touched ground.

Since Raf privately had held that opinion of all the alien settlements he had so far seen, he agreed. Their two alien passengers were out of the flutter as soon as he opened the bubble shield. And as they stood by the Terran flyer, they held their weapons ready, facing out into the dusk as if they half expected trouble. After the earlier episode that day, Raf did not wonder at their preparedness. Terror begets terror, and ruthlessness arouses retaliation in kind.

"Kurbi! Soriki!" Hobart's voice sounded out of the shadows. "Stay where you are for the present."

Soriki settled deeper in his seat. "He doesn't have to tell me to brake jets," he muttered. "I like it here—"

Raf did not need to echo that. He had a strong surmise that had he been tempted to roam away from the flutter the move would not have been encouraged by the alien guardsmen. If this was their treasure city, they would not welcome any independent investigation by strangers.

When the captain joined them, he was accompanied by the officer who had first shown Raf the globe. And the warrior was either disturbed or angry, for he was talking in a steady stream and his hands were whirling in explanatory gestures.



“They didn’t like that flare,” Hobart remarked. But there was no reproof in his words. As a spacer pilot he knew that Raf had only done what duty demanded. “We’re to remain here—for the night.”

“Where’s Lablet?” Soriki wanted to know.

“He’s staying with Yussoz, the alien commander. He thinks he has the language problem about solved.”

“Good enough.” Soriki pulled out his bed roll. “We’re out of touch with the ship—”

There was a second of silence, unduly prolonged it seemed to Raf. Then Hobart spoke:

“We couldn’t expect to keep in call forever. The best com has its range. When did you lose contact?”

“Just before these wrapped-up heroes played with fire back there. I gave the boys all I knew up until then. They know we were headed west, and they had us beamed as long as they could.”

So it wasn’t too bad, thought Raf. But he didn’t like it, even with that mitigating factor. To all purposes the four Terrans were now surrounded by some twenty times their number, in an unknown country, out of all communication with the rest of their kind. It could add up to disaster.

## 9. Sea Gate

“What is it?” Dalgard asked his question as Sssuri, his attention still on their back trail, stole along cautiously on a retracing of their path.

But that retreat ended abruptly with the merman plastered against the wall, his whole shadowy form a tense warning which stopped Dalgard short. In that moment the answer flashed from mind to mind.

“There are those which follow—”

“Snake-devils? Those Others?” The colony scout supplied the only two explanations he had, sending his own thought out questing. But as usual he could not hope to equal the more sensitive merman whose race had always used that form of communication.

“Those who have long haunted the darkness,” was the only reply he could get.

But Sssuri’s actions were far more indicative of danger. For the merman turned and caught at Dalgard, pulling the larger colonist along a step or two with the urgency of his grip.

“We cannot return this way—and we must travel fast!”

For Sssuri who would face and had faced up to a snake-devil with a spear his sole weapon, this timidity was new. Dalgard was wise enough to accept his verdict of the wisdom of flight. Together they ran along the underground corridor, soon putting a mile between them and the point where the merman had first taken alarm.

“From what do we flee?” As the merman began to slacken pace, Dalgard sent that query.

“There are those who live in this darkness. By one, or by two, we could speedily remove them from life. But they hunt in packs and they are as greedy for the kill as are the snake-devils scenting meat. Also they are intelligent. Once, long before the days of burning, they served Those Others as hunters of game. And Those Others tried to make them ever more intelligent and crafty so they might be sent to hunt without a huntsman. At last they grew too knowing for their masters. Then Those Others, realizing their menace, tried to kill them all with traps and tricks. But only the most stupid and the slowest were so disposed of. The others withdrew into underground ways such as this, venturing forth only in the dark of night.”

“But if they are intelligent,” countered the scout, “why can they not be reached by the mind touch?”

“Through the years they have developed their own ways of thought. And these are not the simple creatures of the sun, or such as the runners. Once they were taught to answer only to Those Others. Now they answer only to each other. But”—he spread out his hands in one of his quick, nervous gestures—“to those who are cornered by one of their packs, they are sudden death!”

Since they could not, by Sssuri’s reckoning, turn back, there was only one course before them, to follow the passage they had chanced upon. The merman was certain that it underran the river and that eventually they would reach the sea—unless some side turn before that point would make them free in the countryside once more.

Dalgard doubted if it had ever been a well-used way. And the presence of earth falls here and there, over which they stumbled and clawed their way, led him to consider the wisdom of

keeping on to what might be a dead end. But his trust in Sssuri's judgment was great, and as the merman plowed forward with every appearance of confidence, he continued to trot along without complaint.

They snatched moments of rest, taking turns at guard. But the walls about them were so unchanging that it was hard to measure time or distance. Dalgard chewed at his emergency rations, a block of dried meat and fruit pounded together to an almost rocklike consistency, and tried to make the crumbs he sucked loose satisfy his growing hunger.

The passageway was growing damper; water trickled down the walls and gathered in fetid pools on the floor. Dalgard's dislike of the place grew. His shoulders hunched involuntarily as he strode along, for his imagination pictured the rock above them giving away to dump tons of the oily river water down to engulf them. But though Sssuri avoided splashing through the pools wherever he might, he did not appear to find anything upsetting about the moisture.

At last the human could stand it no longer. "How much farther to the sea?" he asked without any hope of a real answer.

As he had expected him to do, Sssuri shrugged. "We should be close. But having never trod this way before, how can I tell you?"

Once more they rested, choosing a stretch which was reasonably dry, munching their dried food and drinking sparingly from the stoppered duocorn horns which swung from their belts. A man would have to be dying of thirst, Dalgard thought, before he would palm up any of the stagnant water from the passage pools.

He drifted off into a troubled sleep in which he fled beneath a sky which was a giant lid in the hand of an unseen enemy, a lid which was slowly lowered to crush him flat. He awoke with a start to find Sssuri's cool, scaled fingers stroking his shoulder.

"Dream demons walk these roads." The words drifted into his half-awake mind.

"They do indeed," he roused to answer.

"It is always so where Those Others have been. They leave behind them the thoughts which breed such dreams to trouble the sleep of those who are not of their kind. Let us go. I would like to be out of this place under the clean sky, where no ancient wickedness hangs to poison the air and thought."

Either the merman had miscalculated the direction of their route or the river mouth was much farther from the inland city than they had believed, for, though they pushed on for what seemed like weary hours, they came to no upward slope, no exit to the world they knew.

Instead Dalgard began to realize that just the opposite was true. At last he could stand it no longer and broke out with what he feared, hoping that Sssuri would deny that fear.

"We are going downhill!"

To his disappointment the merman agreed. "It has been so for the last thousand of our paces. It is my belief that this leads not to the sun but out under the sea."

Dalgard missed a step. To Sssuri the sea was home and perhaps the thought of being under its floor was not disturbing. The land-born human was not so prepared. If he had experienced discomfort under the river, what would it be like under the ocean? His terrifying dream of a lid being pressed down upon him flashed back into his mind. But his companion was continuing:

"There will be doors, perhaps into the sea itself."

“For you,” Dalgard pointed out, “but I am no dweller in the depths.”

“Neither were Those Others, yet they used these ways. And I tell you”—in his earnestness the merman laid his hand once more on Dalgard’s arm—”to turn back now is out of the question. The death which haunts the darkness is still sniffing out our trail.”

Dalgard glanced involuntarily over his shoulder. By the faint and limited light of the purple disks he could see little or nothing. An army might creep there undetected.

“But—” His protest was in answer to the merman’s seeming unconcern.

Sssuri at the first intimation that the hunters were behind them had shown wariness. Now he did not appear to care.

“They had fed,” he replied. “Scouts follow because we are something new and thus suspect. When hunger rises once more in them, and their scouts report that we are meat, then is the time to draw knives and prepare for battle. But before that hour we may have won free. Let us search for the gate we now need.”

However confident the merman might be, Dalgard could not match that confidence. In the open air he would have faced a snake-devil four times his size without any more emotion than a hunter’s instinctive caution. But here in the dark, unable to rid himself of the belief that thousands of tons of sea water hung over his head, he found himself starting at any sound, his knife bare and ready in his sweating hand.

He noted that Sssuri had stepped up the pace, passing into his sure-footed glide which made Dalgard exert himself to keep up. Before them the corridor stretched without a break. The merman’s promised exit, if it existed, was still out of sight.

It was difficult to gauge time in this dark hall, but Dalgard thought that they were at least an hour farther on their way when Sssuri paused abruptly once more, his head cocked in a listening attitude, as if he caught some whisper of sound too rarefied for his human companion.

“Now—” the thought hissed as if he spat the words, “they hunger—and they hunt!”

He bounded forward with a spurt, which Dalgard copied, and they ran lightly, the dust undisturbed in years puffing up beneath the merman’s bare, scaled feet and Dalgard’s hide boots. Still the unbroken walls, the feeble patches of violet in the ceiling. But no exit. And what good would any exit do him, Dalgard thought, if it opened under the sea?

“There are islands off the coast—many islands—” Sssuri caught him up. “It is in my mind that we shall find our door on one of those. But—run now, knife brother, for those at our heels awake and thirst for flesh and blood. They have decided that we are not to be feared but may be run down for their pleasure.”

Dalgard weighed his knife in his hand. “They shall find us with fangs,” he promised grimly.

“It will be better if they do not find us at all,” returned Sssuri.

A burning arch of pain encased Dalgard’s lower ribs, and his breath came in gusts of hastily sucked air as their flight kept on, down the endless corridor. Sssuri was also showing signs of the grueling pace, his round head bent forward, his furred legs pumping as if only his iron will kept them moving. And the determination which kept him going was communicated to the scout as a graver warning than any thought message of fear.

They were passing under one of the infrequent violet lights when Dalgard got something else—a mental thrust so quick and sharp it was as if a sword had cut through the daze of fatigue to reach his brain. Yet that had not come from Sssuri, for it was totally

alien, wavering on a band so near the extreme edge of his consciousness that it pricked, receded, and pricked again as a needle might.

This was no message of fear or warning, but of implacable stubbornness and ravening hunger. And in that instant Dalgard knew that it came from what was sniffing out their trail, and he no longer wondered that the hunters were immune to other mental contact. One could not reason with—that!

He spurted forward, matching the merman's acceleration of speed. But to Dalgard's horror he saw that his companion now ran with one hand brushing along the wall, as if he needed that support.

"Sssuri!"

His thought met a wall of concentration through which he could not break. In a way he was reassured—for a moment, until another of those stabs from their pursuers struck him. He longed to look back, to see what hunted them. But he dared not break stride to do that.

"Ahhhh!" The welcoming cry from Sssuri brought his attention back to his companion as the merman broke into a wild run.

Dalgard summoned up his last rags of energy and coursed after him. Sssuri had halted before a dark lump which protruded from the side of the corridor.

"A sea lock!" Sssuri's claws were clicking over the surface of the hatch, seeking the secret of its latch.

Panting, Dalgard leaned against the opposite wall. Just as a protest formed in his mind he heard something else, the pad of feet, many feet, echoing down the corridor. And somehow he was able now to look.

Round spots of light, dull, greenish, close to the ground, as if someone had flung a handful of phosphorescence into the dark. But this was no phosphorescence! Eyes! Eyes—he tried to count and knew it was impossible to so reckon the number of the pack that ran mute but ready. Nor could he distinguish more than a very shadowy glimpse of forms which glided close to the ground with an unpleasant sinuosity.

"Ahhhhh!" Again Sssuri's paeon of triumph.

There was the grate of unwilling metal forced to move, a puff of air redolent with the sea striking their bodies in chill threat, the brightness of violet light stepped up to a point far beyond the lamps in the corridor.

With it came no rush of drowning water as Dalgard had half expected, and when the merman clambered through the hatch he prepared to follow, well aware that the eyes, and the pattering feet which bore them, were now almost within range.

There was a snarl from the passage, and a black thing sprang at the scout. Without clear sight of what he was fighting, he struck down with his knife and felt it slit flesh. The snarl was a scream of rage as the creature twisted in midair for a second try at him. In that instant Sssuri, leaning halfway out of the hatch, struck in his turn, thrusting his bone knife into shadows which now boiled with life.

Dalgard leaped for the lock door, kicking out swiftly and feeling the toe of his boot contact with a crunch against one of those darting shades, sending it back end over end into the press where its fellows turned snapping upon it. Then Sssuri grabbed at him, bringing him in, and together they slammed the hatch, feeling it shake with the shock of thudding bodies as the pack outside went mad in their frustration.

While the merman fastened the locking bar, bringing out of the long-motionless metal another protesting screech, Dalgard had a chance to look about him. They were in a room some eight or nine feet long, the violet light showing up well tangles of equipment hanging from pegs on the walls, a pile of small cylinders on the floor. At the far end of the chamber was another hatch door, locked with the same type of bar as Sssuri had just lowered to seal the inner one. The merman nodded to it.

“The sea—”

Dalgard slid his knife back into its sheath. So the sea lay beyond. He did not welcome the thought of passing through that door. Like all of his race he could swim—perhaps his feats in the water would have astonished the men of the planet from which his tribe had emigrated. But unlike the mermen, he was not sea-born, nor equipped by nature with a secondary breathing apparatus to make him as free in the world of water as he was on land. Sssuri might crawl through that hatch without fear. For Dalgard it was as big a test as to turn and face what now raged in the corridor on the inner side.

“There is no hope that they will go now,” Sssuri answered his vague question. “They are stubborn. And hours—or even days—will mean nothing. Also they can leave a guard there and rove at will, to return upon signal. That is their way.”

This left only the sea door. Sssuri padded across the chamber and reached up to free one of the strange objects dangling from the wall pegs. Like all things made of the marvelous substance used by Those Others for any article which might be exposed to the elements, it seemed as perfect as on the day it had first been hung there, though that date might be a hundred or more Astran years earlier. The merman uncoiled a length of thin, flexible piping which joined a two-foot canister with a flat piece of metallic fabric.

“Those Others could not breathe under the water, as you cannot,” he explained as he worked deftly and swiftly. “Within my own memory we have trapped their scouts wearing aids such as these so that they might spy upon our safe places. But their last foray was some years ago and at that time we taught them such a lesson that they have not dared to return. Since they are not unlike you in body and since you breathe the same air aboveground, there is no reason why this should not take you out of here.”

Dalgard accepted the apparatus. A couple of elastic metal bands fastened the canister to the chest of the wearer. The fabric molded into a perfect, tight face mask as it touched the skin.

Sssuri went to the pile of cylinders. Choosing one he tinkered with its pointed cone, to be rewarded with a thin hiss.

“Ahhhh—” again his recognition of the rightness of things. “These still contain air.” He tested two more and then brought all three back to where Dalgard stood, the canister strapped into place, the mask ready in his hand. With infinite care the merman fitted two of the cylinders into the canister and then was forced to set the other aside.

“We could not change them while under water anyway,” he explained. “So it will do little good to take extra supplies with us.”

Trying not to speculate on the amount of air he could carry in the cylinders, Dalgard fastened on the mask, adjusted the air tube, and sucked. Air flowed—he could breathe! Only—for how long?

Sssuri, seeing that his companion was fully provided for, worked at the bar locking the sea hatch. But in the end it took their combined strength to spring that barrier and win through to a small cubby which was the actual sea lock.

Dalgard knew one moment of resistance as the merman closed the hatch behind them. For an instant it seemed that the dubious safety of the dressing chamber and a faint hope of the hunters' giving up their vigil was better than what might lie before them now. But Sssuri pushed shut the hatch, and Dalgard stood quietly, without offering any visible protest.

He tried to draw even breaths—slowly—as the merman activated the lock. When the water curled in from hidden openings, rising from ankle to calf and then to knee, its chill striking through flesh to bone, he kept to the same stolid waiting, though this seemed almost worse than a sudden gush of water sweeping them out in its embrace.

The liquid swirled about Dalgard's waist now, tugging at his belt, his arrow quiver, tapping on the bottom of the canister which held his precious air supply. His bow, shielded from the wet by its casing, was swallowed up inch by inch.

As the water lapped at his chin, the outer door opened with a slow inward push which suggested that the machinery controlling it had grown sluggish with the years. Sssuri, perfectly at home, darted out as soon as the opening was large enough to afford him an exit. And his thought came back to reassure the more clumsy landsman.

“We are in the shallows—land rises ahead. The roots of an island. There is nothing to fear—”  
The word ended abruptly in what was like a mental gasp of either astonishment or fear.

Knowing all the menaces which might lie in wait, even in the shallows of the sea, Dalgard drew his knife once more as he plowed through water—ready to rescue or at least to offer what aid he could.

## 10. The Dead Guardians

The spacemen spent a cramped and almost sleepless night. Although in his training on Terra, on his trial trips to Mars and the harsh Lunar valleys, Raf had known weird surroundings and climates, inimical to his kind, he had always been able to rest almost by the exercise of his will. But now, curled in his roll, he was alert to every sound out of the moonless night, finding himself listening—for what he did not know.

Though there were sounds in plenty. The whistling call of some night bird, the distant lap, lap of water which he associated with the river curving through the long-deserted city, the rustle of grass as either the wind or some passing animal disturbed it.

“Not the best place in the world for a nap,” Soriki observed out of the dark as Raf wriggled, trying to find a more comfortable position. “I’ll be glad to see these bandaged boys on the ground waving good-bye as we head away from them—fast—”

“Those weren’t animals they killed—back on that island.” Raf brought out what was at the heart of his trouble.

“They wore fur instead of clothing.” Soriki’s reply was delivered in a colorless, even voice. “We have apes on Terra, but they are not men.”

Raf stared up at the sky in which stars were sprinkled like carelessly flung dust motes. “What is a ‘man’?” he returned, repeating the classical question which was a debating point in all the space training centers.

For so long his kind had wondered that. Was a “man” a biped with certain easily recognized physical characteristics? Well, by that ruling the furry things which had fled fruitlessly from the flames of the globe might well qualify. Or was “man” a certain level of intelligence, no matter what form housed that intelligence? They were supposed to accept the latter definition. Though, in spite of the horror of prejudice, Raf could not help but believe that too many Terrans secretly thought of “man” only as a creature in their own general image. By that prejudiced rule it was correct to accept the aliens as “men” with whom they could ally themselves, to condemn the furry people because they were not smooth-skinned, did not wear clothing, nor ride in mechanical transportation.

Yet somewhere within Raf at that moment was the nagging feeling that this was all utterly wrong, that the Terrans had not made the right choice. And that now “men” were *not* standing together. But he had no intention of spilling that out to Soriki.

“Man is intelligence.” The com-tech was answering the question Raf had almost forgotten that he had asked the moment before. Yes, the proper conventional reply. Soriki was not going to be caught out with any claim of prejudice.

Odd—when Pax had ruled, there were thought police and the cardinal sin was to be a liberal, to experiment, to seek knowledge. Now the wheel had turned—to be conservative was suspect. To suggest that some old ways were better was to exhibit the evil signs of prejudice. Raf grinned wryly. Sure, he had wanted to reach the stars, had fought doggedly to come to the very spot where he now was. So why was he tormented now with all these second thoughts? Why did he feel every day less akin to the men with whom he had shared the voyage? He had had wit enough to keep his semirebellion under cover, but since he had taken the flutter into the morning sky above the landing place of the spacer, that task of self-discipline was becoming more and more difficult.



“Did you notice,” the com-tech said, going off on a new track, “that these painted boys were not too quick about blasting along to their strongbox? I’d say that they thought some bright rocket jockey might have rigged a surprise for them somewhere in there—”

Now that Soriki mentioned it, Raf remembered that the alien party who had gone into the city had huddled together, and that several of the black-and-white warriors had fanned out ahead as scouts might in enemy territory.

“They didn’t go any farther than that building to the west either.”

That Raf had not noticed, but he was willing to accept Soriki’s observation. The com-tech had a ready eye for details. He’d better pay closer attention himself. This was no time to explore the why and wherefore of his present position. So, if they went no farther than that building, it would argue that the aliens themselves didn’t care to go about here after nightfall. For he was certain that the isolated structure Soriki had pointed out was not the treasure house they had come to loot.

The night wore on and sometime during it Raf fell asleep. But the two or three hours of restless, dream-filled unconsciousness was not what he needed, and he blinked in the dawn with eyes which felt as if they were filled with hot sand. In the first gray light a covey of winged things, which might or might not have been birds, arose from some roosting place within the city, wheeled three times over the building, and then vanished out over the countryside.

Raf pulled himself out of his roll, made a sketchy toilet with the preparations in a belt kit, and looked about with little favor for either the scene or his part in it. The globe, sealed as if ready for a take-off, was some distance away, but installed about halfway between it and the flitter were two of the alien warriors. Perhaps they had changed watches during the night. If they had not, they could go without sleep to an amazing degree, for as Raf walked in a circle about the flyer to limber up, they watched him closely, nor did their grips on their odd weapons loosen. And he had a very clear idea that if he stepped over some invisible boundary he would be in for trouble.

When he came back to the flitter, Soriki was awake and stretching.

“Another day,” the com-tech drawled. “And I could do with something besides field rations.” He made a face at the small tin of concentrates he had dug out of the supply compartment.

“We’d do well to be headed west,” Raf ventured.

“Now you can come in with that on the com again!” Soriki answered with unwonted emphasis. “The sooner I see the old girl standing on her pins in the middle distance, the better I’ll feel. You know”—he looked up from his preoccupation with the ration package and gazed out over the city—“this place gives me the shivers. That other town was bad enough. But at least there were people living there. Here’s nothing at all—at least nothing I want to see.”

“What about all the wonders they’ve promised to show us?” countered Raf.

Soriki grinned. “And how much do we understand of their mouth-and-hand talk? Maybe they were promising us wonders, maybe they were offering to take us to where we could have our throats cut more conveniently—for them! I tell you, if I go for a walk with any of these painted faces, I’m going to have at least three of my fingers resting on the grip of my stun gun. And I’d advise you to do the same—if I didn’t know that you were already watching these blast-happy harpies out of the corner of your eye. Ha—company. Oh, it’s the captain—”

The hatch of the globe had opened, and a small party was descending the ladder, conspicuous among them the form and uniform of Captain Hobart. The aliens remained in a cluster at the foot of the ladder while the Terran commander crossed to the flitter.

“You”—he pointed to Raf—“are to come along with us.”

“Why, sir?” “What about me, sir?” The questions from the two at the flitter came together.

“I said that one of you had to remain by the machine. Then they said that you, in particular, must come along, Kurbi.”

“But I’m the pilot—” Raf began and then realized that it was just that fact which had made the aliens attach him to the exploring party. If they believed that the Terran flitter was immobilized when he, and he alone, was not behind its controls, this was just the move they would make. But there they were wrong. Soriki might not be able to repair or service the motor, but in a pinch he could take it up, send it westward, and land it beside the spacer. Each and every man aboard the *RS 10* had that much training.

Now the com-tech was scowling. He had grasped the significance of that arrangement as quickly as Raf. “How long do I wait for you, sir?” he asked in a voice which had lost its usual good-humored drawl.

And at that inquiry Captain Hobart showed signs of irritation. “Your suspicions are not founded on facts,” he stated firmly. “These people have displayed no signs of wanting to harm us. And an attitude of distrust at this point might be fatal for future friendly contact. Labet is sure that they have a highly complex society, probably advanced beyond Terran standards, and that their technical skills will be of vast benefit to us. As it happens we have come at just the right moment in their history, when they are striving to get back on their feet after a disastrous series of wars. It is as if a group of off-world explorers had allied themselves with us after the Burn-Off. We can exchange information which will be of mutual benefit.”

“If any off-world explorers had set down on Terra after the Burn-Off,” observed Soriki softly, “they would have come up against Pax. And just how long would they have lasted?”

Hobart had turned away. If he heard that half-whisper, he did not choose to acknowledge it. But the truth in the com-tech’s words made an impression on Raf, a crew of aliens who had been misguided enough to seek out and try to establish friendly relations with the officials of Pax would have had a short and most unhappy shrift. If all the accounts of that dark dictatorship were true, they would have vanished from Terra, and not in their ships either. What if something like Pax ruled here? They had no way of knowing for sure.

Raf’s eyes met Soriki’s, and the com-tech’s hand dropped to hook fingers in his belt within touching distance of his side arm. The flitter pilot nodded.

“Kurbi!” Hobart’s impatient call sent him on his way. But there was some measure of relief in knowing that Soriki was left behind and that they had this slender link with escape.

He had tramped the streets of that other alien city. There there had been some semblance of habitation; here was abandonment. Earth drifted in dunes to half block the lanes, and here and there climbing vines had broken down masonry and had dislodged blocks of the paved sideways and courtyards.

The party threaded their way from one narrow lane to another, seeming to avoid the wider open stretches of the principal thoroughfares, Raf became aware of an unpleasant odor in the air which he vaguely associated with water, and a few minutes afterward he caught glimpses of the river between the buildings which fronted on it. Here the party turned abruptly at a

right angle, heading westward once more, passing vast, blank-walled structures which might have been warehouses.

One of the aliens just ahead of Raf in the line of march suddenly swung around, his weapon pointing up, and from its nose shot a beam of red-yellow light which brought an answering shrill scream as a large, winged creature came fluttering down. The killer kicked at the crumpled thing as he passed. As far as Raf could see there had been no reason for that wanton slaying.

The head of the party had reached a doorway, sealed shut by what looked like a solid slab of material. He placed both palms flat down on its surface at shoulder height and leaned forward against it, almost as if he were whispering some secret formula. Raf watched the muscles stand up on his slender arms as he exerted strength. And then the door split in two, and his fellows helped him push the separate halves back into the wall.

Lablet, Hobart, and Raf were among the last to enter. It was as if their companions had now forgotten them, for the aliens were pushing on at a pace which took them down an empty corridor at a quickening trot.

The corridor ended in a ramp which did not slope in one straight reach but curled around itself, so that in some places only the presence of a handrail, to which they all clung, kept them from losing balance. Then they gathered in a vaulted room, one of which opened a complete circle of closed doors.

There was some argument among the aliens, a dispute of sorts over which of those doors was to be opened first, and the Terrans drew a little apart, unable to follow the twittering words and lightning-swift gestures.

Raf tried to work out the patterns of color which swirled and looped over each door and around the walls, only to discover that too long an examination of any one band, or an attempt to trace its beginning or end, awoke a sick sensation which approached inner turmoil the longer he looked. At last he had to rest his eyes by studying the gray flooring under his boots.

The aliens finally made up their minds, or else one group was able to outargue the other, for they converged upon a door directly opposite the ramp. Once more they went through the process of unsealing the panels, while the Terrans, drawn by curiosity, were close behind them as they entered the long room beyond. Here were shelves in solid tiers along the walls, crowded with such an array of strange objects that Raf, after one mystified look, thought that it might well take months to sort them all out.

In addition, long tables divided the chamber into aisles. Halfway down one of these narrow passageways the aliens had gathered in a group as silent and intent now as they had been noisy outside. Raf could see nothing to so rivet their attention but a series of scuffed marks in the dust which covered the floor. But an alien, whom he recognized as the officer who had taken him to inspect the globe, moved carefully along that trail, following it to a second door. And as Raf pushed down another aisle, paralleling his course, he was conscious of a sickly sweet, stomach-churning stench. Something was very, very dead and not too far away.

The officer must have come to the same conclusion, for he hurried to open the other door. Before them now was a narrow hall broken by slit windows, near the roof, through which entered sunlight. And one such beam fully illuminated a carcass as large as that of a small elephant, or so it seemed to Raf's startled gaze.

It was difficult to make out the true appearance of the creature, though guessing from the scaled strips of skin it had been reptilian, for the body had been found by scavengers and feasting had been in progress.

The alien officer skirted the corpse gingerly. Raf thought that he would like to investigate the body closely but could not force himself to that highly disagreeable task. There was a chorus of excited exclamation from the doorway as others crowded there.

But the officer, having circled the carcass, turned his attention to the dusty floor again. If there had been any trail there, it was now muddled past their reading, for remnants of the grisly meal had been dragged back and forth. The alien picked his way fastidiously through the noxious debris to the end of the long room. Raf, with the same care, toured the edge of the chamber in his wake.

They were out in a smaller passageway, which was taking them underground, the Terran estimated. Then there was a large space with barred cells about it and a second corridor. The stench of the death chamber either clung to them, or was wafted from another point, and Raf gagged as an especially foul blast caught him full in the face. He kept a sharp look about him for signs of those feasters. The feast had not been finished—it might have been that their entrance into the storeroom had disturbed the scavengers. And things formidable enough to drag down that scaled horror were not foes he would choose to meet in these unlighted ways.

The passage began to slope upward once more, and Raf saw a half-moon of light ahead, brilliant light which could only come from the sun. The alien was outlined there as he went out; then he himself was scuffing through sand close upon another death scene. The dead monster had had its counterparts, and here they were, sprawled out, mangled, and torn. Raf remained by the archway, for even the open air and the morning winds could not destroy the reek which seemed as deadly as a gas attack.

It must have disturbed the officer too, for he hesitated. Then with visible effort he advanced toward the hunks of flesh, casting back and forth as if to find some clue to the manner of their death. He was still so engaged when a second alien burst out of the archway, a splintered length of white held out before him as if he had made some important discovery.

The officer grabbed that shaft away from him, turning it around in his hands. And though expression was hard to read on those thin features under the masking face paint, the emotion his whole attitude expressed was surprise tinged with unbelief—as if the object his subordinate had brought was the last he expected to find in that place.

Raf longed to inspect it, but both aliens brushed by him and pattered back down the corridor, the discoverer pouring forth a volume of words to which the officer listened with great intentness. And the Terran pilot had to hurry to keep up with them.

Something he had seen just before he had left the arena remained in his mind: a forearm flung out from the supine body of what appeared to be the largest of the dead things—and on that forearm a bracelet of metal. Were those things pets! Watchdogs? Surely they were not intelligent beings able to forge and wear such ornaments of their own accord. And if they were watchdogs—whom did they serve? He was inclined to believe that the aliens must be their masters, that the monsters had been guardians of the treasure, perhaps. But dead guardians suggested a rifled treasure house. Who and what—?

His mind filled with speculations and questions, Raf trotted behind the others back to the chamber where they had found the first reptile. The alien who had brought the discovery to his commander stepped gingerly through the litter and laid the white rod in a special spot, apparently the place where it had been found.

At a barked order from the officer, two of the others came forward and tugged at the creature's mangled head, which had been freed from the serpent neck, rolling it over to expose the underparts. There was a broad tear there in the flesh, but Raf could see little difference between it and those left by the feasters. However the officer, holding a strip of cloth over his nose, bent stiffly above it for a closer look and then made some statement which sent his command into a babbling clamor.

Four of the lower ranks separated from the group and, with their hand weapons at alert, swung into action, retracing the way back toward the arena. It looked to Raf as if they now expected an attack from that direction.

Under a volley of orders the rest went back to the storeroom, and the officer, noting that Raf still lingered, waved him impatiently after them.

Inside the men spread out, going from shelf to table, selecting things with a speed which suggested that they had been rehearsed in this task and had only a limited time in which to accomplish it. Some took piles of boxes or other containers which were so light that they could manage a half-dozen in an armload, while two or three others struggled pantingly to move a single piece of weird machinery from its bed to the wheeled trolley they had brought. There was to be no lingering on this job—that was certain.

## 11. Espionage

Intent upon joining Sssuri, Dalgard left the lock, forgetting his earlier unwillingness, stepping from the small chamber down to the sea bottom, or endeavoring to, although instinctively he had begun to swim and so forged ahead at a different rate of speed.

Waving fronds of giant water plants, such as were found only in the coastal shallows, grew forest fashion but did not hide rocks which stretched up in a sharp rise not too far ahead. The scout could not see the merman, but as he held onto one of those fronds he caught the other's summons:

"Here—by the rocks—!"

Pushing his way through the drifting foliage, Dalgard swam ahead to the foot of the rocky escarpment. And there he saw what had so excited his companion.

Sssuri had just driven away an encircling collection of sand-dwelling scavengers, and what he was on his knees studying intently was an almost clean-picked skeleton of one of his own race. But there was something odd—Dalgard brushed aside a tendril of weed which cut his line of vision and so was able to see clearly.

White and clean most of those bones were, but the skull was blackened, and similar charring existed down one arm and shoulder. That merman had not died from any mishap in the sea!

"It is so," Sssuri replied to his thought. "*They* have come once more to give the flaming death—"

Dalgard, startled, looked up that slope which must lead to the island top above the waves.

"Long dead?" he asked tentatively, already guessing what the other's answer would be.

"The pickers move fast," Sssuri indicated the sand dwellers. "Perhaps yesterday, perhaps the day before—but no longer than that."

"And *they* are up there now?"

"Who can tell? However, *they* do not know the sea, nor the islands—"

It was plain that the merman intended to climb to investigate what might be happening above. Dalgard had no choice but to follow. And it was true that the merpeople had no peers or equals when it came to finding their ways about the sea and the coasts. He was confident that Sssuri could get to the island top and discover just what he wished to learn without a single sentry above, if they had stationed sentries, being the wiser. Whether he himself could operate as efficiently was another matter.

In the end they half climbed, half swam upward, detouring swiftly once to avoid the darting attack of a rock hornet, harmless as soon as they moved out of the reach of its questing stinger, for it was anchored for its short life to the rough hollow in which it had been hatched.

Dalgard's head broke water as he rolled through the surf onto a scrap of beach in the lee of a row of tooth-pointed outcrops. It was late evening by the light, and he clawed the mask off his face to draw thankful lungfuls of the good outer air. Sssuri, his fur sleeked tight to his body, waded ashore, shook himself free of excess water, and turned immediately to study the wall of the cliff which guarded the interior of the island.

This was one of a chain of such isles, Dalgard noted, now that he had had time to look about him. And with their many-creviced walls they were just the type of habitations which

appealed most strongly to the merpeople. Here could be found the dry inner caves with underwater entrances, which they favored for their group homes. And in the sea were kelp beds for harvesting.

The cliffs did not present too much of a climbing problem. Dalgard divested himself of the diving equipment, tucking it into a hollow which he walled up with stones that he thought the waves would not scour out in a hurry. He might need it again. Then, hitching his belt tighter, pressing what water he could out of his clothing, and settling his bow and quiver to the best advantage at his back, he crossed to where Sssuri was already marking claw holds.

“We may be seen—” Dalgard craned his neck, trying to make out details of what might be waiting above.

The merman shook his head with a quick jerk of negation. “*They* are gone. Behind them remains only death—much death—” And the bleakness of his thoughts reached the scout.

Dalgard had known Sssuri since he was a toddler and the other a cub coming to see the wonders of dry land for the first time. Never, during all their years of close association since, had he felt in the other a desolation so great. And to that emotional blast he could make no answer.

In the twilight, with the last red banners across the sky at their back, they made the climb. And it was as if the merman had closed off his mind to his companion. Flesh fingers touched scaled ones as they moved from one hold to the next, but Sssuri might have been half a world away for all the communication between them. Never had Dalgard been so shut out and with that his sensitivity to the night, to the world about him, was doubly acute.

He realized—and it worried him—that perhaps he had come to depend too much on Sssuri’s superior faculty of communication. It was time that he tried to use his own weaker powers to the utmost extent. So, while he climbed, Dalgard sent questing thoughts into the gloom. He located a nest of duck-dogs, those shy waterline fishers living in cliff holes. They were harmless and just settling down for the night. But of higher types of animals from which something might be learned—hoppers, runners—there were no traces. For all he was able to pick up, they might be climbing into blank nothingness.

And that in itself was ominous. Normally he should have been able to mind touch more than duck-dogs. The merpeople lived in peace with most of the higher fauna of their world, and a colony of hoppers, even a covey of moth birds, would settle in close by a mer tribe to garner in the remnants of feasts and for protection from the flying dragons and the other dangers they must face.

“*They* hunt all life,” the first break in Sssuri’s self-absorption came. “Where *they* walk the little, harmless peoples face only death. And so it has been here.” He had pulled himself over the rim of the cliff, and through the dark Dalgard could hear him panting with the same effort which made his own lungs labor.

Just as the stench of the snake-devil’s lair had betrayed its site, here disaster and death had an odor of its own. Dalgard retched before he could control throat and stomach muscles. But Sssuri was unmoved, as if he had expected this.

Then, to Dalgard’s surprise the merman set up the first real call he had ever heard issue from that furred throat, a plaintive whistle which had a crooning, summoning note in it, akin to the mind touch in an odd fashion, yet audible. They sat in silence for a long moment, the human’s ears as keen for any sound out of the night as those of his companion. Why did Sssuri not use the customary noiseless greeting of his race? When he beamed that inquiry, he

met once again that strange, solid wall of non-acceptance which had enclosed the merman as they climbed. As if now there was danger to be feared from following the normal ways.

Again Sssuri whistled, and in that cry Dalgard heard a close resemblance to the flute tone of the night moth birds. Up the scale the notes ran with mournful persistence. When the answer came, the scout at first thought that the imitation had lured a moth bird, for the reply seemed to ripple right above their heads.

Sssuri stood up, and his hand dropped on Dalgard's shoulder, applying pressure which was both a warning and a summons, bringing the scout to his feet with as little noise as possible. The horrible smell caught at his throat, and he was glad when the merman did not head inland toward the source of that odor, but started off along the edge of the cliff, one hand in Dalgard's to draw him along.

Twice more Sssuri paused to whistle, and each time he was answered by a signing note or two which seemed to reassure him.

Against the lighter expanse which was the sea, Dalgard saw the loom of a peak which projected above the general level of the island. Though he knew that the merpeople did not build aboveground, being adept in turning natural caves and crevices into the kind of living quarters they found most satisfactory, the barrenness of this particular rock top was forbidding.

Led by Sssuri, he threaded a tangled patch among outcrops, once-squeezing through a gap which scraped the flesh on his arms as he wriggled. Then the sky was blotted out, the last winking star disappeared, and he realized that he must have entered a cave of sorts, or was at least under an overhang.

The merman did not pause but padded on, tugging Dalgard along, the scout's boots scraping on the rough footing. The colonist was conscious now that they were on an incline, heading down into the heart of the island. They came to a stretch where Sssuri set his hands on holds, patiently shoved his feet into hollowed places, finding for him the ladder steps he could not see, which took him through a sweating, fearful journey of yards to another level, another sloping, downward way.

Here at long last was a fraction of light, not the violet glimmer which had illuminated the underground ways of those Others, but a ghostly radiance which he recognized as the lamps of the mermen—living creatures from the sea depths imprisoned in laboriously fashioned globes of crystal and kept in the caves for the light they yielded.

But still no mind touch! Never had Dalgard penetrated into the cave cities of the sea folk before without inquiries and open welcome lapping about him. Were they entering a place of massacre where no living merman remained? Yet there was that whistling which had led Sssuri to this place....

And at that moment a shrill keening note arose from the depths to ring in Dalgard's ears, startling him so that he almost lost his footing. Once again Sssuri made answer vocally—but no mind touch.

Then they rounded a curve, and the scout was able to see into the heart of the amphibian territory. This was a natural cave, as were all the merman's dwellings, but its walls had been smoothed and hung with the garlands of shells which they wove in their leisure into strange pictures. Silver-gray sand, smooth and dust-fine, covered the floor to the depth of a foot or more. And opening off the main chamber were small nooks, each marking the private storage place and holding of some family clan. It was a large place, and with a quick estimate Dalgard thought that it had been fashioned to harbor close to a hundred inhabitants, at least



the nooks suggested that many. But gathered at the foot of the ledge they were descending, spears poised, were perhaps ten males, some hardly past cubhood, others showing the snowy shine of fur which was the badge of age. And behind them, drawn knives in their ready hands, were half again as many merwomen, forming a protecting wall before a crouching group of cubs.

Sssuri spoke to Dalgard. "Spread out your hands—empty—so that they may see them clearly!"

The scout obeyed. In the limited light his ten fingers were fans, and it was then that he understood the reason for such a move. If these mermen had not seen a colonist before, he might resemble Those Others in their eyes. But only his species on all Astra had five fingers, five toes, and that physical evidence might insure his safety now.

"Why do you bring a destroyer among us? Or do you offer him for our punishment, so that we can lay upon him the doom that his kind have earned?"

The question came with arrow force, and Dalgard held out his hands, hoping they would see the difference before one of those spears from below tore through his flesh.

"Look upon the hands of this—my knife brother—look upon his face. He is not of the race of those you hate, but rather one from the south. Have you of the northern reaches not heard of Those-Who-Help, Those-Who-Came-From-the-Stars?"

"We have heard." But there was no relaxing of tension, not a spear point wavered.

"Look upon his hands," Sssuri insisted. "Come into his mind, for he speaks with us so. And do *they* do that?"

Dalgard tried to throw open his mind, awaiting the trial. It came quickly, traces of inimical, alien thought, which changed as they touched his mind, reading there only all the friendliness he and his held for the sea people.

"He is not of *them*." The admission was grudging. As if they did not want to believe that. "Why comes one from the south to this place—now?"

There was an inflection to that "now" which was disturbing.

"After the manner of his people he seeks new things so that he may return and report to his Elders. Then he will receive the spear of manhood and be ready for the choosing of mates," Sssuri translated the reason for Dalgard's quest into the terms of his own people. "He has been my knife brother since we were cubs together, and so I journey with him. But here in the north we have found evil—"

His flow of thought was submerged by a band of hate so red that its impact upon the mind was almost a blow. Dalgard shook his head. He had known that the merpeople, aroused, were deadly fighters, fearless and crafty, and with a staying power beyond that of any human. But their rage was something he had not met before.

"*They* come once again—*they* burn with the fire—*They* are among our islands—"

A cub whimpered and a merwoman stooped to pat it to silence.

"Here they have killed with the fire—"

They did not elaborate upon that statement, and Dalgard had no wish for them to do so. He was still very glad that it had been dark when he had climbed to the top of that cliff, that he had not been able to see what his imagination told him lay there.

"Do *they* stay?" That was Sssuri.

“Not so. In their sky traveler they go to the land where lies the dark city. There they make much evil against the day when this shall be their land once more.”

“But these lie if they think that.” Another strong thought broke across the current of communication. “*We* are not now penned for their pleasure. We may flee into the sea once more, and there live as did our fathers’ fathers, and they dare not follow us there—”

“Who knows?” It was Sssuri who raised that objection. “With their ancient knowledge once more theirs, even the depths of the sea may not be ours much longer. Do they not know how to ride upon the air?”

The knot of mer-warriors stirred. Several spears thudded butt down into the sand. And Sssuri accepted that as an invitation to descend, summoning Dalgard after him with a beckoning finger.

Later they sat in a circle in the cushioning gray powder, the two from the south eating dried fish and sea kelp, while Sssuri related, between mouthfuls, their recent adventures.

“Three times have *they* flown across these islands on their way to that city,” the Elder of the pitifully decimated merman tribe told the explorers.

“But this time,” broke in one of his companions, “they had with them a new ship—”

“A new ship?” Sssuri pounced upon that scrap of information.

“Yes. The ships of the air in which *they* travel are fashioned so”—with his knife point he drew a circle in the sand—“but this one was smaller and more in the likeness of a spear with a heavy point—thus”—he made a second sketch beside the first, and Dalgard and Sssuri leaned over to study it.

“That is unlike any of their ships that I have heard of,” Sssuri agreed. “Even in the old tales of the Days Before the Burning there is nothing spoken of like that.”

“It is true. Therefore we wait now for the coming of our scouts, who were set in hiding upon *their* sea rock of resting, that they may tell us more concerning this new ship. They should be here within this time of sleeping. Now, go you to rest, which you plainly have need of, and we shall call you when they come.”

Dalgard was willing enough to stretch out in the sand in the shadows of the far end of the cave. Beyond him three cubs slumbered together, their arms about each other, and a feeling of peace was there such as he had not known since he left the stronghold of Homeport.

The weird glow of the imprisoned sea monsters gave light to the main part of the cave, and it might still have been night when the scout was shaken awake once more. A group of the merpeople were sitting together, and their thoughts interrupted each other as their excitement arose. Their spies must have returned.

Dalgard crossed to join that group, but it seemed to him that his welcome was not unqualified, and that some of the openness of the early hours of the night was lacking. He might have been once more under suspicion.

“Knife brother”—to Dalgard’s sensitive mind that form of address from Sssuri was used for a special purpose: to underline the close bond between them—“listen to the words of Sssim who is a Hider-to-Watch on the island where *they* rest their ships during the voyage from one land to another.” He drew Dalgard down beside him to face a young merman who was staring round-eyed at the colony scout.

“He is like—yet unlike”—his first wisp of thought meant nothing to the scout. “The strangers wear many coverings on their bodies as do *they*, and they had also coverings upon their heads. They were bigger. Also from their minds I learned that they are not of this world—”

“Not of this world!” Dalgard burst out in his own speech.

“There!” The spy was triumphant. “So did they talk to one another, not with the mind but by making mouth noises, different mouth noises from those that *they* make. Yes, they are like—but unlike this one.”

“And these strangers flew the ship we have not seen before?”

“It is so. But they did not know the way and were guided by the globe. And at least one among them was distrustful of *those* and wished to be free to return to his own place. He walked by the rocks near my hiding place, and I read his thoughts. No, they were with *them*, but they are not *them*!”

“And now they have gone on to the city?” Sssuri probed.

“It was the way their ship flew.”

“Like me,” Dalgard repeated, and then the truth which might lie behind that exploded within his brain. “Terrans!” he breathed the word. Men of Pax perhaps who had come to hunt down the outlaws who had successfully eluded their rule on earth? But how had the colonists been traced? And why? Or were they other fugitives like themselves? So much, so very much of what the colonists should know of their past had been erased during the time of the Great Sickness twenty years after their landing. Then three fourths of the original immigrants had died. Only the children of the second generation and a handful of weakened Elders had remained. Knowledge was lost and some distorted by failing memories, old skills were gone. But if the new Terrans were in that city.... He had to know—to know and be able to warn his people. For the darkness of Pax was a memory they had *not* lost!

“I must see them,” he said.

“That is true. And only you can tell us what manner of folk these strangers be,” the merman chief agreed. “Therefore you shall go ashore with my warriors and look upon them—to tell us the truth. Also we must learn what *they* do here.”

It was decided that using waterways known to the merpeople, one which Dalgard could also take wearing the diving equipment, a scouting party would head shoreward the next day, with the river itself providing the entrance into the heart of the forbidden territory.

## 12. Alien Patrol

Raf leaned back against the wall. Long since the actions of the aliens in the storage house had ceased to interest him, since they would not allow any of the Terrans to approach their plunder and he could not ask questions. Lablet continued to follow the officer about, vainly trying to understand his speech. And Hobart had taken his place by the upper entrance, his hand held stiffly across his body. The pilot knew that the captain was engaged in photographing all this activity with a wristband camera, hoping to make something of it later.

But Raf's own inclination was to slip out and do some exploring in those underground corridors beyond. Having remained where he was for a wearisome time, he noticed that his presence was now taken for granted by the hurrying aliens who brushed about him intent upon their assignments. And slowly he began to edge along the wall toward the other doorway. Once he froze as the officer strode by, Lablet in attendance. But what the painted warrior was looking for was a crystal box on a shelf to Raf's left. When he had pointed that out to an underling he was off again, and Raf was free to continue his crab's progress.

Luck favored him, for, as he reached the moment when he must duck out the portal, there was a sudden flurry at the other end of the chamber where four of the aliens, under a volley of orders, strove to move an unwieldy piece of intricate machinery.

Raf dodged around the door and flattened back against the wall of the room beyond. The moving bars of sun said that it was midday. But the room was empty save for the despoiled carcass, and there was no sign of the aliens who had been sent out to scout.

The Terran ran lightly down the narrow room to the second door, which gave on the lower pits beneath and the way to the arena. As he took that dark way, he drew his stun gun. Its bolt was intended to render the victim unconscious, not to kill. But what effect it might have on the giant reptiles was a question he hoped he would not be forced to answer, and he paused now and then to listen.

There were sounds, deceptive sounds. Noises as regular as footfalls, like a distant padded running. The aliens returning? Or the things they had gone to hunt? Raf crept on—out into the sunshine which filled the arena.

For the first time he studied the enclosure and recognized it for what it was—a place in which savage and bloody entertainments could be provided for the population of the city—and it merely confirmed his opinion of the aliens and all their ways.

The temptation to explore the city was strong. He eyed the grilles speculatively. They could be climbed—he was sure of that. Or he could try some other of the various openings about the sanded area. But as he hesitated over his choice, he heard something from behind. This was no unidentifiable noise, but a scream which held both terror and pain. It jerked him around, sent him running back almost before he thought.

But the scream did not come again. However there were other sounds—snuffing whines—a scabbling—

Raf found himself in the round room walled by the old prison cells. Stabs of light shot through the gloom, thrusting into a roiling black mass which had erupted through one of the entrances and now held at bay one of the alien warriors. Three or four of the black creatures ringed the alien in, moving with speed that eluded the bolts of light he shot from his weapon,

keeping him cornered and from escape, while their fellows worried another alien limp and defenseless on the floor.

It was impossible to align the sights of his stun gun with any of those flitting shadows, Raf discovered. They moved as quickly as a ripple across a pond. He snapped the button on the hand grip to “spray” and proceeded to use the full strength of the charge across the group on the floor.

For several seconds he was afraid that the stun ray would prove to have no effect on the alien metabolism of the creatures, for their weaving, tearing activity did not cease. Then one after another dropped away from the center mass and lay unmoving on the floor. Seeing that he could control them, Raf turned his attention to the others about the standing warrior.

Again he sent the spray wide, and they subsided. As the last curled on the pavement, the alien moved forward and, with a snarl, deliberately turned the full force of his beam weapon on each of the attackers. But Raf plowed on through the limp pile to the warrior they had pulled down.

There was no hope of helping him—death had come with a wide tear in his throat. Raf averted his eyes from the body. The other warrior was methodically killing the stunned animals. And his action held such vicious cruelty that Raf did not want to watch.

When he looked again at the scene, it was to find the narrow barrel of the strange weapon pointed at him. Paying no attention to his dead comrade, the alien was advancing on the Terran as if in Raf he saw only another enemy to be burned down.

Moves drilled in him by long hours of weary practice came almost automatically to the pilot. The stun gun faced the alien rifle sight to sight. And it seemed that the warrior had developed a hearty respect for the Terran arm during the past few minutes, for he slipped his weapon back to the crook of his arm, as if he did not wish Raf to guess he had used it to threaten.

The pilot had no idea what to do now. He did not wish to return to the storehouse. And he believed that the alien was not going to let him go off alone. The ferocity of the creatures now heaped about them had been sobering, an effective warning against venturing alone in these underground ways.

His dilemma was solved by the entrance of a party of aliens from another doorway. They stopped short at the sight of the battlefield, and their leader descended upon the surviving scout for an explanation, which was made with gestures Raf was able to translate in part.

The alien had been far down one of the neighboring corridors with his dead companion when they had been tracked by the pack and had managed to reach this point before they were attacked. For some reason Raf could not understand, the aliens had preferred to flee rather than to face the menace of the hunters. But they had not been fast enough and had been trapped here. The gesturing hands then indicated Raf, acted out the battle which had ensued.

Crossing to the Terran pilot, the alien officer held out his hand and motioned for Raf to surrender his weapon. The pilot shook his head. Did they think him so simple that he would disarm himself at the mere asking? Especially since the warrior had rounded on him like that only a few moments before? Nor did he holster his gun. If they wanted to take it by force just let them try such a move!

His determination to resist must have gotten across to the leader, for he did not urge obedience to his orders. Instead he waved the Terran to join his own party. And since Raf had no reason not to, he did. Leaving the dead, both alien and enemy, where they had fallen, the

warriors took another way out of the underground maze, a way which brought them out into a street running to the river.

Here the party spread out, paying close attention to the pavement, as if they were engaged in tracking something. Raf saw impressed in one patch of earth a print dried by the sun, left by one of the reptiles. And there were smaller tracks he could not identify. All were inspected carefully, but none of them appeared to be what his companions sought.

They trotted up and down along the river bank, and from what he had already observed concerning the aliens, Raf thought that the leader, at least, was showing exasperation and irritation. They expected to find something—it was not there—but it had to be! And they were fast reaching the point where they wanted to produce it themselves to justify the time spent in hunting for it.

Ruthlessly they rayed to death any creature their dragnet drove into the open, leaving feebly kicking bodies of the furry, long-legged beasts Raf had first seen after the landing of the spacer. He could not understand the reason for such wholesale extermination, since certainly the rabbitlike rodents were harmless.

In the end they gave up their quest and circled back to come out near the field where the flitter and the globe rested. When the Terran flyer came into sight, Raf left the party and hurried toward it. Soriki waved a welcoming hand.

“Bout time one of you showed up. What are they doing—toting half the city here to load into that thing?”

Raf looked along the other’s pointing finger. A party of aliens towing a loaded dolly were headed for the gaping hatch of the globe, while a second party and an empty conveyance passed them on the way back to the storehouse.

“They are emptying a warehouse, or trying to.”

“Well, they act as if Old Time himself was heating their tails with a rocket flare. What’s the big hurry?”

“Somebody’s been here.” Swiftly Raf outlined what he had seen in the city, and ended by describing the hunt in which he had taken an unwilling part. “I’m hungry,” he ended and went to burrow for a ration pack.

“So,” mused Soriki as Raf chewed the stuff which never had the flavor of fresh provisions, “somebody’s been trying to beat the painted lads to it. The furry people?”

“It was a spear shaft they found broken with the dead lizard thing,” Raf commented. “And some of those on the island were armed with spears—”

“Must be good fighters if, armed with spears, they brought down a reptile as big as you say. It was big, wasn’t it?”

Raf stared at the city, a square of half-eaten concentrate in his fingers. Yes, that was a puzzler. The dead monster would be more than *he* would care to tackle without a blaster. And yet it was dead, with a smashed spear for evidence as to the manner of killing.

All those others dead in the arena, too. How large a party had invaded the city? Where were they now?

“I’d like to know,” he was speaking more to himself than to the com-tech, “how they *did* do it. No other bodies—”

“Those could have been taken away by their friends,” Soriki suggested. “But if they’re still hanging about, I hope they won’t believe that we’re bigger and better editions of the painted lads. I don’t want a spear through me!”

Raf, remembering the maze of lanes and streets—bordered by buildings which could provide hundreds of lurking places for attackers—which he had threaded with the confidence of ignorance earlier that day, began to realize why the aliens had been so nervous. Had a sniper with a blast rifle been stationed at a vantage point somewhere on the roofs today none of them would ever have returned to this field. And even a few spacemen with good cover and accurate throwing aim could have cut down their number a quarter or a third. He was developing a strong distaste for those structures. And he had no intention of returning to the city again.

He lounged about with Soriki for the rest of the afternoon, watching the ceaseless activity of the aliens. It was plain that they were intent upon packing into the cargo hold of their ship everything they could wrest from the storage house. As if they must make this trip count double. Was that because they had discovered that their treasure house was no longer inviolate?

In the late afternoon Hobart and Lablet came back with one of the work teams. Lablet was still excited, full of what he had seen, deduced, or guessed during the day. But the captain was very quiet and sober, and he unstrapped the wrist camera as soon as he reached the flitter, turning it over to Soriki.

“Run that through the ditto,” he ordered. “I want two records as soon as we can get them!”

The com-tech’s eyebrows slid up, “Think you might lose one, sir?”

“I don’t know. Anyway, we’ll play it safe with double records.” He accepted the ration pack Raf had brought out for him. But he did not unwrap it at once; instead he stared at the globe, digging the toe of his space boot into the soil as if he were grinding something to powder.

“They’re operating under full jets,” he commented. “As if they were about due to be jumped—”

“They told us that this was territory now held by their enemies,” Lablet reminded him.

“And who are these mysterious enemies?” the captain wanted to know. “Those animals back on that island?”

Raf wanted to say yes, but Lablet broke in with a question concerning what had happened to him, and the pilot outlined his adventures of the day, not forgetting to give emphasis to the incident in the celled room when the newly rescued alien had turned upon him.

“Naturally they are suspicious,” Lablet countered, “but for a people who lack space flight, I find them unusually open-minded and ready to accept us, strange as we must seem to them.”

“Ditto done, Captain.” Soriki stepped out of the flitter, the wrist camera dangling from his fingers.

“Good.” But Hobart did not buckle the strap about his arm once more, neither did he pay any attention to Lablet. Instead, apparently coming to some decision, he swung around to face Raf.

“You went out with that scouting party today. Think you could join them again, if you see them moving for another foray?”

“I could try.”

“Sure,” Soriki chuckled, “they couldn’t do any more than pop him back at us. What do you think about them, sir? Are they fixing to blast us?”

But the captain refused to be drawn. “I’d just like to have a record of any more trips they make.” He handed the camera to Raf. “Put that on and don’t forget to trigger it if you do go. I don’t believe they’ll go out tonight. They aren’t too fond of being out in the open in darkness. We saw that last night. But keep an eye on them in the morning—”

“Yes, sir.” Raf buckled on the wristband. He wished that Hobart would explain just what he was to look for, but the captain appeared to think that he had made everything perfectly plain. And he walked off with Lablet, heading to the globe, as if there was nothing more to be said.

Soriki stretched. “I’d say we’d better take it watch and watch,” he said slowly. “The captain may think that they won’t go off in the dark, but we don’t know everything about them. Suppose we just keep an eye on them, and then you’ll be ready to tail—”

Raf laughed. “Tailing would be it. I don’t think I’ll have a second invitation and if I get lost—”

But Soriki shook his head. “That you won’t. At least if you do—I’m going to make a homer out of you. Just tune in your helmet buzzer.”

It needed a com-tech to think of a thing like that! A small adjustment to the earphones built into his helmet, and Soriki, operating the flitter com, could give him a guide as efficient as the spacer’s radar! He need not fear being lost in the streets should he lose touch with those he was spying upon.

“You’re on course!” He pulled off his helmet and then glanced up to find Soriki smiling at him.

“Oh, we’re not such a bad collection of space bums. Maybe you’ll find that out someday, boy. They breezed you into this flight right out of training, didn’t they?”

“Just about,” Raf admitted cautiously, on guard as ever against revealing too much of himself. After all, his experience was part of his record, which was open to anyone on board the spacer. Yes, he was not a veteran; they must all know that.

“Someday you’ll lose a little of that suspicion,” the com-tech continued, “and find out it isn’t such a bad old world after all. Here, let’s see if you’re on the beam.” He took the helmet out of Raf’s hands and, drawing a small case of delicate instruments from his belt pouch, unscrewed the ear plates of the com device and made some adjustments. “Now that will keep you on the buzzer without bursting your eardrums. Try it.”

Raf fastened on the helmet and started away from the flitter. The buzzer which he had expected to roar in his ears was only a faint drone, and above it he could easily hear other sounds. Yet it was there, and he tested it by a series of loops away from the flyer. Each time as he came on the true beam he was rewarded by a deepening of the muted note. Yes, he could be a homer with that, and at the same time be alert to any other noise in his vicinity.

“That’s it!” He paid credit where it was due. But he was unable to break his long habit of silence. Something within him still kept him wary of the com-tech’s open friendliness.

None of the aliens approached the flitter as the shadows began to draw in. The procession of moving teams stopped, and most of the burden-bearing warriors withdrew to the globe and stayed there. Soriki pointed this out.

“They’re none too sure, themselves. Look as if they are closing up for the night.”



Indeed it did. The painted men had hauled up their ramp, the hatch in the globe closed with a definite snap. Seeing that, the com-tech laughed.

“We have a double reason for a strict watch. Suppose whatever they’ve been looking for jumps *us*? They’re not worrying over that it now appears.”

So they took watch and watch, three hours on and three hours in rest. When it came Raf’s turn he did not remain sitting in the flitter, listening to the com-tech’s heavy breathing, but walked a circular beat which took him into the darkness of the night in a path about the flyer. Overhead the stars were sharp and clear, glittering gem points. But in the dead city no light showed, and he was sure that no aliens camped there tonight.

He was sleeping when Soriki’s grasp on his shoulder brought him to that instant alertness he had learned on field maneuvers half the Galaxy away.

“Business,” the com-tech’s voice was not above a whisper as he leaned over the pilot. “I think they are on the move.”

The light was the pale gray of pre-dawn. Raf pulled himself up with caution to look at the globe. The com-tech was right. A dark opening showed on the alien ship; they had released their hatch. He fastened his tunic, buckled on his equipment belt and helmet, strapped his boots.

“Here they come!” Soriki reported. “One—two—five—no, six of them. And they’re heading for the city. No dollies with them, but they’re all armed.”

Together the Terrans watched that patrol of alien warriors, their attitude suggesting that they hoped to pass unseen, hurry toward the city. Then Raf slipped out of the flyer. His dark clothing in this light should render him largely invisible.

Soriki waved encouragingly and the pilot answered with a quick salute before he sped after his quarry.

## 13. A Hound Is Loosed

Dalgard's feet touched gravel; he waded cautiously to the bank, where a bridge across the river made a concealing shadow on the water. None of the mermen had accompanied him this far. Sssuri, as soon as his human comrade had started for the storage city, had turned south to warn and rally the tribes. And the merpeople of the islands had instituted a loose chain of communication, which led from a clump of water reeds some two miles back to the seashore, and so out to the islands. Better than any of the now legendary coms of his Terran forefathers were these minds of the spies in hiding, who could pick up the racing thoughts beamed to them and pass them on to their fellows.

Although there were no signs of life about the city, Dalgard moved with the same care that he would have used in penetrating a snake-devil's lair. In the first hour of dawn he had contacted a hopper. The small beast had been frightened almost out of coherent thought, and Dalgard had had to spend some time in allaying that terror to get a fractional idea of what might be going on in this countryside.

Death—the hopper's terror had come close to insanity. Killers had come out of the sky, and they were burning—burning—All living things were fleeing before them. And in that moment Dalgard had been forced to give up his plan for an unseen spy ring, which would depend upon the assistance of the animals. His information must come via his own eyes and ears.

So he kept on, posting the last of the mermen in his mental relay well away from the city, but swimming upstream himself. Now that he was here, he could see no traces of the invaders. Since they could not have landed their sky ships in the thickly built-up section about the river, it must follow that their camp lay on the outskirts of the metropolis.

He pulled himself out of the water. Bow and arrows had been left behind with the last merman; he had only his sword-knife for protection. But he was not there to fight, only to watch and wait. Pressing the excess moisture out of his scant clothing, he crept along the shore. If the strangers were using the streets, it might be well to get above them. Speculatively he eyed the buildings about him as he entered the city.

Dalgard continued to keep at street level for two blocks, darting from doorway to shadowed doorway, alert not only to any sound but to any flicker of thought. He was reasonably sure, however, that the aliens would be watching and seeking only for the merpeople. Though they were not telepathic as their former slaves, Those Others were able to sense the near presence of a merman, so that the sea people dared not communicate while within danger range of the aliens without betraying themselves. It was the fact that he was of a different species, therefore possibly immune to such detection, which had brought Dalgard into the city.

He studied the buildings ahead. Among them was a cone-shaped structure which might have been the base of a tower that had had all stories above the third summarily amputated. It was ornamented with a series of bands in high relief, bands bearing the color script of the aliens. This was the nearest answer to his problem. However the scout did not move toward it until after a long moment of both visual and mental inspection of his surroundings. But that inspection did not reach some twelve streets away where another crouched to watch. Dalgard ran lightly to the tower at the same moment that Raf shifted his weight from one foot to the other behind a parapet as he spied upon the knot of aliens gathered below him in the street....

The pilot had followed them since that early morning hour when Soriki had awakened him. Not that the chase had led him far in distance. Most of the time he had spent in waiting just as he was doing now. At first he had believed that they were searching for something, for they had ventured into several buildings, each time to emerge conferring, only to hunt out another and invade it. Since they always returned with empty hands, he could not believe that they were out for further loot. Also they moved with more confidence than they had shown the day before. That confidence led Raf to climb above them so that he could watch them with less chance of being seen in return.

It had been almost noon when they had at last come into this section. If two of them had not remained idling on the street as the long moments crept by, he would have believed that they had given him the slip, that he was now a cat watching a deserted mouse hole. But at the moment they were coming back, carrying something.

Raf leaned as far over the parapet as he dared, trying to catch a better look at the flat, boxlike object two of them had deposited on the pavement. Whatever it was either needed some adjustment or they were attempting to open it with poor success, for they had been busied about it for what seemed an unusually long time. The pilot licked dry lips and wondered what would happen if he swung down there and just walked in for a look-see. That idea was hardening into resolution when suddenly the group below drew quickly apart, leaving the box sitting alone as they formed a circle about it.

There was a puff of white vapor, a protesting squawk, and the thing began to rise in jerks as if some giant in the sky was pulling at it spasmodically. Raf jumped back. Before he could return to his vantage point, he saw it rise above the edge of the parapet, reach a level five or six feet above his head, hovering there. It no longer climbed; instead it began to swing back and forth, describing in each swing a wider stretch of space.

Back and forth—watching it closely made him almost dizzy. What was its purpose? Was it a detection device, to locate him? Raf's hand went to his stun gun. What effect its rays might have on the box he had no way of knowing, but at that moment he was sorely tempted to try the beam out, with the oscillating machine as his target.

The motion of the floating black thing became less violent, its swoop smoother as if some long-idle motor was now working more as its builders had intended it to perform. The swing made wide circles, graceful glides as the thing explored the air currents.

Searching—it was plainly searching for something. Just as plainly it could not be hunting for him, for his presence on that roof would have been uncovered at once. But the machine was—it must be—out of sight of the warriors in the street. How could they keep in touch with it if it located what they sought? Unless it had some built-in signaling device.

Determined to keep it in sight, Raf risked a jump from the parapet of the building where he had taken cover to another roof beyond, running lightly across that as the hound bobbed and twisted, away from its masters, out across the city in pursuit of some mysterious quarry...

\*\*\*\*\*

The climb which had looked so easy from the street proved to be more difficult when Dalgard actually made it. His hours of swimming in the river, the night of broken rest, had drained his strength more than he had known. He was panting as he flattened himself against the wall, his feet on one of the protruding bands of colored carving, content to rest before reaching for another hold. To all appearances the city about him was empty of life and, except for the certainty of the merpeople that the alien ship and its strange companion had landed here, he would have believed that he was on a fruitless quest.

Grimly, his lower lip caught between his teeth, the scout began to climb once more, the sun hot on his body, drawing sweat to dampen his forehead and his hands. He did not pause again but kept on until he stood on the top of the shortened tower. The roof here was not flat but sloped inward to a cuplike depression, where he could see the outline of a round opening, perhaps a door of sorts. But at that moment he was too winded to do more than rest.

There was a drowsiness in that air. He was tempted to curl up where he sat and turn his rest into the sleep his body craved. It was in that second or so of time when he was beginning to relax, to forget the tenseness which had gripped him since his return to this ill-omened place, that he touched—

Dalgard stiffened as if one of his own poisoned arrows had pricked his skin. Rapport with the merpeople, with the hoppers and the runners, was easy, familiar. But this was no such touch. It was like contacting something which was icy cold, inimical from birth, something which he could never meet on a plain of understanding. He snapped off mind questing at that instant and huddled where he was, staring up into the blank turquoise of the sky, waiting—for what he did not know. Unless it was for that other mind to follow and ferret out his hiding place, to turn him inside out and wring from him everything he ever knew or hoped to learn.

As time passed in long breaths, and he was not so invaded, he began to think that while he had been aware of contact, the other had not. And, emboldened, he sent out a tracer. Unconsciously, as the tracer groped, he pivoted his body. It lay—there!

At the second touch he withdrew in the same second, afraid of revelation. But as he returned to probe delicately, ready to flee at the first hint that the other suspected, his belief in temporary safety grew. To his disappointment he could not pierce beyond the outer wall of identity. There was a living creature of a high rate of intelligence, a creature alien to his own thought processes, not too far away. And though his attempts to enter into closer communication grew bolder, he could not crack the barrier which kept them apart. He had long known that contact with the merpeople was on a lower, a far lower, band than they used when among themselves, and that they were only able to “talk” with the colonists because for generations they had exchanged thought symbols with the hoppers and other unlike species. They had been frank in admitting that while Those Others could be aware of their presence through telepathic means, they could not exchange thoughts. So now, his own band, basically strange to this planet, might well go unnoticed by the once dominant race of Astra.

They—or him—or it—were over in that direction, Dalgard was sure of that. He faced northwest and saw for the first time, about a mile away, the swelling of the globe. If the strange flyer reported by the merpeople was beside it, he could not distinguish it from this distance. Yet he was sure the mind he had located was closer to him than that ship.

Then he saw it—a black object rising by stiff jerks into the air as if it were being dragged upward against its inclination. It was too small to be a flyer of any sort. Long ago the colonists had patched together a physical description of Those Others which had assured them that the aliens were close to them in general characteristics and size. No, that couldn't be carrying a passenger. Then what—or why?

The object swung out in a gradually widening circle. Dalgard held to the walled edge of the roof. Something within him suggested that it would be wiser to seek some less open space, that there was danger in that flying box. He released his hold and went to the trap door. It took only a minute to fit his fingers into round holes and tug. Its stubborn resistance gave, and stale air whooshed out in his face as it opened.

In his battle with the door Dalgard had ignored the box, so he was startled when, with a piercing whistle, almost too high on the scale for his ears to catch, the thing suddenly

swooped into a screaming dive, apparently heading straight for him. Dalgard flung himself through the trap door, luckily landing on one of the steep, curved ramps. He lost his balance and slid down into the dark, trying to brake his descent with his hands, the eerie screech of the box trumpeting in his ears.

There was little light in this section of the cone building, and he was brought up with bruising force against a blank wall two floors below where he had so unceremoniously entered. As he lay in the dark trying to gasp some breath back into his lungs, he could still hear the squeal. Was it summoning? There was no time to be lost in getting away.

On his hands and knees the scout crept along what must have been a short hall until he found a second descending ramp, this one less steep than the first, so that he was able to keep to his feet while using it. And the gloom of the next floor was broken by odd scraps of light which showed through pierced portions of the decorative bands. The door was there, a locking bar across it.

Dalgard did not try to shift that at once, although he laid his hands upon it. If the box was a hound for hunters, had it already drawn its masters to this building? Would he open the door only to be faced by the danger he wished most to avoid? Desperately he tried to probe with the mind touch. But he could not find the alien band. Was that because the hunters could control their minds as they crept up? His kind knew so little of Those Others, and the merpeople's hatred of their ancient masters was so great that they tended to avoid rather than study them.

The scout's sixth sense told him that nothing waited outside. But the longer he lingered with that beacon overhead the slimmer his chances would be. He must move and quickly. Sliding back the bar, he opened the door a crack and looked out into a deserted street. There was another doorway to take shelter in some ten feet or so farther along, beyond that an alley wall overhung by a balcony. He marked these refuges and went out to make his first dash to safety.

Nothing stirred, and he sprinted. There came again that piercing shriek to tear his ears as the floating box dived at him. He swerved away from the doorway to dart on under the balcony, sure now that he must keep moving, but under cover so that the black thing could not pounce. If he could find some entrance into the underground ways such as those that ran from the arena—But now he was not even sure in which direction the arena stood, and he dared no longer climb to look over the surrounding territory.

He touched the alien mind! They *were* moving in, following the lead of their hound. He must not allow himself to be cornered. The scout fought down a surge of panic, attempted to battle the tenseness which tied his nerves. He must not run mindlessly either. That was probably just what they wanted him to do. So he stood under the balcony and tried not to listen to the shrilling of the box as he studied the strip of alley.

This was a narrow side way, and he had not made the wisest of choices in entering it, for not much farther ahead it was bordered with smooth walls protecting what had once been gardens. He had no way of telling whether the box would actually attack him if he were caught in the open—to put that to the test was foolhardy—nor could he judge its speed of movement.

The walls.... A breeze which blew up the lane carried with it the smell of the river. There was a slim chance that it might end in water, and he had a feeling that if he could reach the stream he would be able to baffle the hunters. He did not have long to make up his mind—the aliens were closer.

Lightly Dalgard ran under the length of the balcony, turned sharply as he reached the end of its protecting cover, and leaped. His fingers gripped the ornamental grillwork, and he was able to pull himself up and over to the narrow runway. A canopy was still over his head, and there came a bump against it as the baffled box thumped. So it would try to knock him off if it could get the chance! That was worth knowing.

He looked over the walls. They guarded masses of tangled vegetation grown through years of neglect into thick mats. And those promised a way of escape, if he could reach them. He studied the windows, the door opening onto the balcony. With the hilt of his sword-knife he smashed his way into the house, to course swiftly through the rooms to the lower floor, and find the entrance to the garden.

Facing that briary jungle on the ground level was a little daunting. To get through it would be a matter of cutting his way. Could he do it and escape that bobbing, shrilling thing in the air? A trace of pebbled path gave him a ghost of a chance, and he knew that these shrubs tended to grow upward and not mass until they were several feet above the ground.

Trusting to luck, Dalgard burrowed into the green mass, slashing with his knife at anything which denied him entrance. He was swallowed up in a strange dim world wherein dead shrubs and living were twined together to form a roof, cutting off the light and heat of the sun. From the sour earth, sliming his hands and knees, arose an overpowering stench of decay and disturbed mold. In the dusk he had to wait for his eyes to adjust before he could mark the line of the old path he had taken for his guide.

Fortunately, after the first few feet, he discovered that the tunneled path was less obstructed than he had feared. The thick mat overhead had kept the sun from the ground and killed off all the lesser plants so that it was possible to creep along a fairly open strip. He was conscious of the chitter of insects, but no animals lingered here. Under him the ground grew more moist and the mold was close to mud in consistency. He dared to hope that this meant he was either approaching the river or some garden stream feeding into the larger flood.

Somewhere the squeal of the hunter kept up a steady cry, but, unless the foliage above him was distorting that sound, Dalgard believed that the box was no longer directly above him. Had he in some way thrown it off his trail?

He found his stream, a thread of water, hardly more than a series of scummy pools with the vegetation still meeting almost solidly over it. And it brought him to a wall with a drain through which he was sure he could crawl. Disliking to venture into that cramped darkness, but seeing no other way out, the scout squirmed forward in slime and muck, feeling the rasp of rough stone on his shoulders as he made his worm's progress into the unknown.

Once he was forced to halt and, in the dark, loosen and pick out stones embedded in the mud bottom narrowing the passage. On the other side of that danger point, he was free to wriggle on. Could the box trace him now? He had no idea of the principle on which it operated; he could only hope.

Then before him he saw the ghostly gray of light and squirmed with renewed vigor—to be faced then by a grille, beyond which was the open world. Once more his knife came into use as he pried and dug at the barrier. He worked for long moments until the grille splashed out into the sluggish current a foot or so below, and then he made ready to lower himself into the same flood.

It was only because he was a trained hunter that he avoided death in that moment. Some instinct made him dodge even as he slipped through, and the hurtling black box did not strike

true at the base of his brain but raked along his scalp, tearing the flesh and sending him tumbling unconscious into the brown water.

## 14. The Prisoner

Raf was two streets away from the circling box but still able to keep it in sight when its easy glide stopped, and, in a straight line, it swooped toward a roof emitting a shrill, rising whistle. It rose again a few seconds later as if baffled, but it continued to hover at that point, keening forth its warning. The pilot reached the next building, but a street still kept him away from the conical structure above which the box now hung.

Undecided, he stayed where he was. Should he go down to street level and investigate? Before he had quite made up his mind he saw the foremost of the alien scouting party round into the thoroughfare below and move purposefully at the cone tower, weapons to the fore. Judging by their attitude, the box had run to earth there the prey they had been searching for.

But it wasn't to be so easy. With another eerie howl the machine soared once more and bobbed completely over the cone to the street which must lie beyond it. Raf knew that he could not miss the end of the chase and started on a detour along the roof tops which should bring him to a vantage point. By the time he had made that journey he found himself on a warehouse roof which projected over the edge of the river.

From a point farther downstream a small boat was putting out. Two of the aliens paddled while a third crouched in the bow. A second party was picking its way along the bank some distance away, both groups seemingly heading toward a point a building or two to the left of the one where Raf had taken cover.

He heard the shrilling of the box, saw it bobbing along a line toward the river. But in that direction there was only a mass of green. The end to the weird chase came so suddenly that he was not prepared, and it was over before he caught a good look at the quarry. Something moved down on the river bank and in that same instant the box hurtled earthward as might a spear. It struck, and the creature who had just crawled out—out of the ground as far as Raf could see—toppled into the stream. As the waters closed over the body, the box slued around and came to rest on the bank. The party in the boat sent their small craft flying toward the spot where the crawler had sunk.

One of the paddlers abandoned his post and slipped over the side, diving into the oily water. He made two tries before he was successful and came to the surface with the other in tow. They did not try to heave the unconscious captive into the boat, merely kept the lolling head above water as they turned downstream once more and vanished from Raf's sight around the end of a pier, while the second party on the bank reclaimed the now quiet box and went off.

But Raf had seen enough to freeze him where he was for a moment. The creature which had popped out of the ground only to be struck by the box and knocked into the river—he would take oath on the fact that it was not one of the furred animals he had seen on the sea island. Surely it had been smooth-skinned, not unlike the aliens in conformation—one of their own kind they had been hunting down, a criminal or a rebel?

Puzzled, the pilot moved along from roof to roof, trying to pick up the trail of the party in the boat, but as far as he could now see, the river was bare. If they had come ashore anywhere along here, they had simply melted into the city. At last he was forced to use the homing beam, and it guided him back across the deserted metropolis to the field.

There was still activity about the globe; they were bringing in the loot from the warehouse, but Lablet and Hobart stood by the flutter. As the pilot came up to them, the captain looked up eagerly.



“What happened?”

Raf sensed that there had been some change during his absence, that Hobart was looking to him for an explanation to make clear happenings here. He told his story of the hunt and its ending, the capture of the stranger. Lablet nodded as he finished.

“That is the reason for this, you may depend upon it, Captain. One of their own people is at the bottom of it.”

“Of what?” Raf wanted to ask, but Soriki did it for him.

Hobart smiled grimly. “We are all traveling back together. Take off in the early morning. For some reason they wanted us out of the globe in a hurry—practically shoved us out half an hour ago.”

Though the Terrans kept a watch on the larger ship as long as the light lasted, the darkness defeated them. They did not see the prisoner being taken aboard. Yet none of them doubted that sometime during the dusky hours it had been done.

It was barely dawn when the globe took off the next day, and Raf brought the flitter up on its trail, heading westward into the sea wind. Below them the land held no signs of life. They swept over the deserted, terraced city that was the gateway to the guarded interior, flew back over the line of sea islands. Raf climbed higher, not caring to go too near the island where the aliens had wrought their terrible vengeance on the trip out. And all four of the Terrans knew relief, though they might not admit it to each other, when once more Soriki was able to establish contact with the distant spacer.

“Turn north, sir?” the pilot suggested. “I could ride her beam in from here—we don’t have to follow them home.” He wanted to do that so badly it was almost a compulsion to make his hand move on the controls. And when Hobart did not answer at once, he was sure that the captain would give that very order, taking them out of the company of those he had never trusted.

But Lablet spoiled that. “We have their word, Captain. That anti-grav unit that they showed us last night alone—”

So Hobart shook his head, and they meekly continued on the path set by the globe across the ocean.

As the hours passed Raf’s inner uneasiness grew. For some queer reason which he could not define to himself or explain to anyone else, he was now possessed by an urgency to trail the globe which transcended and then erased his dislike of the aliens. It was as if some appeal for help was being broadcast from the other ship, drawing him on. It was then that he began to question his assumption that the prisoner was one of them.

Over and over again in his mind he tried to re-picture the capture as he had witnessed it from the building just too far away and at slightly the wrong angle for a clear view. He would swear that the body he had seen tumble into the flood had not been furred, that much he was sure of. But clothing, yes, there had been clothing. Not—his mind suddenly produced that one scrap of memory—not the bandage windings of the aliens. And hadn’t the skin been fairer? Was there another race on this continent, one they had not been told about?

When they at last reached the shore of the western continent and finally the home city of the aliens, the globe headed back to its berth, not in the roof cradle from which it had arisen, but sinking into the building itself. Raf brought the flitter down on a roof as close to the main holding of the painted people as he could get. None of the aliens came near them. It seemed that they were to be ignored. Hobart paced along the flat roof, and Soriki sat in the flyer,

nursing his com, intent upon the slender thread of beam which tied them to the parent ship so many miles away.

“I don’t understand it.” Lablet’s voice arose almost plaintively. “They were so very persuasive about our accompanying them. They were eager to have us see their treasures—”

Hobart swung around. “Somehow the balance of power has changed,” he observed, “in their favor. I’d give anything to know more about that prisoner of theirs. You’re sure it wasn’t one of the furry people?” he asked Raf, as if hoping against hope that the pilot would reply in doubt.

“Yes, sir.” Raf hesitated. Should he air his suspicions, that the captive was not of the same race as his captors either? But what proof had he beyond a growing conviction that he could not substantiate?

“A rebel, a thief—” Lablet was ready to dismiss it as immaterial. “Naturally they would be upset if they were having trouble with one of their own men. But to leave now, just when we are on the verge of new discoveries—That anti-gravity unit alone is worth our whole trip! Imagine being able to return to earth with the principle of that!”

“Imagine being able to return to earth with our skins on our backs,” was Soriki’s whispered contribution. “If we had the sense of a Venusian water nit, we’d blast out of here so quick our tail fumes’d take off with us!”

Privately Raf concurred, but the urge to know more about the mysterious prisoner was still pricking at him, until he, contrary to his usual detachment, felt driven to discover all that he could. It was almost, but Raf shied away from that wild idea, it was almost as if he were hearing a voiceless cry for aid, as if his mind was one of Soriki’s coms tuned in on an unknown wave length. He was angrily impatient with himself for that fantastic supposition. At the same time, another part of his mind, as he walked to the edge of the roof and looked out at the buildings he knew were occupied by the aliens, was busy examining the scene as if he intended to crawl about on roof tops on a second scouting expedition.

Finally the rest decided that Lablet and Hobart were to try to establish contact with the aliens once more. After they had gone, Raf opened a compartment in the flutter, the contents of which were his particular care. He squatted on his heels and surveyed the neatly stowed objects inside thoughtfully. A survival kit depended a great deal on the type of terrain in which the user was planning to survive—an aquatic world would require certain basic elements, a frozen tundra others—but there were a few items common to every emergency, and those were now at Raf’s fingertips. The blast bombs, sealed into their pexilod cases, guaranteed to stop all the attackers that Terran explorers had so far met on and off worlds, a coil of rope hardly thicker than a strand of knitting yarn but of inconceivable toughness and flexibility, an aid kit with endurance drugs and pep pills which could keep a man on his feet and going long after food and water failed. He had put them all in their separate compartments.

For a long moment he hunkered there, studying the assortment. And then, almost as if some will other than his own was making a choice, he reached out. The rope curled about his waist under his tunic so tautly that its presence could not be detected without a search, blast bombs went into the sealed seam pocket on his breast, and two flat containers with their capsules were tucked away in his belt pouch. He snapped the door shut and got to his feet to discover Soriki watching him. Only for a moment was Raf disconcerted. He knew that he would not be able to explain why he must do what he was going to do. There was no reason why he should. Soriki, except for being a few years his senior, had no authority over him. He was not under the com-tech’s orders.

“Another trip into the blue?”

The pilot replied to that with a nod.

“Somehow, boy, I don’t think anything’s going to stop you, so why waste my breath? But use your homer—and your eyes!”

Raf paused. There was an unmistakable note of friendliness in the com-tech’s warning. Almost he was tempted to try and explain. But how could one make plain feelings for which there was no sensible reason? Sometimes it was better to be quiet.

“Don’t dig up more than you can rebury.” That warning, in the slang current when they had left Terra, was reassuring simply because it was of the earth he knew. Raf grinned. But he did not head toward the roof opening and the ramp inside the building. Instead he set a course he had learned in the other city, swinging down to the roof of the neighboring structure, intent on working away from the inhabited section of the town before he went into the streets.

Either the aliens had not set any watch on the Terrans or else all their interest was momentarily engaged elsewhere. Raf, having gone three or four blocks in the opposite direction to his goal, made his way through a silent, long-deserted building to the street without seeing any of the painted people. In his ear buzzed the comforting hum of the com, tying him with the flitter and so, in a manner, to safety.

He knew that the alien community had gathered in and around the central building they had visited. To his mind the prisoner was now either in the headquarters of the warriors, where the globe had been berthed, or had been taken to the administration building. Whether he could penetrate either stronghold was a question Raf did not yet face squarely.

But the odd something which tugged at him was as persistent as the buzz in his earphones. And an idea came. If he *were* obeying some strange call for assistance, couldn’t that in some way lead him to what he sought? The only difficulty was that he had no way of being more receptive to the impulse than he now was. He could not use it as a compass bearing.

In the end he chose the Center as his goal, reasoning that if the prisoner were to be interviewed by the leaders of the aliens, he would be taken to those rulers, they would not go to him. From a concealed place across from the open square on which the building fronted, the pilot studied it carefully. It towered several stories above the surrounding structures, to some of which it was tied by the ways above the streets. To use one of those bridges as a means of entering the headquarters would be entirely too conspicuous.

As far as the pilot was able to judge, there was only one entrance on the ground level, the wide front door with the imposing picture-covered gates. Had he had free use of the flitter he might have tried to swing down from the hovering machine after dark. But he was sure that Captain Hobart would not welcome the suggestion.

Underground? There had been those ways in that other city, a city which, though built on a much smaller scale, was not too different in general outline from this one. The idea was worth investigation.

The doorway, which had afforded him a shelter from which to spy out the land, yielded to his push, and he went through three large rooms on the ground floor, paying no attention to the strange groups of furnishings, but seeking something else, which he had luck to find in the last room, a ramp leading down.

It was in the underground that he made his first important find. They had seen ground vehicles in the city, a few still in operation, but Raf had gathered that the fuel and extra parts for the machines were now so scarce that they were only used in emergencies. Here,

however, was a means of transportation quite different, a tunnel through which ran a ribbon of belt, wide enough to accommodate three or four passengers at once. It did not move, but when Raf dared to step out upon its surface, it swung under his weight. Since it ran in the general direction of the Center he decided to use it. It trembled under his tread, but he found that he could run along it making no sound.

The tunnel was not in darkness, for square plates set in the roof gave a diffused violet light. However, not too far ahead, the light was brighter, and it came from one side, not the roof. Another station on this abandoned way? The pilot approached it with caution. If his bump of direction was not altogether off, this must be either below the Center or very close to it.

The second station proved to be a junction where more than one of the elastic paths met. Though he crouched to listen for a long moment before venturing out into that open space, he could hear or see nothing which suggested that the aliens ever came down now to these levels.

They had provided an upward ramp, and Raf climbed it, only to meet his first defeat at its top. For here was no opening to admit him to the ground floor of what he hoped was the Center. Baffled by the smooth surface over which he vainly ran his hands seeking for some clue to the door, he decided that the aliens had, for some purpose of their own, walled off the lower regions. Discouraged, he returned to the junction level. But he was not content to surrender his plans so easily. Slowly he made a circuit of the platform, examining the walls and ceiling. He found an air shaft, a wide opening striking up into the heart of the building above.

It was covered with a grille and it was above his reach but....

Raf measured distances and planned his effort. The mouth of a junction tunnel ran less than two feet away from that grille. The opening was outlined with a ledge, which made a complete arch from the floor. He stopped and triggered the gravity plates in his space boots. Made to give freedom of action when the ship was in free fall, they might just provide a weak suction here. And they did! He was able to climb that arch and, standing on it, work loose the grille which had been fashioned to open. Now....

The pilot flashed his hand torch up into that dark well. He had been right—and lucky! There were holds at regular intervals, something must have been serviced by workmen in here. This was going to be easy. His fingers found the first hold, and he wormed his way into the shaft.

It was not a difficult climb, for there were niches along the way where the alien mechanics who had once made repairs had either rested or done some of their work. And there were also grilles on each level which gave him at least a partial view of what lay beyond.

His guess was right; he recognized the main hall of the Center as he climbed past the grid there, heading up toward those levels where he was sure the leaders of the aliens had their private quarters. Twice he paused to look in upon conferences of the gaudily wrapped and painted civilians, but, since he could not understand what they were saying, it was a waste of time to linger.

He was some eight floors up when chance, luck, or that mysterious something which had brought him into this venture, led him to the right place at the right time. There was one of those niches, and he had just settled into it, peering out through the grid, when he saw the door at the opposite end of the room open and in marched a party of warriors with a prisoner in their midst.

Raf's eyes went wide. It was the captive he sought; he had no doubt of that. But who—what—was that prisoner?

This was no fur-covered half-animal, nor was it one of the delicate-boned, decadent, painted creatures such as those who now ringed in their captive. Though the man had been roughly handled and now reeled rather than walked, Raf thought for one wild instant that it was one of the crew from the spacer. The light hair, showing rings of curl, the tanned face which, beneath dirt and bruises, displayed a very familiar cast of features, the body hardly covered by rags of clothing—they were all so like those of his own kind that his mind at first refused to believe that this was *not* someone he knew. Yet as the party moved toward his hiding place he knew that he was facing a total stranger.

Stranger or no, Raf was sure that he saw a Terran. Had another ship made a landing on this planet? One of those earlier ships whose fate had been a mystery on their home world? Who—and when—and why? He huddled as close to the grid as he could get, alert to the slightest movement below as the prisoner faced his captors.

## 15. Arena

The dull pain which throbbed through Dalgard's skull with every beat of his heart was confusing, and it was hard to think clearly. But the colony scout, soon after he had fought his way back to consciousness, had learned that he was imprisoned somewhere in the globe ship. Just as he now knew that he had been brought across the sea from the continent on which Homeport was situated and that he had no hope of rescue.

He had seen little of his captors, and the guards, who had hustled him from one place of imprisonment to another, had not spoken to him, nor had he tried to communicate with them. At first he had been too sick and confused, then too wary. These were clearly Those Others and the conditioning which had surrounded him from birth had instilled in him a deep distrust of the former masters of Astra.

Now Dalgard was more alert, and his being brought to this room in what was certainly the center of the alien civilization made him believe that he was about to meet the rulers of the enemy. So he stared curiously about him as the guards jostled him through the door.

On a dais fashioned of heaped-up rainbow-colored pads were three aliens, their legs folded under them at what seemed impossible angles. One wore the black wrappings, the breastplate of the guards, but the other two had indulged their love of color in weird, eye-disturbing combinations of shades in the bandages wrapping the thin limbs and paunchy bodies. They were, as far as he could see through the thick layers of paint overlaying their skins, older than their officer companion. But nothing in their attitude suggested that age had mellowed them.

Dalgard was brought to stand before the trio as before a tribunal of judges. His sword-knife had been taken from his belt before he had regained his senses, his hands were twisted behind his back and locked together in a bar and hoop arrangement. He certainly could offer little threat to the company, yet they ringed him in, weapons ready, watching his every move. The scout licked cracked lips. There was one thing they could not control, could not prevent him from doing. Somewhere, not too far away, was help ...

Not from the merpeople, but he was sure that he had been in contact with another friendly mind. Since the hour of his awakening on board the globe ship, when he had half-consciously sent out an appeal for aid over the band which united him with Sssuri's race, and had touched that other consciousness—not the cold alien stream about him—he had been sure that somewhere within the enemy throng there was a potential savior. Was it among those who manned the strange flyer, those the merpeople had spied upon but whom he had not yet seen?

Dalgard had striven since that moment of contact to keep in touch with the nebulous other mind, to project his need for help. But he had been unable to enter in freely as he could with his own kind, or with Sssuri and the sea people. Now, even as he stood in the heart of the enemy territory completely at the mercy of the aliens, he felt, more strongly than ever before, that another, whose mind he could not enter and yet who was in some queer way sensitive to his appeal, was close at hand. He searched the painted faces before him trying to probe behind each locked mask, but he was certain that the one he sought was not there. Only—he must be! The contact was so strong—Dalgard's startled eyes went to the wall behind the dais, tried vainly to trace what could only be felt. He would be willing to give a knife oath that the stranger was within seeing, listening distance at this minute!

While he was so engrossed in his own problem, the guard had moved. The hooped bar which locked his wrists was loosened, and his arms, each tight in the grip of one of the warriors were brought out before him. The officer on the dais tossed a metal ring to one of the guards.

Roughly the warrior holding Dalgard's left arm forced the band over his hand and jerked it up his forearm as far as it would go. As it winked in the light the scout was reminded of a similar bracelet he had seen—where? On the front leg of the snake-devil he had shot!

The officer produced a second ring, slipping it smoothly over his own arm, adjusting it to touch bare skin and not the wrappings which served him as a sleeve. Dalgard thought he understood. A device to facilitate communication. And straightway he was wary. When his ancestors had first met the merpeople, they had established a means of speech through touch, the palm of one resting against the palm of the other. In later generations, when they had developed their new senses, physical contact had not been necessary. However, here—Dalgard's eyes narrowed, the line along his jaw was hard.

He had always accepted the merpeople's estimate of Those Others, that their ancient enemies were all-seeing and all-knowing, with mental powers far beyond their own definition or description. Now he half expected to be ruthlessly mind-invaded, stripped of everything the enemy desired to know.

So he was astonished when the words which formed in his thoughts were simple, almost childish. And while he prepared to answer them, another part of him watched and listened, waiting for the attack he was sure would come.

"You—are—who—what?"

He forced a look of astonishment. Nor did he make the mistake of answering that mentally. If Those Others did not know he could use the mind speech, why betray his power?

"I am of the stars," he answered slowly, aloud, using the speech of Homeport. He had so little occasion to talk lately that his voice sounded curiously rusty and harsh in his own ears. Nor had he the least idea of the impression those few archaically accented words would have on one who heard them.

To Dalgard's inner surprise the answer did not astonish his interrogator. The alien officer might well have been expecting to hear just that. But he pulled off his own arm band before he turned to his fellows with a spurt of the twittering speech they used among themselves. While the two civilians were still trilling, the officer edged forward an inch or so and stared at Dalgard intently as he replaced the band.

"You not look—same—as others—"

"I do not know what you mean. Here are not others like me."

One of the civilians twitched at the officer's sleeve, apparently demanding a translation, but the other shook him off impatiently.

"You come from sky—now?"

Dalgard shook his head, then realized that gesture might not mean anything to his audience. "Long ago before I was, my people came."

The alien digested that, then again took off his band before he relayed it to his companions. The excited twitter of their speech scaled up.

"You travel with the beasts—" the alien's accusation came crisply while the others gabbled. "That which hunts could not have tracked you had not the stink of the beast things been on you."

“I know no beasts,” Dalgard faced up to that squarely. “The sea people are my friends!”

It was hard to read any emotion on these lacquered and bedaubed faces, but before the officer once more broke bracelet contact, Dalgard did sense the other’s almost hysterical aversion. The scout might just have admitted to the most revolting practices as far as the alien was concerned. After he had translated, all three of those on the dais were silent. Even the guards edged away from the captive as if in some manner they might be defiled by proximity. One of the civilians made an emphatic statement, got creakily to his feet, and walked always as if he would have nothing more to do with this matter. After a second or two of hesitation his fellow followed his example.

The officer turned the bracelet around in his fingers, his dark eyes with their slitted pupils never leaving Dalgard’s face. Then he came to a decision. He pushed the ring up his arm, and the words which reached the prisoner were coldly remote, as if the captive were no longer judged an intelligent living creature but something which had no right of existence in a well-ordered universe.

“Beast friends with beast. As the beasts—so shall you end. It is spoken.”

One of the guards tore the bracelet from Dalgard’s arm, trying not to touch the scout’s flesh in the process. And those who once more shackled his wrists ostentatiously wiped their hands up and down the wrappings on their thighs afterwards.

But before they jabbed him into movement with the muzzles of their weapons, Dalgard located at last the source of that disturbing mental touch, not only located it, but in some manner broke through the existing barrier between the strange mind and his and communicated as clearly with it as he might have with Sssuri. And the excitement of his discovery almost led to self-betrayal!

Terran! One of those who traveled with the aliens? Yet he read clearly the other’s distrust of that company, the fact that he lay in concealment here without their knowledge. And he was not unfriendly—surely he could not be a Peaceman of Pax! Another fugitive from a newly-come colony ship—? Dalgard beamed a warning to the other. If he who was free could only reach the merpeople! It might mean the turning point in their whole venture!

Dalgard was furiously planning, simplifying, trying to impress the most imperative message on that other mind as he stumbled away in the midst of the guards. The stranger was confused, apparently Dalgard’s arrival, his use of the mind touch, had been an overwhelming surprise. But if he could only make the right move—would make it—The scout from Homeport had no idea what was in store for him, but with one of his own breed here and suspicious of the aliens he had at least a slim chance. He snapped the thread of communication. Now he must be ready for any opportunity—

Raf watched that amazing apparition go out of the room below. He was shaking with a chill born of no outside cold. First the shock of hearing that language, queerly accented as the words were, then that sharp contact, mind to mind. He was being clearly warned against revealing himself. The stranger was a Terran, Raf would swear to that. So somewhere on this world there was a Terran colony! One of those legendary ships of outlaws, who had taken to space during the rule of Pax, had made the crossing safely and had here established a foothold.

While one part of Raf’s brain fitted together the jigsaw of bits and patches of information, the other section dealt with that message of warning the other had beamed to him. The pilot knew that the captive must be in immediate danger. He could not understand all that had happened



in that interview with the aliens, but he was left with the impression that the prisoner had been not only tried but condemned. And it was up to him to help.

But how? By the time he got back to the flutter or was able to find Hobart and the others, it might already be too late. *He* must make the move, and soon, for there had been unmistakable urgency in the captive's message. Raf's hands fumbled at the grid before him, and then he realized that the opening was far too small to admit him to the room on the other side of the wall.

To return to the underground ways might be a waste of time, but he could see no other course open to him. What if he could not find the captive later? Where in the maze of the half-deserted city could he hope to come across the trail again? Even as he sorted out all the points which could defeat him, Raf's hands and feet felt for the notched steps which would take him down. He had gone only two floors when he was faced with a grille opening which was much larger. On impulse he stopped to measure it, sure he could squeeze through here, if he could work loose the grid.

Prying with one hand and a tool from his belt pouch, he struggled not only against the stubborn metal but against time. That strange mental communication had ceased. Though he was sure that he still received a trace of it from time to time, just enough to reassure him that the prisoner was still alive. And each time it touched him Raf redoubled his efforts on the metal clasps of the grid. At last his determination triumphed, and the grille swung out, to fall with an appalling clatter to the floor.

The pilot thrust his feet through the opening and wriggled desperately, expecting any moment to confront a reception committee drawn by the noise. But when he reached the floor, the hallway was still vacant. In fact, he was conscious of a hush in the whole building, as if those who made their homes within its walls were elsewhere. That silence acted on him as a spur.

Raf ran along the corridor, trying to subdue the clatter of his space boots, coming to a downward ramp. There he paused, unable to decide whether to go down—until he caught sight of a party of aliens below, walking swiftly enough to suggest that they too were in a hurry.

This small group was apparently on its way to some gathering. And in it for the first time the Terran saw the women of the aliens, or at least the fully veiled, gliding creatures he guessed were the females of the painted people. There were four of them in the group ahead, escorted by two of the males, and the high fluting of their voices resounded along the corridor as might the cheeping of birds. If the males were colorful in their choice of body wrappings, the females were gorgeous beyond belief, as cloudy stuff which had the changing hues of Terran opals frothed about them to completely conceal their figures.

The harsher twittering of the men had an impatient note, and the whole party quickened pace until their glide was close to an undignified trot. Raf, forced to keep well behind lest his boots betray him, fumed.

They did not go into the open, but took another way which sloped down once more. Luckily the journey was not a long one. Ahead was light which suggested the outdoors.

Raf sucked in his breath as he came out a goodly distance behind the aliens. Established in what was once a court surrounded by the towers and buildings of the city was a miniature of that other arena where he had seen the dead lizard things. The glittering, gayly dressed aliens were taking their places on the tiers of seats. But the place which had been built to accommodate at least a thousand spectators now housed less than half the number. If this was the extent of the alien nation, it was the dregs of a dwindling race.

Directly below where Raf lingered in an aisle dividing the tiers of seats, there was a manhole opening with a barred gate across it, an entrance to the sand-covered enclosure. And fortunately the aliens were all clustered close to the oval far from that spot.

Also the attention of the audience was firmly riveted on events below. A door at the sand level had been flung open, and through it was now hustled the prisoner. Either the aliens still possessed some idea of fair play or they hoped to prolong a contest to satisfy their own pleasure, for the captive's hands were unbound and he clutched a spear.

Remembering far-off legends of earlier and more savage civilizations on his own world, Raf was now sure that the lone man below was about to fight for his life. The question was, against what?

Another of the mouthlike openings around the edge of the arena opened, and one of the furry people shambled out, weaving weakly from side to side as he came, a spear in his scaled paws. He halted a step or two into the open, his round head swinging from side to side, spittle drooling from his gaping mouth. His body was covered with raw sores and bare patches from which the fur had been torn away, and it was apparent that he had long been the victim of ill-usage, if not torture.

Shrill cries arose from the alien spectators as the furred one blinked in the light and then sighted the man some feet away. He stiffened, his arm drew back, the spear poised. Then as suddenly it dropped to his side, and he fell on his knees before wriggling across the sand, his paws held out imploringly to his fellow captive.

The cries from the watching aliens were threatening. Several rose in their seats gesturing to the two below. And Raf, thankful for their absorption, sped down to the manhole, discovering to his delight it could be readily opened from his side. As he edged it around, there was another sound below. This was no high-pitched fluting from aliens deprived of their sport, but a hissing nightmare cry.

Raf's line of vision, limited by the door, framed a portion of scaled back, as it looked, immediately below him. His hand went to the blast bombs as he descended the runway, and his boots hit the sand just as the drama below reached its climax.

The furred one lay prone in the sand, uncaring. Above that mistreated body, the human stood in the half-crouch of a fighting man, the puny spear pointed up bravely at a mark it could not hope to reach, the soft throat of one of the giant lizards. The reptile did not move to speedily destroy. Instead, hissing, it reared above the two as if studying them with a vicious intelligence. But there was no time to wonder how long it would delay striking.

Raf's strong teeth ripped loose the tag end of the blast bomb, and he lobbed it straight with a practiced arm so that the ball spiraled across the arena to come to rest between the massive hind legs of the lizard. He saw the man's eyes widen as they fastened on him. And then the human captive flung himself to the earth, half covering the body of the furred one. The reptile grabbed in the same instant, its grasping claws cutting only air, and before it could try a second time the bomb went off.

Literally torn apart by the explosion, the creature must have died at once. But the captive moved. He was on his feet again, pulling his companion up with him, before the startled spectators could guess what had happened. Then half carrying the other prisoner, he ran, not onward to the waiting Raf, but for the gate through which he had come into the arena. At the same time a message beat into the Terran's brain—

“This way!”

Avoiding bits of horrible refuse, Raf obeyed that order, catching up in a couple of strides with the other two and linking his arm through the dangling one of the furred creature to take some of the strain from the stranger.

“Have you any more of the power things?” the words came in the archaic speech of his own world.

“Two more bombs,” he answered.

“We may have to blow the gate here,” the other panted breathlessly.

Instead Raf drew his stun gun. The gate was already opening, a wedge of the painted warriors heading through, flame-throwers ready. He sprayed wide, and on the highest level. A spout of fire singed the cloth of his tunic across the top of his shoulder as one of the last aliens fired before his legs buckled and he went down. Then, opposition momentarily gone, the two with their semiconscious charge stumbled over the bodies of the guards and reached the corridor beyond.

## 16. Surprise Attack

So much had happened so quickly during the past hour that Dalgard had no chance to plan or even sort out impressions in his mind. He had no guess as to where this stranger, now taking some of the burden of the wounded merman from him, had sprung from. The other's clothing, the helmet covering his head were more akin to those worn by the aliens than they were to the dress of the colonist. Yet the man beneath those trappings was of the same breed as his own people. And he could not believe he was a Peaceman of Pax—all he had done here spoke against those legends of dark Terran days Dalgard had heard from childhood. But where had he come from? The only answer could be another outlaw colony ship.

“We are in the inner ways,” Dalgard tried to reach the mind of the merman as they pounded on into the corridors which led from the arena. “Do you know these—” He had a faint hope that the sea man because of his longer captivity might have a route of escape to suggest.

“—down to the lower levels—” the thought came slowly, forced out by a weakening will. “Lower—levels—roads to the sea—”

That was what Dalgard had been hoping for, some passage which would run seaward and so to safety, such as he had found with Sssuri in that other city.

“What are we hunting?” the stranger broke in, and Dalgard realized that perhaps the other did not follow the mind talk. His words had an odd inflection, a clipped accent which was new.

“A lower way,” he returned in the speech of his own people.

“To the right.” The merman, struggling against his own weakness, had raised his head and was looking about as one who searches for a familiar landmark.

There was a branching way to the right, and Dalgard swung into it, bringing the other two after him. This was a narrow passage, and twice they brushed by sealed doors. It brought them up against a blank wall. The stranger wheeled, his odd weapon ready, for they could hear the shouts of pursuers behind them. But the merman pulled free of Dalgard and went down on the floor to dig with his taloned fingers at some depressions there.

“Open here,” the thought came clearly, “then down!”

Dalgard went down on one knee, able now to see the outline of a trap door. It must be pried up. His sword-knife was gone, the spear they had given him for the arena he had dropped when he dragged the merman out of danger. He looked to the stranger. About the other's narrow hips was slung a belt from which hung pouches and tools the primitive colonist could not evaluate. But there was also a bush knife, and he reached for it.

“The knife—”

The stranger glanced down at the blade he wore in surprise, as if he had forgotten it. Then with one swift movement he drew it from its sheath and flipped it to Dalgard.

On the track behind the clamor was growing, and the colony scout worked with concentration at his task of fitting the blade into the crack and freeing the door. As soon as there was space enough, the merman's claws recklessly slid under, and he added what strength he could to Dalgard's. The door arose and fell back onto the pavement with a clang, exposing a dark pit.

“Got ‘em!” the words burst from the stranger. He had pressed the firing button of his weapon. Where the passage in which they stood met the main corridor, there was an agitated shouting and then sudden silence.

“Down—” The merman had crawled to the edge of the opening. From it rose a dank, fetid smell. Now that the noise in the corridor was stilled Dalgard could hear something: the sound of water.

“How do we get down?” he questioned the merman.

“It is far, there are no climbing holds—”

Dalgard straightened. Well, he supposed, even a leap into that was better than to be taken a second time by Those Others. But was he ready for such a desperate solution?

“A long way down?” The stranger leaned over to peer into the well.

“He says so,” Dalgard nodded at the merman. “And there are no climbing holds.”

The stranger plucked at the front of his tunic with one hand, still holding his weapon with the other. From an opening he drew a line, and Dalgard grabbed it eagerly, testing the first foot with a sharp jerk. He had never seen such stuff, so light of weight and yet so tough. His delight reached the merman, who sat up to gaze owlily at the coils the stranger pulled from concealment.

They used the door of the well for the lowering beam, hitching the cord about it. Then the merman noosed one end about him, and Dalgard, the door taking some of the strain, lowered him. The end of the cord was perilously close to the scout’s fingers when there was a signaling pull from below, and he was free to reel in the loose line. He turned to the stranger.

“You go. I’ll watch them.” The other waved his weapon to the corridor.

There was some sense to that, Dalgard had to agree. He made fast the end of the cord and went in his turn into the dark, burning the palm of one hand before he was able to slacken the speed of his descent. Then he landed thigh-deep in water, from which arose an unpleasant smell.

“All right—Come—” he put full force into the thought he beamed at the stranger above. When the other did not obey, Dalgard began to wonder if he should climb to his aid. Had the aliens broken through and overwhelmed the other? Or what had happened? The rope whisked up out of his hands. And a moment later a voice rang eerily overhead.

“Clear below! Coming down!”

Dalgard scrambled out of the space under the opening, heading on into the murk where the merman waited. There was a splash as the stranger hit the stream, and the rope lashed down behind him at their united jerk.

“Where do we go from here?” The voice carried through the dark.

Scaled fingers hooked about Dalgard’s right hand and tugged him on. He reached back in turn and locked grip with the stranger. So united the three splashed on through the rancid liquid. In time they came out of the first tunnel into a wider section, but here the odor was worse, catching in their throats, making them sway dizzily. There seemed to be no end to these ways, which Raf guessed were the drains of the ancient city.

Only the merman appeared to have a definite idea of where they were going, though he halted once or twice when they came to a side passage as if thinking out their course. Since the man

from the arena accepted the furred one's guidance, Raf depended upon it too. Though he wondered if they would ever find their way out into the open once more.

He was startled by sudden pain as the hand leading him tightened its grip to bone-bruising force. They had stopped, and the liquid washed about them until Raf wondered if he would ever feel clean again. When they started on, they moved much more swiftly. His companions were in a hurry, but Raf was unprepared for the sight which broke as they came out in a high-roofed cavern.

There was an odd, cold light there—but that light was not all he saw. Drawn up on a ledge rising out of the contaminated stream were rows of the furred people, all sitting in silence, bone spears resting across their knees, long knives at their belts. They watched with round, unblinking eyes the three who had just come out of the side passage. The rescued merman loosened his grip on Dalgard's hand and waded forward to confront that quiet, waiting assembly. Neither he nor his fellows made any sound, and Raf guessed that they had some other form of communication, perhaps the same telepathic ability to broadcast messages which this amazing man beside him displayed.

"They are of his tribe," the other explained, sensing that Raf could not understand. "They came here to try to save him, for he is one of their Speakers-for-Many."

"Who are they? Who are you?" Raf asked the two questions which had been with him ever since the wild adventure had begun.

"They are the People-of-the-Sea, our friends, our knife brothers. And I am of Homeport. My people came from the stars in a ship, but not a ship of this world. We have been here for many years."

The mermen were moving now. Several had waded forward to greet their chief, aiding him ashore. But when Raf moved toward the ledge, Dalgard put out a restraining hand.

"Until we are summoned—no. They have their customs. And this is a party-for-war. This tribe knows not my people, save by rumor. We wait."

Raf looked over the ranks of the sea folk. The light came from globes borne by every twentieth warrior, a globe in which something that gave off phosphorescent gleams swam around and around. The spears which each merman carried were slender and wickedly barbed, the knives almost sword length. The pilot remembered the flame-throwers of the aliens and could not see any victory for the merman party.

"No, knife blade against the fire—that is not equal."

Raf started, amazed and then irritated that the other had read his thoughts so easily.

"But what else can be done? Some stand must be taken, even if a whole tribe goes down to the Great Dark because they do it."

"What do you mean?" Raf demanded.

"Is it not the truth that Those Others went across the sea to plunder their forgotten storehouse of knowledge?" countered the other. He spoke slowly as if he found difficulty in clothing thoughts with words. "Sssuri said that was why they came."

Raf, remembering what he had seen—the stripping of shelves and tables of the devices that were stored on them—could only nod.

"Then it is also true that soon they will have worse than fire with which to hunt us down. And they shall turn against your colony as they will against Homeport. For the mermen, and their

own records, have taught us that it is their nature to rule, that they can live in peace only when all living things on this world are their slaves.”

“My colony?” Raf was momentarily diverted. “I’m one of a spacer’s crew, not the member of any colony!”

Dalgard stared at the stranger. His guess had been right. A new ship, another ship which had recently crossed deep space to find them had flown the dark wastes even as the First Elders had done! It must be that more outlaws had come to find a new home! This was wonderful news, news he must take to Homeport. Only, it was news which must wait. For the sea people had come to a decision of their own.

“What are they going to do now?” Raf asked.

The mermen were not retreating, instead they were slipping from the ledge in regular order, forming somewhat crooked ranks in the water.

Dalgard did not reply at once, making mind touch not only to ask but to impress his kinship on the sea people. They were united in a single-minded purpose, with failure before them—unless—He turned to the stranger.

“They go to war upon Those Others. He who guided us here knows also that the new knowledge they have brought into the city is danger. If an end is not put to it before they can use it, then”—he shrugged—“the mermen must retreat into the depths. And we, who can not follow them—” He made a quick, thrusting gesture as if using a knife on his own throat. “For a time Those Others have been growing fewer in number and weaker. Their children are not many and sometimes there are years when none are born at all. And they have forgotten so much. But now, perhaps they can increase once more, not only in wisdom and strength of arms, but in numbers. The mermen have kept a watch on them, content to let matters rest, sure that time would defeat them. But now, time no longer fights on our side.”

Raf watched the furred people with their short spears, their knives. He recalled that rocky island where the aliens had unleashed the fire. The expeditionary force would not have a chance against that.

“But *your* weapons would.” The words addressed to him were clear, though they had not been spoken aloud. Raf’s hand went to the pocket where two more of the blast bombs rested. “And this is your battle as much as ours!”

But it wasn’t his fight! Dalgard had gone too far with that suggestion. Raf had no ties on this world, the *RS 10* was waiting to take him away. It was strictly against all orders, all his training, for him to become involved in alien warfare. The pilot’s hand went back to his belt. He was not going to allow himself to be pushed onto anything foolish, whether this “colonist” could read his mind or not.

The first ranks of the mermen had already waded past them, heading into the way down which the escaping prisoners had come. To Raf’s eyes none of them paid any attention to the two humans as they went, though they were probably in mental touch with his companion.

“You are already termed one of us in *their* eyes,” Dalgard was careful to use oral speech this time. “When you came to our rescue in the arena they believed that you were of our kind. Do you think you can return to walk safely through the city? So”—he drew a hissing breath of surprise when the thought which leaped into Raf’s mind was plain to Dalgard also—“you have—there are more of you there! But already Those Others may be moving against them because of what you have done!”

Raf who had been about to join the mermen stopped short. That aspect had not struck him before. What had happened to Soriki and the flitter, to the captain and Lablet, who had been in the heart of the enemy territory when he had challenged the aliens? It would be only logical that the painted people would consider them all dangerous now. He must get out of here, back to the flitter, try to help where unwittingly he had harmed—

Dalgard caught up with him. He had been able to read a little of what had passed through the other's mind. Though it was difficult to sort order out of the tangled thoughts. The longer he was with the stranger, the more aware he became of the differences between them. Outwardly they might appear of the same species, but inwardly—Dalgard frowned—there was something that he must consider later, when they had a thinking space. But now he could understand the other's agitation. It was very true that Those Others might turn on the stranger's fellows in retaliation for his deeds.

Together they joined the mermen. There was no talk, nothing to break the splashing sound of bodies moving against the current. As they pressed on, Raf was sure that this was not the same way they had come. And once more Dalgard answered his unspoken question.

“We seek another door into the city, one long known to these tribesmen.”

Raf would gladly have run, but he could not move faster than his guides, and while their pace seemed deliberate, they did not pause to rest. The whole city, he decided, must be honeycombed with these drains. After traversing a fourth tunnel, they climbed out of the flood onto a dry passage, which wormed along, almost turning on itself at times.

Side passages ran out from this corridor like rootlets from a parent root, and small parties of mermen broke from the regiment to follow certain ones, leaving without orders or farewells. At the fifth of these Dalgard touched Raf's arm and drew him aside.

“This is our way.” Tensely the scout waited. If the stranger refused, then the one plan the scout had formed during the past half-hour would fail. He still held to the hope that Raf, with what Raf carried, could succeed in the only project which would mean, perhaps not his safety nor the safety of the tribe he now marched among, but the eventual safety of Astra itself, the safety of all the harmless people of the sea, the little creatures of the grass and the sky, of his own land at Homeport. He would have to force Raf into action if need be. He did not use the mind touch; he knew now the unspoken resentment which followed that. If it became necessary—Dalgard's hands balled into fists—he would strike down the stranger—take from him—Swiftly he turned his thoughts from that. It might be easy, now that he had established mental contact with this off-worlder, for the other to pick up a thought as vivid as that.

But luckily Raf obediently turned into the side passage with the six mermen who were to attack at this particular point. The way grew narrower until they crept on hands and knees between rough walls which were not of the same construction as the larger tunnels. The smaller mermen had no difficulty in getting through, but twice Raf's equipment belt caught on projections and he had to fight his way free.

They crawled one by one into a ventilation shaft much like the one he had climbed at the Center. Dalgard's whisper reached him.

“We are now in the building which houses their sky ship.”

“I know that one,” Raf returned almost eagerly, glad at last to be back so close to familiar territory. He climbed up the hand-and footholds the sea-monster lamp disclosed, wishing the mermen ahead would speed up.



The grille at the head of the shaft had been removed, and the invaders arose one by one into a dim and dusty place of motionless machinery, which, by all tangible evidence, had not been entered for some time. But the cautious manner in which the sea people strung out to approach the far door argued that the same might not be true beyond.

For the first time Raf noticed that his human companion now held one of the knives of the merpeople, and he drew his stun gun. But he could not forget the flame-throwers which might at that very moment be trained upon the other side of that door by the aliens. They might be walking into a trap.

He half expected one of those disconcerting thought answers from Dalgard. But the scout was playing safe—nothing must upset the stranger. Confronted by what had to be done, he might be influenced into acting for them. So Dalgard strode softly ahead, apparently not interested in Raf.

One of the mermen worked at the door, using the point of his spear as a lever. Here again was a vista of machinery. But these machines were alive; a faint hum came from their casings. The mermen scattered, taking cover, a move copied by the two humans.

The pilot remained in hiding, but he saw one of the furred people running on as light-footedly as a shadow. Then his arm drew back, and he cast his spear. Raf fancied he could hear a faint whistle as the weapon cut the air. There was a cry, and the merman ran on, vanishing into the shadows, to return a second or two later wiping stains from his weapon. Out of their places of concealment, his fellows gathered about him. And the humans followed.

Now they were fronted by a ramp leading up, and the mermen took it quickly, their bare, scaled feet setting up a whispering echo which was drowned by the clomp of Raf's boots. Once more the party was alert, ready for trouble, and taking his cue from them, he kept his stun gun in his hand.

But the maneuver at the head of the ramp surprised him. For, though he had heard no signal, all the party but one plastered their bodies back against the wall, Dalgard pulling Raf into position beside him, the scout's muscular bare arm pinning the pilot into a narrow space. One merman stood at the crack of the door at the top of the ramp. He pushed the barrier open and crept in.

Meanwhile those who waited poised their spears, all aimed at that door. Raf fingered the button on his gun to "spray" as he had when he had faced the attack of the scavengers in the arena tunnels.

There was a cry, a shout with a summons in it. And the venturesome merman thudded back through the door. But he was not alone. Two of the black guardsmen, their flamers spitting fiery death, ran behind him, and the curling lash of one of those flames almost wreathed the runner before he swung aside. Raf fired without consciously aiming. Both of the sentries fell forward, to slide limply down the ramp.

Then Dalgard pulled him on. "The way is open," he said. "This is it!" There was an excited exultation in his voice.

## 17. Destruction Unleashed

The space they now entered must be the core of the building, Raf thought a little dazedly. For there, towering over them was the round bulb of the globe. And about its open hatch were piles of the material which he had last seen in the warehouse on the other continent. The unloading of the alien ship had been hastily interrupted.

Since neither the merman nor Dalgard took cover, Raf judged that they did not fear attack now. But when he turned his attention away from the ship, he found not only the colony scout but most of the sea people gathered about him as if waiting for some action on his part.

“What is it?” He could feel it, that strong pressure, that band united, in willing him into some move. His stubborn streak of independence made his reaction contrary. He was not going to be pushed into anything.

“In this hour,” Dalgard spoke aloud, avoiding the mind touch which might stiffen Raf’s rebellion. He wished that some older, wiser Elder from Homeport were there. So little time— Yet this stranger with practically no effort might accomplish all they had come to do, if he could only be persuaded into action. “In this hour, here is the heart of what civilization remains to Those Others. Destroy it, and it will not matter whether they kill us. For in the days to come they will have nothing left.”

Raf understood. This was why he had been brought here. They wanted him to use the blast bombs. And one part of him *was* calculating the best places to set his two remaining bombs for the wildest possible destruction. That part of him could accept the logic of Dalgard’s reasoning. He doubted if the aliens could repair the globe if it were damaged, and he was sure that much which they had brought back from the eastern continent was irreplaceable. The bombs had not been intended for such a use. They were defensive, anti-personal weapons to be employed as he had done against the lizard in the arena. But placed properly—Without thinking his hands went to the sealed pocket in the breast of his tunic.

Dalgard saw that gesture and inside him some taut cord began to unwind. Then the stranger’s hands dropped, and he swung around to face the colony scout squarely, a scowl twisting his black brows almost together.

“This isn’t my fight,” he stated flatly. “I’ve got to get back to the flitter, to my spacer—”

What was the matter? Dalgard tried to understand. If the aliens won now, this stranger was in as great a danger as were the rest of them. Did he believe that Those Others would allow any colony to be established on a world they ruled?

“There will be no future for you here,” he spoke slowly, trying with all his power to get through to the other. “They will not allow you to found another Homeport. You will have no colony—”

“Will you get it into your thick head,” burst out the pilot, “that I’m not here to start a colony! We can take off from this blasted planet whenever we want to. We didn’t come here to stay!”

Beneath the suntan, Dalgard’s face whitened. The other had come from no outlaw ship, seeking a refuge across space, as his own people had fled to a new life from tyranny. His first fears had been correct! This was a representative of Pax, doubtless sent to hunt down the descendants of those who had escaped its throttling dictatorship. The slender strangely garbed Terran might be of the same blood as his own, but he was as great an enemy as Those Others!

“Pax!” He did not know that he had said that word aloud.

The other laughed. “You are living back in history. Pax has been dead and gone almost two centuries. I’m of the Federation of Free Men—”

“Will the stranger use his fire now?” The question formed in Dalgard’s mind. The mermen were growing impatient, as well they might. This was no time for talk, but for action. Could Raf be persuaded to aid them? A Federation of Free Men—Free Men! That was what they were fighting for here and now.

“You are free,” he said. “The sea people won their freedom when Those Others fought among themselves. My people came across the star void in search of freedom, paying in blood to win it. But these, these are not the weapons of the free.” He pointed to the supplies about the globe, to the globe itself.

The mermen were waiting no longer. With the butts of their spears they smashed anything breakable. But the damage one could do by hand in the short space of time granted them—Raf was surprised that a guard was not already down upon them—was sharply limited. The piled-up secrets of an old race, a race which had once ruled a planet. He thought fleetingly of Labet’s preoccupation with this spoil, of Hobart’s hope of gaining knowledge they could take back with them. But would the aliens keep their part of the bargain? He no longer believed that.

Why not give these barbarians a chance, and the colonists. Sure, he was breaking the stiffest rule of the Service. But, perhaps by now the flutter was gone, he might never reach the *RS 10*. It was not his war, right enough. But he’d give the weaker side a fighting chance.

Dalgard followed him into the globe ship, climbing the ladders to the engine level, watching with curious eyes as Raf inspected the driving power of the ship and made the best disposition possible of one of the bombs.

Then they were on the ladder once more as the ship shook under them, plates buckling as a great wound tore three decks apart. Raf laughed recklessly. Now that he was committed to this course, he had a small-boy delight in the destruction.

“They won’t raise her again in a hurry,” he confided to Dalgard. But the other did not share his triumph.

“They come—we must move fast,” the scout urged.

When they jumped from the hatch, they discovered that the mermen had been busy in their turn. As many of the supplies as they could move had been pushed and piled into one great mass. Broken crystal littered the floor in shards and puddles of strange chemicals mingled smells to become a throat-rasping fog. Raf eyed those doubtfully. Some of those fumes might combine in the blast—

Once again Dalgard read his mind and waved the mermen back, sending them through the door to the ramp and the lower engine room. Raf stood in the doorway, the bomb in his hand, knowing that it was time for him to make the most accurate cast of his life.

The sphere left his fingers, was a gleam in the murky air. It struck the pile of material. Then the whole world was hidden by a blinding glare.

It was dark—black dark. And he was swinging back and forth through this total darkness. He was a ball, a blast bomb being tossed from hand to hand through the dark by painted warriors who laughed shrilly at his pain, tossed through the dark. Fear such as he had never known,

even under the last acceleration pressure of the take-off from Terra, beat through Raf's veins away from his laboring heart. He was helpless in the dark!

"Not alone—" the words came out of somewhere, he didn't know whether he heard them, or, in some queer way, felt them. "You are safe—not alone."

That brought a measure of comfort. But he was still in the dark, and he was moving—he could not will his hands to move—yet he was moving. He was being carried!

The flutter—he was back on the flutter! They were air-borne. But who was piloting?

"Captain! Soriki!" he appealed for reassurance. And then was aware that there was no familiar motor hum, none of that pressure of rushing air to which he had been so long accustomed that he missed it only now.

"You are safe—" Again that would-be comfort. But Raf tried to move his arms, twist his body, be sure that he rested in the flutter. Then another thought, only vaguely alarming at first, but which grew swiftly to panic proportions—He was in the alien globe—He was a prisoner!

"You are safe!" the words beat in his mind.

"But where—where?" he felt as if he were screaming that at the full power of his lungs. He must get out of this dark envelope, be free. Free! Free Men—He was Raf Kurbi of the Federation of Free Men, member of the crew of the Spacer *RS 10*. But there had been something else about free men—

Painfully he pulled fragments of pictures out of the past, assembled a jigsaw of wild action. And all of it ended in a blinding flash, blinding!

Raf cowered mentally if not physically, as his mind seized upon that last word. The blinding flash, then this depth of darkness. Had he been—?

"You are safe."

Maybe he was safe, he thought, with an anger born of honest fear, but was he—blind? And where was he? What had happened to him since that moment when the blast bomb had exploded?

"I am blind," he spat out, wanting to be told that his fears were only fears and not the truth.

"Your eyes are covered," the answer came quickly enough, and for a short space he was comforted until he realized that the reply was not a flat denial of his statement.

"Soriki?" he tried again. "Captain? Lablet?"

"Your companions"—there was a moment of hesitation, and then came what he was sure was the truth—"have escaped. Their ship took to the air when the Center was invaded."

So, he wasn't on the flutter. That was Raf's first reaction. Then, he must still be with the mermen, with the young stranger who claimed to be one of a lost Terran colony. But they couldn't leave him behind! Raf struggled against the power which held him motionless.

"Be quiet!" That was not soothing; it had the snap of a command, so sharp and with such authority in it that he obeyed. "You have been hurt; the gel must do its work. Sleep now. It is good to sleep—"

Dalgard walked by the hammock, using all the quieting power he possessed to ease the stranger, who now bore little resemblance to the lithe, swiftly moving, other-worldly figure of the day before. Stripped of his burned rags of clothing, coated with the healing stuff of the merpeople—that thick jelly substance which was their bulwark against illness and hurt—

lashed into a hammock of sea fibers, he had the outward appearance of a thick bundle of supplies. The scout had seen miracles of healing performed by the gel, he could only hope for one now. "Sleep—" he made the soothing suggestion over and over and felt the other begin to relax, to sink into the semicomma in which he must rest for at least another day.

It was true that they had watched the strange flying machine take off from a roof top. And none of the mermen who had survived the battle which had raged through the city had seen any of the off-worlder's kind among the living or the dead of the alien forces. Perhaps, thinking Raf dead, they had returned to their space ship.

Now there were other, more immediate, problems to be met. They had done everything that they could to insure the well-being of the stranger, without whom they could not have delivered that one necessary blow which meant a new future for Astra.

The aliens were not all dead. Some had gone down under the spears of the mermen, but more of the sea people had died by the superior weapons of their foes. To the aliens, until they discovered what had happened to the globe and its cargo, it would seem an overwhelming triumph, for less than a quarter of the invading force fought its way back to safety in the underground ways. Yes, it would appear to be a victory for Those Others. But—now time was on the other side of the scales.

Dalgard doubted if the globe would ever fly again. And the loss of the storehouse plunder could never be repaired. By its destruction they had insured the future for their people, the mermen, the slowly growing settlement at Homeport.

They were well out of the city, in the open country, traveling along a rocky gorge, through which a river provided a highway to the sea. Dalgard had no idea as yet how he could win back across the waste of water to his own people. While the mermen with whom he had stormed the city were friendly, they were not of the tribes he knew, and their own connection with the eastern continent was through messages passed between islands and the depths.

Then there was the stranger—Dalgard knew that the ship which had brought him to this planet was somewhere in the north. Perhaps when he recovered, they could travel in that direction. But for the moment it was good just to be free, to feel the soft winds of summer lick his skin, to walk slowly under the sun, carrying the little bundle of things which belonged to the stranger, with a knife once more at his belt and friends about him.

But within the quarter-hour their peace was broken. Dalgard heard it first, his landsman's ears serving him where the complicated sense which gave the sea people warning did not operate. That shrill keening—he knew it of old. And at his warning the majority of the mermen plunged into the stream, becoming drifting shadows below the surface of the water. Only the four who were carrying the hammock stood their ground. But the scout, having told them to deposit their burden under the shelter of an overhanging ledge of rock, waved them to join their fellows. Until that menace in the sky was beaten, they dare not travel overland.

Was it still after him alone, hunting him by some mysterious built-in sense as it had overseas? He could see it now, moving in circles back and forth across the gorge, probably ready to dive on any prey venturing into the open.

Had it not been for the stranger, Dalgard could have taken to the water almost as quickly and easily as his companions. But they could not float the pilot down the stream, thus dissolving the thick coating of gel which was healing his terrible flash burns. And Those Others, were they following the trail of their mechanical hound as they had before?

Dalgard sent out questing tendrils of thought. Nowhere did he encounter the flashes which announced the proximity of Those Others. No, it would appear that they had unleashed the

hound to do what damage it could, perhaps to serve them as a marker for a future counterattack. At present it was alone. And he relayed that information to the mermen.

If they could knock out the hound—his hand went to the tender scrape on his own scalp where that box had left its glancing mark—if they could knock out the hound—But how? As accurate marksmen as the mermen were with their spears, he was not sure they could bring down the box. Its sudden darts and dips were too erratic. Then what? Because as long as it bobbed there, he and the stranger were imprisoned in this pocket of the gorge wall.

Dalgard sat down, the bundle of the stranger's belongings beside him. Then, he carefully unfastened the scorched cloth which formed that bag and examined its contents. There was the belt with its pouches, sheaths, and tool case. And the weapon which the stranger had used to such good effect during their escape from the arena. Dalgard took up the gun. It was light in weight, and it fitted into his hand almost as if it had been molded to his measure.

He aimed at the hovering box, pressed the button as he had seen the other do, with no results. The stun ray, which had acted upon living creatures, could not govern the delicate mechanism in the hound's interior. Dalgard laid it aside. There were no more of the bombs, nor would they have been effective against such a target. As far as he could see, there was nothing among Raf's possessions which could help them now.

One of the black shadows in the water moved to shore. The box swooped, death striking at the merman who ran to shelter. A second followed him, eluding the attack of the hound by a matter of inches. Now the box buzzed angrily.

Dalgard, catching their thoughts, hurried to aid them. They undid the knots of the hammock about the helpless stranger, leaving about him only the necessary bandage ties. Now they had a crude net, woven, as Dalgard knew, of undersea fibers strong enough to hold captive plunging monsters a dozen times the size of the box. If they could net it!

He had seen the exploits of the merman hunters, knew their skill with net and spear. But to scoop a flying thing out of the air was a new problem.

"Not so!" the thought cut across his. "They have used such as this to hunt us before, long ago. We had believed they were all lost. It must be caught and broken, or it will hunt and kill and hunt again, for it does not tire nor can it be beaten from any trail it is set upon. Now—"

"I will do that, for you have the knowledge—" the scout cut in quickly. After his other meeting with the hound he had no liking for the task he had taken on, but there must be bait to draw the box within striking distance.

"Stand upright and move toward those rocks." The mermen changed position, the net, now with stones in certain loops to weigh it, caught in their three-fingered hands.

Dalgard moved, fighting against hunching his shoulders, against hurrying the pace. He saw the shadow of the flitting death, and flung himself down beside the boulder the mermen had pointed out. Then he rolled over, half surprised not to be struck.

The hound was still in the air but over it now was draped the net, the rocks in its fringes weighing it down in spite of its jerky attempts to rise. In its struggles to be free, it might almost have led the watcher to believe that it had intelligence of a sort. Now the mermen were coming out of the stream, picking up rocks as they advanced. And a hail of stones flew through the air, while others of the sea people sprang to catch the dangling ends of the net and drag the captive to earth.

In the end they smashed it completely, burying the remains under a pile of rocks. Then, retrieving their net, they once more fastened Raf into it and turned downstream, as intent as

ever upon reaching the sea. Dalgard wondered whether Those Others would ever discover what had become of their hound. Or had it in some way communicated with its masters, so that now they were aware that it had been destroyed. But he was sure they had nothing more to fear, that the way to the sea was open.

In mid-morning of the second day they came out upon shelving sand and saw before them the waves which promised safety and escape to the mermen. Dalgard sat down in the blue-gray sand beside Raf. The sea people had assured him that the stranger was making a good recovery, that within a matter of hours he could be freed from his cocoon of healing.

Dalgard squinted at the sun sparkling on the waves. Where now? To the north where the space ship waited? If what he read in Raf's mind was true the other wanted to leave Astra, to voyage back to that other world which was only a legend to Dalgard, and a black, unhappy legend at that. If the Elders were here, had a chance to contact these men from Terra—Dalgard's eyes narrowed, would they choose to? Another chain of thought had been slowly developing in his mind during these past hours when he had been so closely companioned with the stranger. And almost he had come to a decision which would have seemed very odd even days before.

No, there was no way of suddenly bringing the Elders here, of transferring his burden of decision to them. Dalgard cupped his chin in his hand and tried to imagine what it would be like to shut oneself up in a small metal-walled spacer and set out blindly to leave one world for another. His ancestors had done that, and they had traveled in cold sleep, ignorant of whether they would ever reach their goal. They had been very brave, or very desperate, men.

But—Dalgard measured sand, sun, and sky, watching the mermen sporting in the waves—but for him Astra was enough. He wanted nothing but this land, this world. There was nothing which drew him back. He would try to locate the spacer for the sake of the stranger; Astra owed Raf all they could manage to give him. But the ship was as alien to Homeport as it now existed as the city's globe might have been.

## 18. Not Yet—

Raf lay on his back, cushioned in the sand, his face turned up to the sky. Moisture smarted in his eyes, trickled down his cheeks as he tried to will himself to *see*! The yellow haze which had been his day had faded into grayness and now to the dark he feared so much that he dared not even speak of it. Somewhere over him the stars were icy points of light—but he could not see them. They were very far away, but no farther than he was from safety, from comfort (now the spacer seemed a haven of ease), from the expert treatment which might save, save his sight!

He supposed he should be thankful to that other one who was a slow voice speaking out of the mist, a thought now and then when his inner panic brought him almost to the breaking point. In some manner he had been carried out of the reach of the aliens, treated for his searing wounds, and now he was led along, fed, tended—Why didn't they go away and leave him alone! He had no chance of reaching the spacer—

It was so easy to remember those mountains, the heights over which he had lifted the flitter. There wasn't one chance in a million of his winning over those and across the miles of empty plains beyond to where the *RS 10* stood waiting, ready to rise again. The crew must believe him dead. His fists clenched upon sand, and it gritted between his fingers, sifted away. Why wasn't he dead! Why had that barbarian dragged him here, continued to coax him, put food into his hands, those hands which were only vague shapes when he held them just before his straining, aching eyes.

"It is not as bad as you think," the words came again out of the fog, spoken with a gentleness which rasped Raf's nerves. "Healing is not done in a second, or even in a day. You cannot force the return of strength—"

A hand, warm, vibrant with life, pressed on his forehead—a human, flesh-covered hand, not one of the cool, scaled paws of the furred people. Though those hands, too, had been laid upon him enough during the past few days, steadying him, leading him, guiding him to food and water. Now, under that firm, knowing touch he felt some of the ever-present fear subside, felt a relaxation.

"My ship—They will take off without me!" He could not help but voice that plaint, as he had so many times before during that foggy, nightmare journey.

"They have not done so yet."

He struggled up, flung off that calming hand, turned angrily toward where he thought the other was. "How can you be sure?"

"Word has come. The ship is still there, though the small flyer has returned to it."

This assurance was something new. Raf's suspicions could not stand up against the note of certainty in the other's voice. He got awkwardly to his feet. If the ship was still here, then they must still think him alive—They might come back! He had a chance—a real chance!

"Then they are waiting for me—They'll come!"

He could not see the soberness with which Dalgard listened to that. The star ship had not lifted, that message had found its way south, passed along by hopper and merman. But the scout doubted if the explorers were waiting for the return of Raf. He believed that they would not have left the city had they not thought the pilot already dead.



As to going north now—His picture of the land ahead had been built up from reports gained from the sea people. It could be done, but with Raf to be nursed and guided, lacking even the outrigger Dalgard had used in home waters, it would take days—weeks, probably—to cover the territory which lay between them and the plains where the star ship had planeted.

But he owed Raf a great deal, and it was summer, the season of warm calms. So far he had not been able to work out any plan for a return to his own land. It might be that they were both doomed to exile. But it was not necessary to face that drear future yet, not until they had expended every possible effort. So now he said willingly enough, “We are going north.”

Raf sat down again in the sand. He wanted to run, to push on until his feet were too tired to carry him any farther. But now he fought that impulse, lay down once more. Though he doubted if he could sleep.

Dalgard watched the stars, sketched out a map of action for the morning. They must follow the shore line where they could keep in touch with the mermen, though along this coast the sea people did not come to land with the freedom their fellows showed on the eastern continent—they had lived too long in fear of Those Others.

But since the war party had reached the coast, there had been no sign of any retaliation, and as several days passed, Dalgard had begun to believe that they had little to fear. Perhaps the blow they had struck at the heart of the citadel had been more drastic than they had hoped. He had listened since that hour in the gorge for the shrilling of one of the air hounds. And when it did not come the thought that maybe it was the last of its kind had been heartening.

At last the scout lay down beside the off-world man, listening to the soft hiss of waves on sand, the distant clattering of night insects. And his last waking thought was a wish for his bow.

There was another day of patient plodding; two, three. Raf, led by the hand, helped over rocks and obstacles which were only dark blurs to his watering eyes, raged inwardly and sometimes outwardly, against the slowness of their advance, his own helplessness. His fear grew until he refused to credit the fact that the blurs were sharpening in outline, that he could now count five fingers on the hand he sometimes waved despairingly before his face.

When he spoke of the future, he never said “if we reach the ship” but always “when,” refusing to admit that perhaps they would not be in time. And Dalgard by his anxiety, tried to get more news from the north.

“When we get there, will you come back to earth with us?” the pilot asked suddenly on the fifth day.

It was a question Dalgard had once asked himself. But now he knew the answer; there was only one he dared give.

“We are not ready—”

“I don’t understand what you mean.” Raf was almost querulous. “It is your home world. Pax is gone; the Federation would welcome you eagerly. Just think what it would mean—a Terran colony among the stars!”

“A Terran colony.” Dalgard put out a hand, steadied Raf over a stretch of rough shingle.

“Yes, once we were a Terran colony. But—can you now truthfully swear that I am a Terran like yourself?”

Raf faced the misty figure, trying to force his memory to put features there, to sharpen outlines. The scout was of middle height, a little shorter in stature than the crewmen with

whom the pilot had lived so long. His hair was fair, as was his skin under its sun tan. He was unusually light on his feet and possessed a wiry strength Raf could testify to. But there was that disconcerting habit of mind reading and other elusive differences.

Dalgard smiled, though the other could not see that.

“You see,” deliberately he used the mind touch as if to accent those differences the more, “once our roots were the same, but now from these roots different plants have grown. And we must be left to ourselves a space before we mingle once more. My father’s father’s father’s father was a Terran, but I am—what? We have something that you have not, just as you have developed during centuries of separation qualities of mind and body we do not know. You live with machines. And, since we could not keep machines in this world, having no power to repair or rebuild, we have been forced to turn in other directions. To go back to the old ways now would be throwing away clues to mysteries we have not yet fully explored, turning aside from discoveries ready to be made. To you I am a barbarian, hardly higher in the scale of civilization than the mermen—”

Raf flushed, would have given a quick and polite denial, had he not known that his thoughts had been read. Dalgard laughed. His amusement was not directed against the pilot, rather it invited him to share the joke. And reluctantly, Raf’s peeling lips relaxed in a smile.

“But,” he offered one argument the other had not cited, “what if you do go down this other path of yours so far that we no longer have any common meeting ground?” He had forgotten his own problem in the other’s.

“I do not believe that will ever happen. Perhaps our bodies may change; climate, food, ways of life can all influence the body. Our minds may change; already my people with each new generation are better equipped to use the mind touch, can communicate more clearly with the animals and the mermen. But those who were in the beginning born of Terra shall always have a common heritage. There are and will be other lost colonies among the stars. We could not have been the only outlaws who broke forth during the rule of Pax, and before the blight of that dictatorship, there were at least two expeditions that went forth on Galactic explorations.

“A thousand years from now stranger will meet with stranger, but when they make the sign of peace and sit down with one another, they shall find that words come more easily, though one may seem outwardly monstrous to the other. Only, *now* we must go our own way. We are youths setting forth on our journey of testing, while the Elders wish us well but stand aside.”

“You don’t want what we have to offer?” This was a new idea to Raf.

“Did you truly want what the city people had to offer?”

That caught the pilot up. He could remember with unusual distinctness how he had disliked, somehow feared the things they had brought from the city storehouse, how he had privately hoped that Hobart and Lablet would be content to let well enough alone and not bring that knowledge of an alien race back with them. If he had not secretly known that aversion, he would not have been able to destroy the globe and the treasures piled about it.

“But”—his protest was hot, angry—“we are not *them*! We can do much for you.”

“Can you?” The calm question sank into his mind as might a stone into a troubled pool, and the ripples of its passing changed an idea or two. “I wish that you might see Homeport. Perhaps then it would be easier for you to understand. No, your knowledge is not corrupt, it would not carry with it the same seeds of disaster as that of Those Others. But it would be too

easy for us to accept, to walk a softer road, to forget what we have so far won. Just give us time—”

Raf cupped his palms over his watering eyes. He wanted badly to see clearly the other’s face, to be able to read his expression. Yet it seemed that somehow he *was* able to see that sober face, as sincere as the words in his mind.

“You will come again,” Dalgard said with certainty. “And we shall be waiting because you, Raf Kurbi, made it possible.” There was something so solemn about that that Raf looked up in surprise.

“When you destroyed the core of Those Other’s holding, you gave us our chance. For had you not done that we, the mermen, the other harmless, happy creatures of this world, would have been wiped out. There would be no new beginning here, only a dark and horrible end.”

Raf blinked; to his surprise that other figure standing in the direct sunlight did not waver, and beyond the proudly held head was a stretch of turquoise sky. He could see the color!

“Yes, you shall see with your eyes—and with your mind,” now Dalgard spoke aloud. “And if the Spirit which rules all space is kind, you shall return to your own people. For you have served His cause well.”

Then, as if he were embarrassed by his own solemnity, Dalgard ended with a most prosaic inquiry: “Would you like shellfish for eating?”

Moments later, wading out into the water-swirled sand, his boots kicked off, his toes feeling for the elusive shelled creatures no one could see, Raf felt happier, freer than he could ever remember having been before. It was going to be all right. He could *see*! He would find the ship! He laughed aloud at nothing and heard an answering chuckle and then a whoop of triumph from the scout stooping to claw one of their prey out of hiding.

It was after they had eaten that Dalgard asked another question, one which did not seem important to Raf. “You have a close friend among the crew of your ship?”

Raf hesitated. Now that he was obliged to consider the point, did he have any friends—let alone a close one—among the crew of the *RS 10*? Certainly he did not claim Wonstead who had shared his quarters—he honestly did not care if he never saw him again. The officers, the experts such as Lablet—quickly face and character of each swept through his mind and was as swiftly discarded. There was Soriki—He could not claim the com-tech as any special friend, but at least during their period together among the aliens he had come to know him better.

Now, as if Dalgard had read his mind—and he probably had, thought Raf with a flash of the old resentment—he had another question.

“And what was he—is he like?”

Though the pilot could see little reason for this he answered as best he could, trying to build first a physical picture of the com-tech and then doing a little guessing as to what lay under the other’s space-burned skin.

Dalgard lay on his back, gazing up into the blue-green sky. Yet Raf knew that he was intent on every word. A merman padded up, settled down cross-legged beside the scout, as if he too were enthralled by the pilot’s halting description of a man he might never see again. Then a second of the sea people came and a third, until Raf felt that some sort of a noiseless council was in progress. His words trailed away, and then Dalgard offered an explanation.

“It will take us many, many days to reach the place where your ship is. And before we are able to complete that journey your friends may be gone. So we shall try something else—with your aid.”

Raf fingered the little bundle of his possessions. Even his helmet with its com phone was missing.

“No,” again Dalgard read his mind. “Your machines are of no use to you now. We shall try *our way*.”

“How?” Wild thoughts of a big signal fire—But how could that be sighted across a mountain range. Of some sort of an improvised com unit—

“I said *our way*.” There was a smile on Dalgard’s face, visible to Raf’s slowly clearing vision. “We shall provide another kind of machine, and these”—he waved at the mermen—“will give us the power, or so we hope. Lie here,” he gestured to the sand beside him, “and think only of your friend in the ship, in his natural surroundings. Try to hold that picture constant in your mind, letting no other thought trouble it.”

“Do you mean—send a message to him mentally!” Raf’s reply was half protest.

“Did I not so reach you when we were in the city—even before I knew of you as an individual?” the scout reminded him. “And such messages are doubly possible when they are sent from friend to friend.”

“But we were close then.”

“That is why—” again Dalgard indicated the mermen. “For them this is the natural means of communication. They will pick up your reaching thought, amplify it with their power, beam it north. Since your friend deals with matters of communication, let us hope that he will be sensitive to this method.”

Raf was only half convinced that it might work. But he remembered how Dalgard had established contact with him, before, as the scout had pointed out, they had met. It was that voiceless cry for aid which had pulled him into this adventure in the first place. It was only fitting that something of the same process give *him* help in return.

Obediently he stretched out on the sand and closed his dim eyes, trying to picture Soriki in the small cabin which held the com, slouched in his bucket seat, his deceptive posture that of a lax idler, as he had seen him so many times. Soriki—his broad face with its flat cheekbones, its wide cheerful mouth, its heavy-lidded eyes. And having fixed Soriki’s face, he tried to believe that he was now confronting the com-tech, speaking directly to him.

“Come—come and get me—south—seashore—Soriki come and get me!” The words formed a kind of chant, a chant aimed at that familiar face in its familiar surroundings. “South—come and get me—” Raf struggled to think only of that, to allow nothing to break through that chant or disturb his picture of the scene he had called from memory.

How long that attempt at communication lasted the pilot could not tell, for somehow he slipped from the deep concentration into sleep, dreamless and untroubled, from which he awoke with the befogged feeling that something important had happened. But had he gotten through?

The ring of mermen was gone, and it was dawn, gray, chill with the forewarnings of rain in the air. He was reassured because he was certain that in spite of the gloom his sight was a fraction clearer than it had been the day before. But had they gotten through? As he arose,

brushing the sand from him, he saw the scout splashing out of the sea, a fish impaled on his spear.

“Did we get through?” Raf blurted out.

“Since your friend cannot reply with the mind touch, we do not know. But later we shall try again.” To Raf’s peering gaze Dalgard’s face had a drawn, gaunt look as if he had been at hard labor during the hours just past. He walked up the beach slowly, without the springing step Raf had come to associate with him. As he settled down to gut the fish with one of the bone knives, the scout repeated, “We can try again—!”

Half an hour later, as the rain swept in from the sea, Raf knew that they would not have to try. His head went up, his face eager. He had known that sound too long and too well ever to mistake it—the drone of a flitter motor cutting through the swish of the falling water. Some trick of the cliffs behind them must be magnifying and projecting the sound, for he could not sight the machine. But it was coming. He whirled to Dalgard, only to see that the other was on his feet and had taken up his spear.

“It is the flitter! Soriki heard—they’re coming!” Raf hastened to assure him.

For the last time he saw Dalgard’s slow, warm smile, clearer than he had ever seen it before. Then the scout turned and trotted away, toward a fringing rock wall. Before he dropped out of sight behind that barrier he raised the spear in salute.

“Swift and fortunate voyaging!” He gave the farewell of Homeport.

Then Raf understood. The colonist meant just what he had said: he wanted no contact with the space ship. To Raf he had owed a debt and now that was paid. But the time was not yet when the men of Astra and the men of Terra should meet. A hundred years from now perhaps—or a thousand—but not yet. And remembering what had summoned the flitter winging toward him, Raf drew a deep breath. What would the men of Astra accomplish in a hundred years? What could those of Terra do to match them in knowledge? It was a challenge, and he alone knew just how much of a challenge. Homeport must remain his own secret. He had been guided to this place, saved by the mermen alone. Dalgard and his people must not exist as far as the crew of the *RS 10* were concerned.

For the last time he experienced the intimacy of the mind touch. “That is it—brother!” Then the sensation was gone as the black blot of the flitter buzzed out of the clouds.

From behind the rocks Dalgard watched the pilot enter the strange machine. For a single moment he had an impulse to shout, to run forward, to surrender to his desire to see the others, the ship which had brought them through space and would, they confidently believed, take them back to the Terra he knew only as a legend of the past. But he mastered that desire. He had been right. The road had already forked and there was no going back. He must carry this secret all the rest of his life—he must be strong-willed enough so that Homeport would never know. Time—give them time to be what they could be. Then in a hundred years—or a thousand—But not yet!

# Key Out Of Time

# 1. Lotus World

There was a shading of rose in the pearl arch of sky, deepening at the horizon meeting of sea and air in a rainbow tint of cloud. The lazy swells of the ocean held the same soft color, darkened with crimson veins where spirals of weed drifted. A rose world bathed in soft sunlight, knowing only gentle winds, peace, and—sloth.

Ross Murdock leaned forward over the edge of the rock ledge to peer down at a beach of fine sand, pale pink sand with here and there a glitter of a crystalline “shell”—or were those delicate, fluted ovals shells? Even the waves came in languidly. And the breeze which ruffled his hair, smoothed about his sun-browned, half-bare body, caressed it, did not buffet on its way inland to stir the growths which the Terran settlers called “trees” but which possessed long lacy fronds instead of true branches.

Hawaika—named for the old Polynesian paradise—a world seemingly without flaw except the subtle one of being too perfect, too welcoming, too wooing. Its long, uneventful, unchanging days enticed forgetfulness, offered a life without effort. Except for the mystery....

Because this world was not the one pictured on the tape which had brought the Terran settlement team here. A map, a directing guide, a description all in one, that was the ancient voyage tape. Ross himself had helped to loot a storehouse on an unknown planet for a cargo of such tapes. Once they had been the space-navigation guides for a race or races who had ruled the star lanes ten thousand years in his own world’s past, a civilization which had long since sunk again into the dust of its beginning.

Those tapes returned to Terra after their chance discovery, were studied, probed, deciphered by the best brains of his time, shared out by lot between already suspicious Terran powers, bringing into the exploration of space bitter rivalries and old hatreds.

Such a tape had landed their ship on Hawaika, a world of shallow seas and archipelagos instead of true continents. The settlement team had had all the knowledge contained on that tape crowded into them, only to discover that much they had learned from it was false!

Of course, none of them had expected to discover here still the cities, the civilization the tape had projected as existing in that long-ago period. But no present island string they had visited approximated those on the maps they had seen, and so far they had not found any trace that any intelligent beings had walked, built, lived, on these beautiful, slumberous atolls. So, what had happened to the Hawaika of the tape?

Ross’s right hand rubbed across the ridged scars which disfigured his left one, to be carried for the rest of his life as a mark of his meeting with the star voyagers in the past of his own world. He had deliberately seared his own flesh to break the mental control they had asserted. Then the battle had gone to him. But from it he had brought another scar—the unease of that old terror when Ross Murdock, fighter, rebel, outlaw by the conventions of his own era, Ross Murdock who considered himself an exceedingly tough individual, that toughness steeled by the training for Time Agent sorties, had come up against a power he did not understand, instinctively hated and feared.

Now he breathed deeply of the wind—the smell of the sea, the scents of the land growths, strange but pleasant. So easy to relax, to drop into the soft, lulling swing of this world in which they had found no fault, no danger, no irritant. Yet, once those others had been here—the blue-suited, hairless ones he called “Baldies.” And what had happened then ... or afterward?

A black head, brown shoulders, slender body, broke the sleepy slip of the waves. A shimmering mask covered the face, catching glitter-fire in the sun. Two hands freed a chin curved yet firmly set, a mouth made more for laughter than sternness, wide dark eyes. Karara Trehern of the Alii, the one-time Hawaiian god-chieftain line, was an exceedingly pretty girl.

But Ross regarded her aloofly, with a coldness which bordered on hostility, as she flipped her mask into its pocket on top of the gill-pack. Below his rocky perch she came to a halt, her feet slightly apart in the sand, an impish twist to her lips as she called mockingly:

“Why not come in? The water’s fine.”

“Perfect, like all the rest of this.” Some of his impatience came out in the sour tone. “No luck, as usual?”

“As usual,” Karara conceded. “If there ever was a civilization here, it’s been gone so long we’ll probably never find any traces. Why don’t you just pick out a good place to set up that time-probe and try it blind?”

Ross scowled. “Because”—his patience was exaggerated to the point of insult—“we have only one peep-probe. Once it’s set we can’t tear it down easily for transport somewhere else, so we want to be sure there’s something to look at beyond.”

She began to wring the water out of her long hair. “Well, as far as we’ve explored ... nothing. Come yourself next time. Tino-rau and Taua aren’t particular; they like company.”

Putting two fingers to her mouth, Karara whistled. Twin heads popped out of the water, facing the shore and her. Projecting noses, mouths with upturned corners so they curved in a lasting pleasant grin at the mammals on the shore—the dolphin pair, mammals whose ancestors had chosen the sea, whistled back in such close counterfeit of the girl’s signal that they could be an echo of her call. Years earlier their species’ intelligence had surprised, almost shocked, men. Experiments, training, co-operation, had developed a tie which gave the water-limited race of mankind new eyes, ears, minds, to see, evaluate, and report concerning an element in which the bipeds were not free.

Hand in hand with that co-operation had gone other experiments. Just as the clumsy armored diving suits of the early twentieth century had allowed man to begin penetration into a weird new world, so had the frog-man equipment made him still freer in the sea. And now the gill-pack which separated the needed oxygen from the water made even that lighter burden of tanks obsolete. But there remained depths into which man could not descend, whose secrets were closed to him. There the dolphins operated, in a partnership of minds, equal minds—though that last fact had been difficult for man to accept.

Ross’s irritation, unjustified as he knew it to be, did not rest on Tino-rau or Taua. He enjoyed the hours when he buckled on gill-pack and took to the sea with those two ten-foot, black-and-silver escorts sharing the action. But Karara ... Karara’s presence was a different matter altogether.

The Agents’ teams had always been strictly masculine. Two men partnered for an interlocking of abilities and temperaments, going through training together, becoming two halves of a strong and efficient whole. Before being summarily recruited into the Project, Ross had been a loner—living on the ragged edges of the law, an indigestible bit for the civilization which had become too ordered and “adjusted” to absorb his kind. But in the Project he had discovered others like himself—men born out of time, too ruthless, too individualistic for their own age, but able to operate with ease in the dangerous paths of the Time Agents.



And when the time search for the wrecked alien ships had succeeded and the first intact ship found, used, duplicated, the Agents had come from forays into the past to be trained anew for travel to the stars. First there had been Ross Murdock, criminal. Then there had been Ross Murdock and Gordon Ashe, Time Agents. Now there was still Ross and Gordon and a quest as perilous as any they had known. Yet this time they had to depend upon Karara and the dolphins.

“Tomorrow”—Ross was still not sorting out his thoughts, truly aware of the feeling which worked upon him as a thorn in the finger—“I will come.”

“Good!” If she recognized his hostility for what it was, that did not bother her. Once more she whistled to the dolphins, waved a casual farewell with one hand, and headed up the beach toward the base camp. Ross chose a more rugged path over the cliff.

Suppose they did not find what they sought near here? Yet the old taped map suggested that this was approximately the site starred upon it. Marking a city? A star port?

Ashe had volunteered for Hawaika, demanded this job after the disastrous Topaz affair when the team of Apache volunteers had been sent out too soon to counter what might have been a Red sneak settlement. Ross was still unhappy over the ensuing months when only Major Kelgarries and maybe, in a lesser part, Ross had kept Gordon Ashe in the Project at all. That Topaz had been a failure was accepted when the settlement ship did not return. And that had added to Ashe’s sense of guilt for having recruited and partially trained the lost team.

Among those dispatched over Ashe’s vehement protests had been Travis Fox who had shared with Ashe and Ross the first galactic flight in an age-old derelict spaceship. Travis Fox—the Apache archaeologist—had he ever reached Topaz? Or would he and his team wander forever between worlds? Did they set down on a planet where some inimical form of native life or a Red settlement had awaited them? The very uncertainty of their fate continued to ride Ashe.

So he insisted on coming out with the second settlement team, the volunteers of Samoan and Hawaiian descent, to carry on a yet more exciting and hazardous exploration. Just as the Project had probed into the past of Terra, so would Ashe and Ross now attempt to discover what lay in the past of Hawaika, to see this world as it had been at the height of the galactic civilization, and so to learn what they could about their fore-runners into space. And the mystery they had dropped into upon landing added to the necessity for that discovery or discoveries.

Their probe, if fortune favored them, might become a gate through time. The installation was a vast improvement over these passage points they had first devised. Technical information had taken a vast leap forward after Terran engineers and scientists had had access to the tapes of the stellar empire. Adaptations and shortcuts developed, so that a new hybrid technology came into use, woven from the knowledge and experimentation of two civilizations thousands of years apart in time.

If and when he or Ashe—or Karara and her dolphins—discovered the proper site, the two Agents could set up their own equipment. Both Ross and Ashe had had enough drill in the process. All they needed was the brick of discovery; then they could build their wall. But they must find some remainder of the past, the smallest trace of ancient ruin upon which to center their peep-probe. And since landing here the long days had flowed into weeks with no such discovery made.

Ross crossed the ridge of rock which formed a cocks-comb rise on the island’s spine and descended to the village. As they had been trained, the Polynesian settlers adapted native

products to their own heritage of building and tools. It was necessary that they live off the land, for their transport ship had had storage space only for a limited number of supplies and tools. After it took off to return home they would be wholly on their own for several years. Their ship, a silvery ball, rested on a rock ledge, its pilot and crew having lingered to learn the results of Ashe's search. Four days more and they would have to lift for home even if the Agents still had only negative results to report.

That disappointment was driving Ashe, the way that six months earlier his outrage and guilt feelings over the Topaz affair had driven him. Karara's suggestion carried weight the longer Ross thought about it. With more swimmers hunting, there was just that much increased chance of turning up some clue. So far the dolphins had not reported any dangerous native sea life or any perils except the natural ones any diver always had at his shoulder under the waves.

There were extra gill-packs, and all of the settlers were good swimmers. An organized hunt ought to shake the Polynesians out of their present do-it-tomorrow attitude. As long as they had had definite work before them—the unloading of the ship, the building of the village, all the labors incidental to the establishing of this base—they had shown energy and enthusiasm. It was only during the last couple of weeks that the languor which appeared part of the atmosphere here had crept up on them, so that now they were content to live at a slower and lazier pace. Ross remembered Ashe's comparison made the evening before, likening Hawaika to a legendary Terran island where the inhabitants lived a drugged existence, feeding upon the seeds of a native plant. Hawaika was fast becoming a lotus land for Terrans.

"Through here, then westward..." Ashe hunched over the crate table in the mat-walled house. He did not look up as Ross entered. Karara's still damp head was bowed until those black locks, now sleeked to her round skull, almost touched the man's close-cropped brown hair. They were both studying a map as if they saw not lines on paper but the actual inlets and lagoons which that drawing represented.

"You are sure, Gordon, that this *is* the modern point to match the site on the tape?" The girl brushed back straying hair.

Ashe shrugged. There were tight brackets about his mouth which had not been there six months ago. He moved jerkily, not with the fluid grace of those old days when he had faced the vast distance of time travel with unruffled calm and a self-confidence to steady and support the novice Ross.

"The general outline of these two islands could stand for the capes on this—" He pulled a second map, this on transparent plastic, to fit over the first. The capes marked on the much larger body of land did slip over the modern islands with a surprising fit. The once large island, shattered and broken, could have produced the groups of atolls and islets they now prospected.

"How long—" Karara mused aloud, "and why?"

Ashe shrugged. "Ten thousand years, five, two." He shook his head. "We have no idea. It's apparent that there must have been some world-wide cataclysm here to change the contours of the land masses so much. We may have to wait on a return space flight to bring a 'copter or a hydroplane to explore farther." His hand swept beyond the boundaries of the map to indicate the whole of Hawaika.

"A year, maybe two, before we could hope for that," Ross cut in. "Then we'll have to depend on whether the Council believes this important enough." The contrariness which spiked his tongue whenever Karara was present made him say that without thinking. Then the twitch of

Ashe's lip brought home Ross's error. Gordon needed reassurance now, not a recitation of the various ways their mission could be doomed.

"Look here!" Ross came to the table, his hand sweeping past Karara, as he used his forefinger for a pointer. "We know that what we want could be easily overlooked, even with the dolphins helping us to check. This whole area's too big. And you know that it is certain that whatever might be down there would be hidden with sea growths. Suppose ten of us start out in a semi-circle from about here and go as far as this point, heading inland. Video-cameras here and here ... comb the whole sector inch by inch if we have to. After all, we have plenty of time and manpower."

Karara laughed softly. "Manpower—always manpower, Ross? But there is woman-power, too. And we have perhaps even sharper sight. But this is a good idea, Gordon. Let me see—" she began to tell off names on her fingers, "PaKeeKee, Vaeoha, Hori, Liliha, Taema, Ui, Hono'ura—they are the best in the water. Me ... you, Gordon, Ross. That makes ten with keen eyes to look, and always there are Tino-rau and Taua. We will take supplies and camp here on this island which looks so much like a finger crooked to beckon. Yes, somehow that beckoning finger seems to me to promise better fortune. Shall we plan it so?"

Some of the tight look was gone from Ashe's face, and Ross relaxed. This was what Gordon needed—not to be sitting in here going over maps, reports, reworking over and over their scant leads. Ashe had always been a field man; and the settlement work had been stultifying, a laborious chore for him.

When Karara had gone Ross dropped down on the bunk against the side wall.

"What *did* happen here, do you think?" Half was real interest in the mystery they had mulled over and over since they had landed on a Hawaika which diverged so greatly from the maps; the other half, a desire to keep Ashe thinking on a subject removed from immediate worries. "An atomic war?"

"Could be. There are old radiation traces. But these aliens had, I'm sure, progressed beyond atomics. Suppose, just suppose, they could tamper with the weather, with the balance of the planet's crust? We don't know the extent of their powers, how they would use them. They had a colony here once, or there would have been no guide tape. And that is all we are sure of."

"Suppose"—Ross rolled over on his stomach, pillowed his head on his arms—"we could uncover some of that knowledge—"

The twitch was back at Ashe's lips. "That's the risk we have to run now."

"Risk?"

"Would you give a child one of those hand weapons we found in the derelict?"

"Naturally not!" Ross snapped and then saw the point. "You mean—we aren't to be trusted?"

The answer was plain to read in Ashe's expression.

"Then why this whole setup, this hunt for what might mean trouble?"

"The old pinch, the bad one. What if the Reds discover something first? They drew some planets in the tape lottery, remember. It's a seesaw between us—we advance here, they there. We have to keep up the race or lose it. They must be combing their stellar colonies for a few answers just as furiously as we are."

“So, we go into the past to hunt if we have to. Well, I think I could do without answers such as the Baldies would know. But I will admit that I would like to know what did happen here—two, five, ten thousand years ago.”

Ashe stood up and stretched. For the first time he smiled. “Do you know, I rather like the idea of fishing off Karara’s beckoning finger. Maybe she’s right about that changing our luck.”

Ross kept his face carefully expressionless as he got up to prepare their evening meal.

## 2. Lair of Mano-Nui

Just under the surface of the water the sea was warm, weird life showed colors Ross could name, shades he could not. The corals, the animals masquerading as plants, the plants disguised as animals which inhabited the oceans of Terra, had their counterparts here. And the settlers had given them the familiar names, though the crabs, the fish, the anemones, and weeds of the shallow lagoons and reefs were not identical with Terran creatures. The trouble was that there was too much, such a wealth of life to attract the eyes, hold attention, that it was difficult to keep to the job at hand—the search for what was not natural, for what had no normal place here.

As the land seduced the senses and bewitched the off-worlder, so did the sea have its enchantment to pull one from duty. Ross resolutely skimmed by a forest of weaving, waving lace which varied from a green which was almost black to a pale tint he could not truly identify. Among those waving fans lurked ghost-fish, finned swimmers transparent enough so that one could sight, through their pallid sides, the evidences of recently ingested meals.

The Terrans had begun their sweep-search a half hour ago, slipping overboard from a ferry canoe, heading in toward the checkpoint of the finger isle, forming an arc of expert divers, men and girls so at home in the ocean that they should be able to make the discovery Ashe needed—if such did exist.

Mystery built upon mystery on Hawaika, Ross thought as he used his spear-gun to push aside a floating banner of weed in order to peer below its curtain. The native life of this world must always have been largely aquatic. The settlers had discovered only a few small animals on the islands. The largest of which was the burrower, a creature not unlike a miniature monkey in that it had hind legs on which it walked erect and forepaws, well clawed for digging purposes, which it used with as much skill and dexterity as a man used hands. Its body was hairless and it was able to assume, chameleon-like, the color of the soil and rocks where it denned. The head was set directly on its bowed shoulders without vestige of neck; and it had round bubbles of eyes near the top of its skull, a nose which was a single vertical slit, and a wide mouth fanged for crushing the shelled creatures on which it fed. All in all, to Terran eyes, it was a vaguely repulsive creature, but as far as the settlers had been able to discover it was the highest form of land life. The smaller rodentlike things, the two species of wingless diving birds, and an odd assortment of reptiles and amphibians sharing the island were all the burrowers' prey.

A world of sea and islands, what type of native intelligent life had it once supported? Or had this been only a galactic colony, with no native population before the coming of the stellar explorers? Ross hovered above a dark pocket where the bottom had suddenly dipped into a saucer-shaped depression. The sea growth about the rim rippled in the water raggedly, but there was something about its general outline....

Ross began a circumference of that hollow. Allowing for the distortion of the growths which had formed lumpy excrescences or reached turrets toward the surface—yes, allowing for those—this was decidedly something out of the ordinary! The depression was too regular, too even, Ross was certain of that. With a thrill of excitement he began a descent into the cup, striving to trace signs which would prove his suspicion correct.

How many years, centuries, had the slow coverage of the sea life gathered there, flourished, died, with other creatures to build anew on the remains? Now there was only a hint that the depression had other than a natural beginning.

Anchoring with a one-handed grip on a spike of Hawaikan coral—smoother than the Terran species—Ross aimed the butt of his spear-gun at the nearest wall of the saucer, striving to reach into a crevice between two lumps of growth and so probe into what might lie behind. The spear rebounded; there was no breaking that crust with such a fragile tool. But perhaps he would have better luck lower down.

The depression was deeper than he had first judged. Now the light which existed in the shallows vanished. Red and yellow as colors went, but Ross was aware of blues and greens in shades and tints which were not visible above. He switched on his diving torch, and color returned within its beam. A swirl of weed, pink in the light, became darkly emerald beyond as if it possessed the chameleon ability of the burrowers.

He was distracted by that phenomenon, and so he transgressed the diver's rule of never becoming so absorbed in surroundings as to forget caution. Just when did Ross become aware of that shadow below? Was it when a school of ghost-fish burst unexpectedly between weed growths, and he turned to follow them with the torch? Then the outer edge of his beam caught the movement of a shape, a flutter in the water of the gloomy depths.

Ross swung around, his back to the wall of the saucer, as he aimed the torch down at what was arising there. The light caught and held for a long moment of horror something which might have come out of the nightmares of his own world. Afterward Ross knew that the monster was not as large as it seemed in that endless minute of fear, perhaps no bigger than the dolphins.

He had had training in shark-infested seas on Terra, been carefully briefed against the danger from such hunters of the deep and ocean jungles. But this kind of thing had only existed before in the fairy tales of his race as the dragon of old lore. A scaled head with wide eyes gleaming in the light beam with cold and sullen hate, a gaping mouth fang-filled, a horn-set muzzle, that long, undulating neck and, below it, the half-seen bulk of a monstrous body.

His spear-gun, the knife at his waist belt, neither were protection against this! Yet to turn his back on that rising head was more than Ross could do. He pulled himself back against the wall of the saucer. The thing before him did not rush to attack. Plainly it had seen him and now it moved with the leisure of a hunter having no fears concerning the eventual outcome of the hunt. But the light appeared to puzzle it and Ross kept the beam shining straight into those evil eyes.

The shock of the encounter was wearing off; now Ross edged his flipper into a crevice to hold him steady while his hand went to the sonic-com at his waist. He tapped out a distress call which the dolphins could relay to the swimmers. The swaying dragon head paused, held rigid on a stiff, scaled column in the center of the saucer. That sonic vibration either surprised or bothered the hunter, made it wary.

Ross tapped again. The belief that if he tried to escape, he was lost, that only while he faced it so had he any chance, grew stronger. The head was only inches below the level of his flippered feet as he held to the weeds.

Again that weaving movement, the rise of head, a tremor along the serpent neck, an agitation in the depths. The dragon was on the move again. Ross aimed the light directly at the head. The scales, as far as he could determine, were not horny plates but lapped, silvery ovals such as a fish possessed. And the underparts of the monster might even be vulnerable to his spear.

But knowing the way a Terran shark could absorb the darts of that weapon and survive, Ross feared to attack except as a last resort.

Above and to his left there was a small hollow where in the past some portion of the growths had been ripped away. If he could fit himself into that crevice, perhaps he could keep the dragon at bay until help arrived. Ross moved with all the skill he had. His hand closed upon the edge of the niche and he whirled himself up, just making it into that refuge as the head lashed at him wickedly. His suspicion that the dragon would attack anything on the run was well founded, and he knew he had no hope of winning to the surface above.

Now he stood in the crevice, facing outward, watching the head darting in the water. He had switched off the torch, and the loss of light appeared to bewilder the reptile for some precious seconds. Ross pulled as far back into the niche as he could, until the point of one shoulder touched a surface which was sleek, smooth, and cold. The shock of that contact almost sent him hurtling out again.

Gripping the spear before him in his right hand, Ross cautiously felt behind him with the left. His finger tips glided over a seamless surface where the growths had been torn or peeled away. Though he could not, or dared not, turn his head to see, he was certain that this was his proof that the walls of the saucer had been fashioned and placed there by some intelligent creature.

The dragon had risen, hovering now in the water directly before the entrance to Ross's hole, its neck curled back against its bulk. It had wide flippers moving like planes to hold it poised. The body, sloping from a massive round of shoulders to a tapering rear, was vaguely familiar. If one provided a Terran seal with a gorgon head and scales in place of fur, the effect would be similar. But Ross was assuredly not facing a seal at this moment.

Slight movement of the flippers kept it as stabilized as if it sprawled on a supporting surface. With the neck flattened against the body, the head curved downward until the horn on its snout pointed the tip straight at Ross's middle. The Terran steadied his spear-gun. The dragon's eyes were its most vulnerable targets; if the creature launched the attack, Ross would aim for them.

Both man and dragon were so intent upon their duel that neither was conscious of the sudden swirl overhead. A sleek dark shape struck down, skimming across the humped-back ridge of the dragon. Some of the settlers had empathy with the dolphins to a high degree, but Ross's own powers of contact were relatively feeble.

Only now he was given an assurance of aid, and a suggestion to attack. The dragon head writhed, twisted as the reptile attempted to see above and behind its own length. But the dolphin was only a streak fast disappearing. And that writhing changed the balance the monster had maintained, pushing it toward Ross.

The Terran fired too soon and without proper aim, so the dart snaked past the head. But the harpoon line half hooked about the neck and seemed to confuse the creature. Ross squirmed as far back as he could into his refuge and drew his knife. Against those fangs the weapon was an almost useless toy, but it was all he had.

Again the dolphin dived in attack on the reptile, this time seizing in its mouth the floating cord of the harpoon and giving it a jerk which jolted the dragon even more off balance, pulling it away from Ross's niche and out into the center of the saucer.

There were two dolphins in action now, Ross saw, playing the dragon as matadors might play a bull, keeping the creature disturbed by their agile maneuvers. Whatever prey came naturally to the Hawaikan monster was not of this type, and the creature was not prepared to deal

effectively with their teasing, dodging tactics. Neither had touched the beast, but they kept it constantly striving to get at them.

Though it swam in circles attempting to face its teasers, the dragon did not abandon the level before Ross's refuge, and now and then it darted its head at him, unwilling to give up its prey. Only one of the dolphins frisked and dodged above now as the sonic on Ross's belt vibrated against his lower ribs with its message warning to be prepared for further action. Somewhere above, his own kind gathered. Hurriedly he tapped out in code his warning in return.

Two dolphins busy again, their last dive over the dragon pushing the monster down past Ross's niche toward the saucer's depths. Then they flashed up and away. The dragon was rising in turn, but coming to meet the Hawaikan creature was a ball giving off light, bringing sharp vision and color with it.

Ross's arm swung up to shield his eyes. There was a flash; such answering vibration carried through the waves that even his nerves, far less sensitive than those of the life about him, reacted. He blinked behind his mask. A fish floated by, spiraling up, its belly exposed. And about him growths drooped, trailed lifelessly through the water; while there was a now motionless bulk sinking to the obscurity of the depression floor. A weapon perfected on Terra to use against sharks and barracuda had worked here to kill what could have been more formidable prey.

The Terran wriggled out of the niche, rose to meet another swimmer. As Ashe descended, Ross relayed his news via the sonic. The dolphins were already nosing into the depths in pursuit of their late enemy.

"Look here—" Ross guided Ashe to the crevice which had saved him, aimed the torch beam into it. He had been right! There was a long groove in the covering built up by the growths; a vertical strip some six feet long, of a uniform gray, showed. Ashe touched the find and then gave the alert via the sonic code.

"Metal or an alloy, we've found it!"

But what did they have? Even after an hour's exploration by the full company, Ashe's expert search with his knowledge of artifacts and ancient remains, they were still baffled. It would require labor and tools they did not have, to clear the whole of the saucer. They could be sure only of its size and shape, and the fact that its walls were of an unknown substance which the sea could cloak but not erode. For the length of gray surface showed not the slightest pitting or time wear.

Down at its centermost point they found the dragon's den, an arch coated with growth, before which sprawled the body of the creature. That was dragged aloft with the dolphins' aid, to be taken ashore for study. But the arch itself ... was that part of some old installation?

Torches to the fore, they entered its shadow, only to remain baffled. Here and there were patches of the same gray showing in its interior. Ashe dug the butt of his spear-gun into the sand on the flooring to uncover another oval depression. But what it all signified or what had been its purpose, they could not guess.

"Set up the peep-probe here?" Ross asked.

Ashe's head moved in a slow negative. "Look farther ... spread out," the sonic clicked.

Within a matter of minutes the dolphins reported new remains—two more saucers, each larger than the first, set in a line on the ocean floor, pointing directly to Karara's Finger Island. Cautiously explored, these were discovered to be free of any but harmless life; they stirred up no more dragons.



When the Terrans came ashore on Finger Island to rest and eat their midday meal one of the men paced along the beached dragon. Ashore it lost none of its frightening aspect. And seeing it, even beached and dead, Ross wondered at his luck in surviving the encounter without a scratch.

“I think that this one would be alone,” PaKeeKee commented. “Where there is an eater of this size, there is usually only one.”

“Mano-Nui!” The girl Taema shivered as she gave to this monster the name of the shark demon of her people. “Such a one is truly king shark in these waters! But why have we not sighted its like before? Tino-rau, Taua ... they have not reported such—”

“Probably because, as PaKeeKee says, these things are rare,” Ashe returned. “A carnivore of size would have to have a fairly wide hunting range, yet there’s evidence that this thing has laired in that den for some time. Which means that it must have a defined hunting territory allowing no trespassing from others of its species.”

Karara nodded. “Also it may hunt only at intervals, eat heavily, and lie quiet until that meal is digested. There are large snakes on Terra that follow that pattern. Ross was in its front yard when it came after him—”

“From now on”—Ashe swallowed a quarter of fruit—“we know what to watch for, and the weapon which will finish it off. Don’t forget that!”

The delicate mechanisms of their sonics had already registered the vibrations which would warn of a dragon’s presence, and the depth globes would then do the rest.

“Big skull, oversize for the body.” PaKeeKee squatted on his heels by the head lying on the sand at the end of the now fully extended neck.

Ross had heretofore been more aware of the armament of that head, the fangs set in the powerful jaws, the horn on the snout. But PaKeeKee’s comment drew his attention to the fact that the scale-covered skull did dome up above the eye pits in a way to suggest ample brain room. Had the thing been intelligent? Karara put that into words:

“Rule One?” She went over to survey the carcass.

Ross resented her half question, whether it was addressed to him or mere thinking aloud on her part.

Rule One: Conserve native life to the fullest extent. Humanoid form may not be the only evidence of intelligence.

There were the dolphins to prove that point right on Terra. But did Rule One mean that you had to let a monster nibble at you because it might just be a high type of alien intelligence? Let Karara spout Rule One while backed into a crevice under water with that horn stabbing at her mid-section!

“Rule One does not mean to forego self-defense,” Ashe commented mildly. “This thing is a hunter, and you can’t stop to apply recognition techniques when you are being regarded as legitimate prey. If you are the stronger, or an equal, yes—stop and think before becoming aggressive. But in a situation like this—take no chances.”

“Anyway, from now on,” Karara pointed out, “it could be possible to shock instead of kill.”

“Gordon”—PaKeeKee swung around—“what have we found here—besides this thing?”

“I can’t even guess. Except that those depressions were made for a purpose and have been there for a long time. Whether they were originally in the water, or the land sank, that we don’t know either. But now we have a site to set up the peep-probe.”

“We do that right away?” Ross wanted to know. Impatience bit at him. But Ashe still had a trace of frown. He shook his head.

“Have to make sure of our site, very sure. I don’t want to start any chain reaction on the other side of the time wall.”

And he was right, Ross was forced to admit, remembering what had happened when the galactics had discovered the Red time gates and traced them forward to their twentieth-century source, ruthlessly destroying each station. The original colonists of Hawaika had been as giants to Terran pygmies when it came to technical knowledge. To use even a peep-probe indiscreetly near one of their outposts might bring swift and terrible retribution.

### 3. The Ancient Mariners

Another map spread out and this time pinned down with small stones on beach gravel.

“Here, here, and here—” Ashe’s finger indicated the points marked in a pattern which flared out from three sides of Finger Island. Each marked a set of three undersea depressions in perfect alliance with the land which, according to the galactic map, had once been a cape on a much larger land mass. Though the Terrans had found the ruins, if those saucers in the sea could be so termed, the remains had no meaning for the explorers.

“Do we set up here?” Ross asked. “If we could just get a report to send back...” That might mean the difference between awakening the co-operation of the Project policy makers so that a flood of supplies and personnel would begin to head their way.

“We set up here,” Ashe decided.

He had selected a point between two of the lines where a reef would provide them with a secure base. And once that decision was made, the Terrans went into action.

Two days to go, to install the peep-probe and take some shots before the ship had to clear with or without their evidence. Together Ross and Ashe floated the installation out to the reef, Ui and Karara helping to tow the equipment and parts, the dolphins lending pushing noses on occasion. The aquatic mammals were as interested as the human beings they aided. And in water their help was invaluable. Had dolphins developed hands, Ross wondered fleetingly, would they have long ago wrested control of their native world—or at least of its seas—from the human kind?

All the human beings worked with practiced ease, even while masked and submerged, to set the probe in place, aiming it landward at the check point of the Finger’s protruding nail of rock. After Ashe made the final adjustments, tested each and every part of the assembly, he gestured them in.

Karara’s swift hand movement asked a question, and Ashe’s sonic code-clicked in reply: “At twilight.”

Yes, dusk was the proper time for using a peep-probe. To see without risk of being sighted in return was their safeguard. Here Ashe had no historical data to guide him. Their search for the former inhabitants might be a long drawn-out process skipping across centuries as the machine was adjusted to Terran time eras.

“When were they here?” Back on shore Karara shook out her hair, spread it over her shoulders to dry. “How many hundred years back will the probe return?”

“More likely thousands,” Ross commented. “Where will you start, Gordon?”

Ashe brushed sand from the page of the notebook he had steadied against one bent knee and gazed out at the reef where they had set the probe.

“Ten thousand years—”

“Why?” Karara wanted to know. “Why that exact figure?”

“We know that galactic ships crashed on Terra then. So their commerce and empire—if it was an empire—was far-flung at that time. Perhaps they were at the zenith of their civilization; perhaps they were already on the down slope. I do not think they were near the

beginning. So that date is as good a starting place as any. If we don't hit what we're after, then we can move forward until we do."

"Do you think that there ever was a native population here?"

"Might have been."

"But without any large land animals, no modern traces of any," she protested.

"Of people?" Ashe shrugged. "Good answers for both. Suppose there was a world-wide epidemic of proportions to wipe out a species. Or a war in which they used forces beyond our comprehension to alter the whole face of this planet, which did happen—the alteration, I mean. Several things could have removed intelligent life. Then such species as the burrowers could have developed or evolved from smaller, more primitive types."

"Those ape-things we found on the desert planet." Ross thought back to their first voyage on the homing derelict. "Maybe they had once been men and were degenerating. And the winged people, they could have been less than men on their way up——"

"Ape-things ... winged people?" Karara interrupted. "Tell me!"

There was something imperious in her demand, but Ross found himself describing in detail their past adventures, first on the world of sand and sealed structures where the derelict had rested for a purpose its involuntary passengers had never understood, and then of the Terrans' limited exploration of that other planet which might have been the capital world of a far-flung stellar empire. There they had made a pact with a winged people living in the huge buildings of a jungle-choked city.

"But you see"—the Polynesian girl turned to Ashe when Ross had finished—"you did find them—these ape-things and the winged people. But here there are only the dragons and the burrowers. Are they the start or the finish? I want to know—"

"Why?" Ashe asked.

"Not just because I am curious, though I am that also, but because we, too, must have a beginning and an end. Did we come up from the seas, rise to know and feel and think, just to return to such beginning at our end? If your winged people were climbing and your ape-things descending"—she shook her head—"it would be frightening to hold a cord of life, both ends in your hands. Is it good for us to see such things, Gordon?"

"Men have asked that question all their thinking lives, Karara. There have been those who have said no, who have turned aside and tried to halt the growth of knowledge here or there, attempted to make men stand still on one tread of a stairway. Only there is that in us which will not stop, ill-fitted as we may be for the climbing. Perhaps we shall be safe and untroubled here on Hawaika if I do not go out to that reef tonight. By that action I may bring real danger down on all of us. Yet I can not hold back for that. Could you?"

"No, I do not believe that I could," she agreed.

"We are here because we are of those who must know—volunteers. And being of that temperament, it is in us always to take the next step."

"Even if it leads to a fall," she added in a low tone.

Ashe gazed at her, though her own eyes were on the sea where a lace of waves marked the reef. Her words were ordinary enough, but Ross straightened to match Ashe's stare. Why had he felt that odd instant of uneasiness as if his heart had fluttered instead of beating true?

“I know of you Time Agents,” Karara continued. “There were plenty of stories about you told while we were in training.”

“Tall tales, I can imagine, most of them.” Ashe laughed, but his amusement sounded forced to Ross.

“Perhaps. Though I do not believe that many could be any taller than the truth. And so also I have heard of that strict rule you follow, that you must do nothing which might alter the course of history. But suppose, suppose here that the course of history could be altered, that whatever catastrophe occurred might be averted? If that was done, what would happen to our settlement in the here and now?”

“I don’t know. That is an experiment which we have never dared to try, which we won’t try—”

“Not even if it would mean a chance of life for a whole native race?” she persisted.

“Alternate worlds then, maybe.” Ross’s imagination caught up that idea. “Two worlds from a change point in history,” he elaborated, noting her look of puzzlement. “One stemming from one decision, another from the alternate.”

“I’ve heard of that! But, Gordon, if you could return to the time of decision here and you had it in your power to say, ‘Yes—live!’ or ‘No—die!’ to the alien natives, what would you do?”

“I don’t know. But neither do I think I shall ever be placed in that position. Why do you ask?”

She was twisting her still damp hair into a pony tail and tying it so with a cord. “Because ... because I feel.... No, I can not really put it into words, Gordon. It is that feeling one has on the eve of some important event—anticipation, fear, excitement. You’ll let me go with you tonight, please! I want to see it—not the Hawaika that is, but that other world with another name, the one they saw and knew!”

An instant protest was hot in Ross’s throat, but he had no time to voice it. For Ashe was already nodding.

“All right. But we may have no luck at all. Fishing in time is a chancy thing, so don’t be disappointed if we don’t turn you up that other world. Now, I’m going to pamper these old bones for an hour or two. Amuse yourselves, children.” He lay back and closed his eyes.

The past two days had wiped half the shadows from his lean, tanned face. He had dropped two years, three, Ross thought thankfully. Let them be lucky tonight, and Ashe’s cure could be nearly complete.

“What do you think happened here?” Karara had moved so that her back was now to the wash of waves, her face more in the shadow.

“How do I know? Could be any of ten different things.”

“And will I please shut up and leave you alone?” she countered swiftly. “Do you wish to savor the excitement then, explore a world upon world, or am I saying it right? We have Hawaika One which is a new world for us; now there is Hawaika Two which is removed in time, not distance. And to explore that—”

“We won’t be exploring it really,” Ross protested.

“Why? Did your agents not spend days, weeks, even months of time in the past on Terra? What is to prevent your doing the same here?”

“Training. We have no way of learning the drill.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it wasn’t as easy as you seem to think it was back on Terra,” he began scornfully. “We didn’t just stroll through one of those gates and set up business, say, in Nero’s Rome or Montezuma’s Mexico. An Agent was physically and psychologically fitted to the era he was to explore. Then he trained, and how he trained!” Ross remembered the weary hours spent learning how to use a bronze sword, the technique of Beaker trading, the hypnotic instruction in a language which was already dead centuries before his own country existed. “You learned the language, the customs, everything you could about your time and your cover. You were letter perfect before you took even a trial run!”

“And here you would have no guides,” Karara said, nodding. “Yes, I can see the difficulty. Then you will just use the peep-probe?”

“Probably. Oh, maybe later on we can scout through a gate. We have the material to set one up. But it would be a strictly limited project, allowing no chance of being caught. Maybe the big brains back home can take peep-data and work out some basis of infiltration for us from it.”

“But that would take years!”

“I suppose so. Only you begin to swim in the shallows, don’t you—not by jumping off a cliff!”

She laughed. “True enough! However, even a look into the past might solve part of the big mystery.”

Ross grunted and stretched out to follow Ashe’s example. But behind his closed eyes his brain was busy, and he did not cultivate the patience he needed. Peep-probes were all right, but Karara had a point. You wanted more than a small window into a mystery, you wanted a part in solving it.

The setting of the sun deepened rose to red, made a dripping wine-hued banner of most of the sky, so that under it they moved in a crimson sea, looked back at an island where shadows were embers instead of ashes. Three humans, two dolphins, and a machine mounted on a reef which might not even have existed in the time they sought. Ashe made his final adjustments, and then his finger pressed a button and they watched the vista-plate no larger than the palms of two hands.

Nothing, a dull gray nothing! Something must have gone wrong with their assembly work. Ross touched Ashe’s shoulder. But now there were shadows gathering on the plate, thickening, to sharpen into a distinct picture.

It was still the sunset hour they watched. But somehow the colors were paler, less red and sullen than the ones about them in the here and now. And they were not seeing the isle toward which the probe had been aimed; they were looking at a rugged coastline where cliffs lifted well above the beach-strand. While on those cliffs—! Ross had not realized Karara had reached out to grasp his arm until her nails bit into his flesh. And even then he was hardly aware of the pain. Because there was a building on the cliff!

Massive walls of native rock reared in outward defenses, culminating in towers. And from the high point of one tower the pointed tail of a banner cracked in the wind. There was a headland of rock reaching out, not toward them but to the north, and rounding that....

“War canoe!” Karara exclaimed, but Ross had another identification:

“Longboat!”

In reality, the vessel was neither one nor the other, not the double canoe of the Pacific which had transported warriors on raid from one island to another, or the shield-hung warship of the Vikings. But the Terrans were right in its purpose: That rakish, sharp-prowed ship had been fashioned for swift passage of the seas, for maneuverability as a weapon.

Behind the first nosed another and a third. Their sails were dyed by the sun, but there were devices painted on them, and the lines of those designs glittered as if they had been drawn with a metallic fluid.

“The castle!” Ashe’s cry pulled their attention back to land.

There was movement along those walls. Then came a flash, a splash in the water close enough to the lead ship to wet her deck with spray.

“They’re fighting!” Karara shouldered against Ross for a better look.

The ships were altering course, swinging away from land, out to sea.

“Moving too fast for sails alone, and I don’t see any oars.” Ross was puzzled. “How do you suppose....”

The bombardment from the castle continued but did not score any hits. Already the ships were out of range, the lead vessel off the screen of the peep as well. Then there was just the castle in the sunset. Ashe straightened up.

“Rocks!” he repeated wonderingly. “They were throwing rocks!”

“But those ships, they must have had engines. They weren’t just depending on sails when they retreated.” Ross added his own cause for bewilderment.

Karara looked from one to the other. “There is something here you do not understand. What is wrong?”

“Catapults, yes,” Ashe said with a nod. “Those would fit periods corresponding from the Roman Empire into the Middle Ages. But you’re right, Ross, those ships had power of some kind to take them offshore that quickly.”

“A technically advanced race coming up against a more backward one?” hazarded the younger man.

“Could be. Let’s go forward some.” The incoming tide was washing well up on the reef. Ashe had to don his mask as he plunged head and shoulders under water to make the necessary adjustment.

Once more he pressed the button. And Ross’s gasp was echoed by one from the girl. The cliff again, but there was no castle dominating it, only a ruin, hardly more than rubble. Now, above the sites of the saucer depressions great pylons of silvery metal, warmed into fire brilliance by the sunset, raked into the sky like gaunt, skeleton fingers. There were no ships, no signs of any life. Even the vegetation which had showed on shore had vanished. There was an atmosphere of stark abandonment and death which struck the Terrans forcibly.

Those pylons, Ross studied them. Something familiar in their construction teased his memory. That refuel planet where the derelict ship had set down twice, on the voyage out and on their return. That had been a world of metal structures, and he believed he could trace a kinship between his memory of those and these pylons. Surely they had no connection with the earlier castle on the cliff.

Once more Ashe ducked to reset the probe. And in the fast-fading light they watched a third and last picture. But now they might have been looking at the island of the present, save that

it bore no vegetation and there was a rawness about it, a sharpness of rock outline now vanished.

Those pylons, were they the key to the change which had come upon this world? What were they? Who had set them there? For the last Ross thought he had an answer. They were certainly the product of the galactic empire. And the castle ... the ships ... natives ... settlers? Two widely different eras, and the mystery still, lay between them. Would they ever be able to bring the key to it out of time?

They swam for the shore where Ui had a fire blazing and their supper prepared.

“How many years lying between those probes?” Ross pulled broiled fish apart with his fingers.

“That first was ten thousand years ago, the second,” Ashe paused, “only two hundred years later.”

“But”—Ross stared at his superior—“that means——”

“That there was a war or some drastic form of invasion, yes.”

“You mean that the star people arrived and just took over this whole planet?” Karara asked.

“But why? And those pylons, what were they for? How much later was that last picture?”

“Five hundred years.”

“The pylons were gone, too, then,” Ross commented. “But why—?” he echoed Karara’s question.

Ashe had taken up his notebook, but he did not open it. “I think”—there was a sharp, grim note in his voice—“we had better find out.”

“Put up a gate?”

Ashe broke all the previous rules of their service with his answer:

“Yes, a gate.”



## 4. Storm Menace

“We have to know.” Ashe leaned back against the crate they had just emptied. “Something was done here—in two hundred years—and then, an empty world.”

“Pandora’s box.” Ross drew a hand across his forehead, smearing sweat and fine sand into a brand.

Ashe nodded. “Maybe we run that risk, loosing all the devils of the aliens. But what if the Reds open the box first on one of their settlement worlds?”

There it was again, the old thorn which prodded them into risks and recklessness. Danger ahead on both paths. Don’t risk trying to learn galactic secrets, but don’t risk your enemy’s learning them either. You held a white-hot iron in both hands in this business. And Ashe was right, they had stumbled on something here which hinted that a whole world had been altered to suit some plan. Suppose the secret of that alteration was discovered by their enemies?

“Were the ship and castle people natives?” Ross wondered aloud.

“Just at a guess they were, or at least settlers who had been established here so long they had developed a local form of civilization which was about on the level of a feudal society.”

“You mean because of the castle and the rock bombardment. But what about the ships?”

“Two separate phases of a society at war, perhaps a more progressive against a less technically advanced. American warships paying a visit to the Shogun’s Japan, for example.”

Ross grinned. “Those warships didn’t seem to fancy their welcome. They steered out to sea fast enough when the rocks began to fall.”

“Yes, but the ships could exist in the castle pattern; the pylons could not!”

“Which period are you aiming for first—the castle or the pylons?”

“Castle first, I think. Then if we can’t pick up any hints, we’ll take some jumps forward until we do connect. Only we’ll be under severe handicaps. If we could only plant an analyzer somewhere in the castle as a beginning.”

Ross did not show his surprise. If Ashe was talking on those terms, then he was intending to do more than just lurk around a little beyond the gate; he was really planning to pick up alien speech patterns, eventually assume an alien agent identity!

“Gordon!” Karara appeared between two of the lace trees. She came so hastily that the contents of the two cups she carried slopped over. “You must hear what Hori has to say—”

The tall Samoan who trailed her spoke quickly. For the first time since Ross had known him he was very serious, a frown line between his eyes. “There is a bad storm coming. Our instruments register it.”

“How long away?” Ashe was on his feet.

“A day ... maybe two....”

Ross could see no change in the sky, islands, or sea. They had had idyllic weather for the six weeks since their planeting, no sign of any such trouble in the Hawaikan paradise.

“It’s coming,” Hori repeated.

“The gate is half up,” Ashe thought aloud, “too much of it set to be dismantled again in a hurry.”

“If it’s completed,” Hori wanted to know, “would it ride out a storm?”

“It might, behind that reef where we have it based. To finish it would be a fast job.”

Hori flexed his hands. “We’re more brawn than brain in these matters, Gordon, but you’ve all our help, for what it’s worth. What about the ship, does it lift on schedule?”

“Check with Rimbault about that. This storm, how will it compare to a Pacific typhoon?”

The Samoan shook his head. “How do we know? We have not yet had to face the local variety.”

“The islands are low,” Karara commented. “Winds and water could—”

“Yes! We’d better see Rimbault about a shelter if needed.”

If the settlement had drowsed, now its inhabitants were busy. It was decided that they could shelter in the spaceship should the storm reach hurricane proportions, but before its coming the gate must be finished. The final fitting was left to Ashe and Ross, and the older agent fastened the last bolt when the waters beyond the reef were already wind ruffled, the sky darkening fast. The dolphins swam back and forth in the lagoon and with them Karara, though Ashe had twice waved her to the shore.

There was no sunlight left, and they worked with torches. Ashe began his inspection of the relatively simple transfer—the two upright bars, the slab of opaque material forming a doorstep between them. This was only a skeleton of the gates Ross had used in the past. But continual experimentation had produced this more easily transported installation.

Piled in a net were several supply containers ready for an exploring run—extra gill-packs, the analyzer, emergency rations, a medical kit, all the basics. Was Ashe going to try now? He had activated the transfer, the rods were glowing faintly, the slab they guarded having an eerie blue glimmer. He probably only wanted to be sure it worked.

What happened at that moment Ross could never find any adequate words to describe, nor was he sure he could remember. The disorientation of the pass-through he had experienced before; this time he was whirled into a vortex of feeling in which his body, his identity, were rift from him and he lost touch with all stability.

Instinctively he lashed out, his reflexes more than his conscious will keeping him above water in the wild rage of a storm-whipped sea. The light was gone; here was only dark and beating water. Then a lightning flash ripped wide the heavens over Ross as his head broke the surface and he saw, with unbelieving eyes, that he was being thrust shoreward—not to the strand of Finger Island—but against a cliff where water pounded an unyielding wall of rock.

Ross comprehended that somehow he had been jerked through the gate, that he was now fronting the land that had been somewhere beneath the heights supporting the castle. Then he fought for his life to escape the hammer of the sea determined to crack him against the surface of the cliff.

A rough surface loomed up before him, and he threw himself in that direction, embracing a rock, striving to cling through the backwash of the wave which had brought him there. His nails grated and broke on the stone, and then the fingers of his right hand caught in a hole, and he held with all the strength in his gasping, beaten body. He had had no preparation, no warning, and only the tough survival will which had been trained and bred into him saved his life.

As the water washed back, Ross strove to pull up farther on his anchorage, to be above the strike of the next wave. Somehow he gained a foot before it came. The mask of the gill-pack saved him from being smothered in that curling torrent as he clung stubbornly, resisting again the pull of the retreating sea.

Inch by inch between waves he fought for footing and stable support. Then he was on the surface of the rock, out of all but the lash of spray. He crouched there, spent and gasping. The thunder roar of the surf, and beyond it the deeper mutter of the rage in the heavens, was deafening, dulling his sense as much as the ordeal through which he had passed. He was content to cling where he was, hardly conscious of his surroundings.

Sparks of light along the shore to the north at last caught Ross's attention. They moved, some clustering along the wave line, a few strung up the cliff. And they were not part of the storm's fireworks. Men here—why at this moment?

Another bolt of lightning showed him the answer. On the reef fringe which ran a tongue of land into the sea hung a ship—two ships—pounded by every hammer wave. Shipwrecks ... and those lights must mark castle dwellers drawn to aid the survivors.

Ross crawled across his rock on his hands and knees, wavered along the cliff wall until he was again faced with angry water. To drop into that would be a mistake. He hesitated—and now more than his own predicament struck home to him.

Ashe! Ashe had been ahead of him at the time gate. If Ross had been jerked through to this past, then somewhere in the water, on the shore, Gordon was here too! But where to find him....

Setting his back to the cliff and holding to the rough stone, Ross got to his feet, trying to see through the welter of foam and water. Not only the sea poured here; now a torrential rain fell into the bargain, streaming down about him, battering his head and shoulders. A chill rain which made him shiver.

He wore gill-pack, weighted belt with its sheathed tool and knife, flippers, and the pair of swimming trunks which had been suitable for the Hawaika he knew; but this was a different world altogether. Dare he use his torch to see the way out of here? Ross watched the lights to the north, deciding they were not too unlike his own beam, and took the chance.

Now he stood on a shelf of rock pitted with depressions, all pools. To his left was a drop into a boiling, whirling caldron from which points of stone fanged. Ross shuddered. At least he had escaped being pulled into that!

To his right, northward, there was another space of sea, a narrow strip, and then a second ledge. He measured the distance between that and the one on which he perched. Staying where he was would not locate Ashe.

Ross stripped off his flippers, made them fast in his belt. Then he leaped and landed painfully, as his feet slipped and he skidded face down on the northern ledge.

As he sat up, rubbing a bruised and scraped knee, he saw lights advancing in his direction. And between them a shadow crawling from water to shore. Ross stumbled along the ledge hastening to reach that figure, who lay still now just out of the waves. Ashe?

Ross's limping pace became a trot. But he was too late; the other lights, two of them, had reached the shadow. A man—or at least a body which was humanoid—sprawled face down. Other men, three of them, gathered over the exhausted swimmer.

Those who held the torches were still partially in the dark, but the third stooped to roll over their find. Ross caught the glint of light on a metallic headcovering, the glisten of wet armor of some type on the fellow's back and shoulders as he made quick examination of the sea's victim.

Then.... Ross halted, his eyes wide. A hand rose and fell with expert precision. There had been a blade in that hand. Already the three were turning away from the man so ruthlessly dispatched. Ashe? Or some survivor of the wrecked ships?

Ross retreated to the end of the ledge. The narrow stream of water dividing it from the rock where he had won ashore washed into a cave in the cliff. Dare he try to work his way into that? Masked, with the gill-pack, he could go under surface if he were not smashed by the waves against some wall.

He glanced back. The lights were very close to the end of his ledge. To withdraw to the second rock would mean being caught in a dead end, for he dared not enter the whirlpool on its far side. There was really no choice: stay and be killed, or try for the cave. Ross fastened on his flippers and lowered his body into the narrow stream. The fact that it was narrow and guarded on either side by the ledges tamed the waves a little, and Ross found the tug against him not so great as he feared it would be.

Keeping hand-holds on the rock, he worked along, head and shoulders often under the wash of rolling water, but winning steadily to the break in the cliff wall. Then he was through, into a space much larger than the opening, water-filled but not with a wild turbulence of waves.

Had he been sighted? Ross kept a handhold to the left of that narrow entrance, his body floating with the rise and fall of the water. He could make out the gleam of light without. It might be that one of those hunters had leaned out over the runnel of the cave entrance, was flashing his torch down into the water there.

Behind mask plate Ross's lips writhed in the snarl of the hunted. In here he would have the advantage. Let one of them, or all three, try to follow through that rock entrance and....

But if he had been sighted at the mouth of the lair, none of his trackers appeared to wish to press the hunt. The light disappeared, and Ross was left in the dark. He counted a hundred slowly and then a second hundred before he dared use his own torch.

For all its slit entrance this was a good-sized hideaway he had chanced upon. And he discovered, when he ventured to release his wall hold and swim out into its middle, the bottom arose in a slope toward its rear.

Moments later Ross pulled out of the water once more, to crouch shivering on a ledge only lapped now and then by wavelets. He had found a temporary refuge, but his good fortune did not quiet his fears. Had that been Ashe on the shore? And why had the swimmer been so summarily executed by the men who found him?

The ships caught on the reef, the castle on the cliff above his head ... enemies ... ships' crews and castle men? But the callous act of the shore patrol argued a state of war carried to fanatic proportions, perhaps inter-racial conflict.

He could not hope to explore until the storm was over. To plunge back into the sea would not find Ashe. And to be hunted along the shore by an unknown enemy was simply asking to die without achieving any good in return. No, he must remain where he was for the present.

Ross unhooked the torch from his belt and used it on this higher portion of the cave. He was perched on a ledge which protruded into the water in the form of a wedge. At his back the wall of the cave was rough, and trails of weed were festooned on its projections. The smell of

fishy decay was strong enough to register as Ross pulled off his mask. As far as he could now see there was no exit except by sea.

A movement in the water brought his light flashing down into the dark flood. Then a sleek head arose in the path of that ray. Not a man swimming, but one of the dolphins!

Ross's exclamation of surprise was half gasp, half cry. The second dolphin showed for a moment and between the shadow of their bodies, just under the surface, moved a third form.

"Ashe!" Ross had no idea how the dolphins had come through the time gate, but that they had guided to safety a Terran he did not doubt at all. "Ashe!"

But it was not Ashe who came wading to the ledge where Ross waited with hand outstretched. He had been so sure of the other's identity that he blinked in complete bewilderment as his eyes met Karara's and she half stumbled, half reeled against him.

His arms about her shoulders steadied her, and her shivering body was close to his as she leaned her full weight upon him. Her hands made a feeble movement to her mask, and he pulled it off. Uncovered, her face was pale and drawn, her eyes now closed, and her breath came in ragged, tearing sobs which shook her even more.

"How did you get here?" Ross demanded even as he pushed her down on the ledge.

Her head moved slowly, in a weak gesture of negation.

"I don't know ... we were close to the gate. There was a flash of light ... then—" Her voice sealed up with a note of hysteria in it. "Then ... I was here ... and Taua with me. Tino-rau came ... Ross, Ross ... there was a man swimming. He got ashore; he was getting to his feet and—and they killed him!"

Ross's hold tightened; he stared into her face with fierce demand.

"Was it Gordon?"

She blinked, brought her hand up to her mouth, and wiped it back and forth across her chin. There was a small red trickle growing between her fingers, dripping down her arm.

"Gordon?" She repeated it as if she had never heard the name before.

"Yes, did they kill Gordon?"

In his grasp she was swaying back and forth. Then, realizing he was shaking her, Ross got himself under control.

But a measure of understanding had come into her eyes. "No, not Gordon. Where is Gordon?"

"You haven't seen him?" Ross persisted, knowing it was useless.

"Not since we were at the gate." Her words were less slurred. "Weren't you with him?"

"No. I was alone."

"Ross, where are we?"

"Better say—when are we," he replied. "We're through the gate and back in time. And we have to find Gordon!" He did not want to think of what might have happened out on the shore.

## 5. Time Wrecked

“Can we go back?” Karara was herself again, her voice crisp.

“I don’t know.” Ross gave her the truth. The force which had drawn them through the gate was beyond his experience. As far as he knew, there had never been such an involuntary passage by time gate, and what their trip might mean he did not know.

The main concern was that Ashe must have come through, too, and that he was missing. Just let the storm abate, and, with the dolphins’ aid, Ross’s chance for finding the missing agent was immeasurably better. He said so now, and Karara nodded.

“Do you suppose there is a war going on here?” She hugged her arms across her breast, her shoulders heaving in the torch light with shudders she could not control. The damp chill was biting, and Ross realized that was also danger.

“Could be.” He got to his feet, switched the light from the girl to the walls. That seaweed, could it make them some form of protective covering?

“Hold this—aim it there!” He thrust the torch into her hands and went for one of the loops of kelp.

Ross reeled in lines of the stuff. It was rank-smelling but only slightly damp, and he piled it on the ledge in a kind of nest. At least in the hollow of that mound they would be sheltered after a fashion.

Karara crawled into the center of the mass, and Ross followed her. The smell of the stuff filled his nose, was almost like a visible cloud, but he had been right, the girl stopped shivering, and he felt a measure of warmth in his own shaking body. Ross snapped off the torch, and they lay together in the dark, the half-rotten pile of weed holding them.

He must have slept, Ross guessed, when he stirred, raising his head. His body was stiff, aching, as he braced himself up on his hands and peered over the edge of their kelp nest. There was light in the cave, a pale grayish wash which grew stronger toward the slit opening. It must be day. And that meant they could move.

Ross groped in the weed, his hand falling on a curve of shoulder.

“Wake up!” His voice was hoarse and held the snap of an order.

There was a startled gasp in answer, and the mound beside him heaved as the girl stirred.

“Day out—” Ross pointed.

“And the storm—” she stood up, “I think it is over.”

It was true that the level of water within the cave had fallen, that wavelets no longer lapped with the same vigor. Morning ... the storm over ... and somewhere Ashe!

Ross was about to snap his mask into place when Karara caught at his arm.

“Be careful! Remember what I saw—last night they were killing swimmers!”

He shook her off impatiently. “I’m no fool! And with the packs on we do not have to surface. Listen—” he had another thought, one which would provide an excellent excuse for keeping her safely out of his company, reducing his responsibility for her, “you take the dolphins and try to find the gate. We’ll want out as soon as I locate Ashe.”

“And if you do not find him soon?”

Ross hesitated. She had not said the rest. What if he could not find Gordon at all? But he would—he had to!

“I’ll be back here”—he checked his watch, no longer an accurate timekeeper, for Hawaikan days held an hour more than the Terran twenty-four, but the settlers kept the off-world measurement to check on work periods—in, say, two hours. You should know by then about the gate, and I’ll have some idea of the situation along the shore. But listen—” Ross caught her shoulders in a taut grip, pulled her around to face him, his eyes hot and almost angry as they held hers, “don’t let yourself be seen—” He repeated the cardinal rule of Agents in new territory. “We don’t dare risk discovery.”

Karara nodded and he could see that she understood, was aware of the importance of that warning. “Do you want Tino-rau or Taua?”

“No, I’m going to search along the shore first. Ashe would have tried for that last night ... was probably driven in the way we were. He’d go to ground somewhere. And I have this—” Ross touched the sonic on his belt. “I’ll set it on his call; you do the same with yours. Then if we get within distance, he’ll pick us up. Back here in two hours—”

“Yes.” Karara kicked free of the weed, was already wading down to where the dolphins circled in the cave pool waiting for her. Ross followed, and the four swam for the open sea.

It could not be much after dawn, Ross thought, as he clung by one hand to a rock and watched Karara and the dolphins on their way. Then he paddled along the shore northward for his own survey of the coast. There was a rose cast in the sky, warming the silver along the far reaches of the horizon. And about him bobbed storm flotsam, so that he had to pick a careful way through floating debris.

On the reef one of the wrecked ships had vanished entirely. Perhaps it had been battered to death by the waves, ground to splinters against the rocks. The other still held, its prow well out of the now receding waves, jagged holes in its sides through which spurts of water cascaded now and then.

The wreck which had been driven landward was composed of planks, boxes, and containers rolled by the waves’ force. Much of this was already free of the sea, and on the beach figures moved examining it. In spite of the danger of chance discovery, Ross edged along rocks, seeking a vantage point from which he could watch that activity.

He was flat against a sea-girt boulder, a swell of floating weed draped about him, when the nearest of the foraging parties moved into good view.

Men ... at least they had the outward appearance of men much like himself, though their skin was dark and their limbs appeared disproportionately long and thin. There were two groups of them, four wearing only a scanty loincloth, busy turning over and hunting through the debris under the direction of the other two.

The workers had thick growths of hair which not only covered their heads, but down their spines and the outer sides of their thin arms and legs to elbow and knee. The hair was a pallid yellow-white in vivid contrast to their dark skins, and their chins protruded sharply, allowing the lower line of their faces to take on a vaguely disturbing likeness to an animal’s muzzle.

Their overseers were more fully clothed, wearing not only helmets on their heads, whose helms had a protective visor over the face, but also breast- and back-plates molded to their bodies. Ross thought that these could not be solid metal since they adapted to the movements of the wearers.

Feet and legs were covered with casing combinations of shoe and leggings, colored dull red. They were armed with swords of an odd pattern; their points curved up so that the blade resembled a fishhook. Unsheathed, the blades were clipped to a waist belt by catches which glittered in the weak morning light as if gem set.

Ross could see little of their faces, for the beak visors overhung their features. But their skins were as dusky as those of the laborers, and their arms and legs of the same unusual length ... men of the same race, he deduced.

Under the orders of the armed overseers the laborers were reducing the beach to order, sorting out the flotsam into two piles. Once they gathered about a find, and the sound of excited speech reached Ross as an agitated clicking. The armored men came up, surveyed the discovery. One of them shrugged, and clicked an order.

Ross caught only a half glimpse of the thing two of the workers dragged away. A body! Ashe.... The Terran was about to move closer when he saw the green cloak dragging about the corpse. No, not Gordon, just another victim from the wrecks.

The aliens were working their way toward Ross, and perhaps it was time for him to go. He was pushing aside his well-arranged curtain of weed when he was startled by a shout. For a second he thought he might have been sighted, until resulting action on shore told him otherwise.

The furred workers shrank back against the mound to which they had just dragged the body. While the two guards took up a position before them, curved swords, snapped from their belt hooks, ready in their hands. Again that shout. Was it a warning or a threat? With the language barrier Ross could only wait to see.

Another party approached along the beach from the south. In the lead was a cloaked and hooded figure, so muffled in its covering of silver-gray that Ross had no idea of the form beneath. Silvery-gray—no, now that hue was deepening with blue tones, darkening rapidly. By the time the cloaked newcomer had passed the rock which sheltered the Terran the covering was a rich blue which seemed to glow.

Behind the leader were a dozen armed men. They wore the same beaked helmets, the supple encasing breast- and back-plates, but their leggings were gray. They, too, carried curved swords, but the weapons were still latched to their belts and they made no move to draw them in spite of the very patent hostility of the guards before them.

Blue cloak halted some three feet from the guards. The sea wind pulled at the cloak, wrapping it about the body beneath. But even so, the wearer remained well hidden. From under a flapping edge came a hand. The fingers, long and slender, were curled about an ivory-colored wand which ended in a knob. Sparks flashed from it in a continuous flickering.

Ross clapped his hand to his belt. To his complete amazement the sonic disk he wore was reacting to those flashes, pricking sharply in perfect beat to their blink-blink. The Terran cupped his scarred fingers over the disk as he waited to see what was going to happen, wondering if the holder of that wand might, in return, pick up the broadcast of the code set on Ashe's call.

The hand clasping the wand was not dusky-skinned but had much of the same ivory shade as the rod, so that to Ross the meeting between flesh and wand was hardly distinguishable. Now by one firm thrust the hand planted the rod into the sand, leaving it to stand sentinel between the two parties.



Retreating a step or two, the red-clad guards gave ground. But they did not reclassify their swords. Their attitude, Ross judged, was that of men in some awe of their opponent, but men urged to defiance, either by a belief in the righteousness of their cause, or strengthened by an old hatred.

Now the cloaked one began to speak—or was that speech? Certainly the flow of sound had little in common with the clicking tongue Ross had caught earlier. This trill of notes possessed the rise and fall of a chant or song which could have been a formula of greeting—or a warning. And the lines of warriors escorting the chanter stood to attention, their weapons still undrawn.

Ross caught his lower lip between his teeth and bit down on it. That chanting—it crawled into the mind, set up a pattern! He shook his head vigorously and then was shocked by that recklessness. Not that any of those on shore had glanced in his direction.

The chant ended on a high, broken note. It was followed by a moment of silence through which sounded only the wind and the beat of wave.

Then one of the laborers flung up his head and clicked a word or two. He and his fellows fell face down on the beach, cupping their hands to pour sand over their unkempt heads. One of the guards turned with a sharp yell to boot the nearest of the workers in the ribs.

But his companion cried out. The wand which had stood so erect when it was first planted, now inclined toward the working party, its sparks shooting so swiftly and with such slight break between that they were fast making a single beam. Ross jerked his hand from contact with the sonic; a distinct throb of pain answered that stepping up of the mysterious broadcast.

The laborers broke and ran, or rather crawled on their bellies until they were well away, before they got to their feet and pelted back down the strand. However, the guards were of sterner stuff. They were withdrawing all right, but slowly backing away, their swords held up before them as men might retreat before insurmountable odds.

When they were well gone the robed one took up the wand. Holding it out beyond, the cloaked leader of the second party approached the two piles of salvage the workers had heaped into rough order. There was a detailed inspection of both until the robed one came upon the body.

At a trilled order two of the warriors came up and laid out the corpse. When the robed one nodded they stood well back. The rod moved, the tip rather than the knobbed head being pointed at the body.

Ross's head snapped back. That bolt of light, energy, fire—whatever it was—issuing from the rod had dazzled him into momentary blindness. And a vibration of force through the air was like a blow.

When he was able to see once more there was nothing at all on the sand where the corpse had lain, nothing except a glassy trough from which some spirals of vapor arose. Ross clung to his rock support badly shaken.

Men with swords ... and now this—some form of controlled energy which argued of technical development and science. Just as the cliff castle had bombarded with rocks ships sailing with a speed which argued engine power of an unknown type. A mixture of barbaric and advanced knowledge. To assess this, he needed more experience, more knowledge than he possessed. Now Ashe could...

Ashe!

Ross was jerked back to his own quest. The rod was quiet, no more sparks were flung from its knob. And under Ross's touch his sonic was quiet also. He snapped off the broadcast. If that device had picked up the flickering of the rod, the reverse could well be true.

The cloaked one chose from the pile of goods, and its escort gathered up the designated boxes, a small cask or two. So laden, the party returned south the way they had come. Ross allowed his breath to expel in a sigh of relief.

He worked his way farther north along the coast, watching other parties of the furred workers and their guards. Lines of the former climbed the cliff, hauling their spoil, their destination the castle. But Ross saw no sign of Ashe, received no answer to the sonic code he had reset once the strangers were out of distance. And the Terran began to realize that his present search might well be fruitless, though he fought against accepting it.

When he turned back to the slit cave Ross's fear was ready to be expressed in anger, the anger of frustration over his own helplessness. With no chance of trying to penetrate the castle, he could not learn whether or not Ashe had been taken prisoner. And until the workers left the beach he could not prowls there hunting the grimmer evidence his mind flinched from considering.

Karara waited for him on the inner ledge. There was no sign of the dolphins and as Ross pulled out of the water, pushing aside his mask, her face in the thin light of the cave was deeply troubled.

"You did not find him," she made that a statement rather than a question.

"No."

"And I did not find it—"

Ross used a length of weed from the nest as a towel. But now he stood very still.

"The gate ... no sign of it?"

"Just this—" She reached behind her and brought up a sealed container. Ross recognized one of the supply cans they had had in the cache by the gate. "There are others ... scattered. Taua and Tino-rau seek them now. It is as if all that was on the other side was sucked through with us."

"You are sure you found the right place?"

"Is—is this not part of it?" Again the girl sought for something on the ledge. What she held out to him was a length of metal rod, twisted and broken at one end as if a giant hand had wrenched it loose from the installation.

Ross nodded dully. "Yes," his voice was harsh as if the words were pulled out of him against his will and against all hope—"that's part of a side bar. It—it must have been totally wrecked."

Yet, even though he held that broken length in his hands, Ross could not really believe the gate was gone. He swam out once more, heading for the reef where the dolphins joined him as guides. There was a second piece of broken tube, the scattered containers of supplies, that was all. The Terrans were wrecked in time as surely as those ships had been wrecked on the sea reef the night before!

Ross headed once again for the cave. Their immediate needs were of major importance now. The containers must be all gathered and taken into their hiding place, because upon their contents three human lives could depend.

He paused just at the entrance to adjust the net of containers he transported. And it was that slight chance which brought him knowledge of the intruder.

On the ledge Karara was heaping up the kelp of the nest. But to one side and on a level with the girl's head...

Ross dared not flash his torch, thus betraying his presence. Leaving the net hitched to the rock by its sling, he swam under water along the side of the cave by a route which should bring him out within striking distance of that hunched figure perching above to watch Karara's every move.

## 6. Loketh the Useless

The wash of waves covered Ross's advance until he came up against the wall not too far from the spy's perch. Whoever crouched there still leaned forward to watch Karara. And Ross's eyes, having adjusted to the gloom of the cavern, made out the outline of head and shoulders. The next two or three minutes were the critical ones for the Terran. He must emerge on the ledge in the open before he could attack.

Karara might almost have read his mind and given conscious help. For now she went out on the point of the ledge to whistle the dolphins' summons. Tino-rau's sleek head bobbed above water as he answered the girl with a bubbling squeak. Karara knelt and the dolphin came to butt against her out-held hand.

Ross heard a gasp from the watcher, a faint sound of movement. Karara began to sing softly, her voice rippling in one of the liquid chants of her own people, the dolphin interjecting a note or two. Ross had heard them at that before, and it made perfect cover for his move. He sprang.

His grasp tightened on flesh, fingers closed about thin wrists. There was a yell of astonishment and fear from the stranger as the Terran jerked him from his perch to the ledge. Ross had his opponent flattened under him before he realized that the other had offered no struggle, but lay still.

"What is it?" Karara's torch beam caught them both. Ross looked down into a thin brown face not too different from his own. The wide-set eyes were closed, and the mouth gaped open. Though he believed the Hawaikan unconscious, Ross still kept hold on those wrists as he moved from the sprawled body. With the girl's aid he used a length of kelp to secure the captive.

The stranger wore a garment of glistening skintight material which covered body, legs, and feet, but left his lanky arms bare. A belt about his waist had loops for a number of objects, among them a hook-pointed knife which Ross prudently removed.

"Why, he is only a boy," Karara said. "Where did he come from, Ross?"

The Terran pointed to the wall crevice. "He was up there, watching you."

Her eyes were wide and round. "Why?"

Ross dragged his prisoner back against the wall of the cave. After witnessing the fate of those who had swum ashore from the wreck, he did not like to think what motive might have brought the Hawaikan here. Again Karara's thoughts must have matched his, for she added:

"But he did not even draw his knife. What are you going to do with him, Ross?"

That problem already occupied the Terran. The wisest move undoubtedly was to kill the native out of hand. But such ruthlessness was more than he could stomach. And if he could learn anything from the stranger—gain some knowledge of this new world and its ways—he would be twice winner. Why, this encounter might even lead to Ashe!

"Ross ... his leg. See?" The girl pointed.

The tight fit of the alien's clothing made the defect clear; the right leg of the stranger was shrunken and twisted. He was a cripple.

"What of it?" Ross demanded sharply. This was no time for an appeal to the sympathies.

But Karara did not urge any modification of the bonds as he half feared she would. Instead, she sat back cross-legged, an odd, withdrawn expression making her seem remote though he could have put out his hand to touch her.

“His lameness—it could be a bridge,” she observed, to Ross’s mystification.

“A bridge—what do you mean?”

The girl shook her head. “This is only a feeling, not a true thought. But also it is important. Look, I think he is waking.”

The lids above those large eyes were fluttering. Then with a shake of the head, the Hawaikan blinked up at them. Blank bewilderment was all Ross could read in the stranger’s expression until the alien saw Karara. Then a flood of clicking speech poured from his lips.

He seemed utterly astounded when they made no answer. And the fluency of his first outburst took on a pleading note, while the expectancy of his first greeting faded away.

Karara spoke to Ross. “He is becoming afraid, very much afraid. At first, I think, he was pleased ... happy.”

“But why?”

The girl shook her head. “I do not know; I can only feel. Wait!” Her hand rose in imperious command. She did not rise to her feet, but crawled on hands and knees to the edge of the ledge. Both dolphins were there, raising their heads well out of the water, their actions expressing unusual excitement.

“Ross!” Karara’s voice rang loudly. “Ross, they can understand him! Tino-rau and Taua can understand him!”

“You mean, they understand this language?” Ross found that fantastic, awesome as the abilities of the dolphins were.

“No, his mind. It’s his mind, Ross. Somehow he thinks in patterns they can pick up and read! They do that, you know, with a few of us, but not in the same way. This is more direct, clearer! They’re so excited!”

Ross glanced at the prisoner. The alien had wriggled about, striving to raise his head against the wall as a support. His captor pulled the Hawaikan into a sitting position, but the native accepted that aid almost as if he were not even aware of Ross’s hands on his body. He stared with a kind of horrified disbelief at the bobbing dolphin heads.

“He is afraid,” Karara reported. “He has never known such communication before.”

“Can they ask him questions?” demanded Ross. If this odd mental tie between Terran dolphin and Hawaikan did exist, then there was a chance to learn about this world.

“They can try. Now he only knows fear, and they must break through that.”

What followed was the most unusual four-sided conversation Ross could have ever imagined. He put a question to Karara, who relayed it to the dolphins. In turn, they asked it mentally of the Hawaikan and conveyed his answer back via the same route.

It took some time to allay the fears of the stranger. But at last the Hawaikan entered wholeheartedly into the exchange.

“He is the son of the lord ruling the castle above.” Karara produced the first rational and complete answer. “But for some reason he is not accepted by his own kind. Perhaps,” she added on her own, “it is because he is crippled. The sea is his home, as he expresses it, and he

believes me to be some mythical being out of it. He saw me swimming, masked, and with the dolphins, and he is sure I change shape at will.”

She hesitated. “Ross, I get something odd here. He does know, or thinks he knows, creatures who can appear and disappear at will. And he is afraid of their powers.”

“Gods and goddesses—perfectly natural.”

Karara shook her head. “No, this is more concrete than a religious belief.”

Ross had a sudden inspiration. Hurriedly he described the cloaked figure who had driven the castle people from the piles of salvage. “Ask him about that one.”

She relayed the question. Ross saw the prisoner’s head jerk around. The Hawaikan looked from Karara to her companion, a shade of speculation in his expression.

“He wants to know why you ask about the Foanna? Surely you must well know what manner of beings they are.”

“Listen—” Ross was sure now that he had made a real discovery, though its importance he could not guess, “tell him we come from where there are no Foanna. That we have powers and must know of their powers.”

If he could only carry on this interrogation straight and not have to depend upon a double translation! And could he even be sure his questions reached the alien undistorted?

Wearily Ross sat back on his heels. Then he glanced at Karara with a twinge of concern. If he was tired by their roundabout communication, she must be doubly so. There was a droop to her shoulders, and her last reply had come in a voice hoarse with fatigue. Abruptly he started up.

“That’s enough—for now.”

Which was true. He had to have time for evaluation, to adjust to what they had learned during the steady stream of questions passed back and forth. And in that moment he was conscious of his hunger, just as his voice was paper dry from lack of drink. The canister of supplies he had left by the cave entrance ...

“We need food and drink.” He fumbled with his mask, but Karara motioned him back from the water.

“Taua brings ... Wait!”

The dolphin trailed the net of containers to them. Ross unscrewed one, pulled out a bulb of fresh water. A second box yielded the dry wafers of emergency rations.

Then, after a moment’s hesitation, Ross crossed to the prisoner, cut his wrist bonds, and pressed both a bulb and a wafer into his hold. The Hawaikan watched the Terrans eat before he bit into the wafer, chewing it with vigor, turning the bulb around in his fingers with alert interest before he sucked at its contents.

As Ross chewed and swallowed, mechanically and certainly with no relish, he fitted one fact to another to make a picture of this Hawaikan time period in which they were now marooned. Of course, his picture was based on facts they had learned from their captive. Perhaps he had purposely misled them or fogged some essentials. But could he have done that in a mental contact? Ross would simply have to accept everything with a certain amount of cautious skepticism.

Anyway, there were the Wreckers of the castle—petty lordlings setting up their holds along the coasts, preying upon the shipping which was the lifeblood of this island-water world. The

Terrans had seen them in action last night and today. And if the captive's information was correct, it was not only the storm's fury which brought the waves' harvest. The Wreckers had some method of attracting ships to crack up on their reefs.

Some method of attraction.... And that force which had pulled the Terrans through the time gate; could there be a connection? However, there remained the Wreckers on the cliff. And their prey, the seafarers of the ocean, with an understandably deep enmity between them.

Those two parties Ross could understand and be prepared to deal with, he thought. But there remained the Foanna. And, from their prisoner's explanation, the Foanna were a very different matter.

They possessed a power which did not depend upon swords or ships or the natural tools and weapons of men. No, they had strengths which were unearthly, to give them superiority in all but one way—numbers. Though the Foanna had their warriors and servants, as Ross had seen on the beach, they, themselves, were of another race—a very old and dying race of which few remained. How many, their enemies could not say, for the Foanna had no separate identities known to the outer world. They appeared, gave their orders, levied their demands, opposed or aided as they wished—always just one or two at a time—always so muffled in their cloaks that even their physical appearances remained a mystery. But there was no mystery about their powers. Ross gathered that no Wrecker lord, no matter how much a leader among his own kind, how ambitious, had yet dared to oppose actively one of the Foanna, though he might make a token protest against some demand from them.

And certainly the captive's description of those powers in action suggested a supernatural origin of Foanna knowledge, or at least for its application. But Ross thought that the answer might be that they possessed the remnants of some almost forgotten technical know-how, the heritage of a very old race. He had tried to learn something of the origin of the Foanna themselves, wondering if the robed ones could be from the galactic empire. But the answer had come that the Foanna were older than recorded time, that they had lived in the great citadel before the race of the Terrans' prisoner had risen from very primitive savagery.

“What do we do now?” Karara broke in upon Ross's thoughts as she refastened the containers.

“These slaves that the Wreckers take upon occasion ... Maybe Ashe...” Ross was catching at very fragile straws; he had to. And the stranger had said that able-bodied men who swam ashore relatively uninjured were taken captive. Several had been the night before.

“Loketh.”

Ross and Karara looked around. The prisoner put down the water bulb, and one of his hands made a gesture they could not mistake; he pointed to himself and repeated that word, “Loketh.”

The Terran touched his own chest. “Ross Murdock.”

Perhaps the other was as impatient as he with their roundabout method of communication and had decided to try and speed it up. The analyzer! Ashe had included the analyzer with the equipment by the gate. If Ross could find that ... why, then the major problem could be behind them. Swiftly he explained to Karara, and with a vigorous nod of assent she called to Taau, ordering the rest of the salvage material from the gate be brought to them.

“Loketh.” Ross pointed to the youth. “Ross.” That was himself. “Karara.” He indicated the girl.

“Rosss.” The alien made a clicking hiss of the first name. “Karara—” He did better with the second.

Ross carefully unpacked the box Taua had located. He had only slight knowledge of how the device worked. It was intended to record a strange language, break it down into symbols already familiar to the Time Agents. But could it also be used as a translator with a totally alien tongue? He could only hope that the rough handling of its journey through the gate had not damaged it and that the experiment might possibly work.

Putting the box between them, he explained what he wanted; and Karara took up the small micro-disk, speaking slowly and distinctly the same liquid syllables she had used in the dolphin song. Ross clicked the lever when she was finished, and watched the small screen. The symbols which flashed there had meaning for him right enough; he could translate what she had just taped. The machine still worked to that extent.

Now he pushed the box into place before Loketh and made the visibly reluctant Hawaikan take the disk from Karara. Then through the dolphin link Ross passed on definite instructions. Would it work as well to translate a stellar tongue as it had with languages past and present of his own planet?

Reluctantly Loketh began to talk to the disk, at first in a very rapid mumble and then, as there was no frightening response, with less speed and more confidence. There were symbol lines on the vista-plate in accordance, and some of them made sense! Ross was elated.

“Ask him: Can one enter the castle unseen to check on the slaves?”

“For what reason?”

Ross was sure he had read those symbols correctly.

“Tell him—that one of our kind may be among them.”

Loketh did not reply so quickly this time. His eyes, grave and measuring, studied Ross, then Karara, then Ross again.

“There is a way ... discovered by this useless one.”

Ross did not pay attention to the odd adjective Loketh chose to describe himself. He pressed to the important matter.

“Can and will he show me that way?”

Again that long moment of appraisal on the part of Loketh before he answered. Ross found himself reading the reply symbols aloud.

“If you dare, then I will lead.”



## 7. Witches' Meat

He might be recklessly endangering all of them, Ross knew. But if Ashe was immured somewhere in that rock pile over their heads, then the risk of trusting Loketh would be worth it. However, because Ross was chancing his own neck did not mean that Karara need be drawn into immediate peril too. With the dolphins at her command and the supplies, scanty as those were, she would have a good chance to hide here safely.

"Holding out for what?" she asked quietly after Ross elaborated on this subject, thus bringing him to silence.

Because her question was just. With the gate gone the Terrans were committed to this time, just as they had earlier been committed to Hawaika when on their home world they had entered the spaceship for the take-off. There was no escape from the past, which had become their present.

"The Foanna," she continued, "these Wreckers, the sea people—all at odds with one another. Do we join any, then their quarrels must also become ours."

Taua nosed the ledge behind the girl, squeaked a demand for attention. Karara looked around at Loketh; her look was as searching as the one the native had earlier turned on her and Ross.

"He"—the girl nodded at the Hawaikan—"wishes to know if you trust him. And he says to tell you this: Because the Shades chose to inflict upon him a twisted leg he is not one with those of the castle, but to them a broken, useless thing. Ross, I gather he thinks we have powers like the Foanna, and that we may be supernatural. But because we did not kill him out of hand and have fed him, he considers himself bound to us."

"Ritual of bread and salt ... could be." Though it might be folly to match alien customs to Terran, Ross thought of that very ancient pact on his own world. Eat a man's food, become his friend, or at least declare a truce between you. Stiff taboos and codes of behavior marked nations on Terra, especially warrior societies, and the same might be true here.

"Ask him," Ross told Karara, "what is the rule for food and drink between friends or enemies!" The more he could learn of such customs the better protection he might be able to weave for them.

Long moments for the relay of that message, and then Loketh spoke into the micro-disk of the analyzer, slowly, with pauses, as if trying to make sure Ross understood every word.

"To give bread into the hands of one you have taken in battle, makes him your man—not as a slave to labor, but as one who draws sword at your bidding. When I took your bread I accepted you as cup-lord. Between such there is no betrayal, for how may a man betray his lord? I, Loketh, am now a sword in your hands, a man in your service. And to me this is doubly good, for as a useless one I have never had a lord, nor one to swear to. Also, with this Sea Maid and her followers to listen to thoughts, how could any man speak with a double tongue were he one who consorted with the Shadow and wore the Cloak of Evil?"

"He's right," Karara added. "His mind is open; he couldn't hide his thoughts from Taua and Tino-rau even if he wished."

"All right, I'll accept that." Ross glanced about the ledge. They had piled the containers at the far end. For Karara to move might be safe. He said so.

“Move where?” she asked flatly. “Those men from the castle are still hunting drift out there. I don’t think anyone knows of this cave.”

Ross nodded to Loketh. “He did, didn’t he? I wouldn’t want you trapped here. And I don’t want to lose those supplies. What is in those containers may be what saves us all.”

“We can sink those over by the wall, weight them down in a net. Then, if we have to move, they will be ready. Do not worry—that is my department.” She smiled at him with a slightly mocking lift of lips.

Ross subsided, though he was irritated because she was right. The management of the dolphin team and sea matters were her department. And while he resented her reminder of that point he could not deny the justice of her retort.

In spite of his crippled leg, Loketh displayed an agility which surprised Ross. Freed from his ankle bonds, he beckoned the Terran back to the very niche where he had hidden to watch Karara. Up he swung into that and in a second had vanished from sight.

Ross followed, to discover it was not a niche after all but the opening of a crevice, leading upward as a vent. And it had been used before as a passage. There was no light, but the native guided Ross’s hands to the hollow climbing holds cut into the stone. Then Loketh pushed past and went up the crude ladder into the dark.

It was difficult to judge either time or distance in this black tube. Ross counted the holds for some check. His agent training made one part of his mind sharply aware of such things; the need for memorizing a passage which led into the enemy’s territory was apparent. What the purpose of this slit had originally been he did not know, but strongholds on Terra had had their hidden ways in and out for use in times of siege, and he was beginning to believe that these aliens had much in common with his own kind.

He had reached twenty in his counting and his senses, alerted by training and instinct, told him there was an opening not too far above. But the darkness remained so thick it fell in tangible folds about his sweating body. Ross almost cried out as fingers clamped about his wrist when he reached for a new hold. Then urged by that grasp, he was up and out, sprawling into a vertical passage. Far ahead was a gray of faint light.

Ross choked and then sneezed as dust puffed up from between his scrabbling hands. The hold which had been on his wrist shifted to his shoulder, and with a surprising strength Loketh hauled the Terran to his feet.

The passage in which they stood was a slit extending in height well above their heads, but narrow, not much wider than Ross’s shoulders. Whether it was a natural fault or had been cut he could not tell.

Loketh was ahead again, his rocking limp making the outline of his body a jerky up-and-down shadow. Again his speed and agility amazed the Terran. Loketh might be lame, but he had learned to adapt to his handicap very well.

The light increased and Ross marked slits in the walls to his right, no wider than the breadth of his two fingers. He peered out of one and was looking into empty air while below he heard the murmur of the sea. This way must run in the cliff face above the beach.

A click of impatient whisper drew him on to join Loketh. Here was a flight of stairs, narrow of tread and very steep. Loketh turned back and side against these to climb, his outspread hand flattened on the stone as if it possessed adhesive qualities to steady him. For the first time his twisted leg was a disadvantage.

Ross counted again—ten, fifteen of those steps, bringing them once more into darkness. Then they emerged from a well-like opening into a circular room. A sudden and dazzling flare of light made the Terran shade his eyes. Loketh set a pallid but glowing cone on a wall shelf, and the Terran discovered that the burst of light was only relative to the dark of the passage; indeed it was very weak illumination.

The Hawaikan braced his body against the far wall. The strain of his effort, whatever its purpose, was easy to read in the contorted line of his shoulders. Then the wall slid under Loketh's urging, a slow move as if the weight of the slab he strove to handle was almost too great for his slender arms, or else the need for caution was intensified here.

They now fronted a narrow opening, and the light of the cone shone only a few feet into the space. Loketh beckoned to Ross and they went on. Here the left wall was cut in many places emitting patches of light in a way which bore no resemblance to conventional windows. It was like walking behind a pierced screen which followed no logical pattern in the cutaway portions. Ross gazed out and gasped.

He was standing above the center core of the castle, and the life below and beyond drew his attention. He had seen drawings reproducing the life of a feudal castle. This resembled them and yet, as Ross studied the scene closer, the differences between the Terran past and this became more distinct.

In the first place there were those animals—or were they animals?—being hooked up to a cart. They had six limbs, walking on four, holding the remaining two folded under their necks. Their harness consisted of a network fitted over their shoulders, anchored to the folded limbs. Their grotesque heads, bobbing and weaving on lengthy necks, their bodies, were sleekly scaled. Ross was startled by a resemblance he traced to the sea dragon he had met in the future of this world.

But the creatures were subject to the men harnessing them. And the activity in other respects ... Ross had to fight a wayward and fascinated interest in all he could see, force himself to concentrate on learning what might be pertinent to his own mission. But Loketh did not allow him to watch for long. Instead, his hand on the Terran's arm urged the other down the gallery behind the screen and once more into the bulk of the fortress.

Another narrow way ran through the thickness of the walls. Then a patch of light, not that of outer day, but a reddish gleam from an opening waist high. There Loketh went awkwardly to his good knee, motioning Ross to follow his example.

What lay below was a hall furnished with a barbaric rawness of color and glitter. There were long strips of brightly hued woven stuff on the walls, touched here and there with sparkling glints which were jewel-like. And set at intervals among the hangings were oval objects perhaps Ross's height on which were designs and patterns picked out in paint and metal. Maybe the stylized representation of native plants and animals.

The whole gave an impression of clashing color, just as the garments of those gathered there were garish in turn.

There were three Hawaikans on the two-step dais. All wore robes fitting tightly to the upper portion of their bodies, girded to their waists with elaborate belts, then falling in long points to floor level, the points being finished off with tassels. Their heads were covered with tight caps which were a latticework of decorated strips, glittering as they moved. And the mixture of colors in their apparel was such as to offend Terran eyes with their harsh clash of shade against shade.

Drawn up below the dais were two rows of guards. But the reason for the assembly baffled Ross, since he could not understand the clicking speech.

There came a hollow echoing sound as from a gong. The three on the dais straightened, turned their attention to the other end of the hall. Ross did not need Loketh's gesture to know that something of importance was about to begin.

Down the hall was a somber note in the splash of clashing color. The Terran recognized the gray-blue robe of the Foanna. There were three of the robed ones this time, one slightly in advance of the other two. They came at a gliding pace as if they swept along above that paved flooring, not by planting feet upon it. As they halted below the dais the men there rose.

Ross could read their reluctance to make that concession in the slowness of their movements. They were plainly being compelled to render deference when they longed to refuse it. Then the middle one of the castle lords spoke first.

"Zahur—" Loketh breathed in Ross's ear, his pointed finger indicating the speaker.

Ross longed vainly for the ability to ask questions, a chance to know what was in progress. That the meeting of the two Hawaikan factions was important he did not doubt.

There was an interval of silence after the castle lord finished speaking. To the Terran this spun on and on and he sensed the mounting tension. This must be a showdown, perhaps even a declaration of open hostilities between Wreckers and the older race. Or perhaps the pause was a subtle weapon of the Foanna, used to throw a less-sophisticated enemy off balance, as a judo fighter might use an opponent's attack as part of his own defense.

When the Foanna did make answer it came in the singsong of chanted words. Ross felt Loketh shiver, felt the crawl of chill along his own spine. The words—if those were words and not just sounds intended to play upon the mind and emotions of a listener—cut into one. Ross wanted to close his ears, thrust his fingers into them to drown out that sound, yet he did not have the power to raise his hands.

It seemed to him that the men on the dais were swaying now as if the chant were a rope leashed about them, pulling them back and forth. There was a clatter; one of the guards had fallen to the floor and lay there, rolling, his hands to his head.

A shout from the dais. The chanting reached a note so high that Ross felt the torment in his ears. Below, the lines of guards had broken. A party of them were heading for the end of the hall, making a wide detour around the Foanna. Loketh gave a small choked cry; his fingers tightened on Ross's forearm with painful intensity as he whispered.

What was about to happen meant something important. To Loketh or to him? Ashe! Was this concerned with Ashe? Ross crowded against the opening, tried to see the direction in which the guards had disappeared.

The wait made him doubly impatient. One of the men on the dais had dropped on the bench there, his head forward on his hands, his shoulders quivering. But the one Loketh had identified as Zahur still fronted the Foanna spokesman, and Ross gave tribute to the strength of will which kept him there.

They were returning, the guards, and herded between their lines three men. Two were Hawaikans, their bare dark bodies easily identifiable. But the third—Ashe! Ross almost shouted his name aloud.

The Terran stumbled along and there was a bandage above his knee. He had been stripped to his swimming trunks, all his equipment taken from him. There was a dark bruise on his left temple, the angry weal of a lash mark on neck and shoulder.

Ross's hands clenched. Never in his life had he so desperately wanted a weapon as he did at that moment. To spray the company below with a machine gun would have given him great satisfaction. But he had nothing but the knife in his belt and he was as cut off from Ashe as if they were in separate cells of some prison.

The caution which had been one of his inborn gifts and which had been fostered by his training, clamped down on his first wild desire for action. There was not the slightest chance of his doing Ashe any good at the present. But he had this much—he knew that Gordon was alive and that he was in the aliens' hands. Faced by those facts Ross could plan his own moves.

The Foanna chant began again, and the three prisoners moved; the two Hawaikans turned, set themselves on either side of Ashe, and gave him support. Their actions had a mechanical quality as if they were directed by a will beyond their own. Ashe gazed about him at the Wreckers and the robed figures. His awareness of them both suggested to Ross that if the natives had come under the control of the Foanna, the Terran resisted their influence. But Ashe did not try to escape the assistance of his two fellow prisoners, and he limped with their aid back down the hall, following the Foanna.

Ross deduced that the captives had been transferred from the lord of the castle to the Foanna. Which meant Ashe was on his way to another destination. The Terran was on his feet and headed back, intent on returning to the sea cave and starting out after Ashe as soon as he could.

"You have found Gordon!" Karara read his news from his face.

"The Wreckers had him prisoner. Now they've turned him over to the Foanna—"

"What will *they* do with him?" the girl demanded of Loketh.

His answer came roundabout as usual as the native squatted by the analyzer and clicked his answer into it.

"They have claimed the wreck survivors for tribute. Your companion will be witches' meat."

"Witches' meat?" repeated Ross, uncomprehending.

Then Karara drew a gagged breath which was a gasp of horror.

"Sacrifice! Ross, he must mean they are going to use Gordon for a sacrifice."

Ross stiffened and then whirled to catch Loketh by the shoulders. The inability to question the native directly was an added disaster now.

"Where are they taking him? Where?" He began that fiercely, and then forced control on himself.

Karara's eyes were half closed, her head back; she was manifestly aiming that inquiry at the dolphins, to be translated to Loketh.

Symbols burned on the analyzer screen.

"The Foanna have their own fortress. It can be entered best by sea. There is a boat ... I can show you, for it is my own secret."

“Tell him—yes, as soon as we can!” Ross broke out. The old feeling that time was all-important worried at him. Witches’ meat ... witches’ meat ... the words were sharp as a lash.

## 8. The Free Rovers

Twilight made a gray world where one could not trace the true meeting of land and water, sea and sky. Surely the haze about them was more than just the normal dusk of coming night.

Ross balanced in the middle of the skiff as it bobbed along the swell of waves inside a barrier reef. To his mind the craft carrying the three of them and their net of supplies was too frail, rode too high. But Karara paddling in the bow, Loketh at the stern seemed to be content, and Ross could not, for pride's sake, question their competency. He comforted himself with the knowledge that no agent was able to absorb every primitive skill, and Karara's people had explored the Pacific in out-rigger canoes hardly more stable than their present vessel, navigating by currents and stars.

Smothering his feeling of helplessness and the slow anger that roused in him, the Terran busied himself with study of a sort. They had had the longer part of the day in the cave before Loketh would agree to venture out of hiding and paddle south. Ross, using the analyzer, had, with Loketh's aid, set about learning what he could of the native tongue.

Now possessed of a working vocabulary of clicked words, he was able to follow Loketh's speech so that translation through the dolphins was not necessary except for complicated directions. Also, he had a more detailed briefing of the present situation on Hawaika.

Enough to know that they might be embarking on a mad venture. The citadel of the Foanna was distinctly forbidden ground, not only for Loketh's people but also for the Foanna's Hawaikan followers who were housed and labored in an outer ring of fortification-cum-village. Those natives were, Ross gathered, a hereditary corps of servants and warriors, born to that status and not recruited from the native population at large. As such, they were armored by the "magic" of their masters.

"If the Foanna are so powerful," Ross had demanded, "why do you go with us against them?" To depend so heavily on the native made him uneasy.

The Hawaikan looked to Karara. One of his hands raised; his fingers sketched a sign toward the girl.

"With the Sea Maid and her magic I do not fear." He paused before adding, "Always has it been said of me—and to me—that I am a useless one, fit only to do women's tasks. No word weaver shall ever chant my battle deeds in the great hall of Zahur. I who am Zahur's true son can not carry my sword in any lord's train. But now you offer me one of the great to-be-remembered quests. If I go, so may I prove that I am a man, even if I go limpingly. There is nothing the Foanna can do to me which is worse than what the Shadow has already done. Choosing to follow you I may stand up to face Zahur in his own hall, show him that the blood of his House has not been drained from my veins because I walk crookedly!"

There was such bitter fire, not only in the sputtering rush of Loketh's words, but in his eyes, his face, the wry twist of his lips, that Ross believed him. The Terran no longer had any doubts that the castle outcast was willing to brave the unknown terrors of the Foanna keep, not just to aid Ross whom he considered himself bound to serve by the customs of his people, but because he saw in this venture a chance to gain what he had never had, a place in his warrior culture.

Shut off from the normal life of his people, he had early turned to the sea. His twisted leg had not proved a handicap in the water, and he stated with confidence that he was the best

swimmer in the castle. Not that the men of his father's following had taken greatly to the sea, which they looked upon merely as a way of preying upon the true sea rovers.

The reef on which the ships had been wrecked was a snare of sorts—first by the whim of nature when wind and current piled up the trading ships there. Then, Ross was startled when Loketh elaborated on a later development of that trap.

“So Zahur returned from this meeting and set up a great magic among the rock, according to the spells he was taught. Now ships are drawn there so the wrecks have been many and Zahur becomes an even greater lord with many men coming to take sword oath under him.”

“This magic,” asked Ross, “of what manner is it and where did Zahur obtain it?”

“It is fashioned so—” Loketh sketched two straight lines in the air, “not curved as a sword. And the color of water under a storm sky, both rods being as tall as a man. There was much care to set them in place, that was done by a man of Glicmas.”

“A man of Glicmas?”

“Glicmas is now the high lord of the Iccio. He is blood kin to Zahur, yet Zahur must take sword oath to send to Glicmas a fourth of all his sea-gleanings for a year in payment for this magic.”

“And Glicmas, where did he get it? From the Foanna?”

Loketh made an emphatic denial of that. “No, the Foanna have spoken out against their use, making even greater ill feeling between the Old Ones and the coast people. It is said that Glicmas saw a great wonder in the sky and followed it to a high place of his own country. A mountain broke in twain and a voice issued forth from the rent, calling that the lord of the country come and stand to hear it. When Glicmas did so he was told that the magic would be his. Then the mountain closed again and he found many strange things upon the ground. As he uses them they make him akin to the Foanna in power. Some he gives to those who are his blood kin, and together they will be great until they close their fists not only upon the sea rovers, but upon the Foanna also. This they have come to believe.”

“But you do not?” Karara asked then.

“I do not know, Sea Maid. The time is coming when perhaps they shall have their chance to prove how strong is their magic. Already the Rovers gather in fleets as they never did before. And it seems that they, too, have found a new magic, for their ships fly through the water, depending no longer on wind-filling sails, or upon strong arms of men at long paddles. There is a struggle before us. But that you must know, being who and what you are, Sea Maid.”

“And what do you think I am? What do you think Ross is?”

“If the Foanna dwell on land and hold old knowledge and power beyond our reckoning in their two hands,” he replied, “then it is possible that the same could have roots in the sea. It is my belief that you are of the Shades, but not the Shadow. And this warrior is also of your kind—but perhaps in different degree, putting into action your desires and wishes. Thus, if you go up against the Foanna, you shall be well matched, kind to kind.”

Nice to be so certain of that, Ross thought. He did not share Loketh's confidence on that subject.

“The Shades ... the Shadow ...” Karara persisted. “What are these, Loketh?”

An odd expression crossed the Hawaikan's face. “Are those not known to you, Sea Maid? Indeed, then you are of a breed different from the men of land. The Shades are those of power who may come to the aid of men should it be their desire to influence the future. And the



Shadow ... the Shadow is That Which Ends All—man, hope, good. To Which there is no appeal, and Which holds a vast and enduring hatred for that which has life and full substance.”

“So Zahur has this new magic. Is it the gift of Shades or Shadow?” Ross brought them back to the subject which had sparked in him a small warning signal.

“Zahur prospers mightily.” Loketh’s answer was ambiguous.

“And so the Shadow could not provide such magic?” The Terran pushed.

But before the Hawaikan had a chance to answer, Karara added another question:

“But you believe that it did?”

“I do not know. Only the magic has made Zahur a part of Glicmas, and Glicmas is now perhaps a part of that which spoke from the mountain. It is not well to accept gifts which tie one man to another unless there is from the first a saying of how deep that bond may run.”

“I think you are wise in that, Loketh,” Karara said.

But the uneasiness had grown in Ross. Alien powers, out of a mountain heart, passed from one lord to another. And on the other hand the Rovers’ sudden magic in turn, lending their ships wings. The two facts balanced in an odd way. Back on Terra there had been those sudden and unaccountable jumps in technical knowledge on the part of the enemy, jumps which had set in action the whole Time Travel service of which he had become a part. And these jumps had not been the result of normal research; they had come from the looting of derelict spaceships wrecked on his world in the far past.

Could driblets of the same stellar knowledge have been here deliberately fed to warring communities? He asked Loketh about the possibility of space-borne explorers. But to the Hawaikan that was a totally foreign conception. The stars, for Loketh, were the doorways and windows of the Shades, and he treated the suggestion of space travel as perhaps natural to those all-powerful specters, but certainly not for beings like himself. There was no hint that Hawaika had been openly visited by a galactic ship. Though that did not bar such landings. The planet was, Ross thought, thinly populated. Whole sections of the interiors of the larger islands were wilderness, and this world must be in the same state of only partial occupation as his own earth had been in the Bronze Age when tribes on the march had fanned out into virgin wilderness, great forests, and steppes unwalked by man before their coming.

Now as he balanced in the canoe and tried to keep his mind off the queasiness in his middle and the insecurity of the one thickness of sea-creature hide stretched over a bone framework which made up the craft between his person and the water, Ross still mulled over what might be true. Had the galactic invaders for their own purposes begun to meddle here, leaking weapons or tools to upset what must be a very delicate balance of power? Why? To bring on a conflict which would occupy the native population to the point of exhaustion or depopulation? So they could win a world for their own purposes without effort or risk on their part? Such cold-blooded fishing in carefully troubled waters fitted very well with the persons of the Baldies as he had known them on Terra.

And he could not set aside that memory of this very coast as he had seen it through the peep, the castle in ruins, tall pylons reaching from the land into the sea. Was this the beginning of that change which would end in the Hawaika of his own time, empty of intelligent life, shattered into a loose network of islands?

“This fog is strange.” Karara’s words startled Ross to return to the here and now.

The haze he had been only half conscious of when they had put out from the tiny secret bay where Loketh kept his boat, was truly a fog, piling up in soft billows and cutting down visibility with speed.

“The Foanna!” Loketh’s answer was sharp, a recognition of danger. “Their magic—they hide their place so! There is trouble, trouble on the move!”

“Do we land then?” Ross did not ascribe the present blotting out of the landscape to any real manipulation of nature on the part of the all-powerful Foanna. Too many times the reputations of “medicine men” had been so enhanced by coincidence. But he did doubt the wisdom of trying to bore ahead blindly in this murk.

“Taua and Tino-rau can guide us,” Karara reminded him. “Throw out the rope, Ross. What is above water will not confuse them.”

He moved cautiously, striving to adapt his actions to the swing of the boat. The line was ready coiled to hand and he tossed the loose end overboard, to feel the cord jerk taut as one of the dolphins caught it up.

They were being towed now, though both paddlers reinforced the forward tug with their efforts. The curtain gathering above the surface of the water did not hamper the swimmers beneath its surface, and Ross felt relief. He turned his head to speak to Loketh.

“How near are we?”

The mist had thickened to the point that, close as the native was, the lines of his body blurred. His clicking answer seemed distorted, too, almost as if the fog had altered not only his form but his personality.

“Maybe very soon now. We must see the sea gate before we are sure.”

“And if we aren’t able to see that?” challenged Ross.

“The sea gate is above and below the water. Those who obey the Sea Maid, who are able to speak thought to thought, will find it if we can not.”

But they were never to reach that goal. Karara gave warning: “There are ships about.”

Ross knew that the dolphins had told her. He demanded in turn: “What kind?”

“Larger, much larger than this.”

Then Loketh broke in: “A Rover Raider—three of them!”

Ross frowned. He was the cripple here. The other two, with their ability to communicate with the dolphins, were the sighted, he the blind. And he resented his handicap in a burst of bitterness which must have colored his tone as he ordered, “Head inshore—now!”

Once on land, even in the fog, he felt that they had the advantage in any hide-and-peek which might ensue with this superior enemy force. But afloat he was helpless and vulnerable, a state Ross did not accept easily.

“No,” Loketh returned as sharply. “There is no place to land along the cliff.”

“We are between two of the ships,” Karara reported.

“Your paddles—” Ross schooled his voice to a whisper, “hold them—don’t use them. Let the dolphins take us on. In the fog, if we make no sound, we may get by the ships.”

“Right!” Karara agreed, and he heard an assenting grunt from Loketh.

They were moving very slowly. Strong as the dolphins were, they dared not expend all their strength on towing the skiff too fast. Ross thought furiously. Perhaps the sea could be their way of escape if the need arose. He had no idea why raiding ships were moving under the cover of fog into the vicinity of the Foanna citadel. But the Terran's knowledge of tactics led him to guess that this impending visit was not anticipated by the Foanna, nor was it a friendly one. And, as veteran seamen who should normally be wary of fog as thick as this, the Rovers themselves must have a driving reason, or some safeguard which led them here now.

But dared the three spill out of their boat, trust to their swimming ability and that of the dolphins, and invade the Foanna sea gate so? Could they use the coming Rover attack as a cover for their own invasion of the hold? Ross considered that the odds in their favor were beginning to look better.

He whispered his idea and began to prepare their gear. The boat was still headed for the shore the three could not see. But they could hear sounds out of the white cotton wall which told them how completely they were boxed in by the raiders; creaks, whispers, noises, Ross could not readily identify, carried across the waves.

Before leaving the cave and beginning this voyage they had introduced Loketh to the use of the gill-pack, made him practice in the depths of the cave pool with one of the extras drawn through the gate among the supplies. Now all three were equipped with the water aid, and they could be gone in the sea before the trap closed.

"The supply net—" Ross warned Karara. A moment or two later there was a small bump against the skiff at his left hand. He cautiously raised the collection of containers and eased the burden into the water, knowing that one of the dolphins would take charge of it.

However, he was not prepared for what happened next. Under him the boat lurched first one way and then the other in sharp jerks as if the dolphins were trying to spill them into the sea. Ross heard Karara call out, her voice thin and frightened:

"Taua! Tino-rau! They have gone mad! They will not listen!"

The boat raced in a zigzag path. Loketh clutched at Ross, striving to steady him, to keep the boat on an even keel.

"The Foanna—!" Just as Loketh cried out, Karara plunged over the prow of the boat, whether by design or chance Ross did not know.

And then the craft whirled about, smashed side against side with a dark bulk looming out of the fog. Above, Ross heard cries, knew that they had crashed against one of the raiders. He fought to retain his balance, but he had been knocked to the bottom of the boat against Loketh and they struggled together, unable to move during a precious second or two.

Out of the air over their heads dropped a mass of waving strands which enveloped both of them. The stuff was adhesive, slimy. Ross let out a choked cry as the lines tightened about his arms and body, pinioning him.

Those tightened, wove a net. Now he was being drawn up out of the plunging skiff, a helpless captive. His flailing legs, still free of the slimy cords, struck against the side of the larger ship. Then he swung in, over the well of the deck, thudded down on that surface with bruising force, unable to understand anything except that he had been taken prisoner by a very effective device.

Loketh dropped beside him. But Karara was not brought in, and Ross held to that small bit of hope. Had she made it to freedom by dropping into the water before the Rovers netted them? He could see men gathering about him, masked and distorted in the fog. Then he was rolled

across the deck, boosted over the edge of a hatch and knew an instant of terror as he fell into the depth below.

How long was he unconscious? It could not have been very long, Ross decided, as he opened his eyes on dark, heard the small sounds of the ship. He lay very still, trying to remember, to gather his wits before he tried to flex his arms. They were held tight to his sides by strands which no longer seemed slimy, but were wrinkling as they dried. There was an odor from them which gagged him. But there was no loosening of those loops in spite of his struggles, which grew more intense as his strength returned. And at last he lay panting, knowing there was no easy way of escape from here.

## 9. Battle Test

Babble of speech, cries, sounded muffled to Ross, made a mounting clamor on the deck. Had the raiders' ship been boarded? Was it now under attack? He strove to hear and think through the pain in his head, the bewilderment.

"Loketh?" He was certain that the Hawaikan had been dumped into the same hold.

The only answer was a low moan, a mutter from the dark. Ross began to inch his way in that direction. He was no seaman, but during that worm's progress he realized that the ship itself had changed. The vibration which had carried through the planks on which he lay was stilled. Some engine shut off; one portion of his mind put that into familiar terms. Now the vessel rocked with the waves, did not bore through them.

Ross brought up against another body.

"Loketh!"

"Ahhhhh ... the fire ... the fire—!" The half-intelligible answer held no meaning for the Terran. "It burns in my head ... the fire—"

The rocking of the ship rolled Ross away from his fellow prisoner toward the opposite side of the hold. There was a roar of voice, bull strong above the noise on deck, then the sound of feet back and forth there.

"The fire ... ahhh—" Loketh's voice rose to a scream.

Ross was now wedged between two abutments he could not see and from which his best efforts could not free him. The pitching of the ship was more pronounced. Remembering the two vessels he had seen pounded to bits on the reef, Ross wondered if the same doom loomed for this one. But that disaster had occurred during a storm. And, save for the fog, this had been a calm night, the sea untroubled.

Unless—maybe the shaking his body had received during the past few moments had sharpened his thinking—unless the Foanna had their own means of protection at the sea gate and this was the result. The dolphins.... What had made Tino-rau and Taua react as they did? And if the Rover ship was out of control, it would be a good time to attempt escape.

"Loketh!" Ross dared to call louder. "Loketh!" He struggled against the drying strands which bound him from shoulder to mid thigh. There was no give in them.

More sounds from the upper deck. Now the ship was answering to direction again. The Terran heard sounds he could not identify, and the ship no longer rocked so violently. Loketh moaned.

As far as Ross could judge, they were heading out to sea.

"Loketh!" He wanted information; he must have it! To be so ignorant of what was going on was unbearable frustration. If they were now prisoners in a ship leaving the island behind.... The threat of that was enough to set Ross struggling with his bonds until he lay panting with exhaustion.

"Rossss?" Only a Hawaikan could make that name a hiss.

"Here! Loketh?" But of course it was Loketh.

“I am here.” The other’s voice sounded oddly weak as if it issued from a man drained by a long illness.

“What happened to you?” Ross demanded.

“The fire ... the fire in my head—eating ... eating...” Loketh’s reply came with long pauses between the words.

The Terran was puzzled. What fire? Loketh had certainly reacted to something beyond the unceremonious handling they had received as captives. This whole ship had reacted. And the dolphins.... But what fire was Loketh talking about?

“I did not feel anything,” he stated to himself as well as to the Hawaikan.

“Nothing burning in your head? So you could not think—”

“No.”

“It must have been the Foanna magic. Fire eating so that a man is nothing, only that which fire feeds upon!”

Karara! Ross’s thoughts flashed back to those few seconds when the dolphins had seemed to go crazy. Karara had then called out something about the Foanna. So the dolphins must have felt this, and Karara, and Loketh. Whatever *it* was. But why not Ross Murdock?

Karara possessed an extra, undefinable sense which gave her contact with the dolphins. Loketh had a mind which those could read in turn. But such communication was closed to Ross.

At first that realization carried with it a feeling of shame and loss. That he did not have what these others possessed, a subtle power beyond the body, a part of mind, was humbling. Just as he had felt shut out and crippled when he had been forced to use the analyzer instead of the sense the others had, so did he suffer now.

Then Ross laughed shortly. All right, sometimes insensitivity could be a defense as it had at the sea gate. Suppose his lack could also be a weapon? He had not been knocked out as the others appeared to be. But for the bad luck of having been captured before the raiders had succumbed, Ross could, perhaps, have been master of this ship by now. He did not laugh now; he smiled sardonically at his own grandiose reaction. No use thinking about what might have been, just file this fact for future reference.

A creaking overhead heralded the opening of the hatch. Light lanced down into the cubby, and a figure swung over and down a side ladder, coming to stand over Ross, feet apart for balancing, accommodating to the swing of the vessel with the ease of long practice.

Thus Ross came face to face with his first representative of the third party in the Hawaikan tangle of power—a Rover.

The seaman was tall, with a heavier development of shoulder and upper arms than the landsmen. Like the guards he wore supple armor, but this had been colored or overlaid with a pearly hue in which other tints wove opaline lines. His head was bare except for a broad, scaled band running from the nape of his neck to the mid-point of his forehead, a band supporting a sharply serrated crest not unlike the erect fin of some Terran fish.

Now as he stood, fists planted on hips, the Rover presented a formidable figure, and Ross recognized in him the air of command. This must be one of the ship’s officers.

Dark eyes surveyed Ross with interest. The light from the deck focused directly across the raider's shoulder to catch the Terran in its full glare, and Ross fought the need for squinting. But he tried to give back stare for stare, confidence for self-confidence.

On Terra in the past more than one adventurer's life had been saved simply because he had the will and nerve enough to face his captors without any display of anxiety. Such bravado might not hold here and now, but it was the only weapon Ross had to hand and he used it.

"You—" the Rover broke the silence first, "you are not of the Foanna—" He paused as if waiting an answer—denial or protest. Ross provided neither.

"No, not of the Foanna, nor of the scum of the coast either." Again a pause.

"So, what manner of fish has come to the net of Torgul?" He called an order aloft. "A rope here! We'll have this fish and its fellow out—"

Loketh and Ross were jerked up to the outer deck, dumped into the midst of a crowd of seamen. The Hawaikan was left to lie but, at a gesture from the officer, Ross was set on his feet. He could see the nature of his bonds now, a network of dull gray strands, shriveled and stinking, but not giving in the least when he made another try at moving his arms.

"Ho—" The officer grinned. "This fish does not like the net! You have teeth, fish. Use them, slash yourself free."

A murmur of applause from the crew answered that mild taunt. Ross thought it time for a countermove.

"I see you do not come too close to those teeth." He used the most defiant words his limited Hawaikan vocabulary offered.

There was a moment of silence, and then the officer clapped his hands together with a sharp explosion of sound.

"You would use your teeth, fish?" he asked and his tone could be a warning.

This was going it blind with a vengeance, but Ross took the next leap in the dark. He had the feeling, which often came to him in tight quarters, that he was being supplied from some hard core of endurance and determination far within him with the right words, the fortunate guess.

"On which one of you?" He drew his lips tight, displaying those same teeth, wondering for one startled moment if he should take the Rover's query literally.

"Vistur! Vistur!" More than one voice called.

One of the crew took a step or two forward. Like Torgul, he was tall and heavy, his over-long arms well muscled. There were scars on his forearms, the seam of one up his jaw. He looked what he was, a very tough fighting man, one who was judged so by peers as seasoned and dangerous.

"Do you choose to prove your words on Vistur, fish?" Again the officer had a formal note in his question, as if this was all part of some ceremony.

"If he meets with me as he stands—no other weapons." Ross flashed back.

Now he had another reaction from them. There were some jeers, a sprinkling of threats as to Vistur's intentions. But Ross caught also the fact that two or three of them had gone silent and were eyeing him in a new and more searching fashion and that Torgul was one of those.

Vistur laughed. "Well said, fish. So shall it be."

Torgul's hand came out, palm up, facing Ross. In its hollow was a small object the Terran could not see clearly. A new weapon? Only the officer made no move to touch it to Ross, the hand merely moved in a series of waves in mid-air. Then the Rover spoke.

"He carries no unlawful magic."

Vistur nodded. "He's no Foanna. And what need have I to fear the spells of any coast crawler? I am Vistur!"

Again the yells of his supporters arose in hearty answer. The statement held more complete and quiet confidence than any wordy boast.

"And I am Ross Murdock!" The Terran matched the Rover tone for tone. "But does a fish swim with its fins bound to its sides? Or does Vistur fear a free fish too greatly to face one?"

His taunt brought the result Ross wanted. The ties were cut from behind, to flutter down as withered, useless strings. Ross flexed his arms. Tight as those thongs had been they had not constricted circulation, and he was ready to meet Vistur. The Terran did not doubt that the Rover champion was a formidable fighter, but he had not had the advantage of going through one of the Agent training courses. Every trick of unarmed fighting known on his own world had been pounded into Ross long ago. His hands and feet could be as deadly weapons as any crook-bladed sword—or gun—provided he could get close enough to use them properly.

Vistur stripped off his weapon belt, put to one side his helmet, showing that under it his hair was plaited into a braid coiled about the crown of his head to provide what must be an extra padding for that strangely narrowed helm. Then he peeled off his armor, peeled it literally indeed, catching the lower edge of the scaled covering with his hands and pulling it up and over his head and shoulders as one might skin off a knitted garment. Now he stood facing Ross, wearing little more than the Terran's swimming trunks.

Ross had dropped his belt and gill-pack. He moved into the circle the crew had made. From above came a strong light, centering from a point on the mainmast and giving him good sight of his opponent.

Vistur was being urged to make a quick end of the reckless challenger, his supporters shouting directions and encouragement. But if the Rover had confidence, he also possessed the more intelligent and valuable trait of caution in the face of the unknown. He outweighed, apparently outmatched Ross, but he did not rush in rashly as his backers wished him to.

They circled, Ross studying every move of the Rover's muscles, every slight fraction of change in the other's balance. There would be something to telegraph an attack from the other. For he intended to fight purely in defense.

The charge came at last as the crew grew impatient and yelled their impatience to see the prisoner taught a lesson. But Ross did not believe it was that which sent Vistur at him. The Hawaikan simply thought he knew the best way to take the Terran.

Ross ducked so that a hammer blow merely grazed him. But the Terran's stiffened hand swept sidewise in a judo chop. Vistur gave a whooping cry and went to his knees and Ross swung again, sending the Rover flat to the deck. It had been quick but not so vicious as it might have been. The Terran had no desire to kill or even disable Vistur for more than a few minutes. His victim would carry a couple of aching bruises and perhaps a hearty respect for a new mode of fighting from this encounter. He could have as easily been dead had either of those blows landed other than where Ross chose to plant them.

"Ahhhh—"



The Terran swung around, setting his back to the foot of the mast. Had he guessed wrong? With their chosen champion down, would the crew now rush him? He had gambled on the element of fair play which existed in a primitive Terran warrior society after a man-to-man challenge. But he could be wrong. Ross waited, tense. Just let one of them pull a weapon, and it could be his end.

Two of them were aiding Vistur to his feet. The Rover's breath whistled in and out of him with that same whooping, and both of his hands rose unsteadily to his chest. The majority of his fellows stared from him to the slighter Terran as if unable to believe the evidence of their eyes.

Torgul gathered up from the deck the belt and gill-pack Ross had shed in preparation for the fight. He turned the belt around over his forearm until the empty knife sheath was uppermost. One of the crew came forward and slammed back into its proper place the long diver's knife which had been there when Ross was captured. Then the Rover offered belt and gill-pack to Ross. The Terran relaxed. His gamble had paid off; by the present signs he had won his freedom.

"And my swordsman?" As he buckled on the belt Ross nodded at Loketh still lying bound where they had pushed him at the beginning of the fight.

"He is sworn to you?" Torgul asked.

"He is."

"Loose the coast rat then," the Rover ordered. "Now—tell me, stranger, what manner of man are you? Do you come from the Foanna, after all? You have a magic which is not our magic, since the Stone of Phutka did not reveal it on you. Are you from the Shades?"

His fingers moved in the same sign Loketh had once made before Karara. Ross gave his chosen explanation.

"I am from the sea, Captain. As for the Foanna, they are no friend to me, since they hold captive in their keep one who is my brother-kin."

Torgul stared him up and down. "You say you are from the sea. I have been a Rover since I was able to stumble on my two feet across a deck, after the manner and custom of my people, yet I have never seen your like before. Perhaps your coming means ill to me and mine, but by the Law of Battle, you have won your freedom on this ship. I swear to you, however, stranger, that if ill comes from you, then the Law will not hold, and you shall match your magic against the Strength of Phutka. That you shall discover is another thing altogether."

"I will swear any oath you desire of me, Captain, that I have no ill toward you and yours. There is only one wish I hold: to bring him whom I seek out from the Foanna hold before they make him witches' meat."

"That will be a task worthy of any magic you may be able to summon, stranger. We have tasted this night of the power of the sea gate. Though we went in under the Will of Phutka, we were as weeds whirled about on the waves. Who enters that gate must have more force than any we now know."

"And you, too, then have a score to settle with the Foanna?"

"We have a score against the Foanna, or against their magic," Torgul admitted. "Three ships—one island fairing—are gone as if they never were! And those who went with them are of our fleet-clan. There is the work of the Shadow stretching dark and heavy across the sea, new come into these waters. But there remains nothing we can do this night. We have

been lucky to win to sea again. Now, stranger, what shall we do with you? Or will you take to the sea again since you name it as home?"

"Not here," Ross countered swiftly. He must gain some idea of where they might be in relation to the island, how far from its shore. Karara and the dolphins—what had happened to them?

"You took no other prisoners?" Ross had to ask.

"There were more of you?" Torgul countered.

"Yes." No need to say how many, Ross decided.

"We saw no others. You ... all of you—" the Captain rounded on the still-clustered crew, "get about your work! We must raise Kyn Add by morning and report to the council."

He walked away and Ross, determined to learn all he could, followed him into the stern cabin. Here again the Terran was faced with barbaric splendor in carvings, hangings, a wealth of plate and furnishing not too different from the display he had seen in the Wreckers' castle. As Ross hesitated just within the doorway Torgul glanced back at him.

"You have your life and that of your man, stranger. Do not ask more of me, unless you have that within your hands to enforce the asking."

"I want nothing, save to be returned to where you took me, Captain."

Torgul smiled grimly. "You are the sea, you yourself said that. The sea is wide, but it is all one. Through it you must have your own paths. Take any you choose. But I do not risk my ship again into what lies in wait before the gates of the Foanna."

"Where do you go then, Captain?"

"To Kyn Add. You have your own choice, stranger—the sea or our fairing."

There would be no way of changing the Rover's decision, Ross thought. And even with the gill-pack he could not swim back to where he had been taken. There were no guideposts in the sea. But a longer acquaintance with Torgul might be helpful.

"Kyn Add then, Captain." He made the next move to prove equality and establish himself with this Rover, seating himself at the table as one who had the right to share the Captain's quarters.

## 10. Death at Kyn Add

The hour was close to dawn again and a need for sleep weighted Ross's eyelids, was a craving as strong as hunger. Still restlessness had brought him on deck, sent him to pacing, alert to this vessel and its crew.

He had seen the ships of the Terran Bronze Age traders—small craft compared to those of his own time, depending upon oarsmen when the wind failed their sails, creeping along coasts rather than venturing too far into dangerous seas, sometimes even tying up at the shore each night. There had been other ships, leaner, hardier. Those had plunged into the unknown, touching lands beyond the sea mists, sailed and oared by men plagued by the need to learn what lay beyond the horizon.

And here was such a ship, taut, well kept, larger than the Viking longboats Ross had watched on the tapes of the Project's collection, yet most like those far-faring Terran craft. The prow curved up in a mighty bowsprit where was the carved likeness of the sea dragon Ross had fought in the Hawaika of his own time. The eyes of that monster flashed with a regular blink of light which the Terran did not understand. Was it a signal or merely a device to threaten a possible enemy?

There were sails, now furled as this ship bore on, answering to the steady throb of what could only be an engine. And his puzzlement held. A Viking longboat powered by motor? The mixture was incongruous.

The crew were uniform as to face. All of them wore the flexible pearly armor, the skull-strip helmets. Though there were individual differences in ornaments and the choice of weapons. The majority of the men did carry curve-pointed swords, though those were broader and heavier than those the Terran had seen ashore. But several had axes with sickle-shaped heads, whose points curved so far back that they nearly met to form a circle.

Spaced at regular intervals on deck were boxlike objects fronting what resembled gun ports. And smaller ones of the same type were on the raised deck at the stern and mounted in the prow, their muzzles, if the square fronts might be deemed muzzles, flanking the blinking dragon head. Catapults of some type? Ross wondered.

"Ross—" His name was given the hiss Loketh used, but it was not the Wrecker youth who joined him now at the stern of the ship. "Ho ... that was strong magic, that fighting knowledge of yours!"

Vistur rubbed his chest reminiscently. "You have big magic, sea man. But then you serve the Maid, do you not? Your swordsman has told us that even the great fish understand and obey her."

"Some fish," qualified Ross.

"Such fish as that, perhaps?" Vistur pointed to the curling wake of foam.

Startled, Ross stared in that direction. Torgul's command was the centermost in a trio of ships, and those cruised in a line, leaving three trails of troubled wave behind them. Coming up now to port in the comparative calm between two wakes was a dark object. In the limited light Ross could be sure of nothing save that it trailed the ships, appeared to rest on or only lightly in the water, and that its speed was less than that of the vessels it doggedly pursued.

"A fish—that?" Ross asked.

“Watch!” Vistur ordered.

But the Hawaikan’s sight must have been keener than the Terran’s. Had there been a quick movement back there? Ross could not be sure.

“What happened?” He turned to Vistur for enlightenment.

“As a salkar it leaps now and then above the surface. But that is no salkar. Unless, Ross, you who say you are from the sea have servants unlike any finned one we have drawn in by net or line before this day.”

The dolphins! Could Tino-rau or Taua or both be in steady pursuit of the ships? But Karara ... Ross leaned against the rail, stared until his eyes began to water from the strain of trying to make out the nature of the black blot. No use, the distance was too great. He brought his fist down against the wood, trying to control his impatience. More than half of him wanted to burst into Torgul’s quarters, demand that the Captain bring the ship about to pick up or contact that trailer or trailers.

“Yours?” again Vistur asked.

Ross had tight rein on himself now. “I do not know. It could well be.”

It could well be also that the smart thing would be to encourage the Rovers to believe that he had a force of sea dwellers much larger than the four Time castaways. The leader of an army—or a navy—had more prestige in any truce discussion than a member of a lost scouting party. But the thought that the dolphins could be trailing held both promise and worry—promise of allies, and worry over what had happened to Karara. Had she, too, disappeared after Ashe into the hold of the Foanna?

The day did not continue to lighten. Though there was no cottony mist as had enclosed them the night before, there was an odd muting of sea and sky, limiting vision. Shortly Ross was unable to sight the follower or followers. Even Vistur admitted he had lost visual contact. Had the blot been hopelessly outdistanced, or was it still dogging the wakes of the Rover ships?

Ross shared the morning meal with Captain Torgul, a round of leathery substance with a salty, meaty flavor, and a thick mixture of what might be native fruit reduced to a tart paste. Once before he had tasted alien food when in the derelict spaceship it had meant eat or starve. And this was a like circumstance, since their emergency ration supplies had been lost in the net. But though he was apprehensive, no ill effects followed. Torgul had been uncommunicative earlier; now he was looser of tongue, volunteering that they were almost to their port—the fairing of Kyn Add.

The Terran had no idea how far he might question the Hawaikan, yet the fuller his information the better. He discovered that Torgul appeared willing to accept Ross’s statement that he was from a distant part of the sea and that local customs differed from those he knew.

Living on and by the sea the Rovers were quick-witted, adaptive, with a highly flexible if loose-knit organization of fleet-clans. Each of these had control over certain islands which served them as “fairings,” ports for refitting and anchorage between voyages, usually ruggedly wooded where the sea people could find the raw material for their ships. Colonies of clans took to the sea, not in the slim, swift cruisers like the ship Ross was now on, but in larger, deeper vessels providing living quarters and warehouses afloat. They lived by trade and raiding, spending only a portion of the year ashore to grow fast-sprouting crops on their fairing islands and indulge in some manufacture of articles the inhabitants of the larger and more heavily populated islands were not able to duplicate.

Their main article of commerce was, however, a sea-dwelling creature whose supple and well-tanned hide formed their defensive armor and served manifold other uses. This could only be hunted by men trained and fearless enough to brave more than one danger Torgul did not explain in detail. And a cargo of such skins brought enough in trade to keep a normal-sized fleet-clan for a year.

There was warfare among them. Rival clans tried to jump each other's hunting territories, raid fairings. But until the immediate past, Ross gathered, such encounters were relatively bloodless affairs, depending more upon craft and skillful planning to reduce the enemy to a position of disadvantage in which he was forced to acknowledge defeat, rather than ruthless battle of no quarter.

The shore-side Wrecker lords were always considered fair game, and there was no finesse in Rover raids upon them. Those were conducted with a cold-blooded determination to strike hard at a long-time foe. However, within the past year there had been several raids on fairings with the same blood-bath result of a foray on a Wrecker port. And, since all the fleet-clans denied the sneak-and-strike, kill-and-destroy tactics which had finished those Rover holdings, the seafarers were divided in their opinion as to whether the murderous raids were the work of Wreckers suddenly acting out of character and taking to the sea to bring war back to their enemies, or whether there was a rogue fleet moving against their own kind for some purpose no Rover could yet guess.

"And you believe?" Ross asked as Torgul finished his résumé of the new dangers besetting his people.

Torgul's hand, its long, slender fingers spidery to Terran eyes, rubbed back and forth across his chin before he answered:

"It is very hard for one who has fought them long to believe that suddenly those shore rats are entrusting themselves to the waves, venturing out to stir us with their swords. One does not descend into the depths to kick a salkar in the rump; not if one still has his wits safely encased under his skull braid. As for a rogue fleet ... what would turn brother against brother to the extent of slaying children and women? Raiding for a wife, yes, that is common among our youth. And there have been killings over such matters. But not the killing of a woman—never of a child! We are a people who have never as many women as there are men who wish to bring them into the home cabin. And no clan has as many children as they hope the Shades will send them."

"Then who?"

When Torgul did not answer at once Ross glanced at the Captain, and what the Terran thought he saw showing for an instant in the other's eyes was a revelation of danger. So much so that he blurted out:

"You think that I—we—"

"You have named yourself of the sea, stranger, and you have magic which is not ours. Tell me this in truth: Could you not have killed Vistur easily with those two blows if you had wished it?"

Ross took the bold course. "Yes, but I did not. My people kill no more wantonly than yours."

"The coast rats I know, and the Foanna, as well as any man may know their kind and ways, and my people—But you I do not know, sea stranger. And I say to you as I have said before, make me regret that I suffered you to claim battle rights and I shall speedily correct that mistake!"

“Captain!”

That cry had come from the cabin door behind Ross. Torgul was on his feet with the swift movements of a man called many times in the past for an instant response to emergency.

The Terran was close on the Rover’s heels as they reached the deck. A cluster of crewmen gathered on the port side near the narrow bow. That odd misty quality this day held provided a murk hard to pierce, but the men were gesturing at a low-riding object rolling with the waves.

That was near enough for even Ross to be able to distinguish a small boat akin to the one in which he, Karara, and Loketh had dared the sea gate of the Foanna.

Torgul took up a great curved shell hanging by a thong on the mainmast. Setting its narrow end to his lips, he blew. A weird booming note, like the coughing of a sea monster, carried over the waves. But there was no answer from the drifting boat, no sign it carried any passengers.

“Hou, hou, hou—” Torgul’s signal was re-echoed by shell calls from the other two cruisers.

“Heave to!” the Captain ordered. “Wakti, Zimmon, Yoana—out and bring that in!”

Three of the crew leaped to the railing, poised there for a moment, and then dived almost as one into the water. A rope end was thrown, caught by one of them. And then they swam with powerful strokes toward the drifting boat. Once the rope was made fast the small craft was drawn toward Torgul’s command, the crewmen swimming beside it. Ross longed to know the reason for the tense expectancy of the men around him. It was apparent the skiff had some ominous meaning for them.

Ross caught a glimpse of a body huddled within the craft. Under Torgul’s orders a sling was dropped, to rise, weighted with a passenger. The Terran was shouldered back from the rail as the limp body was hurried into the Captain’s cabin. Several crewmen slid down to make an examination of the boat itself.

Their heads came up, their eyes searched along the rail and centered on Ross. The hostility was so open the Terran braced himself to meet those cold stares as he would a rush from a challenger.

A slight sound behind sent Ross leaping to the right, wanting to get his back against solid protection. Loketh came up, his limp making him awkward so that he clutched at the rail for support. In his other hand was one of the hooked swords bared and ready.

“Get the murderers!” Someone in the back line of the massing crew yipped that.

Ross drew his diver’s knife. Shaken at this sudden change in the crew’s attitude, he was warily on the defensive. Loketh was beside him now and the Hawaikan nodded to the sea.

“Better go there,” he cried. “Over before they try to gut you!”

“Kill!” The word shrilled into a roar from the Rovers. They started up the deck toward Ross and Loketh. Then someone leaped between, and Vistur fronted his own comrades.

“Stand away—” One of the others ran forward, thrusting at the tall Rover with a stiffened out-held arm to fend him out of their path.

Vistur rolled a shoulder, sending the fellow shunting away. He went down while two more, unable to halt, thudded on him. Vistur stamped on an outstretched hand and sent a sword spinning.

“What goes here!” Torgul’s demand was loud enough to be heard. It stopped a few of the crew and two more went down as the Captain struck out with his fists. Then he was facing Ross, and the chill in his eyes was the threat the others had voiced.

“I told you, sea stranger, that if I found you were a danger to me or mine, you would meet the Justice of Phutka!”

“You did,” Ross returned. “And in what way am I now a danger, Captain?”

“Kyn Add has been taken by those who are not Wreckers, not Rovers, not those who serve the Foanna—but strangers out of the sea!”

Ross could only stare back, confused. And then the full force of his danger struck home. Who those raiding sea strangers could be, he had no idea, but that he was now condemned out of his own mouth was true and he realized that these men were not going to listen to any argument from him in their present state of mind.

The growl of the crew was that of a hungry animal. Ross saw the wisdom in Loketh’s choice. Far better chance the open sea than the mob before them.

But his time for choice had passed. Out of nowhere whirled a lacy gray-white net, slapping him back against a bulkhead to glue him there. Ross tried to twist loose, got his head around in time to see Loketh scramble to the top of the rail, turn as if to launch himself at the men speeding for the now helpless Terran. But the Hawaikan’s crippled leg failed him and he toppled back overside.

“No!” Again Torgul’s shout halted the crew. “He shall take the Black Curse with him when he goes to meet the Shadow—and only one can speak that curse. Bring him!”

Helpless, reeling under their blows, dragged along, Ross was thrown into the Captain’s cabin, confronted by a figure braced up by coverings and cushions in Torgul’s own chair.

A woman, her face a drawn death’s head of skin pulled tight upon bone, yet a fiery inner strength holding her mind above the suffering of her body, looked at the Terran with narrowed eyes. She nursed a bandaged arm against her, and now and then her mouth quivered as if she could not altogether control some emotion or physical pain.

“Yours is the cursing, Lady Jazia. Make it heavy to bear for him as his kind has laid the burden of pain and remembering on all of us.”

She brought her good hand up to her mouth, wiping its back across her lips as if to temper their quiver. And all the time her eyes held upon Ross.

“Why do you bring me this man?” Her voice was strained, high. “He is not of those who brought the Shadow to Kyn Add.”

“What—?” Torgul began and then schooled his voice to a more normal tone. “Those were from the sea?” He was gentle in his questioning. “They came out of the sea, using weapons against which we had no defense?”

She nodded. “Yes, they made very sure that only the dead remained. But I had gone to the Shrine of Phutka, since it was my day of duty, and Phutka’s power threw its shade over me. So I did not die, but I saw—yes, I saw!”

“Not those like me?” Ross dared to speak to her directly.

“No, not those like you. There were few ... only so many—” She spread out her five fingers. “And they were all of one like as if born in one birth. They had no hair on their heads, and

their bodies were of this hue—” She plucked at one of the coverings they had heaped around her; it was a lavender-blue mixture.

Ross sucked in his breath, and Torgul was fast to pounce upon the understanding he read in the Terran’s face.

“Not your kind—but still you know them!”

“I know them,” Ross agreed. “They are the enemy!”

The Baldies from the ancient spaceships, that wholly alien race with whom he had once fought a desperate encounter on the edge of an unnamed sea in the far past of his own world. The galactic voyagers were here—and in active, if secret, conflict with the natives!



## 11. Weapon from the Depths

Jazia told her story with an attention to time and detail which amazed Ross and won his admiration for her breed. She had witnessed the death and destruction of all which was her life, and yet she had the wit to note and record mentally for possible future use all that she had been able to see of the raiders.

They had come out of the sea at dawn, walking with supreme confidence and lack of any fear. Axes flung when they did not reply to the sentries' challenges had never touched them, and a bombardment of heavier missiles had been turned aside. They proved invulnerable to any weapon the Rovers had. Men who made suicidal rushes to use sword or battle ax hand-to-hand had fallen, before they were in striking distance, under spraying tongues of fire from tubes the aliens carried.

Rovers were not fearful or easily cowed, but in the end they had fled from the five invaders, gone to ground in their halls, tried to reach their beached ships, only to die as they ran and hid. The slaughter had been remorseless and entire, leaving Jazia in the hill shrine as the only survivor. She had hidden for the rest of the day, seen the killing of a few fugitives, and that night had stolen to the shore, launched one of the ship's boats which was in a cove well away from the main harbor of the fairing, heading out to sea in hope of meeting the homing cruisers with her warning.

"They stayed there on the island?" Ross asked. That point of her story puzzled him. If the object of that murderous raid had been only to stir up trouble among the Hawaikan Rovers, perhaps turning one clan against the other, as he had deduced when he had listened to Torgul's report of similar happenings, then the star men should have withdrawn as soon as their mission was complete, leaving the dead to call for vengeance in the wrong direction. There would be no reason to court discovery of their true identity by lingering.

"When the boat was asea there were still lights at the fairing hall, and they were not our lights, nor did the dead carry them," she said slowly. "What have those to fear? They can not be killed!"

"If they are still there, that we can put to the test," Torgul replied grimly, and a murmur from his officers bore out his determination.

"And lose all the rest of you?" Ross retorted coldly. "I have met these before; they can will a man to obey them. Look you—" He slammed his left hand flat on the table. The ridges of scar tissue were plain against his tanned skin. He knew no better way of driving home the dangers of dealing with the star men than providing this graphic example. "I held my own hand in fire so that the hurt of it would work against their pull upon my thoughts, against their willing that I come and be easy meat for their butchering."

Jazia's fingers flickered out, smoothed across his old scars lightly as she gazed into his eyes.

"This, too, is true," she said slowly. "For it was also pain of body which kept me from their last snare. They stood by the hall and I saw Prahad, Okun, Mosaji, come out to them to be killed as if they were in a hold net and were drawn. And there was that which called me also so that I would go to them though I called upon the Power of Phutka to save. And the answer to that plea came in a strange way, for I fell as I went from the shrine and cut my arm on the rocks. The pain of that hurt was as a knife severing the net. Then I crawled for the wood and that calling did not come again—"

“If you know so much about them, tell us what weapons we may use to pull them down!” That demand came from Vistur.

Ross shook his head. “I do not know.”

“Yet,” Jazia mused, “all things which live must also die sooner or later. And it is in my mind that these have also a fate they dread and fear. Perhaps we may find and use it.”

“They came from the sea—by a ship, then?” Ross asked. She shook her head.

“No, there was no ship; they came walking through the breaking waves as if they had followed some road across the sea bottom.”

“A sub!”

“What is that?” Torgul demanded.

“A type of ship which goes under the waves, not through them, carrying air within its hull for the breathing of the crew.”

Torgul’s eyes narrowed. One of the other captains who had been summoned from the two companion cruisers gave a snort of disbelief.

“There are no such ships—” he began, to be silenced by a gesture from Torgul.

“We know of no such ships,” the other corrected. “But then we know of no such devices as Jazia saw in operation either. How does one war upon these under-the-seas ships, Ross?”

The Terran hesitated. To describe to men who knew nothing of explosives the classic way of dealing with a sub via depth charges was close to impossible. But he did his best.

“Among my people one imprisons in a container a great power. Then the container is dropped near the sub and—”

“And how,” broke in the skeptical captain, “do you know where such a ship lies? Can you see it through the water?”

“In a way—not see, but hear. There is a machine which makes for the captain of the above-seas ship a picture of where the sub lies or moves so that he may follow its course. Then when he is near enough he drops the container and the power breaks free—to also break apart the sub.”

“Yet the making of such containers and the imprisoning of the power within them,” Torgul said, “this is the result of a knowledge which is greater than any save the Foanna may possess. You do not have it?” His conclusion was half statement, half question.

“No. It took many years and the combined knowledge of many men among my people to make such containers, such a listening device. I do not have it.”

“Why then think of what we do not have?” Torgul’s return was decisive. “What *do* we have?”

Ross’s head came up. He was listening, not to anything in that cabin, but to a sound which had come through the port just behind his head. There—it had come again! He was on his feet.

“What—?” Vistur’s hand hovered over the ax at his belt. Ross saw their gaze centered on him.

“We may have reinforcements now!” The Terran was already on his way to the deck.

He hurried to the rail and whistled, the thin, shrill summons he had practiced for weeks before he had ever begun this fantastic adventure.

A sleek dark body broke water and the dolphin grin was exposed as Tino-rau answered his call. Though Ross's communication powers with the two finned scouts was very far from Karara's, he caught the message in part and swung around to face the Rovers who had crowded after him.

"We have a way now of learning more about your enemies."

"A boat—it comes without sail or oars!" One of the crew pointed.

Ross waved vigorously, but no hand replied from the skiff. Though it came steadily onward, the three cruisers its apparent goal.

"Karara!" Ross called.

Then side by side with Tino-rau were two wet heads, two masked faces showing as the swimmers trod water—Karara and Loketh.

"Drop ropes!" Ross gave that order as if he rather than Torgul commanded. And the Captain himself was one of those who moved to obey.

Loketh came out of the sea first and as he scrambled over the rail he had his sword ready, looking from Ross to Torgul. The Terran held up empty hands and smiled.

"No trouble now."

Loketh snapped up his mask. "So the Sea Maid said the finned ones reported. Yet before, these thirsted for your blood on their blades. What magic have you worked?"

"None. Just the truth has been discovered." Ross reached for Karara's hand as she came nimbly up the rope, swung her across the rail to the deck where she stood unmasked, brushing back her hair and looking around with a lively curiosity.

"Karara, this is Captain Torgul," Ross introduced the Rover commander who was staring round-eyed at the girl. "Karara is she who swims with the finned ones, and they obey her." Ross gestured to Tino-rau. "It is Taua who brings the skiff?" he asked the Polynesian.

She nodded. "We followed from the gate. Then Loketh came and said that ... that..." She paused and then added, "But you do not seem to be in danger. What has happened?"

"Much. Listen—this is important. There is trouble at an island ahead. The Baldies were there; they murdered the kin of these men. The odds are they reached there by some form of sub. Send one of the dolphins to see what is happening and if they are still there..."

Karara asked no more questions, but whistled to the dolphin. With a flip of tail Tino-rau took off.

Since they could make no concrete plan of action, the cruiser captains agreed to wait for Tino-rau's report and to cruise well out of sight of the fairing harbor until it came.

"This belief in magic," Ross remarked to Karara, "has one advantage. The natives seem able to take in their stride the fact the dolphins will scout for us."

"They have lived their lives on the sea; for it they must have a vast respect. Perhaps they know, as did my people, that the ocean has many secrets, some of which are never revealed except to the forms of life which claim their homes there. But, even if you discover this Baldy sub, what will the Rovers be able to do about it?"

“I don’t know—yet.” Ross could not tell why he clung to the idea that they could do anything to strike back at the superior alien force. He only knew that he was not yet willing to relinquish the thought that in some way they could.

“And Ashe?”

Yes, Ashe....

“I don’t know.” It hurt Ross to admit that.

“Back there, what really happened at the gate?” he asked Karara. “All at once the dolphins seemed to go crazy.”

“I think for a moment or two they did. You felt nothing?”

“No.”

“It was like a fire slashing through the head. Some protective device of the Foanna, I think.”

A mental defense to which he was not sensitive. Which meant that he might be able to breach that gate if none of the others could. But he had to be there first. Suppose, just suppose Torgul could be persuaded that this attack on the gutted Kyn Add was useless. Would the Rover commander take them back to the Foanna keep? Or with the dolphins and the skiff could Ross himself return to make the try?

That he could make it on his own, Ross doubted. Excitement and will power had buoyed him up throughout the past Hawaikan day and night. Now fatigue closed in, past his conditioning and the built-in stimulant of the Terran rations, to enclose him in a groggy haze. He had been warned against this reaction, but that was just another item he had pushed out of his conscious mind. The last thing he remembered now was seeing Karara move through a fuzzy cloud.

Voices argued somewhere beyond, the force of that argument carried more by tone than any words Ross could understand. He was pulled sluggishly out of a slumber too deep for any dream to trouble, and lifted heavy eyelids to see Karara once again. There was a prick in his arm—or was that part of the unreality about him?

“—four—five—six—” she was counting, and Ross found himself joining in:

“—seven—eight—nine—ten!”

On reaching “ten” he was fully awake and knew that she had applied the emergency procedure they had been drilled in using, giving him a pep shot. When Ross sat up on the narrow bunk there was a light in the cabin and no sign of day outside the porthole. Torgul, Vistur, the two other cruiser captains, all there ... and Jazia.

Ross swung his feet to the deck. A pep-shot headache was already beginning, but would wear off soon. There was, however, a concentration of tension in the cabin, and something must have driven Karara to use the drug.

“What is it?”

Karara fitted the medical kit into the compact carrying case.

“Tino-rau has returned. There *is* a sub in the bay. It emits energy waves on a shoreward beam.”

“Then they are still there.” Ross accepted the dolphin’s report without question. Neither of the scouts would make a mistake in those matters. Energy waves beamed shoreward—power

for some type of unit the Baldies were using? Suppose the Rovers could find a way of cutting off the power.

“The Sea Maid has told us that this ship sits on the bottom of the harbor. If we could board it—” began Torgul.

“Yes!” Vistur brought his fist down against the end of the bunk on which the Terran still sat, jarring the dull, drug-borne pain in Ross’s head. “Take it—then turn it against its crew!”

There was an eagerness in all Rover faces. For that was a game the Hawaikan seafarers understood: Take an enemy ship and turn its armament against its companions in a fleet. But that plan would not work out. Ross had a healthy respect for the technical knowledge of the galactic invaders. Of course he, Karara, even Loketh might be able to reach the sub. Whether they could then board her was an entirely different matter.

Now the Polynesian girl shook her head. “The broadcast there—Tino-rau rates it as lethal. There are dead fish floating in the bay. He had warning at the reef entrance. Without a shield, there will be no way of getting in.”

“Might as well wish for a depth bomb,” Ross began and then stopped.

“You have thought of something?”

“A shield—” Ross repeated her words. It was so wild this thought of his, and one which might have no chance of working. He knew almost nothing about the resources of the invaders. Could that broadcast which protected the sub and perhaps activated the weapons of the invaders ashore be destroyed? A wall of fish—sea life herded in there as a shield ... wild, yes, even so wild it might work. Ross outlined the idea, speaking more to Karara than to the Rovers.

“I do not know,” she said doubtfully. “That would need many fish, too many to herd and drive—”

“Not fish,” Torgul cut in, “salkars!”

“Salkars?”

“You have seen the bow carving on this ship. That is a salkar. Such are larger than a hundred fish! Salkars driven in ... they might even wreck this undersea ship with their weight and anger.”

“And you can find these salkars near-by?” Ross began to take fire. That dragon which had hunted him—the bulk of the thing was well above any other sea life he had seen here. And to its ferocity he could give testimony.

“At the spawning reefs. We do not hunt at this season which is the time of the taking of mates. Now, too, they are easily angered so they will even attack a cruiser. To slay them at present is a loss, for their skins are not good. But they would be ripe for battle were they to be disturbed.”

“And how would you get them from the spawning reefs to Kyn Add?”

“That is not too difficult; the reef lies here.” Torgul drew lines with the point of his sword on the table top. “And here is Kyn Add. Salkars have a great hunger at this time. Show them bait and they will follow; especially will they follow swimming bait.”

There were a great many holes in the plan which had only a halfway chance of working. But the Rovers seized upon it with enthusiasm, and so it was set up.

Perhaps some two hours later Ross swam toward the land mass of Kyn Add. Gleams of light pricked on the shore well to his left. Those must mark the Rover settlement. And again the Terran wondered why the invaders had remained there. Unless they knew that there had been three cruisers out on a raid and for some reason they were determined to make a complete mop-up.

Karara moved a little to his right, Taua between them, the dolphin's super senses their guide and warning. The swiftest of the cruisers had departed, Loketh on board to communicate with Tino-rau in the water. Since the male dolphin was the best equipped to provide a fox for salkar hounds, he was the bait for this weird fishing expedition.

"No farther!" Ross's sonic pricked a warning against his body. Through that he took a jolt which sent him back, away from the bay entrance.

"On the reef." Karara's tapped code drew him on a new course. Moments later they were both out of the water, though the wash of waves over their flippered feet was constant. The rocks among which they crouched were a rough harborage from which they could see the shore as a dark blot. But they were well away from the break in the reef through which, if their outlandish plan succeeded, the salkars would come.

"A one-in-a-million chance!" Ross commented as he put up his mask.

"Was not the whole Time Agent project founded on just such chances?" Karara asked the right question. This was Ross's kind of venture. Yes, one-in-a-million chances had been pulled off by the Time Agents. Why, it had been close to those odds against their ever finding what they had first sought along the back trails of time—the wrecked spaceships.

Just suppose this could be a rehearsal for another attack? If the salkars could be made to crack the guard of the Baldies, could they also be used against the Foanna gate? Maybe.... But take one fight at a time.

"They come!" Karara's fingers gripped Ross's shoulder. Her hand was hard, bar rigid. He could see nothing, hear nothing. That warning must have come from the dolphins. But so far their plan was working; the monsters of the Hawaikan sea were on their way.

## 12. Baldies

“Ohhhh!” Karara clutched at Ross, her breath coming in little gasps, giving vent to her fear and horror. They had not known what might come from this plan; certainly neither had foreseen the present chaos in the lagoon.

Perhaps the broadcast energy of the enemy whipped the already vicious-tempered salkars into this insane fury. But now the moonlit water was beaten into foam as the creatures fought there, attacking each other with a ferocity neither Terran had witnessed before.

Lights gleamed along the shore where the alien invaders must have been drawn by the clamor of the fighting marine reptiles. Somewhere in the heights above the beach of the lagoon a picked band of Rovers should now be making their way from the opposite side of Kyn Add under strict orders not to go into attack unless signaled. Whether the independent sea warriors would hold to that command was a question which had worried Ross from the first.

Tino-rau and Taua in the waters to the seaward of the reef, the two Terrans on that barrier itself, and between them and the shore the wild melee of maddened salkars. Ross started. The sonic warning which had been pulsing steadily against his skin cut off sharply. The broadcast in the bay had been silenced! This was the time to move, but no swimmer could last in the lagoon itself.

“Along the reef,” Karara said.

That would be the long way round, Ross knew, but the only one possible. He studied the cluster of lights ashore. Two or three figures moved there. Seemingly the attention of the aliens was well centered upon the battle still in progress in the lagoon.

“Stay here!” he ordered the girl. Adjusting his mask, Ross dropped into the water, cutting away from the reef and then turning to swim parallel with it. Tino-rau matched him as he went, guiding Ross to a second break in the reef, toward the shore some distance from where the conflict of the salkars still made a hideous din in the night.

The Terran waded in the shallows, stripping off his flippers and snapping them to his belt, letting his mask swing free on his chest. He angled toward the beach where the aliens had been. At least he was better armed for this than he had been when he had fronted the Rovers with only a diver’s knife. From the Time Agent supplies he had taken the single hand weapon he had long ago found in the armory of the derelict spaceship. This could only be used sparingly, since they did not know how it could be recharged, and the secret of its beam still remained secret as far as Terran technicians were concerned.

Ross worked his way to a curtain of underbrush from which he had a free view of the beach and the aliens. Three of them he counted, and they were Baldies, all right—taller and thinner than his own species, their bald heads gray-white, the upper dome of their skulls overshadowing the features on their pointed chinned faces. They all wore the skintight blue-purple-green suits of the space voyagers—suits which Ross knew of old were insulated and protective for their wearers, as well as a medium for keeping in touch with one another. Just as he, wearing one, had once been trailed over miles of wilderness.

To him, all three of the invaders looked enough alike to have been stamped out from one pattern. And their movements suggested that they worked or went into action with drilled precision. They all faced seaward, holding tubes aimed at the salkar-infested lagoon. There was no sound of any explosion, but green spears of light struck at the scaled bodies plunging

in the water. And where those beams struck, flesh seared. Methodically the trio raked the basin. But, Ross noted, those beams which had been steady at his first sighting, were now interrupted by flickers. One of the Baldies upended his tube, rapped its butt against a rock as if trying to correct a jamming. When the alien went into action once again his weapon flashed and failed. Within a matter of moments the other two were also finished. The lighted rods pushed into the sand, giving a glow to the scene, darkened as a fire might sink to embers. Power fading?

An ungainly shape floundered out of the churned water, lumbered over the shale of the beach, its supple neck outstretched, its horned nose down for a gore-threatening charge. Ross had not realized that the salkars could operate out of what he thought was their natural element, but this wild-eyed dragon was plainly bent on reaching its tormentors.

For a moment or two the Baldies continued to front the creature, almost, Ross thought, as if they could not believe that their weapons had failed them. Then they broke and ran back to the fairing which they had taken with such contemptuous ease. The salkar plowed along in their wake, but its movements grew more labored the farther it advanced, until at last it lay with only its head upraised, darting it back and forth, its fanged jaws well agape, voicing a coughing howl.

Its plaint was answered from the water as a second of its kind wallowed ashore. A terrible wound had torn skin and flesh just behind its neck; yet still it came on, hissing and bubbling a battle challenge. It did not attack its fellow; instead it dragged its bulk past the first comer, on its way after the Baldies.

The salkars continued to come ashore, two more, a third, a fourth, mangled and torn—pulling themselves as far as they could up the beach. To lie, facing inland, their necks weaving, their horned heads bobbing, their cries a frightful din. What had drawn them out of their preoccupation of battle among themselves into this attempt to reach the aliens, Ross could not determine. Unless the intelligence of the beasts was such that they had been able to connect the searing beams which the Baldies had turned on them so tellingly with the men on the beach, and had responded by striving to reach a common enemy.

But no desire could give them the necessary energy to pull far ashore. Almost helplessly beached, they continued to dig into the yielding sand with their flippers in a vain effort to pursue the aliens.

Ross skirted the clamoring barrier of salkars and headed for the fairing. A neck snapped about; a head was lowered in his direction. He smelled the rank stench of reptile combined with burned flesh. The nearest of the brutes must have scented the Terran in turn, as it was now trying vainly to edge around to cut across Ross's path. But it was completely outclassed on land, and the man dodged it easily.

Three Baldies had fled this way. Yet Jazia had reported five had come out of the sea to take Kyn Add. Two were missing. Where? Had they remained in the fairing? Were they now in the sub? And that sub—what had happened to it? The broadcast had been cut off; he had seen the failure of the weapons and the shore lights. Might the sub have suffered from salkar attack? Though Ross could hardly believe that the beasts could wreck it.

The Terran was traveling blindly, keeping well under cover of such brush as he could, knowing only that he must head inland. Under his feet the ground was rising, and he recalled the nature of this territory as Torgul and Jazia had pictured it for him. This had to be part of the ridge wall of the valley in which lay the buildings of the fairing. In these heights was the Shrine of Phutka where Jazia had hidden out. To the west now lay the Rover village, so he



had to work his way left, downhill, in order to reach the hole where the Baldies had gone to ground. Ross made that progress with the stealth of a trained scout.

Hawaika's moon, triple in size to Terra's companion, was up, and the landscape was sharply clear, with shadows well defined. The glow, weird to Terran eyes, added to the effect of being abroad in a nightmare, and the bellowing of the grounded salkars continued a devils' chorus.

When the Rovers had put up the buildings of their fairing, they had cleared a series of small fields radiating outward from those structures. All of these were now covered with crops almost ready to harvest. The grain, if that Terran term could be applied to this Hawaikan product, was housed in long pods which dipped from shoulder-high bushes. And the pods were well equipped with horny projections which tore. A single try at making his way into one of those fields convinced Ross of the folly of such an advance. He sat back to nurse his scratched hands and survey the landscape.

To go down a very tempting lane would be making himself a clear target for anyone in those buildings ahead. He had seen the flamers of the Baldies fail on the beach, but that did not mean the aliens were now weaponless.

His best chance, Ross decided, was to circle north, come back down along the bed of a stream. And he was at the edge of that watercourse when a faint sound brought him to a frozen halt, weapon ready.

"Rosss—"

"Loketh!"

"And Torgul and Vistur."

This was the party from the opposite side of the island, gone expertly to earth. In the moonlight Ross could detect no sign of their presence, yet their voices sounded almost beside him.

"They are in there, in the great hall." That was Torgul. "But no longer are there any lights."

"Now—" An urgent exclamation drew their attention.

Light below. But not the glow of the rods Ross had seen on the beach. This was the warm yellow-red of honest fire, bursting up, the flames growing higher as if being fed with frantic haste.

Three figures were moving down there. Ross began to believe that there were only this trio ashore. He could sight no weapons in their hands, which did not necessarily mean they were unarmed. But the stream ran close behind the rear wall of one of the buildings, and Ross thought its bed could provide cover for a man who knew what he was doing. He pointed out as much to Torgul.

"And if their magic works and you are drawn out to be killed?" The Rover captain came directly to the point.

"That is a chance to be taken. But remember ... the magic of the Foanna at the sea gate did not work against me. Perhaps this won't either. Once, earlier, I won against it."

"Have you then another hand to give to the fire as your defense?" That was Vistur. "But no man has the right to order another's battle challenge."

"Just so," returned Ross sharply. "And this is a thing I have long been trained to do."

He slid down into the stream bed. Approaching from this angle, the structures of the fairing were between him and the fire. So screened he reached a log wall, got to his feet, and edged along it. Then he witnessed a wild scene. The fire raged in great, sky-touching tongues. And already the roof of one of the Rover buildings smoldered. Why the aliens had built up such a conflagration, Ross could not guess. A signal designed to reach some distance?

He did not doubt there was some urgent purpose. For the three were dragging in fuel with almost frenzied haste, bringing out of the Rover buildings bales of cloth to be ripped apart and whirled into the devouring flames, furniture, everything movable which would burn.

There was one satisfaction. The Baldies were so intent upon this destruction that they kept no watch save that now and then one of them would run to the head of the path leading to the lagoon and listen as if he expected a salkar to come pounding up the slope.

“They’re ... they’re rattled!” Ross could hardly believe it. The Baldies who had always occupied his mind and memory as practically invincible supermen were acting like badly frightened primitives! And when the enemy was so off balance you pushed—you pushed hard.

Ross thumbed the button on the grip of the strange weapon. He sighted with deliberation and fired. The blue figure at the top of the path wilted, and for a long moment neither of his companions noted his collapse. Then one of them whirled and started for the limp body, his colleague running after him. Ross allowed them to reach his first victim before he fired the second and third time.

All three lay quiet, but still Ross did not venture forth until he had counted off a dozen Terran seconds. Then he slipped forward keeping to cover until he came up to the bodies.

The blue-clad shoulder had a flaccid feel under his hand as if the muscles could not control the flesh about them. Ross rolled the alien over, looked down in the bright light of the fire into the Baldy’s wide-open eyes. Amazement—the Terran thought he could read that in the dead stare which answered his intent gaze—and then anger, a cold and deadly anger which chilled into ice.

“Kill!”

Ross slewed around, still down on one knee, to face the charge of a Rover. In the firelight the Hawaikan’s eyes were blazing with fanatical hatred. He had his hooked sword ready to deliver a finishing stroke. The Terran blocked with a shoulder to meet the Rover’s knees, threw him back. Then Ross landed on top of the fighting crewman, trying to pin the fellow to earth and avoid that recklessly slashing blade.

“Loketh! Vistur!” Ross shouted as he struggled.

More of the Rovers appeared from between the buildings, bearing down on the limp aliens and the two fighting men. Ross recognized the limping gait of Loketh using a branch to aid him into a running scuttle across the open.

“Loketh—here!”

The Hawaikan covered the last few feet in a dive which carried him into Ross and the Rover. “Hold him,” the Terran ordered and had just time enough to throw himself between the Baldies and the rest of the crew. There was a snarling from the Rovers; and Ross, knowing their temper, was afraid he could not save the captives which they considered, fairly, their legitimate prey. He must depend upon the hope that there were one or two cooler heads among them with enough authority to restrain the would-be avengers. Otherwise he would have to beam them into helplessness.

“Torgul!” he shouted.

There was a break in the line of runners speeding for him. The big man lunging straight across could only be Vistur; the other, yelling orders, was Torgul. It would depend upon how much control the Captain had over his men. Ross scrambled to his feet. He had clicked on the beamer to its lowest frequency. It would not kill, but would render its victim temporarily paralyzed; and how long that state would continue Ross had no way of knowing. Tried on Terran laboratory animals, the time had varied from days to weeks.

Vistur used the flat side of his war ax, clapping it against the foremost runners, setting his own bulk to impose a barrier. And now Torgul’s orders appeared to be getting through, more and more of the men slacked, leaving a trio of hotheads, two of whom Vistur sent reeling with his fists.

The Captain came up to Ross. “They are alive then?” He leaned over to inspect the Baldy the Terran had rolled on his back, assessing the alien’s frozen stare with thoughtful measurement.

“Yes, but they can not move.”

“Well enough.” Torgul nodded. “They shall meet the Justice of Phutka after the Law. I think they will wish that they had been left to the boarding axes of angry men.”

“They are worth more alive than dead, Captain. Do you not wish to know why they have carried war to your people, how many of them there may yet be to attack—and other things? Also—” Ross nodded at the fire now catching the second building, “why have they built up that blaze? Is it a signal to others of their kind?”

“Very well said. Yes, it would be well for us to learn such things. Nor will Phutka be jealous of the time we take to ask questions and get answers, many answers.” He prodded the Baldy with the toe of his sea boot.

“How long will they remain so? Your magic has a bite in it.”

Ross smiled. “Not my magic, Captain. This weapon was taken from one of their own ships. As to how long they will remain so—that I do not know.”

“Very well, we can take precautions.” Under Torgul’s orders the aliens were draped with capture nets like those Ross and Loketh had worn. The sea-grown plant adhered instantly, wet strands knitting in perfect restrainers as long as it was uncut.

Having seen to that, Torgul ordered the excavation of Kyn Add.

“As you say,” he remarked to Ross, “that fire may well be a signal to bring down more of their kind. I think we have had the Favor of Phutka in this matter, but the prudent man stretches no favor of that kind too far. Also,” he looked about him—“we have given to Phutka and the Shades our dead; there is nothing for us here now but hate and sorrow. In one day we have been broken from a clan of pride and ships to a handful of standardless men.”

“You will join some other clan?” Karara had come with Jazia to stand on the stone ledge chipped to form a base for a column bearing a strange, brooding-eyed head looking seaward. The Rover woman was superintending the freeing of the head from the column.

At the Terran girl’s question the Captain gazed down into the dreadful chaos of the valley. They could yet hear the roars of the dying salkars. The reptiles that had made their way to land had not withdrawn but still lay, some dead now, some with weaving heads reaching inland. And the whole of the fairing was ablaze with fire.

“We are now blood-sworn men, Sea Maid. For such there is no clan. There is only the hunting and the kill. With the magic of Phutka perhaps we shall have a short hunt and a good kill.”

“There ... now ... so....” Jazia stepped back. The head which had faced the sea was lowered carefully to a wide strip of crimson-and-gold stuff she had brought from Torgul’s ship. With her one usable hand the Rover woman drew the fabric about the carving, muffling it except for the eyes. Those were large ovals deeply carved, and in them Ross saw a glitter. Jewels set there? Yet, he had a queer, shivery feeling that something more than gems occupied those sockets—that he had actually been regarded for an instant of time, assessed and dismissed.

“We go now.” Jazia waved and Torgul sent men forward. They lifted the wrapped carving to a board carried between them and started downslope.

Karara cried out and Ross looked around.

The pillar which had supported the head was crumbling away, breaking into a rubble which cascaded across the stone ledge. Ross blinked—this must be an illusion, but he was too tired to be more than dully amazed as he became one of the procession returning to the ships.

## 13. The Sea Gate of the Foanna

Ross raised a shell cup to his lips but hardly sipped the fiery brew it contained. This was a gesture of ceremony, but he wanted a steady head and a quick tongue for any coming argument. Torgul, Afrukta, Ongal—the three commanders of the Rover cruisers; Jazia, who represented the mysterious Power of Phutka; Vistur and some other subordinate officers; Karara; himself, with Loketh hovering behind: a council of war. But summoned against whom?

The Terran had come too far afield from his own purpose—to reach Ashe in the Foanna keep. And to further his own plans was a task he doubted his ability to perform. His attack on the Baldies had made him too important to the Rovers for them to allow him willingly to leave them on a quest of his own.

“These star men”—Ross set down the cup, tried to choose the most telling words in his limited Hawaikan vocabulary—”possess weapons and powers you can not dream of, that you have no defense against. Back at Kyn Add we were lucky. The salkars attacked their sub and halted the broadcast powering their flamers. Otherwise we could not have taken them, even though we were many against their few. Now you talk of hunting them in their own territory—on land and in the mountains where they have their base. That would be folly akin to swimming barehanded to front a salkar.”

“So—then we must sit and wait for them to eat us up?” flared Ongal. “I say it is better to die fighting with one’s blade wet!”

“Do you not also wish to take at least one of the enemy with you when you fight to that finish?” Ross countered. “These could kill you before you came in blade range.”

“You had no trouble with that weapon of yours,” Afrukta spoke up.

“I have told you—this weapon was stolen from them. I have only one and I do not know how long it will continue to serve me, or whether they have a defense against it. Those we took were naked to any force, for their broadcast had failed them. But to smash blindly against their main base would be the act of madmen.”

“The salkars opened a way for us—” That was Torgul.

“But we can not move a pack of those inland to the mountains,” Vistur pointed out reasonably.

Ross studied the Captain. That Torgul was groping for a plan and that it had to be a shrewd one, the Terran guessed. His respect for the Rover commander had been growing steadily since their first meeting. The cruiser-raiders had always been captained by the most daring men of the Rover clans. But Ross was also certain that a successful cruiser commander must possess a level-headed leaven of intelligence and be a strategist of parts.

The Hawaikan force needed a key which would open the Baldy base as the salkars had opened the lagoon. And all they had to aid them was a handful of facts gained from their prisoners.

Oddly enough the picklock to the captives’ minds had been produced by the dolphins. Just as Tino-rau and Taua had formed a bridge of communication between the Terran and Loketh, so did they read and translate the thoughts of the galactic invaders. For the Baldies, among their own kind, were telepathic, vocalizing only to give orders to inferiors.

Their capture by these primitive “inferiors” had delivered the first shock, and the mind-probes of the dolphins had sent the “supermen” close to the edge of sanity. To accept an animal form as an equal had been shattering.

But the star men’s thoughts and memories had been winnowed at last and the result spread before this impromptu council. Rovers and Terrans were briefed on the invaders’ master plan for taking over a world. Why they desired to do so even the dolphins had not been able to discover; perhaps they themselves had not been told by their superiors.

It was a plan almost contemptuous in its simplicity, as if the galactic force had no reason to fear effective opposition. Except in one direction—one single direction.

Ross’s fingers tightened on the shell cup. Had Torgul reached that conclusion yet, the belief that the Foanna could be their key? If so, they might be able to achieve their separate purposes in one action.

“It would seem that they are wary of the Foanna,” he suggested, alert to any telltale response from Torgul. But it was Jazia who answered the Terran’s half question.

“The Foanna have a powerful magic; they can order wind and wave, man and creature—if so be their will. Well might these killers fear the Foanna!”

“Yet now they move against them,” Ross pointed out, still eyeing Torgul.

The Captain’s reply was a small, quiet smile.

“Not directly, as you have heard. It is all a part of their plan to set one of us against the other, letting us fight many small wars and so use up our men while they take no risks. They wait the day when we shall be exhausted and then they will reveal themselves to claim all they wish. So today they stir up trouble between the Wreckers and the Foanna, knowing that the Foanna are few. Also they strive in turn to anger us by raids, allowing us to believe that either the Wreckers or Foanna have attacked. Thus—” he held up his left thumb, made a pincers of right thumb and forefinger to close upon it, “they hope to catch the Foanna, between Wreckers and Rovers. Because the Foanna are those they reckon the most dangerous they move against them now, using us and weakening our forces into the bargain. A plan which is clever, but the plan of men who do not like to fight with their own blades.”

“They are worse than the coast scum, these cowards!” Ongal spat.

Torgul smiled again. “That is what they believe we will say, kinsman, and so underrate them. By our customs, yes, they are cowards. But what care they for our judgments? Did we think of the salkars when we used them to force the lagoon? No, they were only beasts to be our tools. So now it is the same with us, except that we know what they intend. And we shall not be such obedient tools. If the Foanna are our answer, then—” He paused, gazing into his cup as if he could read some shadowy future there.

“If the Foanna are the answer, then what?” Ross pushed.

“Instead of fighting the Foanna, we must warm, cherish, try to ally ourselves with them. And do all that while we still have time!”

“Just how do we do these things?” demanded Ongal. “The Foanna you would warn, cherish, claim as allies, are already our enemies. Were we not on the way to force their sea gate only days ago? There is no chance of seeking peace now. And have the finned ones not learned from the women-killers that already there is an army of Wreckers camped about the citadel to which these sons of the Shadow plan to lend certain weapons? Do we throw away three

cruisers—all we have left—in a hopeless fight? Such is the council of one struck by loss of wits.”

“There is a way—my way,” Ross seized the opening. “In the Foanna citadel is my sword-lord, to whose service I am vowed. We were on our way to attempt his freeing when your ship picked us out of the waves. He is learned beyond me in the dealing with strange peoples, and if the Foanna are as clever as you say, they will already have discovered that he is not just a slave they claimed from Lord Zahur.”

There it was in the open, his own somewhat tattered hope that Ashe had been able to impress his captors with his knowledge and potential. Trained to act as contact man with other races, there was a chance that Gordon had saved himself from whatever fate had been planned for the prisoners the Foanna had claimed. If that happened, Ashe could be their opening wedge in the Foanna stronghold.

“This also I know: That which guards the gate—which turns your minds whirling and sent you back from your raid—does not affect me. I may be able to win inside and find my clansman, and in that doing treat with the Foanna.”

The Baldy prisoners had not underestimated the attack on the Foanna citadel. As the Rover cruisers beat in under the cover of night the fires and torches of both besieged and besiegers made a wild glow across the sky. Only on the sea side of the fortress there was no sign of involvement. Whatever guarded the gate must still be in force.

Ross stood with his feet well apart to balance his body against the swing of the deck. His suggestion had been argued over, protested, but at last carried with the support of Torgul and Jazia, and now he was to make his try. The sum of the Rovers’ and Loketh’s knowledge of the sea gate had been added for his benefit, but he knew that this venture must depend upon himself alone. Karara, the dolphins, the Hawaikans, were all too sensitive to the barrier.

Torgul moved in the faint light. “We are close; our power is ebbing. If we advance, we shall be drifting soon.”

“It is time then.” Ross crossed to the rope ladder, but another was there before him. Karara perched on the rail. He regarded her angrily.

“You can’t go.”

“I know. But we are still safe here. Just because you are free of one defense of the gate, Ross, do not believe that makes it easy.”

He was stung by her assumption that he could be so self-assured.

“I know my business.”

Ross pushed past her, swinging down the rope ladder, pausing only above water level to snap on flippers, make sure of the set of his weighted belt, and slide his gill-mask over his face. There was a splash beside him as the net containing spare belt, flippers, and mask hit the water and he caught at it. These could provide Ashe’s escape from the fortress.

The lights on the shore made a wide arc of radiance across the sea. As Ross headed toward the wave-washed coast he began to hear shouting and other sounds which made him believe that the besiegers were in the midst of an all-out assault. Yet those distant fires and rocketlike blasts into the sky had a wavery blur. And Ross, making his way with the effortless water cleaving of the diver, surfaced now and then to spot film curling up from the surface of the sea between the two standing rock pillars which marked the sea gate.

He was startled by a thunderous crack, rending the air above the small bay. Ross pulled to one of the pillars, steadied himself with one hand against it. Those twists of film rising from the surging surface were thickening. More tendrils grew out from parent stems to creep along above the waves, raising up sprouts and branches in turn. A wall of mist was building between gate and shore.

Again a thunderclap overhead. Involuntarily the Terran ducked. Then he turned his face up to the sky, striving to see any evidence of storm. What hung there sped the growth of the fog on the water. Yet where the fog was gray-white, it was a darkness spouting from the highest point of the citadel. Ross could not explain how he was able to see one shade of darkness against equal dusk, but he did—or did he only sense it? He shook his head, willing himself to look away from the finger. Only it was a finger no longer; now it was a fist aimed at the stars it was fast blotting out. A fist rising to the heavens before it curled back, descended to press the fortress and its surroundings into rock and earth.

Fog curled about Ross, spilled outward through the sea gates. He loosed his grip on the pillar and dived, swimming on through the gap with the fortress of the Foanna before him.

There was a jetty somewhere ahead; that much he knew from Torgul's description. Those who served the Foanna sometimes took sea roads and they had slim, fast cutters for such coastwise travel. Ross surfaced cautiously, to discover there was no visibility to wave level. Here the mist was thick, a smothering cover so bewildering he was confused as to direction. He ducked below again and flipped on.

Was his confusion born of the fog, or was it also in his head? Did he, after all, have this much reaction to the gate defense? Ross ducked that suspicion as he had ducked the moist blanket on the surface. He had come from the gate, which meant that the jetty must lie—there!

A few moments later Ross had proof that his sense of direction had not altogether failed him, when his shoulder grazed against a solid obstruction in the water and his exploring touch told him that he had found one of the jetty piles. He surfaced again and this time he heard not a thunder roll but the singsong chanting of the Foanna.

It was loud, almost directly above his head, but since the cotton mist held he was not afraid of being sighted. The chanter must be on the jetty. And to Ross's right was a dark bulk which he thought was one of the cutters. Was a sortie by the besieged being planned?

Then, out of the night, came a dazzling beam, well above the level of Ross's head where he clung to the piling. It centered on the cutter, slicing into the substance of the vessel with the ease of steel piercing clay. The chanting stopped on mid-note, broken by cries of surprise and alarm. Ross, pressing against the pile, received a jolt from his belt sonic.

There must be a Baldy sub in the basin inside the gate. Perhaps the flame beam now destroying the cutter was to be turned on the walls of the keep in turn.

Foanna chant again, low and clear. Splashes from the water as those on the jetty cast into the sea objects Ross could not define. The Terran's body jerked, his mask smothered a cry of pain. About his legs and middle, immersed in the waves, there was cold so intense that it seared. Fear goaded him to pull up on one of the under beams of the pier. He reached that refuge and rubbed his icy legs with what vigor he could summon.

Moments later he crept along toward the shore. The energy ray had found another target. Ross paused to watch a second cutter sliced. If the counter stroke of the Foanna would rout the invaders, it had not yet begun to work.



The net holding the extra gear brought along in hopes of Ashe's escape weighed the Terran down, but he would not abandon it as he felt his way from one foot- and hand-hold to the next. The waves below gave off an icy exudation which made him shiver uncontrollably. And he knew that as long as that effect lasted he dared not venture into the sea again.

Light ... along with the cold, there was a phosphorescence on the water—white patches floating, dipping, riding the waves. Some of them gathered under the pier, clustering about the pilings. And the fog thinned with their coming, as if those irregular blotches absorbed and fed upon the mist. The Terran could see now he had reached the land end of the jetty. He wedged his flippers into his belt, pulled on over his feet the covers of salkar-hide Torgul had provided.

Save for his belt, his trunks, and the gill-pack, Ross's body was bare and the cold caught at him. But, slinging the carry net over his shoulder, he dropped to the damp sand and stood listening.

The clamor of the attack which had carried all the way offshore to the Rover cruisers had died away. And there were no more claps of thunder. Instead, there was now a thick wash of rain.

No more fire rays as he faced seaward. And the fog was lifting, so Ross could distinguish the settling cutters, their bows still moored to the jetty. There was no movement there. Had those on the pier fled?

Dot ... dash ... dot ...

Ross did not drop the net. But he crouched back in the half protection of the piling. For a moment which stretched beyond Terran time measure he froze so, waiting.

Dot ... dash ... dot ...

Not the prickle induced by the enemy installations, it was a real coded call picked up by his sonic, and one he knew.

Don't rush, he told himself sharply—play it safe. By rights only two people in this time and place would know that call. And one would have no reason to use it. But—a trap? This could be a trap. Awe of the Foanna powers had touched him a little in spite of his off-world skepticism. He could be lured now by someone using Ashe's call.

Ross stripped for action after a fashion, bundling the net and its contents into a hollow he scooped behind a pile well above water level. The alien hand weapon he had left with Karara, not trusting it to the sea. But he had his diver's knife and his two hands which, by training, could be, and had been, deadly weapons.

With the sonic against the bare skin of his middle where it would register strongest, knife in hand, Ross moved into the open. The floating patches did not supply much light, but he was certain the call had come from the jetty.

There was movement there—a flash or two. And the sonic? Ross had to be sure, very sure. The broadcast was certainly stronger when he faced in that direction. Dared he come into the open? Perhaps in the dark he could cut Ashe away from his captors so they could swim for it together.

Ross clicked a code reply. Dot ... dot ... dot ...

The answer was quick, imperative: "Where?"

Surely no one but Ashe could have sent that! Ross did not hesitate.

“Be ready—escape.”

“No!” Even more imperative. “Friends here....”

Had he guessed rightly? Had Ashe established friendly relations with the Foanna? But Ross kept to the caution which had been his defense and armor so long. There was one question he thought only Ashe could answer, something out of the past they had shared when they had made their first journey into time disguised as Beaker traders of the Bronze Age. Deliberately he tapped that question.

“What did we kill in Britain?”

Tensely he waited. But when the reply came it did not pulse from the sonic under his fingers; instead, a well-remembered voice called out of the night.

“A white wolf.” And the words were Terran English.

“Ashe!” Ross leaped forward, climbed toward the figure he could only dimly see.

## 14. The Foanna

“Ross!” Ashe’s hands gripped his shoulders as if never intending to free him again. “Then you did come through—”

Ross understood. Gordon Ashe must have feared that he was the only one swept through the time door by that freak chance.

“And Karara and the dolphins!”

“Here—now?” In this black bowl of the citadel bay Ashe was only a shadow with voice and hands.

“No, out with the Rover cruisers. Ashe, do you know the Baldies are on Hawaika? They’ve organized this whole thing—the attack here—trouble all over. Right now they have one of their subs out there. That’s what cut those cutters to pieces. Five days ago five of them wiped out a whole Rover fairing, just five of them!”

“Gordon.” Unlike the hissing speech of the Hawaikans, this new voice made a singing, lilting call of Ashe’s name. “This is your swordsman in truth?” Another shadow drew near them, and Ross saw the flutter of cloak edge.

“This is my friend.” There was a tone of correction in Ashe’s reply. “Ross, this is the Guardian of the sea gate.”

“And you come,” the Foanna continued, “with those who gather to feast at the Shadow’s table. But your Rovers will find little loot to their liking—”

“No.” Ross hesitated. How did one address the Foanna? He had claimed equality with Torgul. But that approach was not the proper one here; instinct told him that. He fell back on the complete truth uttered simply. “We took three of the Baldy killers. From them we learned they move to wipe out the Foanna first. For you,” he addressed himself to the cloaked shape, “they believe to be a threat. We heard that they urged the Wreckers to this attack and so—”

“And so the Rovers come, but not to loot? Then they are something new among their kind.” The Foanna’s reply was as chill as the sea bay’s water.

“Loot does not summon men who want a blood price for their dead kin!” Ross retorted.

“No, and the Rovers are believers in the balance of hurt against hurt,” the Foanna conceded. “Do they also believe in the balance of aid against aid? Now that is a thought upon which depends much. Gordon, it would seem that we may not take to our ships. So let us return to council.”

Ashe’s hand was on Ross’s arm guiding him through the murk. Though the fog which had choked the bay had vanished, thick darkness remained and Ross noted that even the fires and flares were dimmed and fewer. Then they were in a passage where a very faint light clung to the walls.

Robed Foanna, three of them, moved ahead with that particular gliding progress. Then Ashe and Ross, and bringing up the rear, a dozen of the mailed guards. The passageway became a ramp. Ross glanced at Ashe. Like the Foanna, the Terran Agent wore a cloak of gray, but his did not shift color from time to time as did those of the Hawaikian enigmas. And now Gordon shoved back its folds, revealing supple body armor.

Questions gathered in Ross. He wanted to know—needed desperately to know—Ashe’s standing with the Foanna. What had happened to raise Gordon from the status of captive in Zahur’s hold to familiar companionship with the most dreaded race on this planet?

The ramp’s head faced blank wall with a sharp-angled turn to the right of a narrower passage. One of the Foanna made a slight sign to the guards, who turned with drilled precision to march off along the passage. Now the other Foanna held out their wands.

What a moment earlier had been unbroken surface showed an opening. The change had been so instantaneous that Ross had not seen any movement at all.

Beyond that door they passed from one world to another. Ross’s senses, already acutely alert to his surroundings, could not supply him with any reason by sight, sound, or smell for his firm conviction that this hold was alien as neither the Wrecker castle nor the Rover ships had been. Surely the Foanna were not the same race, perhaps not even the same species as the other native Hawaikans.

Those robes which he had seen both silver gray and dark blue, now faded, pearly, thinned, until each of the three still gliding before him were opalescent columns without definite form.

Ashe’s grasp fell on Ross’s arm once more, and his whisper reached the younger man thinly. “They are mistresses of illusion. Be prepared not to believe all that you see.”

Mistresses—Ross caught that first. Women, or at least female then. Illusion, yes, already he was convinced that here his eyes could play tricks on him. He could hardly determine what was robe, what was wall, or if more than shades of shades swept before him.

Another blank wall, then an opening, and flowing through it to touch him such a wave of alienness that Ross felt he was buffeted by a storm wind. Yet as he hesitated before it, reluctant in spite of Ashe’s hold to go ahead, he also knew that this did not carry with it the cold hostility he had known while facing the Baldies. Alien—yes. Inimical to his kind—no.

“You are right, younger brother.”

Spoken those words—or forming in his mind?

Ross was in a place which was sheer wonder. Under his feet dark blue—the blue of a Terran sky at dusk—caught up in it twinkling points of light as if he strode, not equal with stars, but above them! Walls—were there any walls here? Or shifting, swaying blue curtains on which silvery lines ran to form symbols and words which some bemused part of his brain almost understood, but not quite.

Constant motion, no quiet, until he came to a place where those swaying curtains were stilled, where he no longer strode above the sky but on soft surface, a mat of gray living sod where his steps released a spicy fragrance. And there he really saw the Foanna for the first time.

Where had their cloaks gone? Had they tossed them away during that walk or drift across this amazing room, or had the substance which had formed those coverings flowed away by itself? As Ross looked at the three in wonder he knew that he was seeing them as not even their servants and guards ever viewed them. And yet was he seeing them as they really were or as they wished him to see them?

“As we are, younger brother, as we are!” Again an answer which Ross was not sure was thought or speech.

In form they were humanoid, and they were undoubtedly women. The muffling cloaks gone, they wore sleeveless garments of silver which were girded at the waist with belts of blue gems. Only in their hair and their eyes did they betray alien blood. For the hair which flowed

and wove about them, cascading down shoulders, rippling about their arms, was silver, too, and it swirled, moved as if it had a separate life of its own. While their eyes.... Ross looked into those golden eyes and was lost for seconds until panic awoke in him, forcing him after sharp struggle to look away.

Laughter? No, he had not heard laughter. But a sense of amusement tinged with respect came to him.

“You are very right, Gordoan. This one is also of your kind. He is not witches’ meat.” Ross caught the distaste, the kind of haunting unhappiness which colored those words, remnants of an old hurt.

“These are the Foanna,” Ashe’s voice broke more of the spell. “The Lady Ynlan, The Lady Yngram, the Lady Ynvalda.”

The Foanna—these three only?

She whom Ashe had named Ynlan, whose eyes had entrapped and almost held what was Ross Murdock, made a small gesture with her ivory hand. And in that gesture as well as in the words witches’ meat the Terran read the unhappiness which was as much a part of this room as the rest of its mystery.

“The Foanna are now but three. They have been only three for many weary years, oh man from another world and time. And soon, if these enemies have their way, they will not be three—but none!”

“But—” Ross was still startled. He knew from Loketh that the Wreckers had deemed the Foanna few in number, an old and dying race. But that there were only three women left was hard to believe.

The response to his unspoken wonder came clear and determined. “We may be but three; however, our power remains. And sometimes power distilled by time becomes the stronger. Now it would seem that time is no longer our servant but perhaps among our enemies. So tell us this tale of yours as to why the Rovers would make one with the Foanna—tell us all, younger brother!”

Ross reported what he had seen, what Tino-rau and Taua had learned from the prisoners taken at Kyn Add. And when he had finished, the three Foanna stood very still, their hands clasped one to the other. Though they were only an arm’s distance from him, Ross had the feeling they had withdrawn from his time and world.

So complete was their withdrawal that he dared to ask Ashe one of the many questions which had been boiling inside him.

“Who are they?” But Ross knew he really meant: What are they?

Gordon Ashe shook his head. “I don’t really know—the last of a very old race which possesses powers and knowledge different from any we have believed in for centuries. We have heard of witches. In the modern day we discount the legends about them. The Foanna bring those legends alive. And I promise you this—if they turn those powers loose”—he paused—“it will be such a war as this world, perhaps any world has never seen!”

“That is so.” The Foanna had returned from the place to which they had withdrawn. “And this is also the truth or one face of the truth. The Rovers are right in their belief that we have kept some measure of balance between one form of change and another on this world. If we were as many as we once were, then against us these invaders could not move at all. But we are three only and also—do we have the right to evoke disaster which will strike not only the

enemy but perhaps recoil upon the innocent? There has been enough death here already. And those who are our servants shall no longer be asked to face battle to keep an empty shell inviolate. We would see with our own eyes these invaders, probe what they would do. There is ever change in life, and if a pattern grows too set, then the race caught in it may wither and die. Maybe our pattern has been too long in its old design. We shall make no decision until we see in whose hands the future may rest.”

Against such finality of argument there was no appeal. These could not be influenced by words.

“Gordoon, there is much to be done. Do you take with you this younger brother and see to his needs. When all is in readiness we shall come.”

One minute Ross had been standing on the carpet of living moss. Then ... he was in a more normal room with four walls, a floor, a ceiling, and light which came from rods set in the corners. He gasped.

“Stunned me, too, the first time they put me through it,” he heard Ashe say. “Here, get some of this inside you, it’ll steady your head.”

There was a cup in his hand, a beautifully carved, rose-red container shaped in the form of a flower. Somehow Ross brought it to his lips with shaking hands, gulped down a good third of its contents. The liquid was a mixture of tart and sweet, cooling his mouth and throat, but warming as it went down, and that glow spread through him.

“What—how did they do that?” he demanded.

Ashe shrugged. “How do they do the hundred and one things I have seen happen here? We’ve been teleported. How it’s done I don’t know any more than I did the first time it happened. Simply a part of Foanna ‘magic’ as far as spectators are concerned.” He sat down on a stool, his long legs stretched out before him. “Other worlds, other ways—even if they are confounded queer ones. As far as I know, there’s no reason for their power to work, but it does. Now, have you seen the time gate? Is it in working order?”

Ross put down the now empty cup and sat down opposite Ashe. As concisely as he could, he outlined the situation with a quick résumé of all that had happened to him, Karara, and the dolphins since they had been sucked through the gate. Ashe asked no questions, but his expression was that of the Agent Ross had known, evaluating and listing all the younger man had to report. When the other was through he said only two words:

“No return.”

So much had happened in so short a time that Ross’s initial shock at the destruction of the gate had faded, been well overlaid by all the demands made upon his resources, skill, and strength. Even now, the fact Ashe voiced seemed of little consequence balanced against the struggle in progress.

“Ashe—” Ross rubbed his hands up and down his arms, brushing away grains of sand, “remember those pylons with the empty seacoast behind them? Does that mean the Baldies are going to win?”

“I don’t know. No one has ever tried to change the course of history. Maybe it is impossible even if we dared to try.” Ashe was on his feet again, pacing back and forth.

“Try what, Gordoon?”

Ross jerked around, Ashe halted. One of the Foanna stood there, her hair playing about her shoulders as if some breeze felt only by her stirred those long strands.

“Dare to try and change the course of the future,” Ashe explained, accepting her materialization with the calm of one who had witnessed it before.

“Ah, yes, your traveling in time. And now you think that perhaps this poor world of ours has a choice as to which overlords it will welcome? I do not know either, Gordoan, whether the future may be altered nor if it be wise to try. But also ... well, perhaps we should see our enemy before we are set in any path. Now, it is time that we go. Younger brother, how did you plan to leave this place when you accomplished your mission?”

“By the sea gate. I have extra swimming equipment cached under the jetty.”

“And the Rover ships await you at sea?”

“Yes.”

“Then we shall take your way, since the cutters are sunk.”

“There is only one extra gill-pack—and that Baldy sub is out there, too!”

“So? Then we shall try another road, though it will sap our power temporarily.” Her head inclined slightly to the left as if she listened. “Good! Our people are now in the passage which will take them to safety. What those outside will find here when they break in will be of little aid to their plans. Secrets of the Foanna remain secrets past others’ prying. Though they shall try, oh, how they shall try to solve them! There is knowledge that only certain types of minds can hold and use, and to others it remains for all time unlearnable. Now—”

Her hand reached out, flattened against Ross’s forehead.

“Think of your Rover ship, younger brother, see it in your mind! And see well and clearly for me.”

Torgul’s cruiser was there; he could picture with details he had not thought he knew or remembered. The deck in the dark of the night with only a shaded light at the mast. The deck ...

Ross gave a choked cry. He did not see this in his mind; he saw it with his eyes! His hand swung out in an involuntary gesture of repudiation and struck painfully against wood. He was on the cruiser!

A startled exclamation from behind him—then a shout. Ashe was here and beyond him three cloaked figures, the Foanna. They had their own road indeed and had taken it.

“You ... Rosss—” Vistur fronted them, his face a mixture of bewilderment and awe. “The Foanna—” said in a half whisper, echoed by crewmen gathering around, but not too close.

“Gordon!” Karara elbowed her way between two of the Hawaikans and ran across the deck. She caught the Agent’s both hands as if to assure herself that he was alive and there before her. Then she turned to the three Foanna.

There was an odd expression on the Polynesian girl’s face, first of measurement with some fear, and then of dawning wonder. From beneath the cloak of the middle Foanna came the rod of office with its sparking knob. Karara dropped Ashe’s hands, took a tentative step forward and then another. The knob was directly before her, breast high. She brought up both hands, cupping them about the knob, but not touching it directly. The sparks it emitted could have been flashing against her flesh, but Karara displayed no awareness of that. Instead, she lifted both hands farther, palm up and cupped, as if she carried some invisible bounty, then flattened them, loosing what she held.

There was a sigh from the crewmen; Karara's gesture had been confident, as if she knew just what she was doing and why. And Ross heard Ashe draw a deep breath also as the Terran girl turned, allying herself with the Foanna.

"These Great Ones stand in peace," she said. "It is their will that no harm comes to this ship and those who sail in her."

"What do the Great Ones want of us?" Torgul advanced but not too near.

"To speak concerning those who are your prisoners."

"So be it." The Captain bowed. "The Great Ones' will is our will; let it be as they wish."



## 15. Return to the Battle

Ross lay listening to the even breathing from across the cabin. He had awakened in that quick transference from sleep to consciousness which was always his when on duty, but he made no attempt to move. Ashe was still sleeping.

Ashe, whom he thought or had thought he knew as well as one man could ever know another, who had taken the place of family for Ross Murdock the loner. Years—two ... four of them now since he had made half of that partnership.

His head turned, though he could not see that lean body, that quiet, controlled face. Ashe still looked the same, but ... Ross's sense of loss was hurt and anger mingled. What had they done to Gordon, those three? Bewitched? Tales Terrans had accepted as purest fantasy for centuries came into his mind. Could it be that his own world once had its Foanna?

Ross scowled. You couldn't refute their "magic," call it by what scientific name you wished—hypnotism ... telaporting. They got results, and the results were impressive. Now he remembered the warning the Foanna themselves had delivered hours earlier to the Rovers. There were limits to their abilities; because they were forced to draw on mental and physical energy, they could be exhausted. Thus, they had barriers, too.

Again Ross considered the subject of barriers. Karara had been able to meet the aliens, if not mind-to-mind, then in a closer way even than Ashe. The talent which tied her to the dolphins had in turn been a bond with the Foanna. Ashe and Karara could enter that circle, but not Ross Murdock. Along with his new separation from Ashe came that feeling of inferiority to bite on, and the taste was sour.

"This isn't going to be easy."

So Ashe was awake.

"What can they do?" Ross asked in return.

"I don't know. I don't believe that they can telaport an army into Baldy headquarters the way Torgul expects. And it wouldn't do such an army much good to get there and then be outclassed by the weapons the Baldies might have," Ashe said.

Ross had a moment of warmth and comfort; he knew that tone of old. Ashe was studying the problem, willing to talk out difficulties as he always had before.

"No, outright assault isn't the answer. We'll have to know more about the enemy. One thing puzzles me: Why have the Baldies suddenly stepped up their timing?"

"What makes you think they have?"

"Well, according to the accounts I've heard, it's been about three or four planet years here since some off-world devices have been infiltrating the native civilization—"

"You mean such things as those attractors set up on the reef at Zahur's castle?" Ross remembered Loketh's story.

"Those, and other things. The refinements added to the engine power on these ships.... Torgul said they spread from Rover fleet to fleet; no one's sure where they started. The Baldies began slowly, but they are speeding up now—those fairing attacks have all been recent. And this assault on the Foanna citadel blew up almost overnight on a flimsy excuse. Why the quick push after the slow beginning?"

“Maybe they decided the natives are easy pushovers and they no longer have to worry about any real opposition,” Ross suggested.

“Could be. Self-confidence becoming arrogance when they didn’t uncover any opponent strong enough to matter. Or else, they may be spurred by some need with a time limit. If we knew the reason for those pylons, we might guess their motives.”

“Are you going to try to change the future?”

“That sounds arrogant, too. Can we if we wish to? We never dared to try it on Terra. And the risk may be worse than all our fears. Also, the choice is not ours.”

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” Ross said. “Why did the Foanna walk out of the citadel and leave it undefended for their enemies? What about their guards? Did they just leave them too?” He was willing to make the most of any flaw in the aliens’ character.

“Most of their people had already escaped through underground ways. The rest left when they knew the cutters had been sunk,” Ashe returned. “As to why they deserted the citadel, I don’t know. The decision was theirs.”

There—up with the barrier between them again. But Ross refused to accept the cutoff this time, determined to pull Ashe back into the familiar world of the here and now.

“That keep could be a trap, about the best on this planet!” The idea was more than just a gambit to attract Ashe’s attention, it was true! A perfect trap to catch Baldies.

“Don’t you see,” Ross sat up, slapped his feet down on the deck as he leaned forward eagerly. “Don’t you see ... if the Baldies know anything at all about the Foanna, and I’m betting they do and want to learn all they can, they’ll visit the citadel. They won’t want to depend on second- and third-hand reports of the place, especially ones delivered by primitives such as the Wreckers. They had a sub there. I’ll bet the crew are in picking over the loot right now!”

“If that’s what they’re hunting”—there was amusement in Ashe’s tone—“they won’t find much. The Foanna have better locks than their enemies have keys. You heard Ynlan before we left—any secrets left will remain secrets.”

“But there’s bait—bait for a trap!” argued Ross.

“You’re right!” To the younger man’s joy Ashe’s enthusiasm was plain. “And if the Baldies could be led to believe that what they wanted was obtainable with just a little more effort, or the right tools—”

“The trap could net bigger catch than just underlings!” Ross’s thought matched Ashe’s.

“Why, it might even pull in the VIP directing the whole operation! How can we set it up, and do we have time?”

“The trap would have to be of Foanna setting; our part would come after it was sprung.” Ashe was thoughtful again. “But it is the only move which we can make at present with any hope of success. And it will only work if the Foanna are willing.”

“Have to be done quickly,” Ross pointed out.

“Yes, I’ll see.” Ashe was a dark figure against the thin light of the companionway as he slid back the cabin door. “If Ynvalda agrees....” As he went out Ross was right behind him.

The Foanna had been given, by their own choice, quarters on the bow deck of the cruiser where sailcloth had been used to form a tent. Not that any of the awe-stricken Rovers would venture too near them. Ashe reached for the flap of the fabric and a lilting voice called:

“You seek us, Gordoan?”

“This is important.”

“Yes, it is important, for the thought which brings you both has merit. Enter then, brothers!”

The flap was looped aside and before them was a swirling of mist? ... light? ... sheets of pale color? Ross could not have described what he saw—save if the Foanna were there, he could not distinguish them from the rippling of their hair, the melting film of their robes.

“So, younger brother, you think that which was our home and our treasure box has now become a trap for the confounding of those who believe we are a threat to them?”

Somehow Ross was not surprised that they knew about his idea before he had said a word, before Ashe had given any explanations. Their omniscience was only a small portion of their other talents.

“Yes.”

“And why do you believe so? We swear to you that the coast folk can not be driven into those parts of the castle which mean the most, any more than our sea gate can be breached unless we will it so.”

“Yet I swam through the sea gate, and the sub was there also.” Ross knew again a flash of—was it pleasure?—at being able to state this fact. There *were* chinks in the Foanna defenses.

“Again the truth. You have that within you, young brother, which is both a lack and a shield. True also that this undersea ship entered after you. Perhaps it has a shield as part of it; perhaps those from the stars have their own protection. But they can not reach the heart of what they wish, not unless we open the doors for them. It is your belief, younger brother, that they still strive to force such doors?”

“Yes. Knowing there is something to be learned, they will try for it. They will not dare not to.” Ross was very certain on that point. His encounters with the Baldies had not led to any real understanding. But the way they had wiped out the line of Russian time stations made him sure that they dealt thoroughly with any situation they considered a threat.

From the prisoners taken at Kyn Add they had learned the invaders believed the Foanna their enemies here, even though the Old Ones had not repulsed them or their activities. Therefore, it followed that, having taken the stronghold, the Baldies would endeavor to rip open every one of its secrets.

“A trap with good bait—”

Ross wondered which one of the Foanna said that. To see nothing but the swirls of mist-color, listen to disembodied voices from it, was disconcerting. Part of the stage dressing, he decided, for building their prestige with the other races with whom they dealt. Three women alone would have to buttress their authority with such trappings.

“Ah, younger brother, indeed you are beginning to understand us!” Laughter, soft, but unmistakable.

Ross frowned. He did not feel the touch-go-touch of mental communication which the dolphins used. But he did not doubt that the Foanna read his thoughts, or at least a few of them.

“Some of them,” echoed from the mist. “Not all—not as your older brother’s or the maiden whose mind meets with ours. With you, younger brother, it is a thought here, a thought there, and only our intuition to connect them into a pattern. But now, there is serious planning to be done. And, knowing this enemy, you believe they will come to search for what they can not find. So you would set a trap. But they have weapons beyond your weapons, have they not,

younger brother? Brave as are these Rover kind, they can not use swords against flame, their hands against a killer who may stand apart and slay. What remains, Gordoan? What remains in our favor?"

"You have your weapons, too," Ashe answered.

"Yes, we have our weapons, but long have they been used only in one pattern, and they are atuned to another race. Did our defenses hold against you, Gordoan, when you strove to prove that you were as you claimed to be? And did another repulse younger brother when he dared the sea gate? So can we trust them in turn against these other strangers with different brains? Only at the testing shall we know, and in such learning perhaps we shall also be forced to eat the sourness of defeat. To risk all may be to lose all."

"That may be true," Ashe assented.

"You mean the sight you have had into our future says that this happens? Yes, to stake all and to lose—not only for ourselves, but for all others here—that is a weighty decision to make, Gordoan. But the trap promises. Let us think on it for a space. Do you also consult with the Rovers if they wish to take part in what may be desperate folly."

Torgul paced the afterdeck, well away from the tent which sheltered the Foanna, but with his eyes turning to it as Ross explained what might be a good attack.

"Those women-killers would have no fear of Foanna magic, rather would they come to seek it out? It would be a chance to catch leaders in a trap?"

"You have heard what the prisoners said or thought. Yes, they would seek out such knowledge and we would have this chance to capture them—"

"With what?" Torgul demanded. "I am not Ongal to argue that it is better to die in pursuit of blood payment than to take an enemy or enemies with me! What chance have we against their powers?"

"Ask that of them!" Ross nodded toward the still silent tent.

Even as he spoke the three cloaked Foanna emerged, pacing down to mid-ship where Torgul and his lieutenants, Ross and Ashe came to meet them.

"We have thought on this." The lilting half chant which the Foanna used for ordinary communication was a song in the dawn wind. "It was in our minds to retreat, to wait out this troubling of the land, since we are few and that which we hold within us is worth the guarding. But now, what profit such guardianship when there may be none to whom we may pass it after us? And if you have seen the truth, elder brother"—the cowled heads swung to Ashe—"then there may be no future for any of us. But still there are our limitations. Rover," now they spoke directly to Torgul, "we can not put your men within the citadel by desiring—not without certain aids which lie sealed there now. No, we, ourselves, must win inside bodily and then ... then, perhaps, we can pull tight the lines of our net!"

"To run a cruiser through the gate—" Torgul began.

"No, not a ship, Captain. A handful of warriors in the water can risk the gate, but not a ship."

Ashe broke in, "How many gill-packs do we have?"

Ross counted hurriedly. "I left one cached ashore. But there's mine and Karara's and Loketh's—also two more—"

"To pass the gates," that was the Foanna, "we ourselves shall not need your underwater aids."

"You," Ross said to Ashe, "and I with Karara's pack——"

“For Karara!”

Both the Terrans looked around. The Polynesian girl stood close to the Foanna, smiling faintly.

“This venture is mine also,” she spoke with conviction. “As it is Tino-rau’s and Taua’s. Is that not so, Daughters of the Alii of this world?”

“Yes, Sea Maid. There are weapons of many sorts, and not all of them fit into a warrior’s hand or can be swung with the force of a man’s arm and shoulder. Yes, this venture is yours, also, sister.”

Ross’s protests bubbled unspoken; he had to accept the finality of the Foanna decree. It seemed now that the make-up of their task force depended upon the whims of the three rather than the experience of those trained to such risks. And Ashe was apparently willing to accept their leadership.

So it was an odd company that took to the water just as dawn colored the sky. Loketh had clung fiercely to his pack, insisted that he be one of the swimmers, and the Foanna accepted him as well. Ross and Ashe, Loketh, and Baleku, a young under-officer of Ongal’s, accorded the best swimmer of the fleet, Karara and the dolphins. And with them those three others, shapes sliding smoothly through the water, as difficult to define in this new element as they had been in their tent. Before them frisked the dolphins. Tino-rau and Taua played about the Foanna in an ecstatic joy and when all were in the sea they shot off shoreward.

That sub within the sea gate, had it unleashed the same lethal broadcast as the one at Kyn Add? But the dolphins could give warning if that were so.

Ross swam easily, Ashe next, Loketh on his left, Baleku a little behind and Karara to the fore as if in vain pursuit of the dolphins—the Foanna well to the left. A queer invasion party, even queerer when one totaled up the odds which might lie ahead.

There was no mist or storm this morning to hide the headlands where the Foanna citadel stood. And the promontories of the sea gate were starkly clear in the growing light. The same drive which always was a part of Ross when he was committed to action sustained him now, though he was visited by a small prick of doubt when he thought that the leadership did not lie with Ashe but with the Foanna.

No warning of any trouble ahead as they passed between the mighty, sea-sunk bases of the gate pillars. Ross depended upon his sonic, but there was no adverse report from the sensitive recorder. The terrible chill of the water during the night attack had been dissipated, but here and there dead sea things floated, being torn and devoured by hunters of the waves.

They were well past the pillars when Ross was aware that Loketh had changed place in the line, spurting ahead. After him went Baleku. They caught up with Karara, flashed past her.

Ross looked to Ashe, on to the Foanna, but saw nothing to explain the action of the two Hawaikans. Then his sonic beat out a signal from Ashe.

“Danger ... follow the Foanna ... left.”

Karara had already changed course to head in that direction. Ahead of her he could see Loketh and Baleku both still bound for the mid-point of the shore where the jetty and the sunken cutters were. Ashe passed before him, and Ross reluctantly followed orders.

A shelf of rock reached out from the cliff wall, under it a dark opening. The Foanna sought this without hesitation, Ashe, Karara, and Ross following. Moments later they were out of the

water where footing sloped back and up. Below them Tino-rau and Taua nosed the rise, their heads lifting out of the water as they “spoke.” And Karara hastened to reply.

“Loketh ... Baleku ...” Ross began when he caught a mental stroke of anger so deadly that it was a chill lance into his brain. He faced the Foanna, startled and a little frightened.

“They will not come—now.” A knob-crowned wand stretched out in the air, pointing to the upper reaches of the slope. “Nor can any of their blood—unless we win.”

“What is wrong?” Ashe asked.

“You were right, very right, men out of time! These invaders are not to be lightly dismissed. They have turned one of our own defenses against us. Loketh, Baleku, all of their kind, can be made into tools for a master. They belong to the enemy now.”

“And we have failed so early?” Karara wanted to know.

Again that piercing thrust of anger so vivid that it was no mere emotion but seemed a tangible force.

“Failed? No, not yet have we even begun to fight! You were very right; this is such an evil as must be faced and fought, even if we lose all in battle! Now we must do that which none of our own race has done for generations—we must open three locks, throw wide the Great Door, and seek out the Keeper of the Closed Knowledge!”

Light, a sharp ray sighting from the tip of the wand. And the Foanna following that beam, the three Terrans coming after ... into the unknown.

## 16. The Opening of the Great Door

It was not the general airlessness of the long-closed passage which wore on Ross's nerves, made Karara suddenly reach out and clasp fingers about the wrists of the two men she walked between; it was a crushing sensation of age, of a toll of years so long, so heavy, as to make time itself into a turgid flood which tugged at their bodies, mired their feet as they trudged after the Foanna. This sense of age, of a dead and heavy past, was so stifling that all three Terrans breathed in gasps.

Karara's breaths became sobs. Yet she matched her pace to Ashe and Ross, kept going. Ross himself had little idea of their surroundings, but one small portion of his brain asked answerless questions. The foremost being: Why did the past crush in on him here? He had traveled time, but never before had he been beaten with the feel of countless dead and dying years.

"Going back—" That hoarse whisper came from Ashe, and Ross thought he understood.

"A time gate!" He was eager to accept such an explanation. Time gates he could understand, but that the Foanna used one....

"Not our kind," Ashe replied.

But his words had pulled Ross out of a spell which had been as quicksand about him. And he began to fight back with a determination not to be sucked into what filled this place. In spite of Ross's efforts, his eyes could supply him with no definite impression of where they were. The ramp had led them out of the sea, but where they walked now, linked hand to hand, Ross could not say. He could see the glimmer of the Foanna; turning his head he could see his companions as shadows, but all beyond that was utter dark.

"Ahhhh—" Karara's sobs gave way to a whisper which was half moan. "This is a way of gods, old gods, gods who never dealt with men! It is not well to walk the road of the gods!"

Her fear lapped to Ross. He faced that emotion as he had faced so many different kinds of fear all his life. Sure, he felt that pressure on him, not the pressure of past centuries now—but a power beyond his ability to describe.

"Not our gods!" Ross put his stubborn defiance into words, more as a shield against his own wavering. "No power where there is no belief!" From what half-forgotten bit of reading had he dredged that knowledge? "No being without belief!" he repeated.

To his vast amazement he heard Ashe laugh, though the sound bordered on hysteria.

"No belief, no power," the older man replied. "You've speared the right fish, Ross! No gods of ours dwell here, Karara, and whatever god does has no rights over us. Hold to that, girl, hold tight!"

"Ah, ye forty thousand gods,

Ye gods of sea, of sky, of woods,

Of mountains, of valleys,

Ye assemblies of gods,

Ye elder brothers of the gods that are,

Ye gods that once were,

Ye that whisper. Ye that watch by night,  
 Ye that show your gleaming eyes,  
 Come down, awake, stir,  
 Walk this road, walk this road!”

She was singing, first softly and then more strongly, the liquid words of her own tongue repeated in English as if what she strove to call she would share with her companions. Now there was triumph in her singing and Ross found himself echoing her, “Walk this road!” as a demand.

It was still there, all of it, the crushing weight of the past, and that which brooded within that past, which had reached out for them, to possess or to alter. Only they were free of that reaching now. And they could see too! The fuzzy darkness was lighter and there were normal walls about them. Ross put out his free hand and rubbed finger tips along rough stone.

Once more their senses were assaulted by a stealthy attack from beyond the bounds of space and time as the walls fell away and they came out into a wide space whose boundaries they could not see. Here that which brooded was strong, a mighty weight poised aloft to strike them down.

“Come down, awake, stir....” Karara’s pleading sank again to a whisper, her voice sounded hoarse as if her mouth were dry, her words formed by a shrunken tongue, issued from a parched throat.

Light spreading in channels along the floor, making a fiery pattern—patterns within patterns, intricate designs within designs. Ross jerked his eyes away from those patterns. To study them was danger, he knew without being warned. Karara’s nails bit into his flesh and he welcomed that pain; it kept him alert, conscious of what was Ross Murdock, holding him safely apart from something greater than he, but entirely alien.

The designs and patterns were lines on a pavement. And now the three Foanna, swaying as if yielding to unseen winds, began to follow those patterns with small dancing steps. But the Terrans remained where they were, holding to one another for the sustaining strength their contact offered.

Back, forth, the Foanna danced—and once more their cloaks vanished or were discarded, so their silver-bright figures advanced, retreated, weaving a way from one arabesque to another. First about the outer rim and then in, by spirals and circles. No light except the crimson glowing rivulets on the floor, the silver bodies of the Foanna moving back and forth, in and out.

Then, suddenly, the three dancers halted, huddled together in an open space between the designs. And Ross was startled by the impression of confusion, doubt, almost despair wafted from them to the Terrans. Back across the patterned floor they came, their hands clasped even as the Terrans stood together, and now they fronted the three out of time.

“Too few ... we are too few....” she who was the mid one of the trio said. “We can not open the Great Door.”

“How many do you need?” Karara’s voice was no longer parched, frightened. She might have traveled through fear to a new serenity.

Why did he think that, Ross wondered fleetingly. Was it because he, too, had had the same release?



The Polynesian girl loosed her grip on her companions' hands, taking a step closer to the Foanna.

“Three can be four—”

“Or five.” Ashe moved up beside her. “If we suit your purpose.”

Was Gordon Ashe crazy? Or had he fallen victim to whatever filled this place? Yet it was Ashe's voice, sane, serene, as Ross had always heard it. The younger Agent wet his lips; it was his turn to have a dry mouth. This was not his game; it could not be. Yet he summoned voice enough to add in turn:

“Six—”

When it came the Foanna answer was a warning:

“To aid us you must cast aside your shields, allow your identities to become one with our forces. Having done so, it may be that you shall never be as you are now but changed.”

“Changed...”

The word echoed, perhaps not in the place where they stood, but in Ross's head. This was a risk such as he had never taken before. His chances in the past had been matters of action where his own strength and wits were matched against the problem. Here, he would open a door to forces he and his kind should not meet—expose himself to danger such as did not exist on the plane where weapons and strength of arm could decide victory or defeat.

And this was not really his fight at all. What did it matter to Terrans ten thousand years or so in the future what happened to Hawaikans in this past? He was a fool; they were all fools to become embroiled in this. The Baldies and their stellar empire—if that ever had existed as the Terrans surmised—was long gone before his breed entered space.

“If you accomplish this with our aid,” said Ashe, “will you be able to defeat the invaders?”

Again a lengthening moment of silence before the Foanna replied:

“We can not tell. We only know that there is a force laid up here, set behind certain gates in the far past, upon which we may call for some supreme effort. But this much we also know: The Evil of the Shadow reaches out from here now, and where that darkness falls men will no longer be men but things in the guise of men who obey and follow as mindless creatures. As yet this shadow of the Shadow is a small one. But it will spread, for that is the nature of those who have spawned it. They have chanced upon and corrupted a thing we know. Such power feeds upon the will to power. Having turned it to their bidding, they will not be able to resist using it, for it is so easy to do and the results exult the nature of those who employ it.

“You have said that you and those like you who travel the time trails fear to change the past. Here the first steps have been taken to alter the future, but unless we complete the defense it will be ill for all of us.”

“And this is your only weapon?” Ashe asked once more.

“The only one strong enough to stand against that which is now unleashed.”

In the pavement the fiery lines were bright and glowing. Even when Ross shut his eyes, parts of those designs were still visible against his eyelids.

“We don't know how.” He made a last feeble protest on the side of prudence. “We couldn't move as you did.”

“Apart, no—together, yes.”

The silvery figures were once more swaying, the mist which was their hair flowing about them. Karara's hands went out, and the slender fingers of one of the Foanna lifted, closed about firm, brown Terran flesh. Ashe was doing the same!

Ross thought he cried out, but he could not be sure, as he watched Karara's head begin to sway in concert with her Foanna partner, her black hair springing out from her shoulders to rival the rippling strands of the alien's. Ashe was consciously matching steps with the companion who also drew him along a flowing line of fire.

In this last instant Ross realized the time for retreat was past—there was no place left to go. His hands went out, though he had to force that invitation because in him there was a shrinking horror of this surrender. But he could not let the others go without him.

The Foanna's touch was cool, and yet it seemed that flesh met his flesh, fingers as normal as his met fingers in that grasp. And when that hold was complete he gave a small gasp. For his horror was wiped away; he knew in its place a burst of energy which could be disciplined to use as a weapon or a tool in concentrated and complicated action. His feet so ... and then so.... Did those directions flow without words from the Foanna's fingers to his and then along his nerves to his brain? He only knew which was the proper next step, and the next, and the next, as they wove their way along the pattern lines, with their going adding a necessary thread to a design.

Forward four steps, backward one—in and out. Did Ross actually hear that sweet thrumming, akin to the lilting speech of the Foanna, or was it a throbbing in his blood? In and out.... What had become of the others he did not know; he was aware only of his own path, of the hand in his, of the silvery shape at his side to whom he was now tied as if one of the Rover capture nets enclosed them both.

The fiery lines under his feet were smoking, tendrils rising and twisting as the hair of the Foanna rippled and twisted. And the smoke clung, wreathed his body. They moved in a cocoon of smoke, thicker and thicker, until Ross could not even see the Foanna who accompanied him, was only assured of her presence by the hand which grasped his.

And a small part of him clung desperately to the awareness of that clasp as an anchorage against what might come, a tie between the world of reality and the place into which he was passing.

How did one find words to describe this? Ross wondered with that part of him which remained stubbornly Ross Murdock, Terran Time Agent. He thought that he did not see with his eyes, hear with his ears but used other senses his own kind did not recognize nor acknowledge.

Space ... not a room ... a cave—anything made by normal nature. Space which held something.

Pure energy? His Terran mind strove to give name to that which was nameless. Perhaps it was that spark of memory and consciousness which gave him that instant of "Seeing." Was it a throne? And on it a shimmering figure? He was regarded intently, measured, and—set aside.

There were questions or a question he could not hear, and perhaps an answer he would never be able to understand. Or had any of this happened at all?

Ross crouched on a cold floor, his head hanging, drained of energy, of all that feeling of power and well-being he had had when they had begun their dance across the symbols. About him those designs still glowed dully. When he looked at them too intently his head ached. He could almost understand, but the struggle was so exhausting he winced at the effort.

“Gordon—?”

There was no clasp on his hand; he was alone, alone between two glowing arabesques. That loneliness struck at him with the sharpness of a blow. His head came up; frantically he stared about him in search of his companions. “Gordon!” His plea and demand in one was answered:

“Ross?”

On his hands and knees, Ross used the rags of his strength to crawl in that direction, stopping now and then to shade his eyes with his hands, to peer through the cracks between his fingers for some sight of Ashe.

There he was, sitting quietly, his head up as if he were listening, or striving to listen. His cheeks were sunken; he had the drained, worn look of a man strained to the limit of physical energy. Yet there was a quiet peace in his face. Ross crawled on, put out a hand to Ashe’s arm as if only by touching the other could he be sure he was not an illusion. And Ashe’s fingers came up to cover the younger man’s in a grasp as tight as the Foanna’s hold had been.

“We did it; together we did it,” Ashe said. “But where—why—?”

Those questions were not aimed at him, Ross knew. And at that moment the younger man did not care where they had been, what they had done. It was enough that his terrible loneliness was gone, that Ashe was here.

Still keeping his hold on Ross, Ashe turned his head and called into the wilderness of the symbol-glowing space about them, “Karara?”

She came to them, not crawling, not wrung almost dry of spirit and strength, but on her two feet. About her shoulders her dark hair waved and spun—or was it dark now? Along those strands there seemed to be threaded motes of light, giving a silvery sheen which was a faint echo of the Foanna’s tresses. And was it only his bemused and bewildered sight, Ross mused, or was her skin fairer?

Karara smiled down at them and held out her hands, offering one to each. When they took them Ross knew again that surge of energy he had felt when he had followed the Foanna into the maze dance.

“Come! There is much to do.”

He could not be mistaken; her voice held the singing lilt of the Foanna. Somehow she had crossed some barrier to become a paler, perhaps a lesser, but still a copy of the three aliens. Was this what they had meant when they warned of a change which might come to those who followed them into the ritual of this place?

Ross looked from the girl to Ashe with searching intensity. No, he could see no outward change in Gordon. And he felt none within himself.

“Come!” Some of Karara’s old impetuousness returned as she tugged at them, urging them to their feet and drawing them with her. She appeared to know where they must go, and both men followed her guidance.

Once more they came out of the weird and alien into the normal, for here were the rock walls of a passage running up at an angle which became so steep they were forced to pull along by handholds hollowed in the walls.

“Where are we going?” Ashe asked.

“To cleanse.” Karara’s answer was ambiguous, and she sped along hardly touching the handholds. “But hurry!”

They finished their climb and were in another corridor where patches of sunlight came through a pierced wall to dazzle their eyes. This was similar to the way which had run beside the courtyard in Zahur’s castle.

Ross looked out of the first opening down into a courtyard. But where Zahur’s had held the busy life of a castle, this was silent. Silent, but not deserted. There were men below, armed, helmeted. He recognized the uniform of the Wrecker warriors, saw one or two who wore the gray of the Foanna servants. They stood in lines, unmoving, without speech among themselves, men who might have been frozen into immobility and arranged so for some game in which they were the voiceless, will-less pieces.

And their immobility was a thing to arouse fear. Were they dead and still standing?

“Come!” Karara’s voice had sunk to a whisper and her hand pulled at the men.

“What—?” began Ross.

Ashe shook his head. Those rows below drawn up as if in order to march, unliving rows. They could not be alive as the Terrans knew life!

Ross left his vantage point, ready to follow Karara. But he could not blot from his mind the picture of those lines, nor forget the terrible blankness which made their faces more unhuman, more frightfully alien than those of the Foanna.

## 17. Shades Against Shadow

The corridor ended in a narrow slit of room, and the wall before them was not the worked stone of the citadel but a single slab of what appeared to be glass curdled into creamy ridges and depressions.

Here were the Foanna, their robes once more cloaking them. Each held, point out, one of the rods. They moved slowly but with the precise gestures of those about a demanding and very important task as they traced each depression in the wall before them with the wand points. Down, up, around ... as their feet had moved in the dance pattern, so now their wands moved to cover each line.

“Now!”

The wands dropped points to the floor. The Foanna moved equidistant from one another. Then, as one, the rods were lifted vertically, brought down together with a single loud tap.

On the wall the blue lines they had traced with such care darkened, melted. The glassy slab shivered, shattered, fell outward in a lace of fragments. So the narrow room became a balcony above a large chamber.

Below a platform ran the full length of that hall, and on it were mounted a line of oval disks. These had been turned to different angles and each reflected light, a ray beam directed at them from a machine whose metallic casing, projecting antennae, was oddly out of place here.

Once more the three staffs of the Foanna raised as one in the air. This time, from the knobs held out over the hall blazed, not the usual whirl of small sparks, but strong beams of light—blue light darkening as it pierced downward until it became thrusting lines of almost tangible substance.

When those blue beams struck the nearest ovals they webbed with lines which cracked wide open. Shattered bits tinkled down to the platform. There was a stir at the end of the hall where the machine stood. Figures ran into plain sight. Baldies! Ross cried out a warning as he saw those star men raise weapon tubes aimed at the perch on which the Foanna stood.

Fire crackling with the speed and sound of lightning lashed up at the balcony. The lances of light met the spears of dark, and there was a flash which blinded Ross, a sound which split open the whole world.

The Terran's eyes opened, not upon darkness but on dazzling light, flashes of it which tore over him in great sweeping arcs. Dazed, sick, he tried to press his prone body into the unyielding surface on which he lay. But there was no way of burrowing out of this wild storm of light and clashing sound. Now under him the very fabric of the floor rocked and quivered as if it were being shaken apart into crumbling rubble.

All the will and ability to move was gone. Ross could only lie there and endure. What had happened, he did not know save that what raged about him now was a warring of inimical forces, perhaps both feeding on each other even as they strove for mastery.

The play of rays resembled sword blades crossing, fencing. Ross threw his arm over his eyes to shut out the intolerable brilliance of that thrust and counter. His body tingled and winced as the whirlwind of energy clashed and re clashed. He was beaten, stupid, as a man pinned down too long under a heavy shelling.

How did it end? In one terrific thunderclap of sound and blasting power? And when did it end—hours ... days later? Time was a thing set apart from this. Ross lay in the quiet which his body welcomed thirstily. Then he was conscious of the touch of wind on his face, wind carrying the hint of sea salt.

He opened his eyes and saw above him a patch of clouded sky. Shakily he levered himself up on his elbows. There were no complete walls any more, just jagged points of masonry, broken teeth set in a skull's jawbone. Open sky, dark clouds spattering rain.

"Gordon? Karara?" Ross's voice was a thin whisper. He licked his lips and tried again:

"Gordon!"

Had there been an answering whimper? Ross crawled into a hollow between two fallen blocks. A pool of water? No, it was the cloak of one of the Foanna spread out across the flooring in this fragment of room. Then Ross saw that Ashe was there, the cloaked figure braced against the Terran's shoulder as he half supported, half embraced the Foanna.

"Ynvalda!" Ashe called that with an urgency which was demanding. Now the Foanna moved, raising an arm in the cloak's flowing sleeve.

Ross sat back on his heels.

"Ross—Ashe?" He turned his head. Karara stood here, then came forward, planting her feet with care, her hands outstretched, her eyes wide and unseeing. Ross pulled himself up and went to her, finding that the once solid floor seemed to dip and sway under him, until he, too, must balance and creep. His hands closed on her shoulders and he pulled her to him in mutual support.

"Gordon?"

"Over there. You all right?"

"I think so." Her voice was weak. "The Foanna ... Ynlan ... Ynvalda—" Steadying herself against him, she tried to look around.

The place which had once been a narrow room, then a balcony, was now a perch above stomach-turning space. The hall of the oval mirrors was gone, having disappeared into a hollow the depths of which were veiled by a vapor which boiled and bubbled as if, far below, some huge caldron hung above a blazing fire.

Karara cried out and Ross drew her back from that drop. He was clearer-headed now and looked about for some way down from this doubtful perch. Of the other two Foanna there was no sign. Had they been sucked up and out in the inferno they had created with their unleashing of energy against the Baldies' installation?

"Ross—look!" Karara's cry, her upflung arm directed his attention aloft.

Under the sullen gathering of the storm a sphere arose as a bubble might seek the surface of a pool before breaking. A ship—a Baldy ship taking off from the ruined citadel! So some of the enemy had survived that trial of strength!

The globe was small, a scout used for within-atmosphere exploration, Ross judged. It arose first, and then moved inland, fleeing the gathering storm, to be out of sight in moments. Inland, where the mountain base of the invaders was reputed to be. Retreating? Or bound to gather reinforcements?

"Baldies?" Karara asked.

"Yes."

She wiped her hand across her face, smearing dust and grime on her cheeks. As raindrops pattered about them, Ross drew the girl with him into the alcove where Ashe sheltered with the Foanna. The cowed alien was sitting up, her hand still gripping one of the wands, now a half-melted ruin.

Ashe glanced at them as if for the first time he remembered they might be there.

“Baldy ship just took off inland,” Ross told him. “We didn’t see either of the other Foanna.”

“They have gone to do what is to be done,” Ashe’s companion replied. “So some of the enemy fled. Well, perhaps they have learned one lesson, not to meddle with others’ devices. Ahh, so much gone which will never come again! Never again—”

She held up the half-melted wand, turning it back and forth before her, before she cast it away. It flew out, up, then dropped into the caldron of the hall which had been. A gust of rain, cold, chilling the lightly clad Terrans, swept across them.

The Foanna was helped to her feet by Ashe. For a moment she turned slowly, giving a lingering look to the ruins. Then she spoke: “Broken stone holds no value. Take hands, my brothers, my sister, it is time we go hence.”

Karara’s hand in Ross’s right, Ashe’s in his left, and both linked to Ynvalda in turn. Then—they were indeed elsewhere, in a courtyard where bodies lay flaccid under the drenching downpour of the rain. And moving among those bodies were the two other Foanna, bending to examine one man after another. Perhaps over one in three they so inspected they held consultation before a wand was used in tracing certain portions of the body between them. When they were finished, that man stirred, moaned, showed signs of life once more.

“Rosss—!” From behind a tumbled wall crept a Hawaikan who did not wear the guard armor of the others. Gill-pack, flippers, diver’s belt, had been stripped from him. There was a bleeding gash down the side of his face, and he held his left arm against his body, supported by his right hand.

“Baleku!”

The Rover pulled himself up to his feet and stood swaying. Ross reached him quickly to catch him as he slumped forward.

“Loketh?” the Terran asked.

“The women-killers took him.” Somehow the Rover got that out as Ross half supported, half led him to where the Foanna were gathering those they had been able to revive. “They wanted to learn”—Baleku was obviously making a great effort to tell his story—“about ... about where we came from ... where we got the packs.”

“So now they will know of us, or will if they get the story out of Loketh.” Ashe worked with Ross to splint the Rover’s broken arm. “How many of them were here, Baleku?”

The Rover’s head moved slowly from side to side. “I do not know in truth. It is—was—like a dream. I was in the water swimming through the sea gate. Then suddenly I was in another place where those from the stars waited about me. They had our packs and belts and these they showed us, demanding to know whereof these were. Loketh was like one deep in sleep and they left him so when they questioned me. Then there came a great noise and the floor under us shook, lightning flashed through the air. Two of the women-killers ran from the room and all of them were greatly excited. They took up Loketh and carried him away, with him the packs and other things. And I was left alone, though I could not move—as if they had left me in a net I could not see.

“More and more were the flashes. Then one of those slayers of women stood in the doorway. He raised his hand, and my feet were free, but I could not move otherwise than to follow after him. We came along a hall and into this court where men stood unstirring, although stones fell from the walls upon some of them and the ground shook—”

Baleku’s voice grew shriller, his words ran together. “The one who pulled me after him by his will—he cried out and put his hands to his head. Back and forth he ran, bumping into the standing men, and once running into a wall as if he were blinded. And then he was gone and I was alone. There was more falling stone and one struck my shoulder so I was thrown to the ground. There I lay until you came.”

“So few—out of many so few—” One of the Foanna stood beside them, her cloak streaming with the falling rain. “And for these”—she faced the lines of those they had not revived—”there was no chance. They died as helplessly as if they went into a meeting of swords with their arms bound to their sides! Evil have we wrought here.”

Ashe shook his head. “Evil has been wrought here, Ynlan, but not by your seeking. And those who died here helplessly may be only a small portion of those yet to be sacrificed. Have you forgotten the slaughter at Kyn Add and those other fairings where women and children were also struck down to serve some purpose we do not even yet know?”

“Lady, Great One—” Baleku struggled to sit up and Ross slipped an arm behind him in aid. “She for whom I made a bride-cup was meat for them at Kyn Add, along with many others. If these slayers are not put to the sword’s edge, there will be other fairings so used. And these Shadow ones possess a magic to draw men to them helplessly to be killed. Great One, you have powers; all men know that wind and wave obey your call. Do you now use your magic! It is better to fall with a power we know, than answer such spells as those killers have netted about the men here!”

“This is one weapon which they shall not use again.” Ynvalda rose from a stone block where she had been sitting. “And perhaps in its way it was one of the most dangerous. But in defeating it we have by so much weakened ourselves also. And the strong place of these star men lies not on the coast, but inland. They will be warned by those who fled this place. Wind and wave, yes, those have served our purpose in the past. But now perhaps we have found that which our power will not best! Only—for this”—her gesture was for the ruins of the citadel and the dead—”there shall be a payment exacted—to the height of our desire!”

Whether the Foanna did have any control over the storm winds or not, the present deluge appeared not to accommodate them. The dazed, injured survivors of the courtyard were brought to shelter in some of the underground passages.

There appeared to be no other reminders of the Wrecker force which had earlier besieged the keep than those survivors. But within hours some of those who had served the Foanna for generations returned. And the Foanna themselves opened the sea gates so that the Rover cruisers anchored in the small bay below their ruined walls.

A small force, and one ill-equipped to go up against the Baldies. Some five star men’s bodies had been found in the citadel, but the ship had gone off to warn their base. To Ross’s thinking the advantage still lay with the invaders.

But the Hawaikans refused to accept the idea that the odds were against them. As soon as the storm blew out its force Ongal’s cruiser headed northwest to other clan fairings where the Rovers could claim kinship. And Afrukta sailed on the same errand south. While some of the Wreckers were released to carry the warning to their lords. Just how great a force could be



gathered through such means and how effective it would be, was a question to make the Terrans uneasy.

Karara disappeared with the Foanna into the surviving inner cliff-burrows below the citadel. But Ashe and Ross remained with Torgul and his officers, striving to bring organization out of the chaos about them.

“We must know just where their lair lies,” Torgul stated the obvious. “The mountains you believe, and they can fly in sky ships to and from that point. Well”—he spread out a chart—”here are the mountains on this island, running so. An army marching hither could be sighted from sky ships. Also, there are many mountains. Which is the one or ones we must seek? It may take many tens of days to find that place, while they will always know where we are, watch us from above, prepare for our coming—”

Again Ross mentally paid tribute to the Captain’s quick grasp of essentials.

“You have a solution, Captain?” Ashe asked.

“There is the river—here—” Torgul said reflectively. “Perhaps I think in terms of water because I am a sailor. But here it does run, and for this far along it our cruisers may ascend.” He pointed with his finger tip. “This lies, however, in Glicmas’s land, and he is now the mightiest of the Wrecker lords, his sword always drawn against us. I do not believe that we could talk him into——”

“Glicmas!” Ross interrupted. They both looked at him inquiringly, and he repeated Loketh’s story of the Wrecker lord who had had dealings with a “voice from the mountain” and so gained the wrecking devices to make him the dominant lord of the district.

“So!” Torgul exclaimed. “That is the evil of this Shadow in the mountains! No, under those circumstances I do not think we shall talk Glicmas into furthering any raid against those who have made him great over his fellows. Rather will he turn against us in their cause.”

“And if we do not use the cruisers up the river”—Ashe coned the map—”then perhaps a small party or parties working overland could strike the stream here, nearer to the uplands.”

Torgul frowned at the map. “I do not think so. Even small parties moving in that direction would be sighted by Glicmas’s people. The more so if they headed inland. He will not wish to share his secrets with others.”

“But, say—a party of Foanna.”

The Captain glanced up swiftly to favor Ashe with a keen regard. “Then he would not dare. No, I am sure he would not dare to interfere. Not yet has he risen high enough to turn the hook of his sword against them. But would the Foanna do so?”

“If not the Foanna, then others wearing like robes,” Ashe said slowly.

“Others wearing like robes?” repeated Torgul. Now his frown was heavy. “No man would take on the guise of the Foanna; he would be blasted by their power for so doing. If the Foanna will lead us in their persons, then we shall follow gladly, knowing that their magic will be with us.”

“There is also this,” Ross broke in. “The Baldies have the gill-packs they took from Baleku and Loketh, and they have Loketh. They will want to learn more about us. We hoped that the citadel would provide bait to draw them and it did. That our plan for a trap there was spoiled was ill fortune. But I am sure that if the Baldies believe we are coming to them, they will hold off an all-out attack against our march, hoping to gather us in intact. They’d risk that.”

Ashe nodded. "I agree. We are the unknown they must solve now. And this much I am sure of—the future of this world and her people balances on a very narrow line of choice. It is my hope that such a choice is still to be made."

Torgul smiled thinly. "We live in perilous times when the Shades require our swords to go up against the Shadow!"

## 18. World in Doubt?

The day was dully overcast as all days had been since they had begun this sulk-and-march penetration into the mountain territory. Ross could not accept the idea that the Foanna might actually command wind and wave, storm and sun, as the Hawaikans firmly believed, but the gloomy weather *had* favored them so far. And now they had reached the last breathing point before they took the plunge into the heart of the enemy country. About the way in which they were to make that plunge, Ross had his own plan. One he did not intend to share with either Ashe or Karara. Though he had had to outline it to the one now waiting here with him.

“This is still your mind, younger brother?”

He did not turn his head to look at the cloaked figure. “It is still my mind!” Ross could be firm on that point.

The Terran backed out of the vantage place from which he had been studying the canyonlike valley cupping the Baldy spaceship. Now he got to his feet and faced Ynlan, his own gray cloak billowing out in the wind to reveal the Rover scale armor underneath.

“You can do it for me?” he asked in turn. During the past days the Foanna had admitted that the weird battle within the citadel had weakened and limited their “magic.” Last night they had detected a force barrier ahead and to transport the whole party through that by telaporting was impossible.

“Yes, you alone. Then my wand would be drained for a space. But what can you do within their hold, save be meat for their taking?”

“There can not be too many of them left there. That’s a small ship. They lost five at the citadel, and the Rovers have three prisoners. No sign of the scout ship we know they have—so more of them must be gone in it. I won’t be facing an army. And what they have in the way of weapons may be powered by installations in the ship. A lot of damage done there. Or even if the ship lifted—” He was not sure of what he could do; this was a venture depending largely on improvisation at the last moment.

“You propose to send off the ship?”

“I don’t know whether that is possible. No, perhaps I can only attract their attention, break through the force shield so the rest may attack.”

Ross knew that he must attempt this independent action, that in order to remain the Ross Murdock he had always been, he must be an actor not a spectator.

The Foanna did not argue with him now. “Where—?” Her long sleeve rippled as she gestured to the canyon. Dull as the skies were overhead, there was light here—too much of it for his purpose as the ground about the ship was open. To appear there might be fatal.

Ross was grasped by another and much more promising idea. The Foanna had transported them all to the deck of Torgul’s cruiser after asking him to picture it for her mentally. And to all outward appearances the Baldy ship before them now was twin to the one which had taken him once on a fantastic voyage across a long-vanished stellar empire. Such a ship he knew!

“Can you put me in the ship?”

“If you have a good memory of it, yes. But how know you these ships?”

“I was in one once for many days. If these are alike, then I know it well!”

“And if this is unlike, to try such may mean your death.”

He had to accept her warning. Yet outwardly this ship was a duplicate. And before he had voyaged on the derelict he had also explored a Wrecker freighter on his own world thousands of years before his own race had evolved. There was one portion of both ships which had been identical—save for size—and that part was the best for his purpose.

“Send me—here!”

With closed eyes, Ross produced a mental picture of the control cabin. Those seats which were not really seats but webbing support swinging before banks of buttons and levers; all the other installations he had watched, studied, until they were as known to him as the plate bulkheads of the cabin below in which he had slept. Very vivid, that memory. He felt the touch of the Foanna’s cool fingers on his forehead—then it was gone. He opened his eyes.

No more wind and gloom, he stood directly behind the pilot’s web-sling, facing a vista-plate and rows of controls, just as he had stood so many times in the derelict. He had made it! This was the control cabin of the spacer. And it was alive—the faint thrumming in the air, the play of lights on the boards.

Ross pulled the cowl of his Foanna cloak up over his head. He had had days to accustom himself to the bulk of the robe, but still its swathings were sometimes a hindrance rather than a help. Slowly he turned. There were no Baldies here, but the well door to the lower levels was open, and from it came small sounds echoing up the communication ladder. The ship was occupied.

Not for the first time since he had started on this venture Ross wished for more complete information. Doubtless several of those buttons or levers before him controlled devices which could be the greatest aid to him now. But which and how he did not know. Once in just such a cabin he had meddled and, in activating a long silent installation, had called the attention of the Baldies to their wrecked ship, to the Terrans looting it. Only by the merest chance had the vengeance of the stellar spacemen fallen then on the Russian investigators and not on his own people.

He knew better than to touch anything before the pilot’s station, but the banks of controls to one side were concerned with the inner well-being of the ship—and they tempted him. To go it blind was, however, more of a risk than he dared take. There was one future precaution for him.

From a very familiar case beside the pilot’s seat Ross gathered up a collection of disks, sorted through them hastily for one which bore a certain symbol on its covering. There was only one of those. Slapping the rest back into their container, Ross pressed a button on the control board.

Again his guess paid off! Another disk was exposed as a small panel slid back. Ross clawed that out of the holder, put in its place the one he had found. Now, if his choice had been correct, the crew who took off in this ship, unless they checked their route tape first, would find themselves heading to another primitive planet and not returning to base. Perhaps exhaustion of fuel might ground them past hope of ever regaining their home port again. Next to damaging the ship, which he could not do, this was the best thing to assure that any enemy leaving Hawaika would not speedily return with a second expeditionary force.

Ross dropped the route disk he had taken out into a pocket on his belt, to be destroyed when he had the chance. Now he catfooted across the deck to look into the well and listen.

The walls glowed with a diffused light. From here the Terran could count at least four levels under him, with perhaps another. The bottom two ought to be supplies and general storage. Then the engine room, tech labs above, and next to the control cabin the living quarters.

Through the fabric of the ship, shivering up his body from the soles of his feet, he could feel the vibration of engines at work. One such must control the force field which ringed this canyon, perhaps even powered the weapons the invaders could turn against any assault.

Ross whirled about, his Foanna cloak in a wide swing. There was one control which he knew. Yes, again the board was the same as the one he was familiar with. His hand plunged out and down, raking the lever from one measure point to the very end of the slit in which it moved. Then he planted himself with his back to the wall. Whoever came up the well hunting the cause for the failure would be facing the other way. Ross crouched a little, pushing the cape well back on his shoulders to free his arms. There was a feline suppleness in his stance just as a jungle cat might wait coming of its prey.

What he heard was a shout below, the click of foot-gear on the rungs of the level ladder. Ross's lips drew back in a snarl which was also feline. He thought that would do it! Spacemen were ultra-sensitive to any failure in air flow.

White head, bare of any hair, thin shoulders a little hunched under the blue-green-lavender stuff of the Baldies' uniforms.... Head turning now so that the eyes could see the necessary switch. An exclamation from the alien and—

But the Baldy never had a chance to complete that turn, look behind him. Ross sprang and struck with the side of his hand. The hairless head snapped forward. His hands already hooked in the other's armpits, the Terran heaved the alien up and over onto the deck of the control cabin. It was only when he was about to bind his captive that Ross discovered the Baldy was dead. A blow calculated to stun the alien had been too severe. Breathing a little faster, the Terran rolled the body back and hoisted it into the navigator's swing-seat, fastening it with the take-off belts. One down—how many left?

He had little time to wonder, for before he could reach the well once again there was a call from below—sharp and demanding. The Terran searched his victim, but the Baldy was unarmed.

Again a shout. Then silence—too complete a silence. How could they have guessed trouble so quickly. Unless, unless the Baldies' mental communication had been at work ... they might even now know their fellow was dead.

But not how he died. Ross was prepared to grant the Baldies super-Terran abilities, but he did not see how they could know what had happened here. They could only suspect danger, not know the form it had taken. And sooner or later one of them must come to adjust the switch. This could be a duel of patience.

Ross squatted at the edge of the well, trying to make his ears supply him with hints of what might be happening below. Had there been an alteration in the volume of vibration? He set his palm flat to the deck, tried to deduce the truth. But he could not be sure. That there had been some slight change he was certain.

They could not wait much longer without making an attempt to reopen the air-supply regulator, or could they? Again Ross was hampered by lack of information. Perhaps the Baldies did not need the same amount of oxygen his own kind depended upon. And if that were true, Ross could be the first to suffer in playing a waiting game. Well, air was not the only thing he could cut off from here, though it had been the first and most important to his mind. Ross hesitated. Two-edged weapons cut in both directions. But he had to force a

countermove from them. He pulled another switch. The control cabin, the whole of the ship, was plunged into darkness.

No sound from below this time. Ross pictured the interior layout of the ships he had known. Two levels down to reach the engine room. Could he descend undetected? There was only one way to test that—try it.

He pulled the Foanna cloak about him, was several rungs down on the ladder when the glow in the walls came on. An emergency switch? With a forward scramble, Ross swung into one of the radiating side corridors. The sliding-door panels along it were all closed; he could detect no sounds behind them. But the vibration in the ship's walls had returned to its steady beat.

Now the Terran realized the folly of his move. He was more securely trapped here than he had been in the control cabin. There was only one way out, up or down the ladder, and the enemy could have that under observation from below. All they would need to do was to use a flamer or a paralyzing ray such as the one he had turned over to Ashe several days ago.

Ross inched along to the stairwell. A faint pad of movement, a shadow of sound from the ladder. Someone on the way up. Could they mentally detect him, know him for an alien intruder by the broadcast of his thoughts? The Baldies had a certain respect for the Foanna and might desire to take one alive. He drew the robe about him, used it to muffle his figure completely as the true wearers did.

But the figure pulling painfully up from rung to rung was no Baldy. The lean Hawaikan arms, the thin Hawaikan face, drawn of feature, painfully blank of expression—Loketh—under the same dread spell as had held the warriors in the citadel courtyard. Could the aliens be using this Hawaikan captive as a defense shield, moving up behind him?

Loketh's head turned, those blank eyes regarded Ross. And their depths were troubled, recognition of a sort returning. The Hawaikan threw up one hand in a beseeching gesture and then went to his knees in the corridor.

"Great One! Great One!" The words came from his lips in a breathy hiss as he groveled. Then his body went flaccid, and he sprawled face down, his twisted leg drawn up as if he would run but could not.

"Foanna!" The one word came out of the walls themselves, or so it seemed.

"Foanna—the wise learn what lies before them when they walk alone in the dark." The Hawaikan speech was stilted, accented, but understandable.

Ross stood motionless. Had they somehow seen him through Loketh's eyes? Or had they been alerted merely by the Hawaikan's call? They believed he was one of the Foanna. Well, he would play that role.

"Foanna!" Sharper this time, demanding. "You lie in our hand. Let us clasp the fingers tightly and you shall be naught."

Out of somewhere the words Karara had chanted in the Foanna temple came to Ross—not in her Polynesian tongue but in the English she had repeated. And softening his voice to his best approximation of the Foanna singsong Ross sang:

"Ye forty thousand gods,

Ye gods of sea, of sky—of stars," he improvised.

"Ye elders of the gods that are,

Ye gods that once were,  
 Ye that whisper, yet that watch by night,  
 Ye that show your gleaming eyes.”

“Foanna!” The summons was on the ragged edge of patience. “Your tricks will not move our mountains!”

“Ye gods of mountains,” Ross returned, “of valleys, of Shades and not the Shadow,” he wove in the beliefs of this world, too. “Walk now this world, between the stars!” His confidence was growing. And there was no use in remaining pent in this corridor. He would have to chance that they were not prepared to kill summarily one of the Foanna.

Ross went to the well, went down the ladder slowly, keeping his robe about him. Here at the next level there was a wider space about the opening, and three door panels. Behind one must be those he sought. He was buoyed up by a curious belief in himself, almost as if wearing this robe did give him in part the power attributed to the Foanna.

He laid his hand on the door to his right and sent it snapping back into its frame, stepped inside as if he entered here by right.

There were three Baldies. To his Terran eyes they were all superficially alike, but the one seated on a control stool had a cold arrogance in his expression, a pitiless half smile which made Ross face him squarely. The Terran longed for one of the Foanna staffs and the ability to use it. To spray that energy about this cabin might reduce the Baldy defenses to nothing. But now two of the paralyzing tubes were trained on him.

“You have come to us, Foanna, what have you to offer?” demanded the commander, if that was his rank.

“Offer?” For the first time Ross spoke. “There is no reason for the Foanna to make any offer, slayer of women and children. You have come from the stars to take, but that does not mean we choose to give.”

He felt it now, that inner pulling, twisting in his mind, the willing which was their more subtle weapon. Once they had almost bent him with that willing because then he had worn their livery, a spacesuit taken from the wrecked freighter. Now he did not have that chink in his defense. And all that stubborn independence and determination to be himself alone resisted the influence with a fierce inner fire.

“We offer life to you, Foanna, freedom of the stars. These other dirt creepers are nothing to you, why take you weapons in their cause? You are not of the same race.”

“Nor are you!” Ross’s hands moved under the envelope of the robe, unloosing the two hidden clasps which held it. That bank of controls before which the commander sat—to silence that would cause trouble. And he depended upon Ynlan. The Rovers should now be massed at either end of the canyon waiting for the force field to fail and let them in.

Ross steadied himself, poised for action. “We have something for you, star men—” he tried to hold their attention with words, “have you not heard of the power of the Foanna—that they can command wind and wave? That they can be where they were not in a single movement of the eyelid? And this is so—behold!”

It was the oldest trick in the world, perhaps on any planet. But because it was so old maybe it had been forgotten by the aliens. For, as Ross pointed, those heads did turn for an instant.

He was in the air, the robe gathered in his arms wide spread as bat wings. And then they crashed in a tangle which bore them all back against the controls. Ross strove to enmesh them

in the robe, using the pressure of his body to slam them all on the buttons and levers of the board. Whether that battering would accomplish his purpose, he could not tell. But that he had only these few seconds torn out of time to try, he knew, and determined to use them as best he could.

One of the Baldies had slithered down to the floor and another was aiming strangely ineffectual blows at him. But the third had wriggled free to bring up a paralyzer. Ross slewed around, dragging the alien he held across his body just as the other fired. But though the fighter went limp and heavy in Ross's hold, the Terran's own right arm fell to his side, his upper chest was numb, and his head felt as if one of the Rover's boarding axes had clipped it. Ross reeled back and fell, his left hand raking down the controls as he went. Then he lay on the cabin floor and saw the convulsed face of the commander above him, a paralyzer aiming at his middle.

To breathe was an effort Ross found torture to endure. The red haze in his head filled all the world. Pain—he strove to flee the pain but was held captive in it. And always the pressure on him kept that agony steady.

“Let ... be....” He wanted to scream that. Perhaps he had, but the pressure continued. Then he forced his eyes open. Ashe—Ashe and one of the Foanna bending over him, Ashe's hands on his chest, pressing, relaxing, pressing again.

“It is good—” He knew Ynvalda's voice. Her hand rested lightly on his forehead and from that touch Ross drew again the quickening of body and spirit he had felt on the dancing floor.

“How—?” He began and then changed to—“Where—?” For this was not the engine room of the spacer. He lay in the open, with sweet, rain-wet wind filling his starved lungs now without Ashe's force aid.

“It is over,” Ashe told him, “all over—for now.”

But not until the sun reached the canyon hours later and they sat in council, did Ross learn all the tale. Just as he had made his own plan for reaching the spacer, so had Ashe, Karara, and the dolphins worked on a similar attempt. The river running deep in those mountain gorges had provided a road for the dolphins and they found beneath its surface an entrance past the force barrier.

“The Baldies were so sure of their superiority on this primitive world they set no guards save that field,” Ashe explained. “We slipped through five swimmers to reach the ship. And then the field went down, thanks to you.”

“So I did help—that much.” Ross grinned wryly. What had he proven by his sortie? Nothing much. But he was not sorry he had made it. For the very fact he had done it on his own had eased in part that small ache which was in him now when he looked at Ashe and remembered how it had once been. Ashe might be—always would be—his friend, but the old tight-locking comradeship of the Project was behind them, vanished like the time gate.

“And what will you do with them?” Ross nodded toward the captives, the three from the ship, two more taken from the small scouting globe which had homed to find their enemies ready for them.

“We wait,” Ynvalda said, “for those on the Rover ship to be brought hither. By our laws they deserve death.”

The Rovers at that council nodded vigorously, all save Torgul and Jazia. The Rover woman spoke first.



“They bear the Curse of Phutka heavy on them. To live under such a curse is worse than a clean, quick dying. Listen, it has come upon me that better this curse not only eat them up but be carried by them to rot those who sent them—”

Together the Foanna nodded. “There has been enough of killing,” said Ynlan. “No, warriors, we do not say this because we shrink from rightful deaths. But Jazia speaks the truth in this matter. Let these depart. Perhaps they will bear that with them which will convince their leaders that this is not a world they may squeeze in their hands as one crushes a ripe quaya to eat its seeds. You believe in your cursing, Rovers, then let the fruit of it be made plain beyond the stars!”

Was this the time to speak of the switched tapes, Ross wondered. No, he did not really believe that the Rover curse or their treatment of the captives would, either one, influence the star leaders. But, if the invaders did not return to their base, their vanishing might also work to keep another expedition from invading Hawaikan skies. Leave it to chance, a curse, and time....

So it was decided.

“Have we won?” Ross asked Ashe later.

“Do you mean, have we changed the future? Who can answer that? They may return in force, this may have been a step which was taken before. Those pylons may still stand in the future above a deserted sea and island. We shall probably never know.”

That was also their own truth. For them also there had been a substitution of journey tapes by Fate, and this was now their Hawaika. Ross Murdock, Gordon Ashe, Karara Trehern, Tino-  
rau, Taua—five Terrans forever lost in time—in the past with a dubious future. Would this be the barren, lotus world, or another now? Yes, no—either. They had found their key to the mystery out of time, but they could not turn it, and there was no key to the gate which had ceased to exist. Grasp tight the present. Ross looked about him. Yes, the present, which might be very satisfying after all....

## **The Defiant Agents**

## 1

No windows broke any of the four plain walls of the office; there was no focus of outer-world sunlight on the desk there. Yet the five disks set out on its surface appeared to glow—perhaps the heat of the mischief they could cause ... had caused ... blazed in them.

But fanciful imaginings did not cushion or veil cold, hard fact. Dr. Gordon Ashe, one of the four men peering unhappily at the display, shook his head slightly as if to free his mind of such cobwebs.

His neighbor to the right, Colonel Kelgarries, leaned forward to ask harshly: “No chance of a mistake?”

“You saw the detector.” The thin gray string of a man behind the desk answered with chill precision. “No, no possible mistake. These five have definitely been snooped.”

“And two choices among them,” Ashe murmured. That was the important point now.

“I thought these were under maximum security,” Kelgarries challenged the gray man.

Florian Waldour’s remote expression did not change. “Every possible precaution was in force. There was a sleeper—a hidden agent—planted——”

“Who?” Kelgarries demanded.

Ashe glanced around at his three companions—Kelgarries, colonel in command of one sector of Project Star, Florian Waldour, the security head on the station, Dr. James Ruthven...

“Camdon!” he said, hardly able to believe this answer to which logic had led him.

Waldour nodded.

For the first time since he had known and worked with Kelgarries Ashe saw him display open astonishment.

“Camdon? But he was sent us by—” The colonel’s eyes narrowed. “He must have been sent.... There were too many cross checks to fake that!”

“Oh, he was sent, all right.” For the first time there was a note of emotion in Waldour’s voice. “He was a sleeper, a very deep sleeper. They must have planted him a full twenty-five or thirty years ago. He’s been just what he claimed to be as long as that.”

“Well, he certainly was worth their time and trouble, wasn’t he?” James Ruthven’s voice was a growling rumble. He sucked in thick lips, continuing to stare at the disks. “How long ago were these snooped?”

Ashe’s thoughts turned swiftly from the enormity of the betrayal to that important point. The time element—that was the primary concern now that the damage was done, and they knew it.

“That’s one thing we don’t know.” Waldour’s reply came slowly as if he hated the admission.

“We’ll be safer, then, if we presume the very earliest period.” Ruthven’s statement was as ruthless in its implications as the shock they had had when Waldour announced the disaster.

“Eighteen months ago?” Ashe protested.

But Ruthven was nodding. “Camdon was in on this from the very first. We’ve had the tapes in and out for study all that time, and the new detector against snooping was not put in

service until two weeks ago. This case came up on the first checking round, didn't it?" he asked Waldour.

"First check," the security man agreed. "Camdon left the base six days ago. But he has been in and out on his liaison duties from the first."

"He had to go through those search points every time," Kelgarries protested. "Thought nothing could get through those." The colonel brightened. "Maybe he got his snooper films and then couldn't take them off base. Have his quarters been turned out?"

Waldour's lips lifted in a grimace of exasperation. "Please, Colonel," he said wearily, "this is not a kindergarten exercise. In confirmation of his success, listen...." He touched a button on his desk and out of the air came the emotionless chant of a newscaster.

"Fears for the safety of Lassiter Camdon, space expediter for the Western Conference Space Council, have been confirmed by the discovery of burned wreckage in the mountains. Mr. Camdon was returning from a mission to the Star Laboratory when his plane lost contact with Ragnor Field. Reports of a storm in that vicinity immediately raised concern—" Waldour snapped off the voice.

"True—or a cover for his escape?" Kelgarries wondered aloud.

"Could be either. They may have deliberately written him off when they had all they wanted," Waldour acknowledged. "But to get back to our troubles—Dr. Ruthven is right to assume the worst. I believe we can only insure the recovery of our project by thinking that these tapes were snooped anywhere from eighteen months ago to last week. And we must work accordingly!"

There was silence in the room as they all considered that. Ashe slipped down in his chair, his thoughts enmeshed in memories. First there had been Operation Retrograde, when specially trained "time agents" had shuttled back and forth in history, striving to locate and track down the mysterious source of alien knowledge which the eastern Communistic nations had suddenly begun to use.

Ashe himself and a younger partner, Ross Murdock, had been part of the final action which had solved the mystery, having traced that source of knowledge not to an earlier and forgotten Terran civilization but to wrecked spaceships from an eon-old galactic empire—an empire which had flourished when glacial ice covered most of Europe and northern America and Terrans were cave-dwelling primitives. Murdock, trapped by the Reds in one of those wrecked ships, had inadvertently summoned its original owners, who had descended to trace—through the Russian time stations—the looters of their wrecks, destroying the whole Red time-travel system.

But the aliens had not chanced on the parallel western system. And a year later that had been put into Project Folsom One. Again Ashe, Murdock, and a newcomer, the Apache Travis Fox, had gone back into time to the Arizona of the Folsom hunters, discovering what they wanted—two ships, one wrecked, the other intact. And when the full efforts of the project had been centered on bringing the intact ship back into the present, chance had triggered controls set by the dead alien commander. A party of four, Ashe, Murdock, Fox, and a technician, had then made an involuntary voyage into space, touching three worlds on which the galactic civilization of the far past was now marked only by ruins.

Voyage tape fed into the controls of the ship had taken the men, and, when rewound, had—by a miracle—returned them to Terra with a cargo of similar tapes found in a building on a world which might have been the central capital for a government comprised not of countries or of worlds but of solar systems. Tapes—each one the key to another planet.

And that ancient galactic knowledge was treasure such as the Terrans had never dreamed of possessing, though there were the attendant fears that such discoveries could be weapons in enemy hands. There had been an enforced sharing with other nations of tapes chosen at random at a great drawing. And each nation secretly remained convinced that, in spite of the untold riches it might hold as a result of chance, its rivals had done better. Right at this moment, Ashe did not in the least doubt, there were agents of his own party intent on accomplishing at the Red project just what Camdon had done there. However, that did not help in solving their present dilemma concerning Operation Cochise, one part of their project, but perhaps the most important now.

Some of the tapes were duds, either too damaged to be useful, or set for worlds hostile to Terrans lacking the equipment the earlier star-traveling race had had at its command. Of the five tapes they now knew had been snooped, three would be useless to the enemy.

But one of the remaining two.... Ashe frowned. One was the goal toward which they had been working feverishly for a full twelve months. To plant a colony across the gulf of space—a successful colony—later to be used as a steppingstone to other worlds....

“So we have to move faster.” Ruthven’s comment reached Ashe through his stream of memories.

“I thought you required at least three more months to conclude personnel training,” Waldour observed.

Ruthven lifted a fat hand, running the nail of a broad thumb back and forth across his lower lip in a habitual gesture Ashe had learned to mistrust. As the latter stiffened, bracing for a battle of wills, he saw Kelgarries come alert too. At least the colonel more often than not was ready to counter Ruthven’s demands.

“We test and we test,” said the fat man. “Always we test. We move like turtles when it would be better to race like greyhounds. There is such a thing as overcaution, as I have said from the first. One would think”—his accusing glance included Ashe and Kelgarries—“that there had never been any improvising in this project, that all had always been done by the book. I say that this is the time we must take the big gamble, or else we may find we have been outbid for space entirely. Let those others discover even one alien installation they can master and—” his thumb shifted from his lip, grinding down on the desk top as if it were crushing some venturesome but entirely unimportant insect—“and we are finished before we really begin.”

There were a number of men in the project who would agree with that, Ashe knew. And a greater number in the country and conference at large. The public was used to reckless gambles which paid off, and there had been enough of those in the past to give an impressive argument for that point of view. But Ashe, himself, could not agree to a speed-up. He had been out among the stars, shaved disaster too closely because the proper training had not been given.

“I shall report that I advise a take-off within a week,” Ruthven was continuing. “To the council I shall say that—”

“And I do not agree!” Ashe cut in. He glanced at Kelgarries for the quick backing he expected, but instead there was a lengthening moment of silence. Then the colonel spread out his hands and said sullenly:

“I don’t agree either, but I don’t have the final say-so. Ashe, what would be needed to speed up any take-off?”

It was Ruthven who replied. “We can use the Redax, as I have said from the start.”

Ashe straightened, his mouth tight, his eyes hard and angry.

“And I’ll protest that ... to the council! Man, we’re dealing with human beings—selected volunteers, men who trust us—not with laboratory animals!”

Ruthven’s thick lips pouted into what was close to a smile of derision. “Always the sentimentalists, you experts in the past! Tell me, Dr. Ashe, were you always so thoughtful of your men when you sent agents back into time? And certainly a voyage into space is less a risk than time travel. These volunteers know what they have signed for. They will be ready—”

“Then you propose telling them about the use of Redax—what it does to a man’s mind?” countered Ashe.

“Certainly. They will receive all necessary instructions.”

Ashe was not satisfied and he would have spoken again, but Kelgarries interrupted:

“If it comes to that, none of us here has any right to make final decisions. Waldour has already sent in his report about the snoop. We’ll have to await orders from the council.”

Ruthven levered himself out of his chair, his solid bulk stretching his uniform coveralls. “That is correct, Colonel. In the meantime I would suggest we all check to see what can be done to speed up each one’s portion of labor.” Without another word, he tramped to the door.

Waldour eyed the other two with mounting impatience. It was plain he had work to do and wanted them to leave. But Ashe was reluctant. He had a feeling that matters were slipping out of his control, that he was about to face a crisis which was somehow worse than just a major security leak. Was the enemy always on the other side of the world? Or could he wear the same uniform, even share the same goals?

In the outer corridor he still hesitated, and Kelgarries, a step or so in advance, looked back over his shoulder impatiently.

“There’s no use fighting—our hands are tied.” His words were slurred, almost as if he wanted to disown them.

“Then you’ll agree to use the Redax?” For the second time within the hour Ashe felt as if he had taken a step only to have firm earth turn into slippery, shifting sand underfoot.

“It isn’t a matter of my agreeing. It may be a matter of getting through or not getting through—now. If they’ve had eighteen months, or even twelve...!” The colonel’s fingers balled into a fist. “And *they* won’t be delayed by any humanitarian reasoning——”

“Then you believe Ruthven will win the council’s approval?”

“When you are dealing with frightened men, you’re talking to ears closed to anything but what they want to hear. After all, we can’t prove that the Redax will be harmful.”

“But we’ve only used it under rigidly controlled conditions. To speed up the process would mean a total disregard of those controls. Snapping a party of men and women back into their racial past and holding them there for too long a period...” Ashe shook his head.

“You have been in Operation Retrograde from the start, and we’ve been remarkably successful——”

“Operating in a different way, educating picked men to return to certain points in history where their particular temperaments and characteristics fitted the roles they were selected to play, yes. And even then we had our percentage of failures. But to try this—returning people not physically into time, but *mentally and emotionally* into prototypes of their ancestors—

that's something else again. The Apaches have volunteered, and they've been passed by the psychologists and the testers. But they're Americans of today, not tribal nomads of two or three hundred years ago. If you break down some barriers, you might just end up breaking them all."

Kelgarries was scowling. "You mean—they might revert utterly, have no contact with the present at all?"

"That's just what I do mean. Education and training, yes, but full awakening of racial memories, no. The two branches of conditioning should go slowly and hand in hand, otherwise—real trouble!"

"Only we no longer have the time to go slow. I'm certain Ruthven will be able to push this through—with Waldour's report to back him."

"Then we'll have to warn Fox and the rest. They must be given a choice in the matter."

"Ruthven said that would be done." The colonel did not sound convinced of that.

Ashe snorted. "If I hear him telling them, I'll believe it!"

"I wonder whether we can...."

Ashe half turned and frowned at the colonel. "What do you mean?"

"You said yourself that we had our failures in time travel. We expected those, accepted them, even when they hurt. When we asked for volunteers for this project we had to make them understand that there was a heavy element of risk involved. Three teams of recruits—the Eskimos from Point Barren, the Apaches, and the Islanders—all picked because their people had a high survival rating in the past, to be colonists on widely different types of planets. Well, the Eskimos and the Islanders aren't matched to any of the worlds on those snooped tapes, but Topaz is waiting for the Apaches. And we may have to move them in there in a hurry. It's a rotten gamble any way you see it!"

"I'll appeal directly to the council."

Kelgarries shrugged. "All right. You have my backing."

"But you believe such an effort hopeless?"

"You know the red-tape merchants. You'll have to move fast if you want to beat Ruthven. He's probably on a straight line now to Stanton, Reese, and Margate. This is what he has been waiting for!"

"There are the news syndicates; public opinion would back us——"

"You don't mean that, of course." Kelgarries was suddenly coldly remote.

Ashe flushed under the heavy brown which overlay his regular features. To threaten a silence break was near blasphemy here. He ran both hands down the fabric covering his thighs as if to rub away some soil on his palms.

"No," he replied heavily, his voice dull. "I guess I don't. I'll contact Hough and hope for the best."

"Meanwhile," Kelgarries spoke briskly, "we'll do what we can to speed up the program as it now stands. I suggest you take off for New York within the hour——"

"Me? Why?" Ashe asked with a trace of suspicion.

“Because I can’t leave without acting directly against orders, and that would put us wrong immediately. You see Hough and talk to him personally—put it to him straight. He’ll have to have all the facts if he’s going to counter any move from Stanton before the council. You know every argument we can use and all the proof on our side, and you’re authority enough to make it count.”

“If I can do all that, I will.” Ashe was alert and eager. The colonel, seeing his change of expression, felt easier.

But Kelgarries stood a moment watching Ashe as he hurried down a side corridor, before he moved on slowly to his own box of office. Once inside he sat for a long unhappy time staring at the wall and seeing nothing but the pictures produced by his thoughts. Then he pressed a button and read off the symbols which flashed on a small visa-screen set in his desk. Another button pushed, and he picked up a hand mike to relay an order which might postpone trouble for a while. Ashe was far too valuable a man to lose, and his emotions could boil him straight into disaster over this.

“Bidwell—reschedule Team A. They are to go to the Hypno-Lab instead of the reserve in ten minutes.”

Releasing the mike, he again stared at the wall. No one dared interrupt a hypno-training period, and this one would last three hours. Ashe could not possibly see the trainees before he left for New York. And that would remove one temptation from his path—he would not talk at the wrong time.

Kelgarries’ mouth twisted sourly. He had no pride in what he was doing. And he was perfectly certain that Ruthven would win and that Ashe’s fears of Redax were well founded. It all came back to the old basic tenet of the service: the end justified the means. They must use every method and man under their control to make sure that Topaz would remain a western possession, even though that strange planet now swung far beyond the sky which covered both the western and eastern alliances on Terra. Time had run out too fast; they were being forced to play what cards they held, even though those might be very low ones. Ashe would be back, but not, Kelgarries hoped, until this had been decided one way or another. Not until this was finished.

Finished! Kelgarries blinked at the wall. Perhaps *they* were finished, too. No one would know until the transport ship landed on that other world which appeared on the direction tape symbolized by a jewellike disk of gold-brown which had given it the code name of Topaz.



## 2

There were an even dozen of the air-borne guardians, each following the swing of its own orbital path just within the atmospheric envelope of the planet which glowed as a great bronze-golden gem in the four-world system of a yellow star. The globes had been launched to form a web of protection around Topaz six months earlier, and the highest skill had gone into their production. Just as contact mines sown in a harbor could close that landfall to ships not knowing the secret channel, so was this world supposedly closed to any spaceship not equipped with the signal to ward off the sphere missiles.

That was the theory of the new off-world settlers whose protection they were to be, already tested as well as possible, but as yet not put to the ultimate proof. The small bright globes spun undisturbed across a two-mooned sky at night and made reassuring blips on an installation screen by day.

Then a thirteenth object winked into being, began the encircling, closing spiral of descent. A sphere resembling the warden-globes, it was a hundred times their size, and its orbit was purposefully controlled by instruments under the eye and hand of a human pilot.

Four men were strapped down on cushioned sling-seats in the control cabin of the Western Alliance ship, two hanging where their fingers might reach buttons and levers, the others merely passengers, their own labor waiting for the time when they would set down on the alien soil of Topaz. The planet hung there in their visa-screen, richly beautiful in its amber gold, growing larger, nearer, so that they could pick out features of seas, continents, mountain ranges, which had been studied on tape until they were familiar, yet now were strangely unfamiliar too.

One of the warden-globes alerted, oscillated in its set path, whirled faster as its delicate interior mechanisms responded to the awakening spark which would send it on its mission of destruction. A relay clicked, but for the smallest fraction of a millimeter failed to set the proper course. On the instrument, far below, which checked the globe's new course the mistake was not noted.

The screen of the ship spiraling toward Topaz registered a path which would bring it into violent contact with the globe. They were still some hundreds of miles apart when the alarm rang. The pilot's hand clawed out at the bank of controls; under the almost intolerable pressure of their descent, there was so little he could do. His crooked fingers fell back powerlessly from the buttons and levers; his mouth was a twisted grimace of bleak acceptance as the beat of the signal increased.

One of the passengers forced his head around on the padded rest, fought to form words, to speak to his companion. The other was staring ahead at the screen, his thick lips wide and flat against his teeth in a snarl of rage.

"They ... are ... here...."

Ruthven paid no attention to the obvious as stated by his fellow scientist. His fury was a red, pulsing thing inside him, fed by his own helplessness. To be pinned here so near his goal, fastened up as a target for an inanimate but cunningly fashioned weapon, ate into him like a stream of deadly acid. His big gamble would puff out in a blast of fire to light up Topaz's sky, with nothing left—nothing. On the armrest of his sling-seat his nails scratched deep.

The four men in the control cabin could only sit and watch, waiting for the rendezvous which would blot them out. Ruthven's flaming anger was a futile blaze. His companion in the passenger seat had closed his eyes, his lips moving soundlessly in an expression of his own scattered thoughts. The pilot and his assistant divided their attention between the screen, with its appalling message, and the controls they could not effectively use, feverishly seeking a way out in these last moments.

Below them in the bowl of the ship were those who would not know the end consciously—save in one compartment. In a padded cage a prick-eared head stirred where it rested on forepaws, slitted eyes blinked, aware not only of familiar surroundings, but also of the tension and fear generated by human minds and emotions levels above. A pointed nose raised, and there was a growling deep in a throat covered with thick buff-gray hair.

The growl aroused another similar captive. Knowing yellow eyes met yellow eyes. An intelligence, which was certainly not that of the animal body which contained it, fought down instinct raging to send both those bodies hurtling at the fastenings of the twin cages. Curiosity and the ability to adapt had been bred into both from time immemorial. Then something else had been added to sly and cunning brains. A step up had been taken—to weld intelligence to cunning, connect thought to instinct.

More than a generation earlier mankind had chosen barren desert—the “white sands” of New Mexico—as a testing ground for atomic experiments. Humankind could be barred, warded out of the radiation limits; the natural desert dwellers, four-footed and winged, could not be so controlled.

For thousands of years, since the first southward roving Amerindian tribes had met with their kind, there had been a hunter of the open country, a smaller cousin of the wolf, whose natural abilities had made an undeniable impression on the human mind. He was in countless Indian legends as the Shaper or the Trickster, sometimes friend, sometimes enemy. Godling for some tribes, father of all evil for others. In the wealth of tales the coyote, above all other animals, had a firm place.

Driven by the press of civilization into the badlands and deserts, fought with poison, gun, and trap, the coyote had survived, adapting to new ways with all his legendary cunning. Those who had reviled him as vermin had unwillingly added to the folklore which surrounded him, telling their own tales of robbed traps, skillful escapes. He continued to be a trickster, laughing on moonlit nights from the tops of ridges at those who would hunt him down.

Then, close to the end of the twentieth century, when myths were scoffed at, the stories of the coyote's slyness began once more on a fantastic scale. And finally scientists were sufficiently intrigued to seek out this creature that seemed to display in truth all the abilities credited to his immortal namesake by pre-Columbian tribes.

What they discovered was indeed shattering to certain closed minds. For the coyote had not only adapted to the country of the white sands; he had evolved into something which could not be dismissed as an animal, clever and cunning, but limited to beast range. Six cubs had been brought back on the first expedition, coyote in body, their developing minds different. The grandchildren of those cubs were now in the ship's cages, their mutated senses alert, ready for the slightest chance of escape. Sent to Topaz as eyes and ears for less keenly endowed humans, they were not completely under the domination of man. The range of their mental powers was still uncomprehended by those who had bred, trained, and worked with them from the days their eyes had opened and they had taken their first wobbly steps away from their dams.

The male growled again, his lips wrinkling back in a snarl as the emanations of fear from the men he could not see reached panic peak. He still crouched, belly flat, on the protecting pads of his cage; but he strove now to wriggle closer to the door, just as his mate made the same effort.

Between the animals and those in the control cabin lay the others—forty of them. Their bodies were cushioned and protected with every ingenious device known to those who had placed them there so many weeks earlier. Their minds were free of the ship, roving into places where men had not trod before, a territory potentially more dangerous than any solid earth could ever be.

Operation Retrograde had returned men bodily into the past, sending agents to hunt mammoths, follow the roads of the Bronze Age traders, ride with Attila and Genghis Khan, pull bows among the archers of ancient Egypt. But Redax returned men in mind to the paths of their ancestors, or this was the theory. And those who slept here and now in their narrow boxes, lay under its government, while the men who had arbitrarily set them so could only assume they were actually reliving the lives of Apache nomads in the wide southwestern wastes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Above, the pilot's hand pushed out again, fighting the pressure to reach one particular button. That, too, had been a last-minute addition, an experiment which had only had partial testing. To use it was the final move he could make, and he was already half convinced of its uselessness.

With no faith and only a very wan hope, he sent that round of metal flush with the board. What followed no one ever lived to explain.

On the planet the installation which tracked the missiles flashed on a screen bright enough to blind momentarily the duty man on watch, and its tracker was shaken off course. When it jiggled back into line it was no longer the efficient eye-in-the-sky it had been, though its tenders were not to realize that for an important minute or two.

While the ship, now out of control, sped in dizzy whirls toward Topaz, engines fought blindly to stabilize, to re-establish their functions. Some succeeded, some wobbled in and out of the danger zone, two failed. And in the control cabin three dead men spun in prisoning seats.

Dr. James Ruthven, blood bubbling from his lips with every shallow breath he could draw, fought the stealthy tide of blackness which crept up his brain, his stubborn will holding to rags of consciousness, refusing to acknowledge the pain of his fatally injured body.

The orbiting ship was on an erratic path. Slowly the machines were correcting, relays clicking, striving to bring it to a landing under auto-pilot. All the ingenuity built into a mechanical brain was now centered in landing the globe.

It was not a good landing, in fact a very bad one, for the sphere touched a mountain side, scraped down rocks, shearing away a portion of its outer bulk. But the mountain barrier was now between it and the base from which the missiles had been launched, and the crash had not been recorded on that tracking instrument. So far as the watchers several hundred miles away knew, the warden in the sky had performed as promised. Their first line of defense had proven satisfactory, and there had been no unauthorized landing on Topaz.

In the wreckage of the control cabin Ruthven pawed at the fastenings of his sling-chair. He no longer tried to suppress the moans every effort tore out of him. Time held the whip, drove him. He rolled from his seat to the floor, lay there gasping, as again he fought doggedly to remain above the waves—those frightening, fast-coming waves of dark faintness.

Somehow he was crawling, crawling along a tilted surface until he gained the well where the ladder to the lower section hung, now at an acute angle. It was that angle which helped him to the next level.

He was too dazed to realize the meaning of the crumpled bulkheads. There was a spur of bare rock under his hands as he edged over and around twisted metal. The moans were now a gobbling, burbling, almost continuous cry as he reached his goal—a small cabin still intact.

For long moments of anguish he paused by the chair there, afraid that he could not make the last effort, raise his almost inert bulk up to the point where he could reach the Redax release. For a second of unusual clarity he wondered if there was any reason for this supreme ordeal, whether any of the sleepers could be aroused. This might now be a ship of the dead.

His right hand, his arm, and finally his bulk over the seat, he braced himself and brought his left hand up. He could not use any of the fingers; it was like lifting numb, heavy weights. But he lurched forward, swept the unfeeling lump of cold flesh down against the release in a gesture which he knew must be his final move. And, as he fell back to the floor, Dr. Ruthven could not be certain whether he had succeeded or failed. He tried to screw his head around, to focus his eyes upward at that switch. Was it down or still stubbornly up, locking the sleepers into confinement? But there was a fog between; he could not see it—or anything.

The light in the cabin flickered, was gone as another circuit in the broken ship failed. It was dark, too, in the small cubby below which housed the two cages. Chance, which had snuffed out nineteen lives in the space globe, had missed ripping open that cabin on the mountain side. Five yards down the corridor the outside fabric of the ship was split wide open, the crisp air native to Topaz entering, sending a message to two keen noses through the combination of odors now pervading the wreckage.

And the male coyote went into action. Days ago he had managed to work loose the lower end of the mesh which fronted his cage, but his mind had told him that a sortie inside the ship was valueless. The odd rapport he'd had with the human brains, unknown to them, had operated to keep him to the old role of cunning deception, which in the past had saved countless of his species from sudden and violent death. Now with teeth and paws he went diligently to work, urged on by the whines of his mate, that tantalizing smell of an outside world tickling their nostrils—a wild world, lacking the taint of man-places.

He slipped under the loosened mesh and stood up to paw at the front of the female's cage. One forepaw caught in the latch and pressed it down, and the weight of the door swung against him. Together they were free now to reach the corridor and see ahead the subdued light of a strange moon beckoning them on into the open.

The female, always more cautious than her mate, lingered behind as he trotted forward, his ears a-prick with curiosity. Their training had been the same since cubhood—to range and explore, but always in the company and at the order of man. This was not according to the pattern she knew, and she was suspicious. But to her sensitive nose the smell of the ship was an offense, and the puffs of breeze from without enticing. Her mate had already slipped through the break; now he barked with excitement and wonder, and she trotted on to join him.

Above, the Redax, which had never been intended to stand rough usage, proved to be a better survivor of the crash than most of the other installations. Power purred along a network of lines, activated beams, turned off and on a series of fixtures in those coffin-beds. For five of the sleepers—nothing. The cabin which had held them was a flattened smear against the mountain side. Three more half aroused, choked, fought for life and breath in a darkness which was a mercifully short nightmare, and succumbed.

But in the cabin nearest the rent through which the coyotes had escaped, a young man sat up abruptly, looking into the dark with wide-open, terror-haunted eyes. He clawed for purchase against the smooth edge of the box in which he had lain, somehow got to his knees, weaving weakly back and forth, and half fell, half pushed to the floor where he could stand only by keeping his hold on the box.

Dazed, sick, weak, he swayed there, aware only of himself and his own sensations. There were small sounds in the dark, a stilled moan, a gasping sigh. But that meant nothing. Within him grew a compulsion to be out of this place, his terror making him lurch forward.

His flailing hand rapped painfully against an upright surface which his questing fingers identified hazily as an exit. Unconsciously he fumbled along the surface of the door until it gave under that weak pressure. Then he was out, his head swimming, drawn by the light behind the wall rent.

He progressed toward that in a scrambling crawl, making his way over the splintered skin of the globe. Then he dropped with a jarring thud onto the mound of earth the ship had pushed before it during its downward slide. Limply he tumbled on in a small cascade of clods and sand, hitting against a less movable rock with force enough to roll him over on his back and stun him again.

The second and smaller moon of Topaz swung brightly through the sky, its weird green rays making the blood-streaked face of the explorer an alien mask. It had passed well on to the horizon, and its large yellow companion had risen when a yapping broke the small sounds of the night.

As the *yipp, yipp, yipp* arose in a crescendo, the man stirred, putting one hand to his head. His eyes opened, he looked vaguely about him and sat up. Behind him was the torn and ripped ship, but he did not look back at it.

Instead, he got to his feet and staggered out into the direct path of the moonlight. Inside his brain there was a whirl of thoughts, memories, emotions. Perhaps Ruthven or one of his assistants could have explained that chaotic mixture for what it was. But for all practical purposes Travis Fox—Amerindian Time Agent, member of Team A, Operation Cochise—was far less of a thinking animal now than the two coyotes paying their ritual addresses to a moon which was not the one of their vanished homeland.

Travis wavered on, drawn somehow by that howling. It was familiar, a thread of something real through all the broken clutter in his head. He stumbled, fell, crawled up again, but he kept on.

Above, the female coyote lowered her head, drew a test sniff of a new scent. She recognized that as part of the proper way of life. She yapped once at her mate, but he was absorbed in his night song, his muzzle pointed moonward as he voiced a fine wailing.

Travis tripped, pitched forward on his hands and knees, and felt the jar of such a landing shoot up his stiffened forearms. He tried to get up, but his body only twisted, so he landed on his back and lay looking up at the moon.

A strong, familiar odor ... then a shadow looming above him. Hot breath against his cheek, and the swift sweep of an animal tongue on his face. He flung up his hand, gripped thick fur, and held on as if he had found one anchor of sanity in a world gone completely mad.

## 3

Travis, one knee braced against the red earth, blinked as he parted a screen of tall rust-brown grass with cautious fingers to look out into a valley where golden mist clouded most of the landscape. His head ached with dull persistence, the pain fostered in some way by his own bewilderment. To study the land ahead was like trying to see through one picture interposed over another and far different one. He knew what ought to be there, but what was before him was very dissimilar.

A buff-gray shape flitted through the tall cover grass, and Travis tensed. *Mba'a*—coyote? Or were these companions of his actually *ga-n*, spirits who could choose their shape at will and had, oddly, this time assumed the bodies of man's tricky enemy? Were they *ndendai*—enemies—or *dalaanbiyat'i*, allies? In this mad world he did not know.

*Ei'dik'e?* His mind formed a word he did not speak: Friend?

Yellow eyes met his directly. Dimly he had been aware, ever since awaking in this strange wilderness with the coming of morning light, that the four-footed ones trotting with him as he walked aimlessly had unbestlike traits. Not only did they face him eye-to-eye, but in some ways they appeared able to read his thoughts.

He had longed for water to ease the burning in his throat, the ever-present pain in his head, and the creatures had nudged him in another direction, bringing him to a pool where he had mouthed liquid with a strange sweet, but not unpleasant taste.

Now he had given them names, names which had come out of the welter of dreams which shadowed his stumbling journey across this weird country.

Nalik'ideyu (Maiden-Who-Walks-Ridges) was the female who continued to shepherd him along, never venturing too far from his side. Naginlta (He-Who-Scouts-Ahead) was the male who did just that, disappearing at long intervals and then returning to face the man and his mate as if conveying some report necessary to their journey.

It was Nalik'ideyu who sought out Travis now, her red tongue lolling from her mouth as she panted. Not from exertion, he was certain of that. No, she was excited and eager ... on the hunt! That was it—a hunt!

Travis' own tongue ran across his lips as an impression hit him with feral force. There was meat—rich, fresh—just ahead. Meat that lived, waiting to be killed. Inside him his own avid hunger roused, shaking him farther out of the crusting dream.

His hands went to his waist, but the groping fingers did not find what vague memory told him should be there—a belt, heavy with knife in sheath.

He examined his own body with attention to find he was adequately covered by breeches of a smooth, dull brown material which blended well with the vegetation about him. He wore a loose shirt, belted in at the narrow waist by a folded strip of cloth, the ends of which fluttered free. On his feet were tall moccasins, the leg pieces extending some distance up his calves, the toes turned up in rounded points.

Some of this he found familiar, but these were fragments of memory; again his mind fitted one picture above another. One thing he did know for sure—he had no weapons. And that realization struck home with a thrust of real and terrible fear which tore away more of the bewilderment cloaking his mind.

Nalik'ideyu was impatient. Having advanced a step or two, she now looked back at him over her shoulder, yellow eyes slitted, her demand on him as instant and real as if she had voiced understandable words. Meat was waiting, and she was hungry. Also she expected Travis to aid in the hunt—at once.

Though he could not match her fluid grace in moving through the grass, Travis followed her, keeping to cover. He shook his head vigorously, in spite of the stab of pain the motion cost him, and paid more attention to his surroundings. It was apparent that the earth under him, the grass around, the valley of the golden haze, were all real, not part of a dream. Therefore that other countryside which he kept seeing in a ghostly fashion was a hallucination.

Even the air which he drew into his lungs and expelled again, had a strange smell, or was it taste? He could not be sure which. He knew that hypno-training could produce queer side effects, but ... this....

Travis paused, staring unseeingly before him at the grass still waving from the coyote's passage. Hypno-training! What was that? Now three pictures fought to focus in his mind: the two landscapes which did not match and a shadowy third. He shook his head again, his hands to his temples. This—this only was real: the ground, the grass, the valley, the hunger in him, the hunt waiting....

He forced himself to concentrate on the immediate present and the portion of world he could see, feel, scent, which lay here and now about him.

The grass grew shorter as he proceeded in Nalik'ideyu's wake. But the haze was not thinning. It seemed to hang in patches, and when he ventured through the edge of a patch it was like creeping through a fog of golden, dancing motes with here and there a glittering speck whirling and darting like a living thing. Masked by the stuff, Travis reached a line of brush and sniffed.

It was a warm scent, a heavy odor he could not identify and yet one he associated with a living creature. Flat to earth, he pushed head and shoulders under the low limbs of the bush to look ahead.

Here was a space where the fog did not hold, a pocket of earth clear under the morning sun. And grazing there were three animals. Again shock cleared a portion of Travis' bemused brain.

They were about the size, he thought, of antelopes, and they had a general resemblance to those beasts in that they had four slender legs, a rounded body, and a head. But they had alien features, so alien as to hold him in open-mouthed amazement.

The bodies had bare spots here and there, and patches of creamy—fur? Or was it hair which hung in strips, as if the creatures had been partially plucked in a careless fashion? The necks were long and moved about in a serpentine motion, as though their spines were as limber as reptiles'. On the end of those long and twisting necks were heads which also appeared more suitable to another species—broad, rather flat, with a singular toadlike look—but furnished with horns set halfway down the nose, horns which began in a single root and then branched into two sharp points.

They were unearthly! Again Travis blinked, brought his hand up to his head as he continued to view the browsers. There were three of them: two larger and with horns, the other a smaller beast with less of the ragged fur and only the beginning button of a protuberance on the nose; it was probably a calf.

One of those mental alerts from the coyotes broke his absorption. Nalik'ideyu was not interested in the odd appearance of the grazing creatures; she was intent upon their usefulness in another way—as a full and satisfying meal—and she was again impatient with him for his dull response.

His examination took a more practical turn. An antelope's defense was speed, though it could be tricked into hunting range through its inordinate curiosity. The slender legs of these beasts suggested a like degree of speed, and Travis had no weapons at all.

Those nose horns had an ugly look; this thing might be a fighter rather than a runner. But the suggestion which had flashed from coyote to him had taken root. Travis was hungry, he was a hunter, and here was meat on the hoof, queer as it looked.

Again he received a message. Naginlta was on the opposite side of the clearing. If the creatures depended on speed, then Travis believed they could probably outrun not only him but the coyotes as well—which left cunning and some sort of plan.

Travis glanced at the cover where he knew Nalik'ideyu crouched and from which had come that flash of agreement. He shivered. These were truly no animals, but *ga-n*, *ga-n* of power! And as *ga-n* he must treat them, accede to their will. Spurred by that, the Apache gave only flicks of attention to the browsers while at the same time he studied the part of the landscape uncovered by mist.

Without weapons or speed, they must conceive a trap. Again Travis sensed that agreement which was *ga-n* magic, and with it the strong impression urging him to the right. He was making progress with skill he did not even recognize and which he had never been conscious of learning.

The bushes and small, droop-limbed trees, their branches not clothed with leaves from proper twigs but with a reddish bristly growth protruding directly from their surfaces, made a partial wall for the pocket-sized meadow. That screen reached a rocky cleft where the mist curled in a long tongue through a wall twice Travis' height. If the browsers could be maneuvered into taking the path through that cleft....

Travis searched about him, and his hands closed upon the oldest weapon of his species, a stone pulled from an earth pocket and balanced neatly in the palm of his hand. It was a long chance but his best one.

The Apache took the first step on a new and fearsome road. These *ga-n* had put their thoughts—or their desires—into his mind. Could he so contact them in return?

With the stone clenched in his fist, his shoulders back against the wall not too far from the cleft opening, Travis strove to think out, clearly and simply, this poor plan of his. He did not know that he was reacting the way scientists deep space away had hoped he might. Nor did Travis guess that at this point he had already traveled far beyond the expectations of the men who had bred and trained the two mutant coyotes. He only believed that this might be the one way he could obey the wishes of the two spirits he thought far more powerful than any man. So he pictured in his mind the cleft, the running creatures, and the part the *ga-n* could play if they so willed.

Assent—in its way as loud and clear as if shouted. The man fingered the stone, weighed it. There would probably be just one moment when he could use it to effect, and he must be ready.



From this point he could no longer see the small meadow where the grazers were. But Travis knew, as well as if he watched the scene, that the coyotes were creeping in, belly flat to earth, adding a feline stealth and patience to their own cunning.

There! Travis' head jerked, the alert had come, the drive was beginning. He tensed, gripping his stone.

A yapping bark was answered by a sound he could not describe, a noise which was neither cough nor grunt but a combination of both. Again a yap-yap....

A toad-head burst through the screen of brush, the double horn on its nose festooned with a length of grass torn up by the roots. Wide eyes—milky and seeming to be without pupils—fastened on Travis, but he could not be sure the thing saw him, for it kept on, picking up speed as it approached the cleft. Behind it ran the calf, and that guttural cry was bubbling from its broad flat lips.

The long neck of the adult writhed, the frog-head swung closer to the ground so that the twin points of the horn were at a slant—aimed now at Travis. He had been right in his guess at their deadliness, but he had only a fleeting chance to recognize that fact as the thing bore down, its whole attitude expressing the firm intention of goring him.

He hurled his stone and then flung his body to one side, stumbling and rolling into the brush where he fought madly to regain his feet, expecting at any moment to feel trampling hoofs and thrusting horns. There was a crash to his right, and the bushes and grass were wildly shaken.

On his hands and knees the Apache retreated, his head turned to watch behind him. He saw the flirt of a triangular flap-tail in the mouth of the cleft. The calf had escaped. And now the threshing in the bushes stilled.

Was the thing stalking him? He got to his feet, for the first time hearing clearly the continued yapping, as if a battle was in progress. Then the second of the adult beasts came into view, backing and turning, trying to keep lowered head with menacing double horn always pointed to the coyotes dancing a teasing, worrying circle about it.

One of the coyotes flung up its head, looked upslope, and barked. Then, as one, both rushed the fighting beast, but for the first time from the same side, leaving it a clear path to retreat. It made a rush before which they fled easily, and then it whirled with a speed and grace, which did not fit its ungainly, ill-proportioned body, and jumped toward the cleft, the coyotes making no effort to hinder its escape.

Travis came out of cover, approaching the brush which had concealed the crash of the other animal. The actions of the coyotes had convinced him that there was no danger now; they would never have allowed the escape of their prey had the first beast not been in difficulties.

His shot with the stone, the Apache decided as he stood moments later surveying the twitching crumpled body, must have hit the thing in the head, stunning it. Then the momentum of its charge had carried it full force against the rock to kill it. Blind luck—or the power of the *ga-n*? He pulled back as the coyotes came padding up shoulder to shoulder to inspect the kill. It was truly more theirs than his.

Their prey yielded not only food but a weapon for Travis. Instead of the belt knife he had remembered having, he was now equipped with two. The double horn had been easy to free from the shattered skull, and some careful work with stones had broken off one prong at just the angle he wanted. So now he had a short and a longer tool, defense. At least they were better than the stone with which he had entered the hunt.

Nalik'ideyu pushed past him to lap daintily at the water. Then she sat up on her haunches, watching Travis as he smoothed the horn with a stone.

“A knife,” he said to her, “this will be a knife. And—” he glanced up, measuring the value of the wood represented by trees and bushes—”then a bow. With a bow we shall hunt better.”

The coyote yawned, her yellow eyes half closed, her whole pose one of satisfaction and contentment.

“A knife,” Travis repeated, “and a bow.” He needed weapons; he had to have them!

Why? His hand stopped scraping. Why? The toad-faced double horn had been quick to attack, but Travis could have avoided it, and it had not hunted him first. Why was he ridden by this fear that he must not be unarmed?

He dipped his hand into the pool of the spring and lifted the water to cool his sweating face. The coyote moved, turned around in the grass, crushing down the growth into a nest in which she curled up, head on paws. But Travis sat back on his heels, his now idle hands hanging down between his knees, and forced himself to the task of sorting out jumbled memories.

This landscape was wrong—totally unlike what it should be—but it was real. He had helped kill this alien creature. He had eaten its meat, raw. Its horn lay within touch now. All that was real and unchangeable. Which meant that the rest of it, that other desert world in which he had wandered with his kind, ridden horses, raided invading men of another race, that was not real—or else far, far removed from where he now sat.

Yet there had been no dividing line between those two worlds. One moment he had been in the desert place, returning from a successful foray against the Mexicans. Mexicans! Travis caught at that identification, tried to use it as a thread to draw closer to the beginning of his mystery.

Mexicans.... And he was an Apache, one of the Eagle people, one who rode with Cochise. No!

Sweat again beaded his face where the water had cooled it. He was not of that past. He was Travis Fox, of the very late twentieth century, not a nomad of the middle nineteenth! He was of Team A of the project!

The Arizona desert and then this! From one to the other in an instant. He looked about him in rising fear. Wait! He had been in the dark when he got out of the desert, lying in a box. Getting out, he had crawled down a passage to reach moonlight, strange moonlight.

A box in which he had lain, a passage with smooth metallic walls, and an alien world at the end of it.

The coyote's ears twitched, her head came up, she was staring at the man's drawn face, at his eyes with their core of fear. She whined.

Travis caught up the two pieces of horn, thrust them into his sash belt, and got to his feet. Nalik'ideyu sat up, her head cocked a little to one side. As the man turned to seek his own back trail she padded along in his wake and whined for Naginlta. But Travis was more intent now on what he must prove to himself than he was on the actions of the two animals.

It was a wandering trail, and now he did not question his skill in being able to follow it so unerringly. The sun was hot. Winged things buzzed from the bushes, small scuttling things fled from him through the tall grass. Once Naginlta growled a warning which led them all to a detour, and Travis might not have picked up the proper trace again had not the coyote scout led him to it.

“Who are you?” he asked once, and then guessed it would have better been said, “What are you?” These were not animals, or rather they were more than the animals he had always known. And one part of him, the part which remembered the desert rancherias where Cochise had ruled, said they were spirits. Yet that other part of him.... Travis shook his head, accepting them now for what they were—welcome company in an alien place.

The day wore on close to sunset, and still Travis followed that wandering trail. The need which drove him kept him going through the rough country of hills and ravines. Now the mist lifted above towering walls of mountains very near him, yet not the mountains of his memory. These were dull brown, with a forbidding look, like sun-dried skulls baring teeth in warning against all comers.

With great difficulty, Travis topped a rise. Ahead against the skyline stood both coyotes. And, as the man joined them, first one and then the other flung back its head and sounded the sobbing, shattering cry which had been a part of that other life.

The Apache looked down. His puzzle was answered in part. The wreckage crumpled on the mountain side was identifiable—a spaceship! Cold fear gripped him and his own head went back; from between his tight lips came a cry as desolate and despairing as the one the animals had voiced.

## 4

Fire, mankind's oldest ally, weapon, tool, leaped high before the naked stone of the mountain side. Men sat cross-legged about it, fifteen of them. And behind, guarded by the flames and that somber circle, were the women. There was a uniformity in this gathering. The members were plainly all of the same racial stock, of medium height, stocky yet fined down to the peak of stamina and endurance, their skin brown, their shoulder-length hair black. And they were all young—none over thirty, some still in their late teens. Alike, too, was a certain drawn look in their faces, a tenseness of the eyes and mouth as they listened to Travis.

“So we must be on Topaz. Do any of you remember boarding the ship?”

“No. Only that we awoke within it.” Across the fire one chin lifted; the eyes which caught Travis' held a deep, smoldering anger. “This is more trickery of the Pinda-lick-o-yi, the White Eyes. Between us there has never been fair dealing. They have broken their promise as a man breaks a rotten stick, for their words are as rotten. And it was you, Fox, who brought us to listen to them.”

A stir about the circle, a murmur from the women.

“And do I not also sit here with you in this strange wilderness?” he countered.

“I do not understand,” another of the men held out his hand, palm up, in a gesture of asking—”what has happened to us. We were in the old Apache world.... I, Jil-Lee, was riding with Cuchillo Negro as we went down to the taking of Ramos. And then I was here, in a broken ship and beside me a dead man who was once my brother. How did I come out of the past of our people into another world across the stars?”

“Pinda-lick-o-yi tricks!” The first speaker spat into the fire.

“It was the Redax, I think,” Travis replied. “I heard Dr. Ashe discuss this. A new machine which could make a man remember not his own past, but the past of his ancestors. While we were on that ship we must have been under its influence, so we lived as our people lived a hundred years or more ago—”

“And the purpose of such a thing?” Jil-Lee asked.

“To make us more like our ancestors perhaps. It is part of what they told us at the project. To venture into these new worlds requires a different type of man than lives on Terra today. Traits we have forgotten are needed to face the dangers of wild places.”

“You, Fox, have been beyond the stars before, and you found there were such dangers to face?”

“It is true. You have heard of the three worlds I saw when the ship from the old days took us off, unwilling, to the stars. Did you not all volunteer to pioneer in this manner so you could also see strange and new things?”

“But we did not agree to be returned to the past in medicine dreams and be sent unknowingly into space!”

Travis nodded. “Deklay is right. But I know no more than you why we were so sent, or why the ship crashed. We have found Dr. Ruthven's body in the cabin with that new installation. Only we have discovered nothing else which tells us why we were brought here. With the ship broken, we must stay.”

They were silent now, men and women alike. Behind them lay several days of activity, nights of exhausted slumber. Against the cliff wall lay the packs of supplies they had salvaged from the wreck. By mutual consent they had left the vicinity of the broken globe, following their old custom of speedily withdrawing from a place of death.

“This is a world empty of men?” Jil-Lee wanted to know.

“So far we have found only animal signs, and the *ga-n* have not warned us of anything else—  
—”

“Those devil ones!” Again Deklay spat into the fire. “I say we should have no dealings with them. The *mba'a* is no friend to the People.”

Again a murmur which seemed one of agreement answered that outburst. Travis stiffened. Just how much influence had the Redax had over them? He knew from his own experience that sometimes he had an odd double reaction—two different feelings which almost sickened him when they struck simultaneously. And he was beginning to suspect that with some of the others the return to the past had been far more deep and lasting. Now Jil-Lee was actually to reason out what had happened. While Deklay had reverted to an ancestor who had ridden with Victorio or Magnus Colorado! Travis had a flash of premonition, a chill which made him half foresee a time when the past and the present might well split them apart—fatally.

“Devil or *ga-n*.” A man with a quiet face, rather deeply sunken eyes, spoke for the first time. “We are in two minds because of this Redax, so let us not do anything in haste. Back in the desert world of the People I have seen the *mba'a*, and he was very clever. With the badger he went hunting, and when the badger had dug up the rat’s nest, so did the *mba'a* wait on the other side of the thorny bush and catch those who would escape that way. Between him and the badger there was no war. These two who sit over yonder now—they are also hunters and they seem friendly to us. In a strange place a man needs all the help he can find. Let us not call names out of old tales, which may mean nothing in fact.”

“Buck speaks straightly,” Jil-Lee agreed. “We seek a camp which can be defended. For perhaps there are men here whose hunting territory we have invaded, though we have not yet seen them. We are a people small in number and alone. Let us walk softly on trails which are strange to our feet.”

Inwardly Travis sighed in relief. Buck, Jil-Lee ... for the moment their sensible words appeared to swing the opinions of the party. If either of them could be established as *haldzil*, or clan leader, they would all be safer. He himself had no aspirations in that direction and dared not push too hard. It had been his initial urging which had brought them as volunteers into the project. Now he was doubly suspect, and especially by those who thought as Deklay, he was considered too alien to their old ways.

So far their protests had been fewer than he anticipated. Although brothers and sisters had followed each other into the team after the immemorial desire of Apaches to cling to family ties, they were not a true clan with solidity of that to back them, but representatives of half a dozen.

Basically, back on Terra, they had all been among the most progressive of their people—progressive, that is, in the white man’s sense of the word. Travis had a fleeting recognition of his now oblique way of thinking. He, too, had been marked by the Redax. They had all been educated in the modern fashion and all possessed a spirit of adventure which marked them over their fellows. They had volunteered for the team and successfully passed the tests to weed out the temperamentally unfit or fainthearted. But all that was before Redax....

Why had they been submitted to that? And why this flight? What had pushed Dr. Ashe and Murdock and Colonel Kelgarries, time agents he knew and trusted, into dispatching them without warning to Topaz? Something had happened, something which had given Dr. Ruthven ascendancy over those others and had started them on this wild trip.

Travis was conscious of a stir about the firelit circle. The men were rising, moving back into the shadows, stretching out on the blankets they had found among other stores on the ship. They had discovered weapons there—knives, bows, quivers of arrows, all of which they had been trained to use in the intensive schooling of the project and which needed no more repair than they themselves could give. And the rations they carried were field supplies, few of them. Tomorrow they must begin hunting in earnest....

“Why has this thing been done to us?” Buck was beside Travis, those quiet eyes sliding past him to seek the fire once more. “I do not think you were told when the rest of us were not—”

Travis seized upon that. “There are those who say that I knew, agreed?”

“That is so. Once we stood at the same place in time—in our thoughts, our desires. Now we stand at many places, as if we climbed a stairway, each at his own speed—a stairway the Pinda-lick-o-yi has set us upon. Some here, some there, some yet farther above....” He sketched a series of step outlines in the air. “And in this there is trouble—”

“The truth,” Travis agreed. “Yet it is also true that I knew nothing of this, that I climb with you on these stairs.”

“So I believe. But there comes a time when it is best not to be a woman stirring a pot of boiling stew but rather one who stands quietly at a distance—”

“You mean?” Travis pressed.

“I say that alone among us you have crossed the stars before, therefore new things are not so hard to understand. And we need a scout. Also the coyotes run in your footsteps, and you do not fear them.”

It made good sense. Let him scout ahead of the party, taking the coyotes with him. Stay away from the camp for a while and speak small—until the people on Buck’s stairway were more closely united.

“I go in the morning,” Travis agreed. He could slip away tonight, but just now he could not force himself away from the fire, from the companionship.

“You might take Tsoay with you,” Buck continued.

Travis waited for him to enlarge on that suggestion. Tsoay was one of the youngest of their group, Buck’s own cross-cousin and near-brother.

“It is well,” Buck explained, “that we learn this land, and it has always been our custom that the younger walk in the footprints of the older. Also, not only should trails be learned, but also men.”

Travis caught the thought behind that. Perhaps by taking the younger men as scouts, one after another, he could build up among them a following of sorts. Among the Apaches, leadership was wholly a matter of personality. Until the reservation days, chieftains had gained their position by force of character alone, though they might come successively from one family clan over several generations.

He did not want the chieftainship here. No, but neither did he want growing whispers working about him to cut him off from his people. To every Apache severance from the clan

was a little death. He must have those who would back him if Deklay, or those who thought like Deklay, turned grumbling into open hostility.

“Tsoay is one quick to learn,” Travis agreed. “We go at dawn—”

“Along the mountain range?” Buck inquired.

“If we seek a protected place for the rancheria, yes. The mountains have always provided good strongholds for the People.”

“And you think there is need for a fort?”

Travis shrugged. “I have been one day’s journey out into this world. I saw nothing but animals. But that is no promise that elsewhere there are no enemies. The planet was on the tapes we brought back from that other world, and so it was known to the others who once rode between star and star as we rode between ranch and town. If they had this world set on a journey tape, it was for a reason; that reason may still be in force.”

“Yet it was long ago that these star people rode so....” Buck mused. “Would the reason last so long?”

Travis remembered two other worlds, one of weird desert inhabited by beast things—or had they once been human, human to the point of possessing intelligence?—that had come out of sand burrows at night to attack a spaceship. And the second world where the ruins of a giant city had stood choked with jungle vegetation, where he had made a blowgun from tubes of rustless metal as a weapon gift for small winged men—but were they men? Both had been remnants of that ancient galactic empire.

“Some things could so remain,” he answered soberly. “If we find them, we must be careful. But first a good site for the rancheria.”

“There is no return to home for us,” Buck stated flatly.

“Why do you say that? There could be a rescue ship later—”

The other raised his eyes again to Travis. “When you slept under the Redax how did you ride?”

“As a warrior—raiding ... living....”

“And I—I was one with *go’ndi*,” Buck returned simply.

“But—”

“But the white man has assured us that such power—the power of a chief—does not exist? Yes, the Pinda-lick-o-yi has told us so many things. He is busy, busy with his tools, his machines, always busy. And those who think in another fashion cannot be measured by his rules, so they are foolish dreamers. Not all white men think so. There was Dr. Ashe—he was beginning to understand a little.

“Perhaps I, too, am standing still, halfway up the stairway of the past. But of this I am very sure: For us, there will be no return to our own place. And the time will come when something new shall grow from the seed of the past. Also it is necessary that you be one of the tenders of that growth. So I urge you, take Tsoay, and the next time, Lupe. For the young who may be swayed this way and that by words—as the wind shakes a small tree—must be given firm roots.”

In Travis education warred with instinct, just as the picture Redax had planted in his mind had warred with his awaking to this alien landscape. Yet now he believed he must be guided by what he felt. And he knew that no man of his race would claim *go’ndi*, the power of spirit

known only to a great chief, unless he had actually felt it swell within him. It might have been fostered by hallucination in the past, but the aura of it carried into the here and now. And Travis had no doubts that Buck believed implicitly in what he said, and that belief carried credulity to others.

“This is wisdom, *Nantan*—”

Buck shook his head. “I am no *nantan*, no chief. But of some things I am sure. You also be sure of what lies within you, younger brother!”

On the third day, ranging eastward along the base of the mountain range, Travis found what he believed would be an acceptable camp site. There was a canyon with a good spring of water cut round by well-marked game trails. A series of ledges brought him up to a small plateau where scrub wood could be used to build the wickiups. Water and food lay within reach, and the ledge approach was easy to defend. Even Deklay and his fellow malcontents were forced to concede the value of the site.

His duty to the clan accomplished, Travis returned to his own concern, one which had haunted him for days. Topaz had been taped by men of the vanished star empire. Therefore, the planet was important, but why? As yet he had found no indication that anything above the intelligence level of the split horns was native to this world. But he was gnawed by the certainty that there *was* something here, waiting.... And the desire to learn what it was became an ever-burning ache.

Perhaps he was what Deklay had accused him of being, one who had come to follow the road of the Pinda-lick-o-yi too closely. For Travis was content to scout with only the coyotes for company, and he did not find the loneliness of the unknown planet as intimidating as most of the others.

He was checking his small trail pack on the fourth day after they had settled on the plateau when Buck and Jil-Lee hunkered down beside him.

“You go to hunt—?” Buck broke the silence first.

“Not for meat.”

“What do you fear? That *ndendai*—enemy people—have marked this as their land?” Jil-Lee questioned.

“That may be true, but now I hunt for what this world was at one time, the reason why the ancient star men marked it as their own.”

“And this knowledge may be of value to us?” Jil-Lee asked slowly. “Will it bring food to our mouths, shelter for our bodies—mean life for us?”

“All that is possible. It is the unknowing which is bad.”

“True. Unknowing is always bad,” Buck agreed. “But the bow which is fitted to one hand and strength of arm, may not be suited to another. Remember that, younger brother. Also, do you go alone?”

“With Naginlta and Nalik’ideyu I am not alone.”

“Take Tsoay with you also. The four-footed ones are indeed *ga-n* for the service of those they like, but it is not good that man walks alone from his kind.”

There it was again, the feeling of clan solidarity which Travis did not always share. On the other hand, Tsoay would not be a hindrance. On other scouts the boy had proved to have a



keen eye for the country and a liking for experimentation which was not a universal attribute even among those of his own age.

“I would go to find a path through the mountains; it may be a long trail,” Travis half protested.

“You believe what you seek may lie to the north?”

Travis shrugged. “I do not know. How can I? But it will be another way of seeking.”

“Tsoay shall go. He keeps silent before older warriors as is proper for the untried, but his thoughts fly free as do yours,” Buck replied. “It is in him also, this need to see new places.”

“There is this,” Jil-Lee got to his feet, “—do not go so far, brother, that you may not easily find a way to return. This is a wide land, and within it we are but a handful of men alone—”

“That, too, I know.” Travis thought he could read more than one kind of warning in Jil-Lee’s words.

\*\*\*\*\*

They were the second day away from the plateau camp, and climbing, when they chanced upon the pass Travis had hoped might exist. Before them lay an abrupt descent to what appeared to be open plains country cloaked in a dusky amber Travis now knew was the thick grass found in the southern valleys. Tsoay pointed with his chin.

“Wide land—good for horses, cattle, ranches....”

But all those lay far beyond the black space surrounding them. Travis wondered if there was any native animal which could serve man in place of the horse.

“Do we go down?” Tsoay asked.

From this point Travis could sight no break far out on the amber plain, no sign of any building or any disturbance of its smooth emptiness. Yet it drew him. “We go,” he decided.

Close as it had looked from the pass, the plain was yet a day and a night, spent in careful watching by turns, ahead of them. It was midmorning of the second day that they left the foothill breaks, and the grass of the open country was waist high about them. Travis could see it rippling where the coyotes threaded ahead. Then he was conscious of a persistent buzzing, a noise which irritated faintly until he was compelled to trace it to its source.

The grass had been trampled flat for an irregular patch, with a trail of broken stalks out of the heart of the plain. At one side was a buzzing, seething mass of glitter-winged insects which Travis already knew as carrion eaters. They arose reluctantly from their feast as he approached.

He drew a short breath which was close to a grunt of astounded recognition. What lay there was so impossible that he could not believe the evidence of his eyes. Tsoay gave a sharp exclamation, went down on one knee for a closer examination, then looked at Travis over his shoulder, his eyes wide, more than a trace of excitement in his voice.

“Horse dung—and fresh!”

## 5

“There was one horse, unshod but ridden. It came here from the plains and it had been ridden hard, going lame. There was a rest here, maybe shortly after dawn.” Travis sorted out what they had learned by a careful examination of the ground.

Nalik’ideyu and Naginlta, Tsoay, watched and listened as if the coyotes as well as the boy could understand every word.

“There is that also—” Tsoay indicated the one trace left by the unknown rider, an impression blurred as if some attempt had been made to conceal it.

“Small and light, the rider is both. Also in fear, I think—”

“We follow?” Tsoay asked.

“We follow,” Travis assented. He looked to the coyotes, and as he had learned to do, thought out his message. This trail was the one to be followed. When the rider was sighted they were to report back if the Apaches had not yet caught up.

There was no visible agreement; the coyotes simply vanished through the wall of grass.

“Then there are others here,” Tsoay said as he and Travis began their return to the foothills. “Perhaps there was a second ship—”

“That horse,” Travis said, shaking his head. “There was no provision in the project for the shipping of horses.”

“Perhaps they have always been here.”

“Not so. To each world its own species of beasts. But we shall know the truth when we look upon that horse—and its rider.”

It was warmer this side of the mountains, and the heat of the plains beat at them. Travis thought that the horse might well be seeking water if allowed his head. Where did he come from? And why had his rider gone in haste and fear?

This was rough, broken country and the tired, limping horse seemed to have picked the easiest way through it, without any hindrance from the man with him. Travis spotted a soft patch of ground with a deep-set impression. This time there had been no attempt at erasure; the boot track was plain. The rider had dismounted and was leading the horse—yet he was moving swiftly.

They followed the tracks around the bend of a shallow cut and found Nalik’ideyu waiting for them. Between her forefeet was a bundle still covered with smears of soft earth, and behind her were drag marks from a hole under the overhang of a bush. The coyote had plainly just disinterred her find. Travis squatted down to examine it, using his eyes before his hands.

It was a bag made of hide, probably the hide of one of the split horns by its color and the scraps of long hair which had been left in a simple decorative fringe along the bottom. The sides had been laced together neatly by someone used to working in leather, the closing flap lashed down tightly with braided thong loops.

As the Apache leaned closer to it he could smell a mixture of odors—the hide itself, horse, wood smoke, and other scents—strange to him. He undid the fastenings and pulled out the contents.

There was a shirt, with long full sleeves, of a gray wool undyed from the sheep. Then a very bulky short jacket which, after fingering it doubtfully, Travis decided was made of felt. It was elaborately decorated with highly colorful embroidery, and there was no mistaking the design—a heavy antlered Terran deer in mortal combat with what might be a puma. It was bordered with a geometric pattern of beautiful, oddly familiar work. Travis smoothed it flat over his knee and tried to remember where he had seen its like before ... a book! An illustration in a book! But which book, when? Not recently, and it was not a pattern known to his own people.

Twisted into the interior of the jacket was a silklike scarf, clear, light blue—the blue of Terra’s cloudless skies on certain days, so different from the yellow shield now hanging above them. A small case of leather, with silhouetted designs cut from hide and affixed to it, designs as intricate and complex as the embroidery on the jacket—art of a high standard. In the case a knife and spoon, the bowl and blade of dull metal, the handles of horn carved with horse heads, the tiny wide-open eyes set with glittering stones.

Personal possessions dear to the owner, so that when they must be abandoned for flight they were hidden with some hope of recovery. Travis slowly repacked them, trying to fold the garments into their original creases. He was still puzzled by those designs.

“Who?” Tsoay touched the edge of the jacket with one finger, his admiration for it plain to read.

“I don’t know. But it is of our own world.”

“That is a deer, though the horns are wrong,” Tsoay agreed. “And the puma is very well done. The one who made this knows animals well.”

Travis pushed the jacket back into the bag and laced it shut. But he did not return it to the hiding place. Instead, he made it a part of his own pack. If they did not succeed in running down the fugitive, he wanted an opportunity for closer study, a chance to remember just where he had seen that picture before.

The narrow valley where they had discovered the bag sloped upward, and there were signs that their quarry found the ground harder to cover. The second discard lay in open sight—again a leather bag which Nalik’ideyu sniffed and then began to lick eagerly, thrusting her nose into its flaccid interior.

Travis picked it up, finding it damp to the touch. It had an odd smell, like that of sour milk. He ran a finger around inside, brought it out wet; yet this was neither water bag nor canteen. And he was completely mystified when he turned it inside out, for though the inner surface was wet, the bag was empty. He offered it to the coyote, and she took it promptly.

Holding it firmly to the earth with her forepaws, she licked the surface, though Travis could see no deposit which might attract her. It was clear that the bag had once held some sort of food.

“Here they rested,” Tsoay said. “Not too far ahead now—”

But now they were in the kind of country where a man could hide in order to check on his back trail. Travis studied the terrain and then made his own plans. They would leave the plainly marked trace of the fugitive, strike out upslope to the east and try to parallel the other’s route. In that maze of rock outcrops and wood copses there was tricky going.

Nalik’ideyu gave a last lick to the bag as Travis signaled her. She regarded him, then turned her head to survey the country before them. At last she trotted on, her buff coat melting into

the vegetation. With Naginlta she would scout the quarry and keep watch, leaving the men to take the longer way around.

Travis pulled off his shirt, folding it into a packet and tucking it beneath the folds of his sash-belt, just as his ancestors had always done before a fight. Then he cached his pack and Tsoay's. As they began the stiff climb they carried only their bows, the quivers slung on their shoulders, and the long-bladed knives. But they flitted like shadows and, like the coyotes, their red-brown bodies became indistinguishable against the bronze of the land.

They should be, Travis judged, not more than an hour away from sundown. And they had to locate the stranger before the dark closed in. His respect for their quarry had grown. The unknown might have been driven by fear, but he held to a good pace and headed intelligently for just the kind of country which would serve him best. If Travis could only remember where he had seen the like of that embroidery! It had a meaning which might be important now....

Tsoay slipped behind a wind-gnarled tree and disappeared. Travis stooped under a line of bush limbs. Both were working their way south, using the peak ahead as an agreed landmark, pausing at intervals to examine the landscape for any hint of a man and horse.

Travis squirmed snake fashion into an opening between two rock pillars and lay there, the westerling sun hot on his bare shoulders and back, his chin propped on his forearm. In the band holding back his hair he had inserted some concealing tufts of wiry mountain grass, the ends of which drooped over his rugged features.

Only seconds earlier he had caught that fragmentary warning from one of the coyotes. What they sought was very close, it was right down there. Both animals were in ambush, awaiting orders. And what they found was familiar, another confirmation that the fugitive was Terran, not native to Topaz.

With searching eyes, Travis examined the site indicated by the coyotes. His respect for the stranger was raised another notch. In time either he or Tsoay might have sighted that hideaway without the aid of the animal scouts; on the other hand, they might have failed. For the fugitive had truly gone to earth, using some pocket or crevice in the mountain wall.

There was no sign of the horse, but a branch here and there had been pulled out of place, the scars of their removal readable when one knew where to look. Odd, Travis began to puzzle over what he saw. It was almost as if whatever pursuit the stranger feared would come not at ground level but from above; the precautions the stranger had taken were to veil his retreat to the reaches of the mountain side.

Had he expected any trailer to make a flanking move from up that slope where the Apaches now lay? Travis' teeth nipped the weathered skin of his forearm. Could it be that at some time during the day's journeying the fugitive had doubled back, having seen his trackers? But there had been no traces of any such scouting, and the coyotes would surely have warned them. Human eyes and ears could be tricked, but Travis trusted the senses of Naginlta and Nalik'ideyu far above his own.

No, he did not believe that the rider expected the Apaches. But the man did expect someone or something which would come upon him from the heights. The heights.... Travis rolled his head slightly to look at the upper reaches of the hills about him—with suspicion.

In their own journey across the mountains and through the pass they had found nothing threatening. Dangerous animals might roam there. There had been some paw marks, one such trail the coyotes had warned against. But the type of precautions the stranger had taken were

against intelligent, thinking beings, not against animals more likely to track by scent than by sight.

And if the stranger expected an attack from above, then Travis and Tsoay must be alert. Travis analyzed each feature of the hillside, setting in his mind a picture of every inch of ground they must cross. Just as he had wanted daylight as an ally before, so now was he willing to wait for the shadows of twilight.

He closed his eyes in a final check, able to recall the details of the hiding place, knowing that he could reach it when the conditions favored, without mistake. Then he edged back from his vantage point, and raising his fingers to his lips, made a small angry chittering, three times repeated. One of the species inhabiting these heights, as they had noted earlier, was a creature about as big as the palm of a man's hand, resembling nothing so much as a round ball of ruffled feathers, though its covering might actually have been a silky, fluffy fur. Its short legs could cover ground at an amazing speed, and it had the bold impudence of a creature with few natural enemies. This was its usual cry.

Tsoay's hand waved Travis on to where the younger man had taken position behind the bleached trunk of a fallen tree.

"He hides," Tsoay whispered.

"Against trouble from above." Travis added his own observation.

"But not us, I think."

So Tsoay had come to that conclusion too? Travis tried to gauge the nearness of twilight. There was a period after the passing of Topaz' sun when the dusky light played odd tricks with shadows. That would be the first time for their move. He said as much, and Tsoay nodded eagerly. They sat with their backs to a boulder, the tree trunk serving as a screen, and chewed methodically on ration tablets. There was energy and sustenance in the tasteless squares which would support men, even though their stomachs continued to demand the satisfaction of fresh meat.

Taking turns, they dozed a little. But the last banners of Topaz' sun were still in the sky when Travis judged the shadows cover enough. He had no way of knowing how the stranger was armed. Though he used a horse for transportation, he might well carry a rifle and the most modern Terran sidearms.

The Apaches' bows were little use for infighting, but they had their knives. However, Travis wanted to take the fugitive unharmed if he could. There was information he must have. So he did not even draw his knife as he started downhill.

When he reached a pool of violet dusk at the bottom of the small ravine Naginlta's eyes regarded him knowingly. Travis signaled with his hand and thought out what would be the coyotes' part in this surprise attack. The prick-eared silhouette vanished. Uphill the chitter of a fluff-fur sounded twice—Tsoay was in position.

A howl ... wailing ... sobbing ... was heard, one of the keening songs of the *mba'a*. Travis darted forward. He heard the nicker of a frightened horse, a clicking which could have marked the pawing of hoof on gravel, saw the brush hiding the stranger's hole tremble, a portion of it fall away.

Travis sped on, his moccasins making no sound on the ground. One of the coyotes gave tongue for the second time, the eerie wailing rising to a yapping which echoed from the rocks about them. Travis poised for a dive.

Another section of those artfully heaped branches had given way and a horse reared, its upflung head plainly marked against the sky. A blurred figure weaved back and forth before it, trying to control the mount. The stranger had his hands full, certainly no weapon drawn—this was it!

Travis leaped. His hands found their mark, the shoulders of the stranger. There was a shrill cry from the other as he tried to turn in the Apache's hold, to face his attacker. But Travis bore them both on, rolling almost under the feet of the horse, sliding downhill, the unknown's writhing body pinned down by the Apache's weight and his clasp, tight as an iron grip, about the other's chest and upper arms.

He felt his opponent go limp, but was suspicious enough not to release that hold, for the heavy breathing of the stranger was not that of an unconscious man. They lay so, the unknown still tight in Travis' hold but no longer fighting. The Apache could hear Tsoay soothing the horse with the purring words of a practiced horseman.

Still the stranger did not resume the struggle. They could not lie in this position all night, Travis thought with a wry twist of amusement. He shifted his hold, and got the lightning-quick response he had expected. But it was not quite quick enough, for Travis had the other's hands behind his back, cupping slender, almost delicate wrists together.

"Throw me a cord!" he called to Tsoay.

The younger man ran up with an extra bow cord, and in a moment they had bonds on the struggling captive. Travis rolled their catch over, reaching down for a fistful of hair to pull the head into a patch of clearer light.

In his grasp that hair came loose, a braid unwinding. He grunted as he looked down into the stranger's face. Dust marks were streaked now with tear runnels, but the gray eyes which turned fiercely on him said that their owner cried more in rage than fear.

His captive might be wearing long trousers tucked into curved, toed boots, and a loose overblouse, but she was certainly not only a woman, but a very young and attractive one. Also, at the present moment, an exceedingly angry one. And behind that anger was fear, the fear of one fighting hopelessly against insurmountable odds. But as she eyed Travis now her expression changed.

He felt she had expected another captor altogether and was astounded at the sight of him. Her tongue touched her lips, moistening them, and now the fear in her was another kind—the wary fear of one facing a totally new and perhaps dangerous thing.

"Who are you?" Travis spoke in English, for he had no doubts that she was Terran.

Now she sucked in her breath with a gasp of pure astonishment.

"Who are *you*?" she parroted his question in a marked accent. English was not her native tongue, he was sure.

Travis reached out, and again his hands closed on her shoulders. She started to twist and then realized he was merely pulling her up to a sitting position. Some of the fear had left her eyes, an intent interest taking its place.

"You are not Sons of the Blue Wolf," she stated in her heavily accented speech.

Travis smiled. "I am the Fox, not the Wolf," he returned. "And the Coyote is my brother." He snapped his fingers at the shadows, and the two animals came noiselessly into sight. Her gaze widened even more at Naginlta and Nalik'ideyu, and she deduced the bond which must exist between her captor and the beasts.

“This woman is also of our world.” Tsoay spoke in Apache, looking over their prisoner with frank interest. “Only she is not of the People.”

Sons of the Blue Wolf? Travis thought again of the embroidery designs on the jacket. Who had called themselves by that picturesque title—where—and when in time?

“What do you fear, Daughter of the Blue Wolf?” he asked.

And with that question he seemed to touch some button activating terror. She flung back her head so that she could see the darkening sky.

“The flyer!” Her voice was muted as if more than a whisper would carry to the stars just coming into brilliance above them. “They will come ... tracking. I did not reach the inner mountains in time.”

There was a despairing note in that which cut through to Travis, who found that he, too, was searching the sky, not knowing what he looked for or what kind of menace it promised, only that it was real danger.

## 6

“The night comes,” Tsoay spoke slowly in English. “Do these you fear hunt in the dark?”

She shook her head to free her forehead from a coil of braid, pulled loose in her struggle with Travis.

“They do not need eyes or such noses as those four-footed hunters of yours. They have a machine to track—”

“Then what purpose is this brush pile of yours?” Travis raised his chin at the disturbed hiding place.

“They do not constantly use the machine, and one can hope. But at night they can ride on its beam. We are not far enough into the hills to lose them. Bahatur went lame, and so I was slowed...”

“And what lies in these mountains that those you fear dare not invade them?” Travis continued.

“I do not know, save if one can climb far enough inside, one is safe from pursuit.”

“I ask it again: Who are you?” The Apache leaned forward, his face in the fast-fading light now only inches away from hers. She did not shrink from his close scrutiny but met him eye to eye. This was a woman of proud independence, truly a chief’s daughter, Travis decided.

“I am of the People of the Blue Wolf. We were brought across the star lanes to make this world safe for ... for ... the....” She hesitated, and now there was a shade of puzzlement on her face. “There is a reason—a dream. No, there is the dream and there is reality. I am Kaydessa of the Golden Horde, but sometimes I remember other things—like this speech of strange words I am mouthing now——”

“The Golden Horde!” Travis knew now. The embroidery, Sons of the Blue Wolf, all fitted into a special pattern. But what a pattern! Scythian art, the ornament that the warriors of Genghis Khan bore so proudly. Tatars, Mongols—the barbarians who had swept from the fastness of the steppes to change the course of history, not only in Asia but across the plains of middle Europe. The men of the Emperor Khans who had ridden behind the yak-tailed standards of Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, Tamerlane—!

“The Golden Horde,” Travis repeated once again. “That lies far back in the history of another world, Wolf Daughter.”

She stared at him, a queer, lost expression on her dust-grimed face.

“I know.” Her voice was so muted he could hardly distinguish the words. “My people live in two times, and many do not realize that.”

Tsoay had crouched down beside them to listen. Now he put out his hand, touching Travis’ shoulder.

“Redax?”

“Or its like.” For Travis was sure of one point. The project, which had been training three teams for space colonization—one of Eskimos, one of Pacific Islanders, and one of his own Apaches—had no reason or chance to select Mongols from the wild past of the raiding Hordes. There was only one nation on Terra which could have picked such colonists.



“You are Russian.” He studied her carefully, intent on noting the effect of his words.

But she did not lose that lost look. “Russian ... Russian ...” she repeated, as if the very word was strange.

Travis was alarmed. Any Russian colony planted here could well possess technicians with machines capable of tracking a fugitive, and if mountain heights were protection against such a hunt, he intended to gain them, even by night traveling. He said this to Tsoay, and the other emphatically agreed.

“The horse is too lame to go on,” the younger man reported.

Travis hesitated for a long second. Since the time they had stolen their first mounts from the encroaching Spanish, horses had always been wealth to his people. To leave an animal which could well serve the clan was not right. But they dared not waste time with a lame beast.

“Leave it here, free,” he ordered.

“And the woman?”

“She goes with us. We must learn all we can of these people and what they do here. Listen, Wolf Daughter,” again Travis leaned close to make sure she was listening to him as he spoke with emphasis—“you will travel with us into these high places, and there will be no trouble from you.” He drew his knife and held the blade warningly before her eyes.

“It was already in my mind to go to the mountains,” she told him evenly. “Untie my hands, brave warrior, you have surely nothing to fear from a woman.”

His hand made a swift sweep and plucked a knife as long and keen as his from the folds of the sash beneath her loose outer garment.

“Not now, Wolf Daughter, since I have drawn your fangs.”

He helped her to her feet and slashed the cord about her wrists with her knife, which he then fastened to his own belt. Alerting the coyotes, he dispatched them ahead; and the three started on, the Mongol girl between the two Apaches. The abandoned horse nickered lonesomely and then began to graze on tufts of grass, moving slowly to favor his foot.

The two moons rode the sky as the hours advanced, their beams fighting the shadows. Travis felt reasonably safe from any attack at ground level, depending upon the coyotes for warning. But he held them all to a steady pace. And he did not question the girl again until all three of them hunkered down at a small mountain spring, to dash icy water over their faces and drink from cupped hands.

“Why do you flee your own people, Wolf Daughter?”

“My name is Kaydessa,” she corrected him.

He chuckled with laughter at the prim tone of her voice. “And you see here Tsoay of the People—the Apaches—while I am Fox.” He was giving her the English equivalent of his tribal name.

“Apaches.” She tried to repeat the word with the same accent he had used. “And what are Apaches?”

“Indians—Amerindians,” he explained. “But you have not answered my question, Kaydessa. Why do you run from your own people?”

“Not from my people,” she said, shaking her head determinedly. “From those others. It is like this—Oh, how can I make you understand rightly?” She spread her wet hands out before her

in the moonlight, the damp patches on her sleeves clinging to her arms. “There are my people of the Golden Horde, though once we were different and we can remember bits of that previous life. Then there are also the men who live in the sky ship and use the machine so that we think only the thoughts they would have us think. Now why,” she looked at Travis intently—“do I wish to tell you all this? It is strange. You say you are Indian—American—are we then enemies? There is a part memory which says that we are ... were....”

“Let us rather say,” he corrected her, “that the Apaches and the Horde are not enemies here and now, no matter what was before.” That was the truth, Travis recognized. By all accounts his people had come out of Asia in the very dim beginnings of migrating peoples. For all her dark-red hair and gray eyes, this girl who had been arbitrarily returned to a past just as they had been by Redax, could well be a distant clan-cousin.

“You—” Kaydessa’s fingers rested for a moment on his wrist—“you, too, were sent here from across the stars. Is this not so?”

“It is so.”

“And there are those here who govern you now?”

“No. We are free.”

“How did you become free?” she demanded fiercely.

Travis hesitated. He did not want to tell of the wrecked ship, the fact that his people possessed no real defenses against the Russian-controlled colony.

“We went to the mountains,” he replied evasively.

“Your governing machine failed?” Kaydessa laughed. “Ah, they are so great, those men of the machines. But they are smaller and weaker when their machines cannot obey them.”

“It is so with your camp?” Travis probed gently. He was not quite sure of her meaning, but he dared not ask more detailed questions without dangerously revealing his own ignorance.

“In some manner their control machine—it can only work upon those within a certain distance. They discovered that in the days of the first landing, when hunters went out freely and many of them did not return. After that when hunters were sent out to learn how lay this land, they went along in the flyer with a machine so that there would be no more escapes. But we knew!” Kaydessa’s fingers curled into small fists. “Yes, we knew that if we could get beyond the machines, there was freedom for us. And we planned—many of us—planned. Then nine or ten sleeps ago those others were very excited. They gathered in their ship, watching their machines. And something happened. For a while all those machines went dead.

“Jagatai, Kuchar, my brother Hulagur, Menlik....” She was counting the names off on her fingers. “They raided the horse herd, rode out....”

“And you?”

“I, too, should have ridden. But there was Aljar, my sister—Kuchar’s wife. She was very near her time and to ride thus, fleeing and fast, might kill her and the child. So I did not go. Her son was born that night, but the others had the machine at work once more. We might long to go here,” she brought her fist up to her breast, and then raised it to her head—“but there was that *here* which kept us to the camp and their will. We only knew that if we could reach the mountains, we might find our people who had already gained their freedom.”

“But you are here. How did you escape?” Tsoay wanted to know.

“They knew that I would have gone had it not been for Aljar. So they said they would make her ride out with them unless I played guide to lead them to my brother and the others. Then I knew I must take up the sword of duty and hunt with them. But I prayed that the spirits of the upper air look with favor upon me, and they granted aid....” Her eyes held a look of wonder. “For when we were out on the plains and well away from the settlement, a grass devil attacked the leader of the searching party, and he dropped the mind control and so it was broken. Then I rode. Blue Sky Above knows how I rode. And those others are not with their horses as are the people of the Wolf.”

“When did this happen?”

“Three suns ago.”

Travis counted back in his mind. Her date for the failure of the machine in the Russian camp seemed to coincide with the crash landing of the American ship. Had one thing any connection with the other? It was very possible. The planeting spacer might have fought some kind of weird duel with the other colony before it plunged to earth on the other side of the mountain range.

“Do you know where in these mountains your people hide?”

Kaydessa shook her head. “Only that I must head south, and when I reach the highest peak make a signal fire on the north slope. But that I cannot do now, for those in the flyer may see it. I know they are on my trail, for twice I have seen it. Listen, Fox, I ask this of you—I, Kaydessa, who am eldest daughter to the Khan—for you are like unto us, a warrior and a brave man, that I believe. It may be that you cannot be governed by their machine, for you have not rested under their spell, nor are of our blood. Therefore, if they come close enough to send forth the call, the call I must obey as if I were a slave dragged upon a horse rope, then do you bind my hands and feet and hold me here, no matter how much I struggle to follow that command. For that which is truly me does not want to go. Will you swear this by the fires which expel demons?”

The utter sincerity of her tone convinced Travis that she was pleading for aid against a danger she firmly believed in. Whether she was right about his immunity to the Russian mental control was another matter, and one he would rather not put to the test.

“We do not swear by your fires, Blue Wolf Maiden, but by the Path of the Lightning.” His fingers moved as if to curl about the sacred charred wood his people had once carried as “medicine.” “So do I promise!”

She looked at him for a long moment and then nodded in satisfaction.

They left the pool and pushed on toward the mountain slopes, working their way back to the pass. A low growl out of the dark brought them to an instant halt. Naginlta’s warning was sharp; there was danger ahead, acute danger.

The moonlight from the moons made a weird pattern of light and dark on the stretch ahead. Anything from a slinking four-footed hunter to a war party of intelligent beings might have been lying in wait there.

A flitting shadow out of shadows. Nalik’ideyu pressed against Travis’ legs, making a barrier of her warm body, attracting his attention to a spot at the left perhaps a hundred yards on. There was a great splotch of dark there, large enough to hide a really formidable opponent; that wordless communication between animal and man told Travis that such an opponent was just what was lurking there.

Whatever lay in ambush beside the upper track was growing impatient as its destined prey ceased to advance, the coyotes reported.

“Your left—beyond that pointed rock—in the big shadow—”

“Do you see it?” Tsoay demanded.

“No. But the *mba’* do.”

The men had their bows ready, arrows set to the cords. But in this light such weapons were practically useless unless the enemy moved into the path of the moon.

“What is it?” Kaydessa asked in a half whisper.

“Something waits for us ahead.”

Before he could stop her, she set her fingers to her lips and gave a piercing whistle.

There was answering movement in the shadow. Travis shot at that, his arrow followed instantly by one from Tsoay. There was a cry, scaling up in a throat-scalding scream which made Travis flinch. Not because of the sound, but because of the hint which lay behind it—could it have been a human cry?

The thing flopped out into a patch of moonlight. It was four-limbed, its body silvery—and it was large. But the worst was that it had been groveling on all fours when it fell, and now it was rising on its hind feet, one forepaw striking madly at the two arrows dancing head-deep in its upper shoulder. Man? No! But something sufficiently manlike to chill the three downtrail.

A whirling four-footed hunter dashed in, snapped at the creature’s legs, and it squalled again, aiming a blow with a forepaw; but the attacking coyote was already gone. Together Naginlta and Nalik’ideyu were harassing the creature, just as they had fought the split horn, giving the hunters time to shoot. Travis, although he again felt that touch of horror and disgust he could not account for, shot again.

Between them the Apaches must have sent a dozen arrows into the raving beast before it went to its knees and Naginlta sprang for its throat. Even then the coyote yelped and flinched, a bleeding gash across its head from the raking talons of the dying thing. When it no longer moved, Travis approached to see more closely what they had brought down. That smell....

Just as the embroidery on Kaydessa’s jacket had awakened memories from his Terran past, so did this stench remind him of something. Where—when—had he smelled it before? Travis connected it with dark, dark and danger. Then he gasped in a half exclamation.

Not on this world, no, but on two others: two worlds of that broken stellar empire where he had been an involuntary explorer two planet years ago! The beast things which had lived in the dark of the desert world the Terrans’ wandering galactic derelict had landed upon. Yes, the beast things whose nature they had never been able to deduce. Were they the degenerate dregs of a once intelligent species? Or were they animals, akin to man, but still animals?

The ape-things had controlled the night of the desert world. And they had been met again—also in the dark—in the ruins of the city which had been the final goal of the ship’s taped voyage. So they were a part of the vanished civilization. And Travis’ own vague surmise concerning Topaz was proven correct. This had not been an empty world for the long-gone space people. This planet had a purpose and a use, or else this beast would not have been here.

“Devil!” Kaydessa made a face of disgust.

“You know it?” Tsoay asked Travis. “What is it?”

“That I do not know, but it is a thing left over from the star people’s time. And I have seen it on two other of their worlds.”

“A man?” Tsoay surveyed the body critically. “It wears no clothes, has no weapons, but it walks erect. It looks like an ape, a very big ape. It is not a good thing, I think.”

“If it runs with a pack—as they do elsewhere—this could be a very bad thing.” Travis, remembering how these creatures had attacked in force on the other worlds, looked about him apprehensively. Even with the coyotes on guard, they could not stand up to such a pack closing in through the dark. They had better hole up in some defensible place and wait out the rest of the night.

Naginlta brought them to a cliff overhang where they could set their backs to the hard rock of the mountain, face outward to a space they could cover with arrow flight if the need arose. And the coyotes, lying before them with their noses resting on paws, would, Travis knew, alert them long before the enemy could close in.

They huddled against the rock, Kaydessa between them, alert at first to every sound of the night, their hearts beating faster at a small scrape of gravel, the rustle of a bush. Slowly, they began to relax.

“It is well that two sleep while one guards,” Travis observed. “By morning we must push on, out of this country.”

So the two Apaches shared the watch in turn, the Tatar girl at first protesting, and then falling exhausted into a slumber which left her breathing heavily.

Travis, on the dawn watch, began to speculate about the ape-thing they had killed. The two previous times he had met this creature it had been in ruins of the old empire. Were there ruins somewhere here? He wanted to make sure about that. On the other hand, there was the problem of the Tatar-Mongol settlement controlled by the Reds. There was no doubt in his mind that, were the Reds to suspect the existence of the Apache camp, they would make every attempt to hunt down and kill or capture the survivors from the American ship. A warning must be carried to the rancheria as quickly as they could make the return trip.

Beside him the girl stirred, raising her head. Travis glanced at her and then watched with attention. She was looking straight ahead, her eyes as fixed as if she were in a trance. Now she inched forward from the mountain wall, wriggling out of its shelter.

“What—?” Tsoay had awakened again. But Travis was already moving. He pushed on, rushing up to stand beside her, shoulder to shoulder.

“What is it? Where do you go?” he asked.

She made no answer, did not even seem aware of his voice. He caught at her arm and she pulled to free herself. When he tightened his grip she did not fight him actively as during their first encounter, but merely pulled and twisted as if she were being compelled to go ahead.

Compulsion! He remembered her plea the night before, asking his help against recapture by the machine. Now he deliberately tripped her, twisted her hands behind her back. She swayed in his hold, trying to win to her feet, paying no attention to him save as a hindrance against her answering that demanding call he could not hear.

## 7

“What happened?” Tsoay took a swift stride, stood over the writhing girl whose strength was now such that Travis had to exert all his efforts to control her.

“I think that the machine she spoke about is holding her. She is being drawn to it out of hiding as one draws a calf on a rope.”

Both coyotes had arisen and were watching the struggle with interest, but there was no warning from them. Whatever called Kaydessa into such mindless and will-less answer did not touch the animals. And neither Apache felt it. So perhaps only Kaydessa’s people were subject to it, as she had thought. How far away was that machine? Not too near, for otherwise the coyotes would have traced the man or men operating it.

“We cannot move her,” Tsoay brought the problem into the open—“unless we bind and carry her. She is one of their kind. Why not let her go to them, unless you fear she will talk.” His hand went to the knife in his belt, and Travis knew what primitive impulse moved in the younger man.

In the old days a captive who was likely to give trouble was efficiently eliminated. In Tsoay that memory was awake now. Travis shook his head.

“She has said that others of her kin are in these hills. We must not set two wolf packs hunting us,” Travis said, giving the more practical reason which might better appeal to that savage instinct for self-preservation. “But you are right, since she has tried to answer this summons, we cannot force her with us. Therefore, do you take the back trail. Tell Buck what we have discovered and have him make the necessary precautions against either these Mongol outlaws or a Red thrust over the mountains.”

“And you?”

“I stay to discover where the outlaws hide and learn all I can of this settlement. We may have reason to need friends——”

“Friends!” Tsoay spat. “The People need no friends! If we have warning, we can hold our own country! As the Pinda-lick-o-yi have discovered before.”

“Bows and arrows against guns and machines?” Travis inquired bitingly. “We must know more before we make any warrior boasts for the future. Tell Buck what we have discovered. Also say I will join you before,” Travis calculated—“ten suns. If I do not, send no search party; the clan is too small to risk more lives for one.”

“And if these Reds take you——?”

Travis grinned, not pleasantly. “They shall learn nothing! Can their machines sort out the thoughts of a dead man?” He did not intend his future to end as abruptly as that, but also he would not be easy meat for any Red hunting party.

Tsoay took a share of their rations and refused the company of the coyotes. Travis realized that for all his seeming ease with the animals, the younger scout had little more liking for them than Deklay and the others back at the rancheria. Tsoay went at dawn, aiming at the pass.

Travis sat down beside Kaydessa. They had bound her to a small tree, and she strove incessantly to free herself, turning her head at an acute and painful angle, only to face the

same direction in which she had been tied. There was no breaking the spell which held her. And she would soon wear herself out with that struggling. Then he struck an expert blow.

The girl sagged limply, and he untied her. It all depended now on the range of the beam or broadcast of that diabolical machine. From the attitude of the coyotes, he assumed that those using the machine had not made any attempt to come close. They might not even know where their quarry was; they would simply sit and wait in the foothills for the caller to reel in a helpless captive.

Travis thought that if he moved Kaydessa farther away from that point, sooner or later they would be out of range and she would awake from the knockout, free again. Although she was not light, he could manage to carry her for a while. So burdened, Travis started on, with the coyotes scouting ahead.

He speedily discovered that he had set himself an ambitious task. The going was rough, and carrying the girl reduced his advance to a snail-paced crawl. But it gave him time to make careful plans.

As long as the Reds held the balance of power on this side of the mountain range, the rancheria was in danger. Bows and knives against modern armament was no contest at all. And it would only be a matter of time before exploration on the part of the northern settlement—or some tracking down of Tatar fugitives—would bring the enemy across the pass.

The Apaches could move farther south into the unknown continent below the wrecked ship, thus prolonging the time before they were discovered. But that would only postpone the inevitable showdown. Whether Travis could make his clan believe that, was also a matter of concern.

On the other hand, if the Red overlords could be met in some practical way.... Travis' mind fastened on that more attractive idea, worrying it as Naginlta worried a prey, tearing out and devouring the more delicate portions. Every bit of sense and prudence argued against such an approach, whose success could rest only between improbability and impossibility; yet that was the direction in which he longed to move.

Across his shoulder Kaydessa stirred and moaned. The Apache doubled his efforts to reach the outcrop of rock he could see ahead, chiseled into high relief by the winds. In its lee they would have protection from any sighting from below. Panting, he made it, lowering the girl into the guarded cup of space, and waited.

She moaned again, lifted one hand to her head. Her eyes were half open, and still he could not be sure whether they focused on him and her surroundings intelligently or not.

“Kaydessa!”

Her heavy eyelids lifted, and he had no doubt she could see him. But there was no recognition of his identity in her gaze, only surprise and fear—the same expression she had worn during their first meeting in the foothills.

“Daughter of the Wolf,” he spoke slowly. “Remember!” Travis made that an order, an emphatic appeal to the mind under the influence of the caller.

She frowned, the struggle she was making naked on her face. Then she answered:

“You—Fox—”

Travis grunted with relief, his alarm subsiding. Then she *could* remember.

“Yes,” he responded eagerly.

But she was gazing about, her puzzlement growing. "Where is this—?"

"We are higher in the mountains."

Now fear was pushing out bewilderment. "How did I come here?"

"I brought you." Swiftly he outlined what had happened at their night camp.

The hand which had been at her head was now pressed tight across her lips as if she were biting furiously into its flesh to still some panic of her own, and her gray eyes were round and haunted.

"You are free now," Travis said.

Kaydessa nodded, and then dropped her hand to speak. "You brought me away from the hunters. You did not have to obey them?"

"I heard nothing."

"You do not hear—you feel!" She shuddered. "Please." She clawed at the stone beside her, pulling up to her feet. "Let us go—let us go quickly! They will try again—move farther in—"

"Listen," Travis had to be sure of one thing—"have they any way of knowing that they had you under control and that you have again escaped?"

Kaydessa shook her head, some of the panic again shadowing her eyes.

"Then we'll just go on—" his chin lifted to the wastelands before them—"try to keep out of their reach."

And away from the pass to the south, he told himself silently. He dared not lead the enemy to that secret, so he must travel west or hole up somewhere in this unknown wilderness until they could be sure Kaydessa was no longer susceptible to that call, or that they were safely beyond its beamed radius. There was the chance of contacting her outlaw kin, just as there was the chance of stumbling into a pack of the ape-things. Before dark they must discover a protected camp site.

They needed water, food. He had a bare half dozen ration tablets. But the coyotes could locate water.

"Come!" Travis beckoned to Kaydessa, motioning her to climb ahead of him so that he could watch for any indication of her succumbing once again to the influence of the enemy. But his burdened early morning flight had told on Travis more than he thought, and he discovered he could not spur himself on to a pace better than a walk. Now and again one of the coyotes, usually Nalik'ideyu, would come into view, express impatience in both stance and mental signal, and then be gone again. The Apache was increasingly aware that the animals were disturbed, yet to his tentative gropings at contact they did not reply. Since they gave no warning of hostile animal or man, he could only be on constant guard, watching the countryside about him.

They had been following a ledge for several minutes before Travis was aware of some strange features of that path. Perhaps he had actually noted them with a trained eye before his archaeological studies of the recent past gave him a reason for the faint marks. This crack in the mountain's skin might have begun as a natural fault, but afterward it had been worked with tools, smoothed, widened to serve the purpose of some form of intelligence!

Travis caught at Kaydessa's shoulder to slow her pace. He could not have told why he did not want to speak aloud here, but he felt the need for silence. She glanced around, perplexed, more so when he went down on his knees and ran his fingers along one of those ancient tool



marks. He was certain it was very old. Inside of him anticipation bubbled. A road made with such labor could only lead to something of importance. He was going to make the discovery, the dream which had first drawn him into these mountains.

“What is it?” Kaydessa knelt beside him, frowning at the ledge.

“This was cut by someone, a long time ago,” Travis half whispered and then wondered why. There was no reason to believe the road makers could hear him when perhaps a thousand years or more lay between the chipping of that stone and this day.

The Tatar girl looked over her shoulder. Perhaps she too was troubled by the sense that here time was subtly telescoped, that past and present might be meeting. Or was that feeling with them both because of their enforced conditioning?

“Who?” Now her voice sank in turn.

“Listen—” he regarded her intently—“did your people or the Reds ever find any traces of the old civilization here—ruins?”

“No.” She leaned forward, tracing with her own finger the same almost-obliterated marks which had intrigued Travis. “But I think they have looked. Before they discovered that we could be free, they sent out parties—to hunt, they said—but afterward they always asked many questions about the country. Only they never asked about ruins. Is that what they wished us to find? But why? Of what value are old stones piled on one another?”

“In themselves, little, save for the knowledge they may give us of the people who piled them. But for what the stones might contain—much value!”

“And how do you know what they might contain, Fox?”

“Because I have seen such treasure houses of the star men,” he returned absently. To him the marks on the ledge were a pledge of greater discoveries to come. He must find where that carefully constructed road ran—to what it led. “Let us see where this will take us.”

But first he gave the chattering signal in four sharp bursts. And the tawny-gray bodies came out of the tangled brush, bounding up to the ledge. Together the coyotes faced him, their attention all for his halting communication.

Ruins might lie ahead; he hoped that they did. But on another planet such ruins had twice proved to be deadly traps, and only good fortune had prevented their closing on Terran explorers. If the ape-things or any other dangerous form of life had taken up residence before them, he wanted good warning.

Together the coyotes turned and loped along the now level way of the ledge, disappearing around a curve fitted to the mountain side while Travis and Kaydessa followed.

They heard it before they saw its source—a waterfall. Probably not a large one, but high. Rounding the curve, they came into a fine mist of spray where sunlight made rainbows of color across a filmy veil of water.

For a long moment they stood entranced. Kaydessa then gave a little cry, held out her hands to the purling mist and brought them to her lips again to suck the gathered moisture.

Water slicked the surface of the ledge, and Travis pushed her back against the wall of the cliff. As far as he could discern, their road continued behind the out-flung curtain of water, and footing on the wet stone was treacherous. With their backs to the solid security of the wall, facing outward into the solid drape of water, they edged behind it and came out into rainbowed sunlight again.

Here either provident nature or ancient art had hollowed a pocket in the stone which was filled with water. They drank. Then Travis filled his canteen while Kaydessa washed her face, holding the cold freshness of the moisture to her cheeks with both palms.

She spoke, but he could not hear her through the roar. She leaned closer and raised her voice to a half shout:

“This is a place of spirits! Do you not also feel their power, Fox?”

Perhaps for a space out of time he did feel something. This was a watering place, perhaps a never-ceasing watering place—and to his desert-born-and-bred race all water was a spirit gift never to be taken for granted. The rainbow—the Spirit People’s sacred sign—old beliefs stirred in Travis, moving him. “I feel,” he said, nodding in emphasis to his agreement.

They followed the ledge road to a section where a landslide of an earlier season had choked it. Travis worked a careful way across the debris, Kaydessa obeying his guidance in turn. Then they were on a sloping downward way which led to a staircase—the treads weather-worn and crumbling, the angle so steep Travis wondered if it had ever been intended for beings with a physique approximating the Terrans’.

They came to a cleft where an arch of stone was chiseled out as a roofing. Travis thought he could make out a trace of carving on the capstone, so worn by years and weather that it was now only a faint shadow of design.

The cleft was a door into another valley. Here, too, golden mist swirled in tendrils to disguise and cloak what stood there. Travis had found his ruins. Only the structures were intact, not breached by time.

Mist flowed in lapping tongues back and forth, confusing outlines, now shuttering, now baring oval windows which were spaced in diamonds of four on round tower surfaces. There were no visible cracks, no cloaking of climbing vegetation, nothing to suggest age and long roots in the valley. Nor did the architecture he could view match any he had seen on those other worlds.

Travis strode away from the cleft doorway. Under his moccasins was a block pavement, yellow and green stone set in a simple pattern of checks. This, too, was level, unchipped and undisturbed, save for a drift or two of soil driven in by the wind. And nowhere could he see any vegetation.

The towers were of the same green stone as half the pavement blocks, a glassy green which made him think of jade—if jade could be mined in such quantities as these five-story towers demanded.

Nalik’ideyu padded to him, and he could hear the faint click of her claws on the pavement. There was a deep silence in this place, as if the air itself swallowed and digested all sound. The wind which had been with them all the day of their journeying was left beyond the cleft.

Yet there was life here. The coyote told him that in her own way. She had not made up her mind concerning that life—wariness and curiosity warred in her now as her pointed muzzle lifted toward the windows overhead.

The windows were all well above ground level, but there was no opening in the first stories as far as Travis could see. He debated moving into the range of those windows to investigate the far side of the towers for doorways. The mist and the message from Nalik’ideyu nourished his suspicions. Out in the open he would be too good a target for whatever or whoever might be standing within the deep-welled frames.

The silence was shattered by a boom. Travis jumped, slewed half around, knife in hand.

Boom-boom ... a second heavy beat-beat ... then a clangor with a swelling echo.

Kaydessa flung back her head and called, her voice rising up as if tunneled by the valley walls. She then whistled as she had done when they fronted the ape-thing and ran on to catch at Travis' sleeve, her face eager.

“My people! Come—it is my people!”

She tugged him on before breaking into a run, weaving fearlessly around the base of one of the towers. Travis ran after her, afraid he might lose her in the mist.

Three towers, another stretch of open pavement, and then the mist lifted to show them a second carved doorway not two hundred yards ahead. The boom-boom seemed to pull Kaydessa, and Travis could do nothing but trail her, the coyotes now trotting beside him.

## 8

They burst through a last wide band of mist into a wilderness of tall grass and shrubs. Travis heard the coyotes give tongue, but it was too late. Out of nowhere whirled a leather loop, settling about his chest, snapping his arms tight to his body, taking him off his feet with a jerk to be dragged helplessly along the ground behind a galloping horse.

A tawny fury sprang in the air to snap at the horse's head. Travis kicked fruitlessly, trying to regain his feet as the horse reared, and fought against the control of his shouting rider. All through the melee the Apache heard Kaydessa shrilly screaming words he did not understand.

Travis was on his knees, coughing in the dust, exerting the muscles in his chest and shoulders to loosen the lariat. On either side of him the coyotes wove a snarling pattern of defiance, dashing back and forth to present no target for the enemy, yet keeping the excited horses so stirred up that their riders could use neither ropes nor blades.

Then Kaydessa ran between two of the ringing horses to Travis and jerked at the loop about him. The tough, braided leather eased its hold, and he was able to gasp in full lungfuls of air. She was still shouting, but the tone had changed from one of recognition to a definite scolding.

Travis won to his feet just as the rider who had lassoed him finally got his horse under rein and dismounted. Holding the rope, the man walked hand over hand toward them, as Travis back on the Arizona range would have approached a nervous, unschooled pony.

The Mongol was an inch or so shorter than the Apache, and his face was young, though he had a drooping mustache bracketing his mouth with slender spear points of black hair. His breeches were tucked into high red boots, and he wore a loose felt jacket patterned with the same elaborate embroidery Travis had seen on Kaydessa's. On his head was a hat with a wide fur border—in spite of the heat—and that too bore touches of scarlet and gold design.

Still holding his lariat, the Mongol reached Kaydessa and stood for a moment, eyeing her up and down before he asked a question. She gave an impatient twitch to the rope. The coyotes snarled, but the Apache thought the animals no longer considered the danger immediate.

"This is my brother Hulagur." Kaydessa made the introduction over her shoulder. "He does not have your speech."

Hulagur not only did not understand, he was also impatient. He jerked at the rope with such sudden force that Travis was almost thrown. Then Kaydessa dragged as fiercely on the lariat in the other direction and burst into a soaring harangue which drew the rest of the men closer.

Travis flexed his upper arms, and the slack gained by Kaydessa's action made the lariat give again. He studied the Tatar outlaws. There were five of them beside Hulagur, lean men, hard-faced, narrow-eyed, the ragged clothing of three pieced out with scraps of hide. Besides the swords with the curved blades, they were armed with bows, two to each man, one long, one shorter. One of the riders carried a lance, long tassels of woolly hair streaming from below its head. Travis saw in them a formidable array of barbaric fighting men, but he thought that man for man the Apaches could not only take on the Mongols with confidence, but might well defeat them.

The Apache had never been a hot-headed, ride-for-glory fighter like the Cheyenne, the Sioux, and the Comanche of the open plains. He estimated the odds against him, used ambush, trick, and every feature of the countryside as weapon and defense. Fifteen Apache fighting men

under Chief Geronimo had kept five thousand American and Mexican troops in the field for a year and had come off victorious for the moment.

Travis knew the tales of Genghis Khan and his formidable generals who swept over Asia into Europe, unbeaten and seemingly undefeatable. But they had been a wild wave, fed by a reservoir of manpower from the steppes of their homeland, utilizing driven walls of captives to protect their own men in city assaults and attacks. He doubted if even that endless sea of men could have won the Arizona desert defended by Apaches under Cochise, Victorio, or Magnus Colorado. The white man had done it—by superior arms and attrition; but bow against bow, knife against sword, craft and cunning against craft and cunning—he did not think so....

Hulagur dropped the end of the lariat, and Kaydessa swung around, loosening the loop so that the rope fell to Travis' feet. The Apache stepped free of it, turned and passed between two of the horsemen to gather up the bow he had dropped. The coyotes had gone with him and when he turned again to face the company of Tatars, both animals crowded past him to the entrance of the valley, plainly urging him to retire there.

The horsemen had faced about also, and the warrior with the lance balanced the shaft of the weapon in his hand as if considering the possibility of trying to spear Travis. But just then Kaydessa came up, towing Hulagur by a firm hold on his sash-belt.

"I have told this one," she reported to Travis, "how it is between us and that you also are enemy to those who hunt us. It is well that you sit together beside a fire and talk of these things."

Again that boom-boom broke her speech, coming from farther out in the open land.

"You will do this?" She made of it a half question, half statement.

Travis glanced about him. He could dodge back into the misty valley of the towers before the Tatars could ride him down. However, if he could patch up some kind of truce between his people and the outlaws, the Apaches would have only the Reds from the settlement to watch. Too many times in Terran past had war on two fronts been disastrous.

"I come—carrying this—and not pulled by your ropes." He held up his bow in an exaggerated gesture so that Hulagur could understand.

Coiling the lariat, the Mongol looked from the Apache bow to Travis. Slowly, and with obvious reluctance, he nodded agreement.

At Hulagur's call the lancer rode up to the waiting Apache, stretched out a booted foot in the heavy stirrup, and held down a hand to bring Travis up behind him riding double. Kaydessa mounted in the same fashion behind her brother.

Travis looked at the coyotes. Together the animals stood in the door to the tower valley, and neither made any move to follow as the horses trotted off. He beckoned with his hand and called to them.

Heads up, they continued to watch him go in company with the Mongols. Then without any reply to his coaxing, they melted back into the mists. For a moment Travis was tempted to slide down and run the risk of taking a lance point between the shoulders as he followed Naginlta and Nalik'ideyu into retreat. He was startled, jarred by the new awareness of how much he had come to depend on the animals. Ordinarily, Travis Fox was not one to be governed by the wishes of a *mba'a*, intelligent and un-animallike as it might be. This was an affair of men, and coyotes had no part in it!

Half an hour later Travis sat in the outlaw camp. There were fifteen Mongols in sight, a half dozen women and two children adding to the count. On a hillock near their yurts, the round brush-and-hide shelters—not too different from the wickiups of Travis' own people—was a crude drum, a hide stretched taut over a hollowed section of log. And next to that stood a man wearing a tall pointed cap, a red robe, and a girdle from which swung a fringe of small bones, tiny animal skulls, and polished bits of stone and carved wood.

It was this man's efforts which sent the boom-boom sounding at intervals over the landscape. Was this a signal—part of a ritual? Travis was not certain, though he guessed that the drummer was either medicine man or shaman, and so of some power in this company. Such men were credited with the ability to prophesy and also endowed with mediumship between man and spirit in the old days of the great Hordes.

The Apache evaluated the rest of the company. As was true of his own party, these men were much the same age—young and vigorous. And it was also apparent that Hulagur held a position of some importance among them—if he were not their chief.

After a last resounding roll on the drum, the shaman thrust the sticks into his girdle and came down to the fire at the center of the camp. He was taller than his fellows, pole thin under his robes, his face narrow, clean-shaven, with brows arched by nature to give him an unchanging expression of scepticism. He strode along, his tinkling collection of charms providing him with a not unmusical accompaniment, and came to stand directly before Travis, eying him carefully.

Travis copied his silence in what was close to a duel of wills. There was that in the shaman's narrowed green eyes which suggested that if Hulagur did in fact lead these fighting men, he had an advisor of determination and intelligence behind him.

"This is Menlik." Kaydessa did not push past the men to the fireside, but her voice carried.

Hulagur growled at his sister, but his admonition made no impression on her, and she replied in as hot a tone. The shaman's hand went up, silencing both of them.

"You are—who?" Like Kaydessa, Menlik spoke a heavily accented English.

"I am Travis Fox, of the Apaches."

"The Apaches," the shaman repeated. "You are of the West, the American West, then."

"You know much, man of spirit talk."

"One remembers. At times one remembers," Menlik answered almost absently. "How does an Apache find his way across the stars?"

"The same way Menlik and his people did," Travis returned. "You were sent to settle this planet, and so were we."

"There are many more of you?" countered Menlik swiftly.

"Are there not many of the Horde? Would one man, or three, or four, be sent to hold a world?" Travis fenced. "You hold the north, we the south of this land."

"But *they* are not governed by a machine!" Kaydessa cut in. "They are free!"

Menlik frowned at the girl. "Woman, this is a matter for warriors. Keep your tongue silent between your jaws!"

She stamped one foot, standing with her fists on her hips.

“I am a Daughter of the Blue Wolf. And we are all warriors—men and women alike—so shall we be as long as the Horde is not free to ride where we wish! These men have won their freedom; it is well that we learn how.”

Menlik’s expression did not change, but his lids drooped over his eyes as a murmur of what might be agreement came from the group. More than one of them must have understood enough English to translate for the others. Travis wondered about that. Had these men and women who had outwardly reverted to the life of their nomad ancestors once been well educated in the modern sense, educated enough to learn the basic language of the nation their rulers had set up as their principal enemy?

“So you ride the land south of the mountains?” the shaman continued.

“That is true.”

“Then why did you come hither?”

Travis shrugged. “Why does anyone ride or travel into new lands? There is a desire to see what may lie beyond——”

“Or to scout before the march of warriors!” Menlik snapped. “There is no peace between your rulers and mine. Do you ride now to take the herds and pastures of the Horde—or to try to do so?”

Travis turned his head deliberately from side to side, allowing them all to witness his slow and openly contemptuous appraisal of their camp.

“*This* is your Horde, Shaman? Fifteen warriors? Much has changed since the days of Temujin, has it not?”

“What do you know of Temujin—you, who are a man of no ancestors, out of the West?”

“What do I know of Temujin? That he was a leader of warriors and became Genghis Khan, the great lord of the East. But the Apaches had their warlords also, rider of barren lands. And I am of those who raided over two nations when Victorio and Cochise scattered their enemies as a man scatters a handful of dust in the wind.”

“You talk bold, Apache....” There was a hint of threat in that.

“I speak as any warrior, Shaman. Or are you so used to talking with spirits instead of men that you do not realize that?”

He might have been alienating the shaman by such a sharp reply, but Travis thought he judged the temper of these people. To face them boldly was the only way to impress them. They would not treat with an inferior, and he was already at a disadvantage coming on foot, without any backing in force, into a territory held by horsemen who were suspicious and jealous of their recently acquired freedom. His only chance was to establish himself as an equal and then try to convince them that Apache and Tatar-Mongol had a common cause against the Reds who controlled the settlement on the northern plains.

Menlik’s right hand went to his sash-girdle and plucked out a carved stick which he waved between them, muttering phrases Travis could not understand. Had the shaman retreated so far along the road to his past that he now believed in his own supernatural powers? Or was this to impress his watching followers?

“You call upon your spirits for aid, Menlik? But the Apache has the companionship of the *ga-n*. Ask of Kaydessa: Who hunts with the Fox in the wilds?” Travis’ sharp challenge stopped that wand in mid-air. Menlik’s head swung to the girl.

“He hunts with wolves who think like men.” She supplied the information the shaman would not openly ask for. “I have seen them act as his scouts. This is no spirit thing, but real and of this world!”

“Any man may train a dog to his bidding!” Menlik spat.

“Does a dog obey orders which are not said aloud? These brown wolves come and sit before him, look into his eyes. And then he knows what lies within their heads, and they know what he would have them do. This is not the way of a master of hounds with his pack!”

Again the murmur ran about the camp as one or two translated. Menlik frowned. Then he rammed his sorcerer’s wand back into his sash.

“If you are a man of power—such powers,” he said slowly, “then you may walk alone where those who talk with spirits go—into the mountains.” He then spoke over his shoulder in his native tongue, and one of the women reached behind her into a hut, brought out a skin bag and a horn cup. Kaydessa took the cup from her and held it while the other woman poured a white liquid from the bag to fill it.

Kaydessa passed the cup to Menlik. He pivoted with it in his hand, dribbling expertly over its brim a few drops at each point of the compass, chanting as he moved. Then he sucked in a mouthful of the contents before presenting the vessel to Travis.

The Apache smelled the same sour scent that had clung to the emptied bag in the foothills. And another part of memory supplied him with the nature of the drink. This was kumiss, a fermented mare’s milk which was the wine and water of the steppes.

He forced himself to swallow a draft, though it was alien to his taste, and passed the cup back to Menlik. The shaman emptied the horn and, with that, set aside ceremony. With an upraised hand he beckoned Travis to the fire again, indicating a pot set on the coals.

“Rest ... eat!” he bade abruptly.

Night was gathering in. Travis tried to calculate how far Tsoay must have backtracked to the rancheria. He thought that he could have already made the pass and be within a day and a half from the Apache camp if he pushed on, as he would. As to where the coyotes were, Travis had no idea. But it was plain that he himself must remain in this encampment for the night or risk rousing the Mongols’ suspicion once more.

He ate of the stew, spearing chunks out of the pot with the point of his knife. And it was not until he sat back, his hunger appeased, that the shaman dropped down beside him.

“The Khatun Kaydessa says that when she was slave to the caller, you did not feel its chains,” he began.

“Those who rule you are not my overlords. The bonds they set upon your minds do not touch me.” Travis hoped that that was the truth and his escape that morning had not been just a fluke.

“This could be, for you and I are not of one blood,” Menlik agreed. “Tell me—how did you escape your bonds?”

“The machine which held us so was broken,” Travis replied with a portion of the truth, and Menlik sucked in his breath.

“The machines, always the machines!” he cried hoarsely. “A thing which can sit in a man’s head and make him do what it will against his will; it is demon sent! There are other machines to be broken, Apache.”



“Words will not break them,” Travis pointed out.

“Only a fool rides to his death without hope of striking a single blow before he chokes on the blood in his throat,” Menlik retorted. “We cannot use bow or tulwar against weapons which flame and kill quicker than any storm lightning! And always the mind machines can make a man drop his knife and stand helplessly waiting for the slave collar to be set on his neck!”

Travis asked a question of his own. “I know that they can bring a caller part way into this mountain, for this very day I saw its effect upon the maiden. But there are many places in the hills well set for ambushes, and those unaffected by the machine could be waiting there. Would there be many machines so that they could send out again and again?”

Menlik’s bony hand played with his wand. Then a slow smile curved his lips into the guise of a hunting cat’s noiseless snarl.

“There is meat in that pot, Apache, rich meat, good for the filling of a lean belly! So men whose minds the machine could not trouble—such men to be waiting in ambush for the taking of the men who use such a machine—yes. But here would have to be bait, very good bait for such a trap, Lord of Wiles. Never do those others come far into the mountains. Their flyer does not lift well here, and they do not trust traveling on horseback. They were greatly angered to come so far in to reach Kaydessa, though they could not have been too close, or you would not have escaped at all. Yes, strong bait.”

“Such bait as perhaps the knowledge that there were strangers across the mountains?”

Menlik turned his wand about in his hands. He was no longer smiling, and his glance at Travis was sharp and swift.

“Do you sit as Khan in your tribe, Lord?”

“I sit as one they will listen to.” Travis hoped that was so. Whether Buck and the moderates would hold clan leadership upon his return was a fact he could not count upon as certain.

“This is a thing which we must hold council over,” Menlik continued. “But it is an idea of power. Yes, one to think about, Lord. And I shall think....”

He got up and moved away. Travis blinked at the fire. He was very tired, and he disliked sleeping in this camp. But he must not go without the rest his body needed to supply him with a clear head in the morning. And not showing uneasiness might be one way of winning Menlik’s confidence.

## 9

Travis settled his back against the spire of rock and raised his right hand into the path of the sun, cradling in his palm a disk of glistening metal. Flash ... flash ... he made the signal pattern just as his ancestors a hundred years earlier and far across space had used trade mirrors to relay war alerts among the Chiricahua and White Mountain ranges. If Tsoay had returned safely, and if Buck had kept the agreed lookout on that peak a mile or so ahead, then the clan would know that he was coming and with what escort.

He waited now, rubbing the small metal mirror absently on the loose sleeve of his shirt, waiting for a reply. Mirrors were best, not smoke fires which would broadcast too far the presence of men in the hills. Tsoay must have returned....

“What is it that you do?”

Menlik, his shaman’s robe pulled up so that his breeches and boots were dark against the golden rock, climbed up beside the Apache. Menlik, Hulagur, and Kaydessa were riding with Travis, offering him one of their small ponies to hurry the trip. He was still regarded warily by the Tatars, but he did not blame them for their cautious attitude.

“Ah—” A flicker of light from the point ahead. One ... two ... three flashes, a pause, then two more together. He had been read. Buck had dispatched scouts to meet them, and knowing his people’s skill at the business, Travis was certain the Tatars would never suspect their flanking unless the Apaches purposefully revealed themselves. Also the Tatars were not to go to the rancheria, but would be met at a mid-point by a delegation of Apaches. This was no time for the Tatars to learn just how few the clan numbered.

Menlik watched Travis flash an acknowledgment to the sentry ahead. “In this way you speak to your men?”

“This way I speak.”

“A thing good and to be remembered. We have the drum, but that is for the ears of all with hearing. This is for the eyes only of those on watch for it. Yes, a good thing. And your people—they will meet with us?”

“They wait ahead,” Travis confirmed.

It was close to midday and the heat, gathered in the rocky ways, was like a heaviness in the air itself. The Tatars had shucked their heavy jackets and rolled the fur brims of their hats far up their heads away from their sweat-beaded faces. And at every halt they passed from hand to hand the skin bag of kumiss.

Now even the ponies shuffled on with drooping heads, picking a way in a cut which deepened into a canyon. Travis kept a watch for the scouts. And not for the first time he thought of the disappearance of the coyotes. Somehow, back in the Tatar camp, he had counted confidently on the animals’ rejoining him once he had started his return over the mountains.

But he had seen nothing of either beast, nor had he felt that unexplainable mental contact with them which had been present since his first awakening on Topaz. Why they had left him so unceremoniously after defending him from the Mongol attack, and why they were keeping themselves aloof now, he did not know. But he was conscious of a thread of alarm for their continued absence, and he hoped he would find they had gone back to the rancheria.

The ponies thudded dispiritedly along a sandy wash which bottomed the canyon. Here the heat became a leaden weight and the men were panting like four-footed beasts running before hunters. Finally Travis sighted what he had been seeking, a flicker of movement on the wall well above. He flung up his hand, pulling his mount to a stand. Apaches stood in full view, bows ready, arrows on cords. But they made no sound.

Kaydessa cried out, booted her mount to draw equal with Travis.

“A trap!” Her face, flushed with heat, was also stark with anger.

Travis smiled slowly. “Is there a rope about you, Wolf Daughter?” he inquired softly. “Are you now dragged across this sand?”

Her mouth opened and then closed again. The quirt she had half raised to slash at him, flopped across her pony’s neck.

The Apache glanced back at the two men. Hulagur’s hand was on his sword hilt, his eyes darting from one of those silent watchers to the next. But the utter hopelessness of the Tatar position was too plain. Only Menlik made no move toward any weapon, even his spirit wand. Instead, he sat quietly in the saddle, displaying no emotion toward the Apaches save his usual self-confident detachment.

“We go on.” Travis pointed ahead.

Just as suddenly as they had appeared from the heart of the golden cliffs, so did the scouts vanish. Most of them were already on their way to the point Buck had selected for the meeting place. There had been only six men up there, but the Tatars had no way of knowing just how large a portion of the whole clan that number was.

Travis’ pony lifted his head, nickered, and achieved a stumbling trot. Somewhere ahead was water, one of those oases of growth and life which pocked the whole mountain range—to the preservation of all animals and all men.

Menlik and Hulagur pushed on until their mounts were hard on the heels of the two ridden by the girl and Travis. Travis wondered if they still waited for some arrow to strike home, though he saw that both men rode with outward disregard for the patrolling scouts.

A grass-leaf bush beckoned them on and again the ponies quickened pace, coming out into a tributary canyon which housed a small pool and a good stand of grass and brush. To one side of the water Buck stood, his arms folded across his chest, armed only with his belt knife. Grouped behind him were Deklay, Tsoay, Nolan, Manulito—Travis tabulated hurriedly. Manulito and Deklay were to be classed together—or had been when he was last in the rancheria. On Buck’s stairway from the past, both had halted more than halfway down. Nolan was a quiet man who seldom spoke, and whose opinion Travis could not foretell. Tsoay would back Buck.

Probably such a divided party was the best Travis could have hoped to gather. A delegation composed entirely of those who were ready to leave the past of the Redax—a collection of Bucks and Jil-Lees—was outside the bounds of possibility. But Travis was none too happy to have Deklay in on this.

Travis dismounted, letting the pony push forward by himself to dip nose into the pool.

“This is,” Travis pointed politely with his chin—”Menlik, one who talks with spirits.... Hulagur, who is son to a chief ... and Kaydessa, who is daughter to a chief. They are of the horse people of the north.” He made the introduction carefully in English.

Then he turned to the Tatars. "Buck, Deklay, Nolan, Manulito, Tsoay," he named them all, "these stand to listen, and to speak for the Apaches."

But sometime later when the two parties sat facing each other, he wondered whether a common decision could come from the clansmen on his side of that irregular circle. Deklay's expression was closed; he had even edged a short way back, as if he had no desire to approach the strangers. And Travis read into every line of Deklay's body his distrust and antagonism.

He himself began to speak, retelling his adventures since they had followed Kaydessa's trail, sketching in the situation at the Tatar-Mongol settlement as he had learned it from her and from Menlik. He was careful to speak in English so that the Tatars could hear all he was reporting to his own kind. And the Apaches listened blank-faced, though Tsoay must already have reported much of this. When Travis was done it was Deklay who asked a question:

"What have we to do with these people?"

"There is this—" Travis chose his words carefully, thinking of what might move a warrior still conditioned to riding with the raiders of a hundred years earlier, "the Pinda-lick-o-yi (whom we call 'Reds,') are never willing to live side by side with any who are not of their mind. And they have weapons such as make our bow cords bits of rotten string, our knives slivers of rust. They do not kill; they enslave. And when they discover that we live, then they will come against us—"

Deklay's lips moved in a wolf grin. "This is a large land, and we know how to use it. The Pinda-lick-o-yi will not find us—"

"With their eyes maybe not," Travis replied. "With their machines—that is another matter."

"Machines!" Deklay spat. "Always these machines ... Is that all you can talk about? It would seem that you are bewitched by these machines, which we have not seen—none of us!"

"It was a machine which brought you here," Buck observed. "Go you back and look upon the spaceship and remember, Deklay. The knowledge of the Pinda-lick-o-yi is greater than ours when it deals with metal and wire and things which can be made with both. Machines brought us along the road of the stars, and there is no tracker in the clan who could hope to do the same. But now I have this to ask: Does our brother have a plan?"

"Those who are Reds," Travis answered slowly, "they do not number many. But more may later come from our own world. Have you heard of such arriving?" he asked Menlik.

"Not so, but we are not told much. We live apart and no one of us goes to the ship unless he is summoned. For they have weapons to guard them, or long since they would have been dead. It is not proper for a man to eat from the pot, ride in the wind, sleep easy under the same sky with him who has slain his brother."

"They have then killed among your people?"

"They have killed," Menlik returned briefly.

Kaydessa stirred and muttered a word or two to her brother. Hulagur's head came up, and he exploded into violent speech.

"What does he say?" Deklay demanded.

The girl replied: "He speaks of our father who aided in the escape of three and so afterward was slain by the leader as a lesson to us—since he was our 'white beard,' the Khan."

“We have taken the oath in blood—under the Wolf Head Standard—that they will also die,” Menlik added. “But first we must shake them out of their ship-shell.”

“That is the problem,” Travis elaborated for the benefit of his clansmen. “We must get these Reds away from their protected camp—out into the open. When they now go they are covered by this ‘caller’ which keeps the Tatars under their control, but it has no effect on us.”

“So, again I say: What is all this to us?” Deklay got to his feet. “This machine does not hunt us, and we can make our camps in this land where no Pinda-lick-o-yi can find them——”

“We are not *dobe-gusndhe-he*—invulnerable. Nor do we know the full range of machines they can use. It does no one well to say ‘*doxa-da*’—this is not so—when he does not know all that lies in an enemy’s wickiup.”

To Travis’ relief he saw agreement mirrored on Buck’s face, Tsoay’s, Nolan’s. From the beginning he had had little hope of swaying Deklay; he could only trust that the verdict of the majority would be the accepted one. It went back to the old, old Apache institution of prestige. A *nantan*-chief had the *go’ndi*, the high power, as a gift from birth. Common men could possess horse power or cattle power; they might have the gift of acquiring wealth so they could make generous gifts—be *ikadntl’izi*, the wealthy ones who spoke for their family groups within the loose network of the tribe. But there was no hereditary chieftainship or even an undivided rule within a rancheria. The *nagunlka-dnat’an*, or war chief, often led only on the warpath and had no voice in clan matters save those dealing with a raid.

And to have a split now would fatally weaken their small clan. Deklay and those of a like mind might elect to withdraw and not one of the rest could deny him that right.

“We shall think on this,” Buck said. “Here is food, water, pasturage for horses, a camp for our visitors. They will wait here.” He looked at Travis. “You will wait with them, Fox, since you know their ways.”

Travis’ immediate reaction was objection, but then he realized Buck’s wisdom. To offer the proposition of alliance to the Apaches needed an impartial spokesman. And if he himself did it, Deklay might automatically oppose the idea. Let Buck talk and it would be a statement of fact.

“It is well,” Travis agreed.

Buck looked about, as if judging time from the lie of sun and shadow on the ground. “We shall return in the morning when the shadow lies here.” With the toe of his high moccasin he made an impression in the soft earth. Then, without any formal farewell, he strode off, the others fast on his heels.

“He is your chief, that one?” Kaydessa asked, pointing after Buck.

“He is one having a large voice in council,” Travis replied. He set about building up the cooking fire, bringing out the body of a split-horn calf which had been left them. Menlik sat on his heels by the pool, dipping up drinking water with his hand. Now he squinted his eyes against the probe of the sun.

“It will require much talking to win over the short one,” he observed. “That one does not like us or your plan. Just as there will be those among the Horde who will not like it either.” He flipped water drops from his fingers. “But this I do know, man who calls himself Fox, if we do not make a common cause, then we have no hope of going against the Reds. It will be for them as a man crushing fleas.” He brought his hand down on his knee in emphatic slaps. “So ... and so ... and so!”

“This do I think also,” Travis admitted.

“So let us both hope that all men will be as wise as we,” Menlik said, smiling. “And since we can take a hand in that decision, this remains a time for rest.”

The shaman might be content to sleep the afternoon away, but after he had eaten, Hulagur wandered up and down the valley, making a lengthy business of rubbing down their horses with twists of last season’s grass. Now and then he paused beside Kaydessa and spoke, his uneasiness plain to Travis although he could not understand the words.

Travis had settled down in the shade, half dozing, yet alert to every movement of the three Tatars. He tried not to think of what might be happening in the rancheria by switching his mind to that misty valley of the towers. Did any of those three alien structures contain such a grab bag of the past as he, Ashe, and Murdock had found on that other world where the winged people had gathered together for them the artifacts of an older civilization? At that time he had created for their hosts a new weapon of defense, turning metal tubes into blow-guns. It had been there, too, where he had chanced upon the library of tapes, one of which had eventually landed Travis and his people here on Topaz.

Even if he did find racks of such tapes in one of those towers, there would be no way of using them—with the ship wrecked on the mountain side. Only—Travis’ fingers itched where they lay quiet on his knees—there might be other things waiting. If he were only free to explore!

He reached out to touch Menlik’s shoulder. The shaman half turned, opening his eyes with the languid effort of a sleepy cat. But the spark of intelligence awoke in them quickly.

“What is it?”

For a moment Travis hesitated, already regretting his impulse. He did not know how much Menlik remembered of the present. Remember of the present—one part of the Apache’s mind was wryly amused at that snarled estimate of their situation. Men who had been dropped into their racial and ancestral pasts until the present time was less real than the dreams conditioning them had a difficult job evaluating any situation. But since Menlik had clung to his knowledge of English, he must be less far down that stairway.

“When we met you, Kaydessa and I, it was outside that valley.” Travis was still of two minds about this questioning, but the Tatar camp had been close to the towers and there was a good chance the Mongols had explored them. “And inside were buildings ... very old....”

Menlik was fully alert now. He took his wand, played with it as he spoke:

“That is, or was, a place of much power, Fox. Oh, I know that you question my kinship with the spirits and the powers they give. But one learns not to dispute what one feels here—and here—” His long, somewhat grimy fingers went to his forehead and then to the bare brown chest where his shirt fell open. “I have walked the stone path in that valley, and there have been the whispers—”

“Whispers?”

Menlik twirled the wand. “Whispers which are too low for many ears to distinguish. You can hear them as one hears the buzzing of an insect, but never the words—no, never the words! But that is a place of great power!”

“A place to explore!”

But Menlik watched only his wand. “That I wonder, Fox, truly do I wonder. This is not our world. And here there may be that which does not welcome us.”

Tricks-in-trade of a shaman? Or was it true recognition of something beyond human description? Travis could not be sure, but he knew that he must return to the valley and see for himself.

“Listen,” Menlik said, leaning closer, “I have heard your tale, that you were on that first ship, the one which brought you unwilling along the old star paths. Have you ever seen such a thing as this?”

He smoothed a space of soft earth and with the narrow tip of his wand began to draw. Whatever role Menlik had played in the present before he had been reconditioned into a shaman of the Horde, he had had the ability of an artist, for with a minimum of lines he created a figure in that sketch.

It was a man or at least a figure with general human outlines. But the round, slightly oversized skull was bare, the clothing skintight to reveal unnaturally thin limbs. There were large eyes, small nose and mouth, rather crowded into the lower third of the head, giving an impression of an over-expanded brain case above. And it was familiar.

Not the flying men of the other world, certainly not the nocturnal ape-things. Yet for all its alien quality Travis was sure he had seen its like before. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize it apart from lines in the soil.

Such a head, white, almost like the bone of a skull laid bare, such a head lying face down on a bone-thin arm clad in a blue-purple skintight sleeve. Where had he seen it?

The Apache gave a sharp exclamation as he remembered fully. The derelict spaceship as he had first found it—the dead alien officer had still been seated at its controls! The alien who had set the tape which took them out into that forgotten empire—he was the subject of Menlik’s drawing!

“Where? When did you see such a one?” The Apache bent down over the Tatar.

Menlik looked troubled. “He came into my mind when I walked the valley. I thought I could almost see such a face in one of the tower windows, but of that I am not sure. Who is it?”

“Someone from the old days—those who once ruled the stars,” Travis answered. But were they still here then, the remnant of a civilization which had flourished ten thousand years ago? Were the Baldies, who centuries ago had hunted down so ruthlessly the Russians who had dared to loot their wrecked ships, still on Topaz?

He remembered the story of Ross Murdock’s escape from those aliens in the far past of Europe, and he shivered. Murdock was tough, steel tough, yet his own description of that epic chase and the final meeting had carried with it his terror. What could a handful of primitively armed and almost primitively minded Terrans do now if they had to dispute Topaz with the Baldies?

## 10

“Beyond this—” Menlik worked his way to the very lip of a drop, raising a finger cautiously—“beyond this we do not go.”

“But you say that the camp of your people lies well out in the plains—” Jil-Lee was up on one knee, using the field glasses they had brought from the stores of the wrecked ship. He passed them along to Travis. There was nothing to be sighted but the rippling amber waves of the tall grasses, save for an occasional break of a copse of trees near the foothills.

They had reached this point in the early morning, threading through the pass, making their way across the section known to the outlaws. From here they could survey the debatable land where their temporary allies insisted the Reds were in full control.

The result of the conference in the south had been this uneasy alliance. From the start Travis realized that he could not hope to commit the clan to any set plan, that even to get this scouting party to come against the stubborn resistance of Deklay and his reactionaries was a major achievement. There was now an opening wedge of six Apaches in the north.

“Beyond this,” Menlik repeated, “they keep watch and can control us with the caller.”

“What do you think?” Travis passed the glasses to Nolan.

If they were ever to develop a war chief, this lean man, tall for an Apache and slow to speak, might fill that role. He adjusted the lenses and began a detailed study-sweep of the open territory. Then he stiffened; his mouth, below the masking of the glasses, was tight.

“What is it?” Jil-Lee asked.

“Riders—two ... four ... five.... Also something else—in the air.”

Menlik jerked back and grabbed at Nolan’s arm, dragging him down by the weight of his body.

“The flyer! Come back—back!” He was still pulling at Nolan, prodding at Travis with one foot, and the Apaches stared at him with amazement.

The shaman sputtered in his own language, and then, visibly regaining command of himself, spoke English once more.

“Those are hunters, and they carry a caller. Either some others have escaped or they are determined to find our mountain camp.”

Jil-Lee looked at Travis. “You did not feel anything when the woman was under that spell?”

Travis shook his head. Jil-Lee nodded and then said to the shaman: “We shall stay here and watch. But since it is bad for you—do you go. And we shall meet you near this place of the towers. Agreed?”

For a moment Menlik’s face held a shadowy expression Travis tried to read. Was it resentment—resentment that he was forced to retreat when the others could stand their ground? Did the Tatar believe that he lost face this way? But the shaman gave a grunt of what they took as assent and slipped over the edge of the lookout point. A moment later they heard him speaking the Mongol tongue, warning Hulagur and Lotchu, his companions on the scout. Then came the clatter of pony hoofs as they rode their mounts away.



The Apaches settled back in the cup, which gave them a wide view over the plains. Soon it was not necessary to use the glasses in order to sight the advancing party of hunters—five riders, four wearing Tatar dress. The fifth had such an odd outline that Travis was reminded of Menlik's sketch of the alien. Under the sharper vision of the glasses he saw that the rider was equipped with a pack strapped between his shoulders and a bulbous helmet covering most of his head. Highly specialized equipment for communication, Travis guessed.

"That is a 'copter up above," Nolan said. "Different shape from ours."

They had been familiar with helicopters back on Terra. Ranchers used them for range inspection, and all of the Apache volunteers had flown in them. But Nolan was correct; this one possessed several unfamiliar features.

"The Tatars say they don't bring those very far into the mountains," Jil-Lee mused. "That could explain their man on horseback; he gets in where they don't fly."

Nolan fingered his bow. "If these Reds depend upon their machine to control what they seek, then they may be taken by surprise——"

"But not yet!" Travis spoke sharply. Nolan frowned at him.

Jil-Lee chuckled. "The way is not so dark for us, younger brother, that we need your torch held for our feet!"

Travis swallowed back any retort, accepting the fairness of that rebuke. He had no right to believe that he alone knew the best way of handling the enemy. Biting on the sourness of that realization, he lay quietly with the others, watching the riders enter the foothills perhaps a quarter of a mile to the west.

The helicopter was circling now over the men riding into a cut between two rises. When they were lost to view, the pilot made wider casts, and Travis thought the flyer's crew were probably in communication with the helmeted one of the quintet on the ground.

He stirred. "They are heading for the Tatar camp, just as if they know exactly where it is——"

"That also may be true," Nolan replied. "What do we know of these Tatars? They have freely said that the Reds can hold them in mind ropes when they wish. Already they may be so bound. I say—let us go back to our own country." He added to the decisiveness of that by handing Jil-Lee the glasses and sliding down from their perch.

Travis looked at the other. In a way he could understand the wisdom of Nolan's suggestion. But he was sure that withdrawal now would only postpone trouble. Sooner or later the Apaches would have to stand against the Reds, and if they could do it now while the enemy was occupied with trouble from the Tatars, so much the better.

Jil-Lee was following Nolan. But something in Travis rebelled. He watched the circling helicopter. If it was overhanging the action area of the horsemen, they had either reined in or were searching a relatively small section of the foothills.

Reluctantly Travis descended to the hollow where Jil-Lee stood with Nolan. Tsoay and Lupe and Rope were a little to one side as if the final orders would come from their seniors.

"It would be well," Jil-Lee said slowly, "if we saw what weapons they have. I want a closer look at the equipment of that one in the helmet. Also," he smiled straight at Nolan—"I do not think that they can detect the presence of warriors of the People unless we will it so."

Nolan ran a finger along the curve of his bow, shot a measuring glance right and left at the general contours of the country.

“There is wisdom in what you say, elder brother. Only this is a trail we shall take alone, not allowing the men with fur hats to know where we walk.” He looked pointedly in Travis’ direction.

“That is wisdom, *Ba’is’a*,” Travis promptly replied, giving Nolan the old title accorded the leader of a war party. Travis was grateful for that much of a concession.

They swung into action, heading southeast at an angle which should bring them across the track of the enemy hunting party. The path was theirs at last, only moments after the passing of their quarry. None of the five riders was taking any precautions to cover his trail. Each moved with the confidence of one not having to fear any attack.

From cover the Apaches looked aloft. They could hear the faint hum of the helicopter. It was still circling, Tsoay reported from a higher check point, but those circles remained close over the plains area—the riders had already passed beyond the limits of that aerial sentry.

Three to a side, the Apaches advanced with the trail between them. They were carefully hidden when they caught up with the hunters. The four Tatars were grouped together; the fifth man, heavily burdened by his pack, had climbed from the saddle and was sitting on the ground, his hands busy with a flat plate which covered him from upper chest to belt.

Now that he had a chance to see them closely, Travis noted the lack of expression on the broad Tatar faces. The four men were blank of eye, astride their mounts with no apparent awareness of their present surroundings. Then as one, their heads swung around to the helmeted leader before they dismounted and stood motionless for a long moment in a way which reminded Travis of the coyotes’ attitude when they endeavored to pass some message to him. But these men even lacked the signs of thinking intelligence the animals had.

The helmeted man’s hand moved across his chest plate, and instantly his followers came into a measure of life. One put his hand to his forehead with an odd, half-dazed gesture. Another half crouched, his lips wrinkling back in a snarl. And the leader, watching him, laughed. Then he snapped an order, his hand poised over his control plate.

One of the four took the horse reins, made the mounts fast to near-by bushes. Then as one they began to walk forward, the Red bringing up the rear several paces behind the nearest Tatar. They were going upslope to the crest of a small ridge.

The Tatar who first reached the crest put his hands to cup his mouth, sent a ringing cry southward, and the faint “hu-hu-hu” echoed on and on through the hills.

Either Menlik had reached the camp in time, or his people were not to be so easily enticed. For though the hunters waited for a long time, there was no answer to that hail. At last the helmeted man called his captives, bringing them sullenly down to mount and ride again—a move which suited the Apaches.

They could not tell how close was the communication between the rider and the helicopter. And they were still too near the plains to attack unless it was necessary for their own protection. Travis dropped back to join Nolan.

“He controls them by that plate on his chest,” he said. “If we would take them, we must get at that—”

“These Tatars use lariats in fighting. Did they not rope you as a calf is roped for branding? Then why do they not so take this Red, binding his arms to his sides?” The suspicion in Nolan’s voice was plain.

“Perhaps in them is some conditioned control making it so that they cannot attack their rulers—”

“I do not like this matter of machines which can play this way and that with minds and bodies!” flared Nolan. “A man should only *use* a weapon, not be one!”

Travis could agree to that. Had they by the wreck of their own ship and the death of Ruthven, escaped just such an existence as these Tatars now endured? If so, why? He and all the Apaches were volunteers, eager and willing to form new world colonies. What had happened back on Terra that they had been so ruthlessly sent out without warning and under Redax? Another small piece of that puzzle, or maybe the heart of the whole picture snapped into place. Had the project learned in some way of the Tatar settlement on Topaz and so been forced to speed up that translation from late twentieth-century Americans to primitives? That would explain a lot!

Travis returned abruptly to the matter now at hand as he saw a peak ahead. The party they were trailing was heading directly for the outlaw hide-out. Travis hoped Menlik had warned them in time. There—that wall of cliff to his left must shelter the valley of the towers, though it was still miles ahead. Travis did not believe the hunters would be able to reach their goal unless they traveled at night. They might not know of the ape-things which could menace the dark.

But the enemy, whether he knew of such dangers or not, did not intend to press on. As the sun pulled away, leaving crevices and crannies shadow dark, the hunters stopped to make camp. The Apaches, after their custom on the war trail, gathered on the heights above.

“This Red seems to think that he shall find those he seeks sitting waiting for him, as if their feet were nipped tight in a trap,” Tsoay remarked.

“It is the habit of the Pinda-lick-o-yi,” Lupe added, “to believe they are greater than all others. Yet this one is a stupid fool walking into the arms of a she-bear with a cub.” He chuckled.

“A man with a rifle does not fear a man armed only with a stick,” Travis cut in quickly. “This one is armed with a weapon which he has good reason to believe makes him invulnerable to attack. If he rests tonight, he probably leaves his machine on guard.”

“At least we are sure of one thing,” Nolan said in half agreement. “This one does not suspect that there are any in these hills save those he can master. And his machine does not work against us. Thus at dawn—” He made a swift gesture, and they smiled in concert.

At dawn—the old time of attack. An Apache does not attack at night. Travis was not sure that any of them could break that old taboo and creep down upon the camp before the coming of new light.

But tomorrow morning they would take over this confident Red, strip him of his enslaving machine.

Travis’ head jerked. It had come as suddenly as a blow between his eyes—to half stun him. What ... what was it? Not any physical impact—no, something which was dazing but still immaterial. He braced his whole body, awaiting its return, trying frantically to understand what had happened in that instant of vertigo and seeming disembodiment. Never had he experienced anything like it—or had he? Two years or more ago when he had gone through the time transfer to enter the Arizona of the Folsom Men some ten thousand years earlier—that moment of transfer had been something like this, a sensation of being awry in space and time with no stable footing to be found.

Yet he was lying here on very tangible rock and soil, and nothing about him in the shadow-hung landscape of Topaz had changed in the slightest. But that blow had left behind it a quivering residue of panic buried far inside him, a tender spot like an open wound.

Travis drew a deep breath which was almost a sob, levered himself up on one elbow to stare intently down into the enemy camp. Was this some attack from the other's unknown weapon? Suddenly he was not at all sure what might happen when the Apaches made that dawn rush.

Jil-Lee was in station on his right. Travis must compare notes with him to be sure that this was not indeed a trap. Better to retreat now than to be taken like fish in a net. He crept out of his place, gave the chittering signal call of the fluff-ball, and heard Jil-Lee's answer in a cleverly mimicked trill of a night insect.

"Did you feel something just now—in your head?" Travis found it difficult to put that sensation into words.

"Not so. But you did?"

He had—of course, he had! The remains of it were still in him, that point of panic. "Yes."

"The machine?"

"I don't know." Travis' confusion grew. It might be that he alone of the party had been struck. If so, he could be a danger to his own kind.

"This is not good. I think we had better hold council, away from here." Jil-Lee's whisper was the merest ghost of sound. He chirped again to be answered from Tsoay upslope, who passed on the signal.

The first moon was high in the sky as the Apaches gathered together. Again Travis asked his question: Had any of the others felt that odd blow? He was met by negatives.

But Nolan had the final word: "This is not good," he echoed Jil-Lee's comment. "If it was the Red machine at work, then we may all be swept into his net along with those he seeks. Perhaps the longer one remains close to that thing, the more influence it gains over him. We shall stay here until dawn. If the enemy would reach the place they seek, then they must pass below us, for that is the easiest road. Burdened with his machine, that Red has ever taken the easiest way. So, we shall see if he also has a defense against these when they come without warning." He touched the arrows in his quiver.

To kill from ambush meant that they might never learn the secret of the machine, but after his experience Travis was willing to admit that Nolan's caution was the wise way. Travis wanted no part of a second attack like that which had shaken him so. And Nolan had not ordered a general retreat. It must be in the war chief's thoughts as it was in Travis' that if the machine could have an influence over Apaches, it must cease to function.

They set their ambush with the age-old skill the Redax had grafted into their memories. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

It was an hour after dawn when Tsoay signaled that the enemy was coming, and shortly after, they heard the thud of ponies' hoofs. The first Tatar plodded into view, and by the stance of his body in the saddle, Travis knew the Red had him under full control. Two, then three Tatars passed between the teeth of the Apache trap. The fourth one had allowed a wider gap to open between himself and his fellows.

Then the Red leader came. His face below the bulge of the helmet was not happy. Travis believed the man was not a horseman by inclination. The Apache set arrow to bow cord, and at the chirp from Nolan, fired in concert with his clansmen.

Only one of those arrows found a target. The Red's pony gave a shrill scream of pain and terror, reared, pawing at the air, toppled back, pinning its shouting rider under it.

The Red had had a defense right enough, one which had somehow deflected the arrows. But he neither had protection against his own awkward seat in the saddle nor the arrow which had seriously wounded the now thrashing pony.

Ahead the Tatars twisted and writhed, mouthed tortured cries, then dropped out of their saddles to lie limply on the ground as if the arrows aimed at the master had instead struck each to the heart.

# 11

Either the Red was lucky, or his reactions were quick. He had somehow rolled clear of the struggling horse as Lupe leaped from behind a boulder, knife out and ready. To the eyes of the Apaches the helmeted man lay easy prey to Lupe's attack. Nor did he raise an arm to defend himself, though one hand lay free across the plate on his chest.

But the young Apache stumbled, rebounding back as if he had run into an unseen wall—when his knife was still six inches away from the other. Lupe cried out, shook under a second impact as the Red fired an automatic with his other hand.

Travis dropped his bow, returned to the most primitive weapon of all. His hand closed around a stone and he hurled the fist-sized oval straight at the helmet so clearly outlined against the rocks below.

But even as Lupe's knife had never touched flesh, so was the rock deflected; the Red was covered by some protective field. This was certainly nothing the Apaches had seen before. Nolan's whistle summoned them to draw back.

The Red fired again, the sharp bark of the hand gun harsh and loud. He did not have any real target, for with the exception of Lupe the Apaches had gone to earth. Between the rocks the Red was struggling to his feet, but he moved slowly, favoring his side and one leg; he had not come totally unharmed from his tumble with the pony.

An armed enemy who could not be touched—one who knew there were more than outlaws in this region. The Red leader was far more of a threat to the Apaches now than he had ever been. He must not be allowed to escape.

He was holstering his gun, moving along with one hand against the rocks to steady himself, trying to reach one of the ponies that stood with trailing reins beside the inert Tatars.

But when the enemy reached the far side of that rock he would have to sacrifice either his steadying hold, or his touch on the chest plate where his other hand rested. Would he, then, for an instant be vulnerable?

The pony!

Travis put an arrow on bow cord and shot. Not at the Red, who had released his hold of the rock, preferring to totter instead of lose control of the chest plate—but into the air straight before the nose of the mount.

The pony neighed wildly, tried to turn, and its shoulder caught the free, groping hand of the Red and spun the man around and back, so that he flung up both hands in an effort to ward himself off the rocks. Then the pony stampeded down the break, its companions catching the same fever, trailing in a mad dash which kept the Red hard against the boulders.

He continued to stand there until the horses, save for the wounded one still kicking fruitlessly, were gone. Travis felt a sense of reprieve. They might not be able to get at the Red, but he was hurt and afoot, two strikes which might yet reduce him to a condition the Apaches could handle.

Apparently the other was also aware of that, for now he pushed out from the rocks and stumbled along after the ponies. But he went only a step or two. Then, settling back once more against a convenient boulder, he began to work at the plate on his chest.

Nolan appeared noiselessly beside Travis. "What does he do?" His lips were very close to the younger man's ear, his voice hardly more than a breath.

Travis shook his head slightly. The Red's actions were a complete mystery. Unless, now disabled and afoot, he was trying to summon aid. Though there was no landing place for a helicopter here.

Now was the time to try and reach Lupe. Travis had seen a slight movement in the fallen Apache's hand, the first indication that the enemy's shot had not been as fatal as it had looked. He touched Nolan's arm, pointed to Lupe; and then, discarding his bow and quiver beside the war leader, he stripped for action. There was cover down to the wounded Apache which would aid him. He must pass one of the Tatars on the way, but none of the tribesmen had shown any signs of life since they had fallen from their saddles at the first attack.

With infinite care, Travis lowered himself into a narrow passage, took a lizard's way between brush and boulder, pausing only when he reached the Tatar for a quick check on the potential enemy.

The lean brown face was half turned, one cheek in the sand, but the slack mouth, the closed eyes were those, Travis believed, of a dead man. By some action of his diabolic machine the Red must have snuffed out his four captives—perhaps in the belief that they were part of the Apache attack.

Travis reached the rock where Lupe lay. He knew that Nolan was watching the Red and would give him warning if he suddenly showed an interest in anything but his machine. The Apache reached out, his hands closing on Lupe's ankles. Beneath his touch, flesh and muscle tensed. Lupe's eyes were open, focused now on Travis. There was a bleeding furrow above his right ear. The Red had tried a difficult head shot, failing in his aim by a mere fraction of an inch.

Lupe made a swift move for which Travis was ready. His grip on the other's body helped to tumble them both around a rock which lay between them and the Red. There was the crack of another shot and dust spurted from the side of the boulder. But they lay together, safe for the present, as Travis was sure the enemy would not risk an open attack on their small fortress.

With Travis' aid Lupe struggled back up to the site where Nolan waited. Jil-Lee was there to make competent examination of the boy's wound.

"Creased," he reported. "A sore head, but no great damage. Perhaps a scar later, warrior!" He gave Lupe an encouraging thump on the shoulder, before plastering an aid pack over the cut.

"Now we go!" Nolan spoke with emphatic decision.

"He saw enough of us to know we are not Tatars."

Nolan's eyes were cold, his mouth grim as he faced Travis.

"And how can we fight him—?"

"There is a wall—a wall you cannot see—about him," Lupe broke in. "When I would strike at him, I could not!"

"A man with invisible protection and a gun," Jil-Lee took up the argument. "How would you deal with him, younger brother?"

"I don't know," Travis admitted. Yet he also believed that if they withdrew, left the Red here to be found by his own people, the enemy would immediately begin an investigation of the southern country. Perhaps, pushed by their need for learning more about the Apaches, they

would bring the helicopter in over the mountains. The answer to all Apache dangers, for now, lay in the immediate future of this one man.

“He is hurt, he cannot go far on foot. And even if he calls the ‘copter, there is no landing place. He will have to move elsewhere to be picked up.” Travis thought aloud, citing the thin handful of points in their favor.

Tsoay nodded toward the rim of the ravine. “Rocks up there and rocks can roll. Start an earthslide....”

Something within Travis balked at that. From the first he had been willing enough to slug it out with the Red, weapon to weapon, man to man. Also, he had wanted to take a captive, not stand over a body. But to use the nature of the country against the enemy, that was the oldest Apache trick of all and one they would have to be forced to employ.

Nolan had already nodded in assent, and Tsoay and Jil-Lee started off. Even if the Red did possess a protective wall device, could it operate in full against a landslide? They all doubted that.

The Apaches reached the cliff rim without exposing themselves to the enemy’s fire. The Red still sat there calmly, his back against the rock, his hands busy with his equipment as if he had all the time in the world.

Then suddenly came a scream from more than one throat.

“*Dar-u-gar!*” The ancient war cry of the Mongol Hordes.

Then over the lip of the other slope rose a wave of men—their curved swords out, a glazed set to their eyes—heading for the Amerindians with utter disregard for any personal safety. Menlik in the lead, his shaman’s robe flapping wide below his belt like the wings of some oversized predatory bird. Hulagur ... Jagatai ... men from the outlaws’ camp. And they were not striving to destroy their disabled overlord in the vale below, but to wipe out the Apaches!

Only the fact that the Apaches were already sheltered behind the rocks they were laboring to dislodge gave them a precious few moments of grace. There was no time to use their bows. They could only use knives to meet the swords of the Tatars, knives and the fact that they could fight with unclouded minds.

“He has them under control!” Travis pawed at Jil-Lee’s shoulder. “Get him—they’ll stop!”

He did not wait to see if the other Apache understood. Instead, he threw the full force of his own body against the rock they had made the center stone of their slide. It gave, rolled, carrying with it and before it the rest of the piled rubble. Travis stumbled, fell flat, and then a body thudded down upon him, and he was fighting for his life to keep a blade from his throat. Around him were the shouts and cries of embroiled warriors; then all was silenced by a roar from below.

Glazed eyes in a face only a foot from his own, the twisted, panting mouth sending gusts of breath into his nostrils. Suddenly there was reason back in those eyes, a bewilderment, which became fear ... panic.... The Tatar’s body twisted in Travis’ hold, striving now not to attack, but to win free. As the Apache loosened his grip the other jerked away, so that for a moment or two they lay gasping, side by side.

Men sat up to look at men. There was a spreading stain down Jil-Lee’s side and one of the Tatars sprawled near him, both his hands on his chest, coughing violently.

Menlik clawed at the trunk of a wind-twisted mountain tree, pulled himself to his feet, and stood swaying as might a man long ill and recovering from severe exertion.



Insensibly both sides drew apart, leaving a space between Tatar and Apache. The faces of the Amerindians were grim, those of the Mongols bewildered and then harsh as they eyed their late opponents with dawning reason. What had begun in compulsion for the Tatars might well flare now into rational combat—and from that to a campaign of extermination.

Travis was on his feet. He looked over the lip of the drop. The Red was still in his place down there, a pile of rubble about him. His protection must have failed, for his head was back at an unnatural angle and the dent in his helmet could be easily seen.

“That one is dead—or helpless!” Travis cried out. “Do you still wish to fight for him, Shaman?”

Menlik came away from the tree and walked to the edge of the drop. The others, too, were moving forward. After the shaman looked down he stooped, picked up a small stone, and flung it at the motionless Red. There was a crack of sound. They all saw the tiny spurt of flame, a curl of smoke from the plate on the Red’s chest. Not only the man, but his control was finished now.

A wolfish growl and two of the Tatars swung over, started down to the Red. Menlik shouted and they slackened pace.

“We want that,” he cried in English. “Perhaps so we can learn—”

“The learning is yours,” Jil-Lee replied. “Just as this land is yours, Shaman. But I warn you, from this day do not ride south!”

Menlik turned, the charms on his belt clicking. “So that is the way it is to be, Apache?”

“That is the way it shall be, Tatar! We do not ride to war with allies who may turn their knives against our backs because they are slaves to a machine the enemy controls.”

The Tatar’s long, slender-fingered hands opened and closed. “You are a wise man, Apache, but sometimes more than wisdom alone is needed——”

“We are wise men, Shaman, let it rest there,” Jil-Lee replied somberly.

Already the Apaches were on their way, putting two cliff ridges behind them before they halted to examine and cover their wounds.

“We go.” Nolan’s chin lifted, indicating the southern route. “Here we do not come again; there is too much witchcraft in this place.”

Travis stirred, saw that Jil-Lee was frowning at him.

“Go—?” he repeated.

“Yes, younger brother? You would continue to run with these who are governed by a machine?”

“No. Only, eyes are needed on this side of the mountains.”

“Why?” This time Jil-Lee was plainly on the side of the conservatives. “We have now seen this machine at work. It is fortunate that the Red is dead. He will carry no tales of us back to his people as you feared. Thus, if we remain south from now on, we are safe. And this fight between Tatar and Red is none of ours. What do you seek here?”

“I must go again to the place of the towers,” Travis answered with the truth. But his friends were facing him with heavy disapproval—now a full row of Deklays.

“Did you not tell us that you felt this strange thing during the night we waited about the camp? What if you become one with these Tatars and are also controlled by the machine?”

Then you, too, can be made into a weapon against us—your clansmen!” Jil-Lee was almost openly hostile.

Sense was on his side. But in Travis was this other desire of which he was becoming more conscious by the minute. There was a reason for those towers, perhaps a reason important enough for him to discover and run the risk of angering his own people.

“There may be this—” Nolan’s voice was remote and cold, “you may already be a piece of this thing, bound to the machines. If so, we do not want you among us.”

There it was—an open hostility with more power behind it than Deklay’s motiveless disapproval had carried. Travis was troubled. The family, the clan—they were important. If he took the wrong step now and was outlawed from that tight fortress, then as an Apache he would indeed be a lost man. In the past of his people there had been renegades from the tribe—men such as the infamous Apache Kid who had killed and killed again, not only white men but his own people. Wolf men living wolves’ lives in the hills. Travis was threatened with that. Yet—up the ladder of civilization, down the ladder—why did this feverish curiosity ride him so cruelly now?

“Listen,” Jil-Lee, his side padded with bandages, stepped closer—”and tell me, younger brother, what is it that you seek in these towers?”

“On another world there were secrets of the old ones to be found in such ancient buildings. Here that might also be true.”

“And among the secrets of those old ones,” Nolan’s voice was still harsh—”were those which brought us to this world, is that not so?”

“Did any man drive you, Nolan, or you, Tsoay, or you, Jil-Lee, or any of us, to promise to go beyond the stars? You were told what might be done, and you were eager to try it. You were all volunteers!”

“Save for this voyage when we were told nothing,” Jil-Lee answered, cutting straight to the heart of the matter. “Yet, Nolan, I do not believe that it is for more voyage tapes that our younger brother now searches, nor would those do us any good—as our ship will not rise again from here. What is it that you do seek?”

“Knowledge—weapons, maybe. Can we stand against these machines of the Reds? Yet many of the devices they now use are taken from the star ships they have looted through time. To every weapon there is a defense.”

Nolan blinked and for the first time a hint of interest touched the mask of his face. “To the bow, the rifle,” he said softly, “to the rifle, the machine gun, to the cannon, the big bomb. The defense can be far worse than the first weapon. So you think that in these towers there may be things which shall be to the Reds’ machines as the bomb is to the cannon of the Horse Soldiers?”

Travis had an inspiration. “Did not our people lay aside the bow for the rifle when we went up against the Bluecoats?”

“We do not so go up against these Reds!” protested Lupe.

“Not now. But what if they come across the mountains, perhaps driving the Tatars before them to do their fighting—?”

“And you believe that if you find weapons in these towers, you will know how to use them?” Jil-Lee asked. “What will give you that knowledge, younger brother?”

“I do not claim such knowledge,” Travis countered. “But this much I do have: Once I studied to be an archaeologist and I have seen other storehouses of these star people. Who else among us can say as much as that?”

“That is the truth,” Jil-Lee acknowledged. “Also there is good sense in this seeking out of the tower things. Let the Reds find such first—if they exist at all—and then we may truly be caught in a box canyon with only death at our heels.”

“And you would go to these towers now?” Nolan demanded.

“I can cut across country and then rejoin you on the other side of the pass!” The feeling of urgency which had been mounting in Travis was now so demanding that he wanted to race ahead through the wilderness. He was surprised when Jil-Lee put out his palm up as if to warn the younger man.

“Take care, younger brother! This is not a lucky business. And remember, if one goes too far down a wrong trail, there is sometimes no returning—”

“We shall wait on the other side of the pass for one day,” Nolan added. “Then—” he shrugged—“where you go will be your own affair.”

Travis did not understand that promise of trouble. He was already two steps down his chosen path.

## 12

Travis had taken a direct cross route through the heights, but not swiftly enough to reach his objective before nightfall. And he had no wish to enter the tower valley by moonlight. In him two emotions now warred. There was the urge to invade the towers, to discover their secret, and flaring higher and higher the beginnings of a new fear. Was he now a battlefield for the superstitions of his race reborn by the Redax and his modern education in the Pinda-lick-o-yi world—half Apache brave of the past, half modern archaeologist with a thirst for knowledge? Or was the fear rooted more deeply and for another reason?

Travis crouched in a hollow, trying to understand what he felt. Why was it suddenly so overwhelmingly important for him to investigate the towers? If he only had the coyotes with him.... Why and where had they gone?

He was alive to every noise out of the night, every scent the wind carried to him. The night had its own life, just as the daylight hours held theirs. Only a few of those sounds could he identify, even less did he see. There was one wide-winged, huge flying thing which passed across the green-gold plate of the nearer moon. It was so large that for an instant Travis believed the helicopter had come. Then the wings flapped, breaking the glide, and the creature merged in the shadows of the night—a hunter large enough to be a serious threat, and one he had never seen before.

Relying on his own small defense, the strewing of brittle sticks along the only approach to the hollow, Travis dozed at intervals, his head down on his forearm across his bent knees. But the cold cramped him and he was glad to see the graying sky of pre-dawn. He swallowed two ration tablets and a couple of mouthfuls of water from his canteen and started on.

By sunup he had reached the ledge of the waterfall, and he hurried along the ancient road at a pace which increased to a run the closer he drew to the valley. Deliberately he slowed, his native caution now in control, so that he was walking as he passed through the gateway into the swirling mists which alternately exposed and veiled the towers.

There was no change in the scene from the time he had come there with Kaydessa. But now, rising from a comfortable sprawl on the yellow-and-green pavement, was a welcoming committee—Nalik'ideyu and Naginlta showing no more excitement at his coming than if they had parted only moments before.

Travis went down on one knee, holding out his hand to the female, who had always been the more friendly. She advanced a step or two, touched a cold nose to his knuckles, and whined.

“Why?” He voiced that one word, but behind it was a long list of questions. Why had they left him? Why were they here where there was no hunting? Why did they meet him now as if they had calmly expected his return?

Travis glanced from the animals to the towers, those windows set in diamond pattern. And again he was visited by the impression that he was under observation. With the mist floating across those openings, it would be easy for a lurker to watch him unseen.

He walked slowly on into the valley, his moccasins making no sound on the pavement, but he could hear the faint click of the coyotes' claws as they paced beside him, on each hand. The sun did not penetrate here, making merely a gilt fog of the mist. As he approached within touching distance of the first tower, it seemed to Travis that the mist was curling about him; he could no longer see the archway through which he had entered the valley.

“Naye’nezyani—Slayer of Monsters—give strength to the bow arm, to the knife wrist!” Out of what long-buried memory did that ancient plea come? Travis was hardly aware of the sense of the words until he spoke them aloud. “You who wait—*shi inday to-dah ishan*—an Apache is not food for you! I am Fox of the Itcatcudnde’yu—the Eagle People; and beside me walk *ga’ns* of power....”

Travis blinked and shook his head as one waking. Why had he spoken so, using words and phrases which were not part of any modern speech?

He moved on, around the base of the first tower, to find no door, no break in its surface below the second-story windows—to the next structure and the next, until he had encircled all three. If he were to enter any, he must find a way of reaching the lowest windows.

On he went to the other opening of the valley, the one which gave upon the territory of the Tatar camp. But he did not sight any of the Mongols as he hacked down a sapling, trimmed, and smoothed it into a blunt-pointed lance. His sash-belt, torn into even strips and knotted together, gave him a rope which he judged would be barely long enough for his purpose.

Then Travis made a chancy cast for the lower window of the nearest tower. On the second try the lance slipped in, and he gave a quick jerk, jamming the lance as a bar across the opening. It was a frail ladder but the best he could improvise. He climbed until the sill of the window was within reach and he could pull himself up and over.

The sill was a wide one, at least a twenty-four-inch span between the inner and outer surface of the tower. Travis sat there for a minute, reluctant to enter. Near the end of his dangling scarf-rope the two coyotes lay on the pavement, their heads up, their tongues lolling from their mouths, their expressions ones of detached interest.

Perhaps it was the width of the outer wall that subdued the amount of light in the room. The chamber was circular, and directly opposite him was a second window, the lowest of the matching diamond pattern. He took the four-foot drop from the sill to the floor but lingered in the light as he surveyed every inch of the room. There were no furnishings at all, but in the very center sank a well of darkness. A smooth pillar, glowing faintly, rose from its core. Travis’ adjusting eyes noted how the light came in small ripples—green and purple, over a foundation shade of dark blue.

The pillar seemed rooted below and it extended up through a similar opening in the ceiling, providing the only possible exit up or down, save for climbing from window to window outside. Travis moved slowly to the well. Underfoot was a smooth surface overlaid with a velvet carpet of dust which arose in languid puffs as he walked. Here and there he sighted prints in the dust, strange triangular wedges which he thought might possibly have been made by the claws of birds. But there were no other footprints. This tower had been undisturbed for a long, long time.

He came to the well and looked down. There was dark there, dark in which the pulsations of light from the pillar shown the stronger. But that glow did not extend beyond the edge of the well through which the thick rod threaded. Even by close examination he could detect no break in the smooth surface of the pillar, nothing remotely resembling hand- or footholds. If it did serve the purpose of a staircase, there were no treads.

At last Travis put out his hand to touch the surface of the pillar. And then he jerked back—to no effect. There was no breaking contact between his fingers and an unknown material which had the sleekness of polished metal but—and the thought made him slightly queasy—the warmth and very slight give of flesh!

He summoned all his strength to pull free and could not. Not only did that hold grip him, but his other hand and arm were being drawn to join the first! Inside Travis primitive fears awoke full force, and he threw back his head, voicing a cry of panic as wild as that of a hunting beast.

An instant later, his left palm was as tight a prisoner as his right. And with both hands so held, his whole body was suddenly snapped forward, off the safe foundation of the floor, tight to the pillar.

In this position he was sucked down into the well. And while unable to free himself from the pillar, he did slip along its length easily enough. Travis shut his eyes in an involuntary protest against this weird form of capture, and a shiver ran through his body as he continued to descend.

After the first shock had subsided the Apache realized that he was not truly falling at all. Had the pillar been horizontal instead of vertical, he would have gauged its speed that of a walk. He passed through two more room enclosures; he must already be below the level of the valley floor outside. And he was still a prisoner of the pillar, now in total darkness.

His feet came down against a level surface, and he guessed he must have reached the end. Again he pulled back, arching his shoulders in a final desperate attempt at escape, and stumbled away as he was released.

He came up sideways against a wall and stood there panting. The light, which might have come from the pillar but which seemed more a part of the very air, was bright enough to reveal that he was in a corridor running into greater dark both right and left.

Travis took two strides back to the pillar, fitted his palms once again to its surface, with no result. This time his flesh did not adhere and there was no possible way for him to climb that slick pole. He could only hope that at some point the corridor would give him access to the surface. But which way to go—?

At last he chose the right-hand path and started along it, pausing every few steps to listen. But there was no sound except the soft pad of his own feet. The air was fresh enough, and he thought he could detect a faint current coming toward him from some point ahead—perhaps an exit.

Instead, he came into a room and a small gasp of astonishment was wrung out of him. The walls were blank, covered with the same ripples of blue-purple-green light which colored the pillar. Just before him was a table and behind it a bench, both carved from the native yellow-red mountain rock. And there was no exit except the doorway in which he now stood.

Travis walked to the bench. Immovable, it was placed so that whoever sat there must face the opposite wall of the chamber with the table before him. And on the table was an object Travis recognized immediately from his voyage in the alien star ship, one of the reader-viewers through which the involuntary explorers had learned what little they knew of the older galactic civilization.

A reader—and beside it a box of tapes. Travis touched the edge of that box gingerly, half expecting it to crumble into nothingness. This was a place long deserted. Stone table, bench, the towers could survive through centuries of abandonment, but these other objects....

The substance of the reader was firm under the film of dust; there was less dust here than had been in the upper tower chamber. Hardly knowing why, Travis threw one leg over the bench and sat down behind the table, the reader before him, the box of tapes just beyond his hand.

He surveyed the walls and then looked away hurriedly. The rippling colors caught at his eyes. He had a feeling that if he watched that ebb and flow too long, he would be captured in some subtle web of enchantment just as the Reds' machine had caught and held the Tatars. He turned his attention to the reader. It was, he believed, much like the one they had used on the ship.

This room, table, bench, had all been designed with a set purpose. And that purpose—Travis' fingers rested on the box of tapes he could not yet bring himself to open—that purpose was to use the reader, he would swear to that. Tapes so left must have had a great importance for those who left them. It was as if the whole valley was a trap to channel a stranger into this underground chamber.

Travis snapped open the box, fed the first disk into the reader, and applied his eyes to the vision tube at its apex.

The rippling walls looked just the same when he looked up once more, but the cramp in his muscles told Travis that time had passed—perhaps hours instead of minutes—since he had taken out the first disk. He cupped his hands over his eyes and tried to think clearly. There had been sheets of meaningless symbol writing, but also there had been many clear, three-dimensional pictures, accompanied by a singsong commentary in an alien tongue, seemingly voiced out of thin air. He had been stuffed with ragged bits and patches of information, to be connected only by guesses, and some wild guesses, too. But this much he did know—these towers had been built by the bald spacemen, and they were highly important to that vanished stellar civilization. The information in this room, as disjointed as it had been for him, led to a treasure trove on Topaz greater than he had dreamed.

Travis swayed on the bench. To know so much and yet so little! If Ashe were only here, or some other of the project technicians! A treasure such as Pandora's box had been, peril for one who opened it and did not understand. The Apache studied the three walls of blue-purple-green in turn and with new attention. There were ways through those walls; he was fairly sure he could unlock at least one of them. But not now—certainly not now!

And there was another thing he knew: The Reds must *not* find this. Such a discovery on their part would not only mean the end of his own people on Topaz, but the end of Terra as well. This could be a new and alien Black Death spread to destroy whole nations at a time!

If he could—much as his archaeologist's training would argue against it—he would blot out this whole valley above and below ground. But while the Reds might possess a means of such destruction, the Apaches did not. No, he and his people must prevent its discovery by the enemy by doing what he had seen as necessary from the first—wiping out the Red leaders! And that must be done before they chanced upon the towers!

Travis arose stiffly. His eyes ached, his head felt stuffed with pictures, hints, speculations. He wanted to get out, back into the open air where perhaps the clean winds of the heights would blow some of this frightening half knowledge from his benumbed mind. He lurched down the corridor, puzzled now by the problem of getting back to the window level.

Here, before him, was the pillar. Without hope, but still obeying some buried instinct, Travis again set his hands to its surface. There was a tug at his cramped arms; once more his body was sucked to the pillar. This time he was rising!

He held his breath past the first level and then relaxed. The principle of this weird form of transportation was entirely beyond his understanding, but as long as it worked in reverse he didn't care to find out. He reached the windowed chamber, but the sunlight had left it;

instead, the clean cut of moon sweep lay on the dusty floor. He must have been hours in that underground place.

Travis pulled away from the embrace of the pillar. The bar of his wooden lance was still across the window and he ran for it. To catch the scouting party at the pass he must hurry. The report they would make to the clan now had to be changed radically in the face of his new discoveries. The Apaches dared not retreat southward and withdraw from the fight, leaving the Reds to use what treasure lay here.

As he hit the pavement below he looked about for the coyotes. Then he tried the mind call. But as mysteriously as they had met him in the valley, so now were they gone again. And Travis had no time to hunt for them. With a sigh, he began his race to the pass.

In the old days, Travis remembered, Apache warriors had been able to cover forty-five or fifty miles a day on foot and over rough territory. But perhaps his modern breeding had slowed him. He had been so sure he could catch up before the others were through the pass. But he stood now in the hollow where they had camped, read the sign of overturned stone and bent twig left for him, and knew they would reach the rancheria and report the decision Deklay and the others wanted before he could head them off.

Travis slogged on. He was so tired now that only the drug from the sustenance tablets he mouthed at intervals kept him going at a dogged pace, hardly more than a swift walk. And always his mind was haunted by fragments of pictures, pictures he had seen in the reader. The big bomb had been the nightmare of his own world for so long, and what was that against the forces the bald star rovers had been able to command?

He fell beside a stream and slept. There was sunshine about him as he arose to stagger on. What day was this? How long had he sat in the tower chamber? He was not sure of time any more. He only knew that he must reach the rancheria, tell his story, somehow win over Deklay and the other reactionaries to prove the necessity for invading the north in force.

A rocky point which was a familiar landmark came into focus. He padded on, his chest heaving, his breath whistling through parched, sun-cracked lips. He did not know that his face was now a mask of driven resolution.

“Hahhhhhh—”

The cry reached his dulled ears. Travis lifted his head, saw the men before him and tried to think what that show of weapons turned toward him could mean.

A stone thudded to earth only inches before his feet, to be followed by another. He wavered to a stop.

“*Ni'ilgac—!*”

Witch? Where was a witch? Travis shook his head. There was no witch.

“*Do ne'ilka da'!*”

The old death threat, but why—for whom?

Another stone, this one hitting him in the ribs with force enough to send him reeling back and down. He tried to get up again, saw Deklay grin widely and take aim—and at last Travis realized what was happening.

Then there was a bursting pain in his head and he was falling—falling into a well of black, this time with no pillar of blue to guide him.



## 13

The rasp of something wet and rough, persistent against his cheek; Travis tried to turn his head to avoid the contact and was answered by a burst of pain which trailed off into a giddiness, making him fear another move, no matter how minor. He opened his eyes and saw the pointed ears, the outline of a coyote head between him and a dull gray sky, was able to recognize Nalik'ideyu.

A wetness other than that from the coyote's tongue slid down his forehead now. The dull clouds overhead had released the first heavy rain Travis had experienced since their landing on Topaz. He shivered as the chill damp of his clothes made him aware that he must have been lying out in the full force of the downpour for some time.

It was a struggle to get to his knees, but Nalik'ideyu mouthed a hold on his shirt, tugging and pulling so that somehow he crept into a hollow beneath the branches of a tree where the spouting water was lessened to a few pattering drops.

There the Apache's strength deserted him again and he could only hunch over, his bent knees against his chest, trying to endure the throbbing misery in his head, the awful floating sensation which followed any movement. Fighting against that, he tried to remember just what had happened.

The meeting with Deklay and at least four or five others ... then the Apache accusation of witchcraft, a serious thing in the old days. Old days! To Deklay and his fellows, these *were* the old days! And the threat that Deklay or some other had shouted at him—"Do ne'ilka da"—meant literally: "It won't dawn for you—death!"

Stones, the last thing Travis remembered were the stones. Slowly his hands went out to explore his body. There was more than one bruised area on his shoulders and ribs, even on his thighs. He must still have been a target after he had fallen under the stone which had knocked him unconscious. Stoned ... outlawed! But why? Surely Deklay's hostility could not have swept Buck, Jil-Lee, Tsoay, even Nolan, into agreeing to that? Now he could not think straight.

Travis became aware of warmth, not only of warmth and the soft touch of a furred body by his side, but a comforting communication of mind, a feeling he had no words to describe adequately. Nalik'ideyu was sitting crowded against him, her nose thrust up to rest on his shoulder. She breathed in soft puffs which stirred the loose locks of his rain-damp hair. And now he flung one arm about her, a gesture which brought a whisper of answering whine.

He was past wondering about the actions of the coyotes, only supremely thankful for Nalik'ideyu's present companionship. And a moment later when her mate squeezed under the low loop of a branch and joined them in this natural wickiup, Travis held out his other hand, drew it lovingly across Naginlta's wet hide.

"Now what?" he asked aloud. Deklay could only have taken such a drastic action with the majority of the clan solidly behind him. It could well be that this reactionary was the new chief, this act of Travis' expulsion merely adding to Deklay's growing prestige.

The shivering which had begun when Travis recovered consciousness, still shook him at intervals. Back on Terra, like all the others in the team, he had had every inoculation known to the space physicians, including several experimental ones. But the cold virus could still practically immobilize a man, and this was no time to give body room to chills and fever.

Catching his breath as his movements touched to life the pain in one bruise after another, Travis peeled off his soaked clothing, rubbed his body dry with handfuls of last year's leaves culled from the thick carpet under him, knowing there was nothing he could do until the whirling in his head disappeared. So he burrowed into the leaves until only his head was uncovered, and tried to sleep, the coyotes curling up one on either side of his nest.

He dreamed but later could not remember any incident from those dreams, save a certain frustration and fear. When he awoke, again to the sound of steady rain, it was dark. He reached out—both coyotes were gone. His head was clearer and suddenly he knew what must be done. As soon as his body was strong enough, he, too, would return to instincts and customs of the past. This situation was desperate enough for him to challenge Deklay.

In the dark Travis frowned. He was slightly taller, and three or four years younger than his enemy. But Deklay had the advantage in a stouter build and longer reach. However, Travis was sure that in his present life Deklay had never fought a duel—Apache fashion. And an Apache duel was not a meeting anyone entered into lightly. Travis had the right to enter the rancheria and deliver such a challenge. Then Deklay must meet him or admit himself in the wrong. That part of it was simple.

But in the past such duels had just one end, a fatal one for at least one of the fighters. If Travis took this trail, he must be prepared to go the limit. And he didn't want to kill Deklay! There were too few of them here on Topaz to make any loss less than a real catastrophe. While he had no liking for Deklay, neither did he nurse any hatred. However, he must challenge the other or remain a tribal outcast; and Travis had no right to gamble with time and the future, not after what he had learned in the tower. It might be his life and skill, or Deklay's, against the blotting out of them all—and their home world into the bargain.

First, he must locate the present camp of the clan. If Nolan's arguments had counted, they would be heading south away from the pass. And to follow would draw him farther from the tower valley. Travis' battered face ached as he grinned bitterly. This was another time when a man could wish he were two people, a scout on sentry duty at the valley, the fighter heading in the opposite direction to have it out with Deklay. But since he was merely one man he would have to gamble on time, one of the trickiest risks of all.

Before dawn Nalik'ideyu returned, carrying with her a bird—or at least birds must have been somewhere in the creature's ancestry, but the present representative of its kind had only vestigial remnants of wings, its trailing feet and legs well developed and far more powerful.

Travis skinned the corpse, automatically putting aside some spine quills to feather future arrows. Then he ate slivers of dusky meat raw, throwing the bones to Nalik'ideyu.

Though he was still stiff and sore, Travis was determined to be on his way. He tried mind contact with the coyote, picturing the Apaches, notably Deklay, as sharply as he could by mental image. And her assent was clear in return. She and her mate were willing to lead him to the tribe. He gave a light sigh of relief.

As he slogged on through the depressing drizzle, the Apache wondered again why the coyotes had left him before and waited in the tower valley. What link was there between the animals of Terra and the remains of the long-ago empire of the stars? For he was certain it was not by chance that Nalik'ideyu and Naginlta had lingered in that misty place. He longed to communicate with them directly, to ask questions and be answered.

Without their aid, Travis would never have been able to track the clan. The drizzle alternated with slashing bursts of rain, torrential enough to drive the trackers to the nearest cover.

Overhead the sky was either dull bronze or night black. Even the coyotes paced nose to ground, often making wide casts for the trail while Travis waited.

The rain lasted for three days and nights, filling watercourses with rapidly rising streams. Travis could only hope that the others were having the same difficulty traveling that he was, perhaps the more so since they were burdened with packs. The fact that they kept on meant that they were determined to get as far from the northern mountains as they could.

On the fourth morning the bronze of the clouds slowly thinned into the usual gold, and the sun struck across hills where mist curled like steam from a hundred bubbling pots. Travis relaxed in the welcome warmth, feeling his shirt dry on his shoulders. It was still a waterlogged terrain ahead which should continue to slow the clan. He had high expectations of catching up with them soon, and now the worst of his bruises had faded. His muscles were limber, and he had worked out his plan as best he could.

Two hours later he sat in ambush, waiting for the scout who was walking into his hands. Under the direction of the coyotes, Travis had circled the line of march, come in ahead of the clan. Now he needed an emissary to state his challenge, and the fact that the scout he was about to jump was Manulito, one of Deklay's supporters, suited Travis' purpose perfectly. He gathered his feet under him as the other came opposite, and sprang.

The rush carried Manulito off his feet and face down on the sod while Travis made the best of his advantage and pinned the wildly fighting man under him. Had it been one of the older braves he might not have been so successful, but Manulito was still a boy by Apache standards.

"Lie still!" Travis ordered. "Listen well—so you can say to Deklay the words of the Fox!"

The frenzied struggles ceased. Manulito managed to wrench his head to the left so he could see his captor. Travis loosened his grip, got to his feet. Manulito sat up, his face darkly sullen, but he did not reach for his knife.

"You will say this to Deklay: The Fox says he is a man of little sense and less courage, preferring to throw stones rather than meet knife to knife as does a warrior. If he thinks as a warrior, let him prove it—his strength against my strength—after the ways of the People!"

Some of the sullenness left Manulito's expression. He was eager, excited.

"You would duel with Deklay after the old custom?"

"I would. Say this to Deklay, openly so that all men may hear. Then Deklay must also give answer openly."

Manulito flushed at that implication concerning his leader's courage, and Travis knew that he would deliver the challenge openly. To keep his hold on the clan the latter must accept it, and there would be an audience of his people to witness the success or defeat of their new chief and his policies.

As Manulito disappeared Travis summoned the coyotes, putting full effort into getting across one message. Any tribe led by Deklay would be hostile to the mutant animals. They must go into hiding, run free in the wilderness if the gamble failed Travis. Now they withdrew into the bushes but not out of reach of his mind.

He did not have too long to wait. First came Jil-Lee, Buck, Nolan, Tsoay, Lupe—those who had been with him on the northern scout. Then the others, the warriors first, the women making a half circle behind, leaving a free space in which Deklay walked.

“I am the Fox,” Travis stated. “And this one has named me witch and *natdahe*, outlaw of the mountains. Therefore do I come to name names in my turn. Hear me, People: This Deklay—he would walk among you as *izesnantan*, a great chief—but he does not have the *go’ndi*, the holy power of a chief. For this Deklay is a fool, with a head filled by nothing but his own wishes, not caring for his clan brothers. He says he leads you into safety; I say he leads you into the worst danger any living man can imagine—even in peyote dreams! He is one twisted in his thoughts, and he would make you twisted also——”

Buck cut in sharply, hushing the murmur of the massed clan.

“These are bold words, Fox. Will you back them?”

Travis’ hands were already peeling off his shirt. “I will back them,” he stated between set teeth. He had known since his awakening after the stoning that this next move was the only one left for him to make. But now that the testing of his action came, he could not be certain of the outcome, of anything save that the final decision of this battle might affect more than the fate of two men. He stripped, noting that Deklay was doing the same.

Having stepped into the center of the glade, Nolan was using the point of his knife to score a deep-ridged circle there. Naked except for his moccasins, with only his knife in his hand, Travis took the two strides which put him in the circle facing Deklay. He surveyed his opponent’s finely muscled body, realizing that his earlier estimate of Deklay’s probable advantages were close to the mark. In sheer strength the other outmatched him. Whether Deklay was skillful with his knife was another question, one which Travis would soon be able to answer.

They circled, eyes intent upon each move, striving to weigh and measure each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Knife dueling among the Pinda-lick-o-yi, Travis remembered, had once been an art close to finished swordplay, with two evenly matched fighters able to engage for a long time without seriously marking each other. But this was a far rougher and more deadly game, with none of the niceties of such a meeting.

He evaded a vicious thrust from Deklay.

“The bull charges,” he laughed. “And the Fox snaps!” By some incredible stroke of good fortune, the point of his weapon actually grazed Deklay’s arm, drawing a thin, red inch-long line across the skin.

“Charge again, bull. Feel once more the Fox’s teeth!”

He strove to goad Deklay into a crippling loss of temper, knowing how the other could explode into violent rage. It was dangerous, that rage, but it could also make a man blindly careless.

There was an inarticulate sound from Deklay, a dusky swelling in the man’s face. He spat, as might an enraged puma, and rushed at Travis who did not quite manage to avoid the lunge, falling back with a smarting slash across the ribs.

“The bull gores!” Deklay bellowed. “Horns toss the Fox!”

He rushed again, elated by the sight of the trickling wound on Travis’ side. But the slighter man slipped away.

Travis knew he must be careful in such evasions. One foot across the ridged circle and he was finished as much as if Deklay’s blade had found its mark. Travis tried a thrust of his own, and his foot came down hard on a sharp pebble. Through the sole of his moccasin pain shot

upward, caused him to stumble. Again the scarlet flame of a wound, down his shoulder and forearm this time.

Well, there was one trick, he knew. Travis tossed the knife into the air, caught it with his left hand. Deklay was now facing a left-handed fighter and must adjust to that.

“Paw, bull, rattle your horns!” Travis cried. “The Fox still shows his teeth!”

Deklay recovered from his instant of surprise. With a cry which was indeed like the bellow of an old range bull, he rushed into grapple, sure of his superior strength against a younger and already wounded man.

Travis ducked, one knee thumping the ground. He groped out with his right hand, caught up a handful of earth, and flung it into the dusky brown face. Again it seemed that luck was on his side. That handful could not be as blinding as sand, but some bit of the shower landed in Deklay’s eye.

For a space of seconds Deklay was wide open—open for a blow which would rip him up the middle, the blow Travis could not and would not deliver.

Instead, he took the offensive recklessly, springing straight for his opponent. As the earth-grimed fingers of one hand clawed into Deklay’s face, he struck with the other, not with the point of the knife but with its shaft. But Deklay, already only half conscious from the blow, had his own chance. He fell to the ground, leaving his knife behind, two inches of steel between Travis’ ribs.

Somehow—he didn’t know from where he drew that strength—Travis kept his feet and took one step and then another, out of the circle until the comforting brace of a tree trunk was against his bare back. Was he finished—?

He fought to nurse his rags of consciousness. Had he summoned Buck with his eyes? Or had the urgency of what he had to say reached somehow from mind to mind? The other was at his side, but Travis put out a hand to ward him off.

“Towers—” He struggled to keep his wits through the pain and billowing weakness beginning to creep through him. “Reds mustn’t get to the towers! Worse than the bomb ... end us all!”

He had a hazy glimpse of Nolan and Jil-Lee closing in about him. The desire to cough tore at him, but they had to know, to believe....

“Reds get to the towers—everything finished. Not only here ... maybe back home too....”

Did he read comprehension on Buck’s face? Would Nolan and Jil-Lee and the rest believe him? Travis could not suppress the cough any longer, and the ripping pain which followed was the worst he had ever experienced. But still he kept his feet, tried to make them understand.

“Don’t let them get to the towers. Find that storehouse!”

Travis stood away from the tree, reached out to Buck his earth and bloodstained hand. “I swear ... truth ... this must be done!”

He was going down, and he had a queer thought that once he reached the ground everything would end, not only for him but also for his mission. Trying to see the faces of the men about him was like attempting to identify the people in a dream.

“Towers!” He had meant to shout it, but he could not even hear for himself that last word as he fell.

## 14

Travis' back was braced against blanketed packs as he steadied a piece of light-yellow bark against one bent knee scowling at the lines drawn on it in faint green.

"We are here then ... and the ship there—" His thumb was set on one point of the crude map, forefinger on the other. Buck nodded.

"That is so. Tsoay, Eskelta, Kawaykle, they watch the trails. There is the pass, two other ways men can come on foot. But who can watch the air?"

"The Tatars say the Reds dare not bring the 'copter into the mountains. After they first landed they lost a flyer in a tricky air-current flow up there. They have only one left and won't risk it. If only they aren't reinforced before we can move!" There it was again, that constant gnawing fear of time, time shortening into a rope to strangle them all.

"You think that the knowledge of our ship will bring them into the open?"

"That—or information about the towers would be the only things important enough to pull out their experts. They could send a controlled Tatar party to explore the ship, sure. But that wouldn't give them the technical reports they need. No, I think if they knew a wrecked Western Confederation ship was here, it would bring them—or enough of them to lessen the odds. We have to catch them in the open. Otherwise, they can hole up forever in that ship-fort of theirs."

"And just how do we let them know our ship is here? Send out another scouting party and let them be trailed back?"

"That's our last resource." Travis continued to frown at the map. Yes, it would be possible to let the Reds sight and trail an Apache party. But there was none in the clan who were expendable. Surely there was some other way of laying the trap with the wrecked ship for bait. Capture one of the Reds, let him escape again, having seen what they wanted him to see? Again a time-wasting business. And how long would they have to wait and what risks would they take to pick up a Red prisoner?

"If the Tatars were dependable...." Buck was thinking aloud.

But that "if" was far too big. They could not trust the Tatars. No matter how much the Mongols wanted to aid in pulling down the Reds, as long as they could be controlled by the caller they were useless. Or were they?

"Thought of something?" Buck must have caught Travis' change of expression.

"Suppose a Tatar saw our ship and then was picked up by a Red hunting patrol and they got the information out of him?"

"Do you think any outlaw would volunteer to let himself be picked up again? And if he did, wouldn't the Reds also be able to learn that he had been set up for the trap?"

"An escaped prisoner?" Travis suggested.

Now Buck was plainly considering the possibilities of such a scheme. And Travis' own spirits rose a little. The idea was full of holes, but it could be worked out. Suppose they capture, say, Menlik, bring him here as a prisoner, let him think they were about to kill him because of that attack back in the foothills. Then let him escape, pursue him northward to a

point where he could be driven into the hands of the Reds? Very chancy, but it just might work. Travis was favoring a gamble now, since his desperate one with the duel had paid off.

The risk he had accepted then had cost him two deep wounds, one of which might have been serious if Jil-Lee's project-sponsored medical training had not been to hand. But it had also made Travis one of the clan again, with his people willing to listen to his warning concerning the tower treasury.

"The girl—the Tatar girl!"

At first Travis did not understand Buck's ejaculation.

"We get the girl," the other elaborated, "let her escape, then hunt her to where they'll pick her up. Might even imprison her in the ship to begin with."

Kaydessa? Though something within him rebelled at that selection for the leading role in their drama, Travis could see the advantage of Buck's choice. Woman-stealing was an ancient pastime among primitive cultures. The Tatars themselves had found wives that way in the past, just as the Apache raiders of old had taken captive women into their wickiups. Yes, for raiders to steal a woman would be a natural act, accepted as such by the Reds. For the same woman to endeavor to escape and be hunted by her captors also was reasonable. And for such a woman, cut off from her outlaw kin, to eventually head back toward the Red settlement as the only hope of evading her enemies—logical all the way!

"She would have to be well frightened," Travis observed with reluctance.

"That can be done for us—"

Travis glanced at Buck with sharp annoyance. He would not allow certain games out of their common past to be played with Kaydessa. But Buck had something very different from old-time brutality in mind.

"Three days ago, while you were still flat on your back, Deklay and I went back to the ship—"

"Deklay?"

"You beat him openly, so he must restore his honor in his own sight. And the council has forbidden another duel or challenge," Buck replied. "Therefore he will continue to push for recognition in another way. And now that he has heard your story and knows we must face the Reds, not run from them, he is eager to take the war trail—too eager. So we returned to the ship to make another search for weapons——"

"There were none there before except those we had...."

"Nor now either. But we discovered something else." Buck paused and Travis was shaken out of his absorption with the problem at hand by a note in the other's voice. It was as if Buck had come upon something he could not summon the right words to describe.

"First," Buck continued, "there was this dead thing there, near where we found Dr. Ruthven. It was something like a man ... but all silvery hair——"

"The ape-things! The ape-things from the other worlds! What else did you see?" Travis had dropped the map. His side gave him a painful twinge as he caught at Buck's sleeve. The bald space rovers—did they still exist here somewhere? Had they come to explore the ship built on the pattern of their own but manned by Terrans?

"Nothing except tracks, a lot of them, in every open cabin and hole. I think there must have been a sizable pack of the things."

“What killed the dead one?”

Buck wet his lips. “I think—fear....” His voice dropped a little, almost apologetically, and Travis stared.

“The ship is changed. Inside, there is something wrong. When you walk the corridors your skin crawls, you think there is something behind you. You hear things, see things from the corners of your eyes.... When you turn, there’s nothing, nothing at all! And the higher you climb into the ship, the worse it is. I tell you, Travis, never have I felt anything like it before!”

“It was a ship of many dead,” Travis reminded him. Had the age-old Apache fear of the dead been activated by the Redax into an acute phobia—to strike down such a level-headed man as Buck?

“No, at first that, too, was my thought. Then I discovered that it was worst not near that chamber where we lay our dead, but higher, in the Redax cabin. I think perhaps the machine is still running, but running in a wrong way—so that it does not awaken old memories of our ancestors now, but brings into being all the fears which have ever haunted us through the dark of the ages. I tell you, Travis, when I came out of that place Deklay was leading me by the hand as if I were a child. And he was shivering as a man who will never be warm again. There is an evil there beyond our understanding. I think that this Tatar girl, were she only to stay there a very short time, would be well frightened—so frightened that any trained scientist examining her later would know there was a mystery to be explored.”

“The ape-things—could they have tried to run the Redax?” Travis wondered. To associate machines with the creatures was outwardly pure folly. But they had been discovered on two of the planets of the old civilization, and Ashe had thought that they might represent the degenerate remnants of a once intelligent species.

“That is possible. If so, they raised a storm which drove them out and killed one of them. The ship is a haunted place now.”

“But for us to use the girl...” Travis had seen the logic in Buck’s first suggestion, but now he differed. If the atmosphere of the ship was as terrifying as Buck said, to imprison Kaydessa there, even temporarily, was still wrong.

“She need not remain long. Suppose we should do this: We shall enter with her and then allow the disturbance we would feel to overcome us. We could run, leave her alone. When she left the ship, we could then take up the chase, shepherding her back to the country she knows. Within the ship we would be with her and could see she did not remain too long.”

Travis could see a good prospect in that plan. There was one thing he would insist on—if Kaydessa was to be in that ship, he himself would be one of the “captors.” He said as much, and Buck accepted his determination as final.

They dispatched a scouting party to infiltrate the territory to the north, to watch and wait their chance of capture. Travis strove to regain his feet, to be ready to move when the moment came.

Five days later he was able to reach the ridge beyond which lay the wrecked ship. With him were Jil-Lee, Lupe, and Manulito. They satisfied themselves that the globe had had no visitors since Buck and Deklay; there was no sign that the ape-things had returned.

“From here,” Travis said, “the ship doesn’t look too bad, almost as if it might be able to take off again.”



“It might lift,” Jil-Lee gestured to the mountaintop behind the curve of the globe—“about that far. The tubes on this side are intact.”

“What would happen were the Reds to get inside and try to fly again?” Manulito wondered aloud.

Travis was struck by a sudden idea, one perhaps just as wild as the other inspirations he had had since landing on Topaz, but one to be studied and explored—not dismissed without consideration. Suppose enough power remained to lift the ship partially and then blow it up? With the Red technicians on board at the time.... But he was no engineer, he had no idea whether any part of the globe might or might not work again.

“They are not fools; a close look would tell them it is a wreck,” Jil-Lee countered.

Travis walked on. Not too far ahead a yellow-brown shape moved out of the brush, stood stiff-legged in his path, facing the ship and growling in a harsh rumble of sound. Whatever moved or operated in that wreck was picked up by the acute sense of the coyote, even at this distance.

“On!” Travis edged around the snarling animal. With one halting step and then another, it followed him. There was a sharp warning yelp from the brush, and a second coyote head appeared. Naginlta followed Travis, but Nalik’ideyu refused to approach the grounded globe.

Travis surveyed the ship closely, trying to remember the layout of its interior. To turn the whole sphere into a trap—was it possible? How had Ashe said the Redax worked? Something about high-frequency waves stimulating certain brain and nerve centers.

What if one were shielded from those rays? That tear in the side—he himself must have climbed through that the night they crashed. And the break was not too far from the space lock. Near the lock was a storage compartment. And if it had not been jammed, or its contents crushed, they might have something. He beckoned to Jil-Lee.

“Give me a hand—up there.”

“Why?”

“I want to see if the space suits are intact.”

Jil-Lee regarded Travis with open bewilderment, but Manulito pushed forward. “We do not need those suits to walk here, Travis. This air we can breathe—”

“Not for the air, and not in the open.” Travis advanced at a deliberate pace. “Those suits may be insulated in more ways than one——”

“Against a mixed-up Redax broadcast, you mean!” Jil-Lee exclaimed. “Yes, but you stay here, younger brother. This is a risky climb, and you are not yet strong.”

Travis was forced to accede to that, waiting as Manulito and Lupe climbed up to the tear and entered. At least Buck and Deklay’s experience had forewarned them and they would be prepared for the weird ghosts haunting the interior.

But when they returned, pulling between them the limp space suit, both men were pale, the shiny sheen of sweat on their foreheads, their hands shaking. Lupe sat down on the ground before Travis.

“Evil spirits,” he said, giving to this modern phenomenon the old name. “Truly ghosts and witches walk in there.”

Manulito had spread the suit on the ground and was examining it with a care which spoke of familiarity.

“This is unharmed,” he reported. “Ready to wear.”

The suits were all tailored for size, Travis knew. And this fitted a slender, medium-sized man. It would fit him, Travis Fox. But Manulito was already unbuckling the fastenings with practiced ease.

“I shall try it out,” he announced. And Travis, seeing the awkward climb to the entrance of the ship, had to agree that the first test should be carried out by someone more agile at the moment.

Sealed into the suit, with the bubble helmet locked in place, the Apache climbed back into the globe. The only form of communication with him was the rope he had tied about him, and if he went above the first level, he would have to leave that behind.

In the first few moments they saw no twitch of alarm running along the rope. After counting fifty slowly, Travis gave it a tentative jerk, to find it firmly fastened within. So Manulito had tied it there and was climbing to the control cabin.

They continued to wait with what patience they could muster. Naginlta, pacing up and down a good distance from the ship, whined at intervals, the warning echoed each time by his mate upslope.

“I don’t like it—” Travis broke off when the helmeted figure appeared again at the break. Moving slowly in his cumbersome clothing, Manulito reached the ground, fumbled with the catch of his head covering and then stood, taking deep, lung-filling gulps of air.

“Well?” Travis demanded.

“I see no ghosts,” Manulito said, grinning. “This is ghost-proof!” He slapped his gloved hand against the covering over his chest. “There is also this—from what I know of these ships—some of the relays still work. I think this could be made into a trap. We could entice the Reds in and then....” His hand moved in a quick upward flip.

“But we don’t know anything about the engines,” Travis replied.

“No? Listen—you, Fox, are not the only one to remember useful knowledge.” Manulito had lost his cheerful grin. “Do you think we are just the savages those big brains back at the project wished us to be? They have played a trick on us with their Redax. So, we can play a few tricks, too. Me—? I went to M.I.T., or is that one of the things you no longer remember, Fox?”

Travis swallowed hastily. He really had forgotten that fact until this very minute. From the beginning, the Apache team had been carefully selected and screened, not only for survival potential, which was their basic value to the project, but also for certain individual skills. Just as Travis’ grounding in archaeology had been one advantage, so had Manulito’s technical training made a valuable, though different, contribution. If at first the Redax, used without warning, had smothered that training, perhaps the effects were now fading.

“You can do something, then?” he asked eagerly.

“I can try. There is a chance to booby trap the control cabin at least. And that is where they would poke and pry. Working in this suit will be tough. How about my trying to smash up the Redax first?”

“Not until after we use it on our captive,” Jil-Lee decided. “Then there would be some time before the Reds come——”

“You talk as if they *will* come,” cut in Lupe. “How can you be sure?”

“We can’t,” Travis agreed. “But we can count on this much, judging from the past. Once they know that there is a wrecked ship here, they will be forced to explore it. They cannot afford an enemy settlement on this side of the mountains. That would be, according to their way of thinking, an eternal threat.”

Jil-Lee nodded. “That is true. This is a complicated plan, yes, and one in which many things may go wrong. But it is also one which covers all the loopholes we know of.”

With Lupe’s aid Manulito crawled out of the suit. As he leaned it carefully against a supporting rock he said:

“I have been thinking of this treasure house in the towers. Suppose we could find new weapons there...”

Travis hesitated. He still shrank from the thought of opening the secret places behind those glowing walls, to loose a new peril.

“If we took weapons from there and lost the fight...” He advanced his first objection and was glad to see the expression of comprehension on Jil-Lee’s face.

“It would be putting the weapons straight into Red hands,” the other agreed.

“We may have to chance it before we’re through,” Manulito warned. “Suppose we do get some of their technicians into this trap. That isn’t going to open up their main defense for us. We may need a bigger nutcracker than we’ve ever seen.”

With a return of that queasy feeling he had known in the tower, Travis knew Manulito was speaking sense. They might have to open Pandora’s box before the end of this campaign.

## 15

They camped another two days near the wrecked ship while Manulito prowled the haunted corridors and cabins in his space suit, planning his booby trap. At night he drew diagrams on pieces of bark and discussed the possibility of this or that device, sometimes lapsing into technicalities his companions could not follow. But Travis was well satisfied that Manulito knew what he was doing.

On the morning of the third day Nolan slipped into their midst. He was dust-grimed, his face gaunt, the signs of hard travel plain to read. Travis handed him the nearest canteen, and they watched him drink sparingly in small sips before he spoke.

“They come ... with the girl—”

“You had trouble?” asked Jil-Lee.

“The Tatars had moved their camp, which was only wise, since the Reds must have had a line on the other one. And they are now farther to the west. But—” he wiped his lips with the back of his hand—“also we saw your towers, Fox. And that is a place of power!”

“No sign that the Reds are prowling there?”

Nolan shook his head. “To my mind the mists there conceal the towers from aerial view. Only one coming on foot could tell them from the natural crags of the hills.”

Travis relaxed. Time still granted them a margin of grace. He glanced up to see Nolan smiling faintly.

“This maiden, she is a kin to the puma of the mountains,” he announced. “She has marked Tsoay with her claws until he looks like the ear-clipped yearling fresh from the branding chute——”

“She is not hurt?” Travis demanded.

This time Nolan chuckled openly. “Hurt? No, we had much to do to keep her from hurting us, younger brother. That one is truly as she claims, a daughter of wolves. And she is also keen-witted, marking a return trail all the way, though she does not know that is as we wish. Did we not pick the easiest way back for just that reason? Yes, she plans to escape.”

Travis stood up. “Let us finish this quickly!” His voice came out on a rough note. This plan had never had his full approval. Now he found it less and less easy to think about taking Kaydessa into the ship, allowing the emotional torment lurking there to work upon her. Yet he knew that the girl would not be hurt, and he had made sure he would be beside her within the globe, sharing with her the horror of the unseen.

A rattling of gravel down the narrow valley opening gave warning to those by the campfire. Manulito had already stowed the space suit in hiding. To Kaydessa they must have seemed reverted entirely to savagery.

Tsoay came first, an angry raking of four parallel scratches down his left cheek. And behind him Buck and Eskelta shoved the prisoner, urging her on with a show of roughness which did not descend to actual brutality. Her long braids had shaken loose, and a sleeve was torn, leaving one slender arm bare. But none of the fighting spirit had left her.

They thrust her out into the circle of waiting men and she planted her feet firmly apart, glaring at them all indiscriminately until she sighted Travis. Then her anger became hotter and more deadly.

“Pig! Rooter in the dirt! Diseased camel—” she shouted at him in English and then reverted to her own tongue, her voice riding up and down the scale. Her hands were tied behind her back, but there were no bonds on her tongue.

“This is one who can speak thunders, and shoot lightnings from her mouth,” Buck commented in Apache. “Put her well away from the wood, lest she set it aflame.”

Tsoay held his hands over his ears. “She can deafen a man when she cannot set her mark on him otherwise. Let us speedily get rid of her.”

Yet for all their jeering comments, their eyes held respect. Often in the past a defiant captive who stood up boldly to his captors had received more consideration than usual from Apache warriors; courage was a quality they prized. A Pinda-lick-o-yi such as Tom Jeffords, who rode into Cochise’s camp and sat in the midst of his sworn enemies for a parley, won the friendship of the very chief he had been fighting. Kaydessa had more influence with her captors than she could dream of holding.

Now it was time for Travis to play his part. He caught the girl’s shoulder and pushed her before him toward the wreck.

Some of the spirit seemed to have left her thin, tense body, and she went without any more fight. Only when they came into full view of the ship did she falter. Travis heard her breathe a gasp of surprise.

As they had planned, four of the Apaches—Jil-Lee, Tsoay, Nolan, and Buck—fanned out toward the heights about the ship. Manulito had already gone to cover, to don the space suit and prepare for any accident.

Resolutely Travis continued to propel Kaydessa ahead. At the moment he did not know which was worse, to enter the ship expecting the fear to strike, or to meet it unprepared. He was ready to refuse to enter, not to allow the girl, sullenly plodding on under his compulsion, to face that unseen but potent danger.

Only the memory of the towers and the threat of the Reds finding and exploiting the treasure there kept him going. Eskelta went first, climbing to the tear. Travis cut the ropes binding Kaydessa’s wrists and gave her a slight slap between the shoulders.

“Climb, woman!” His anxiety made that a harsh order and she climbed.

Eskelta was inside now, heading for the cabin which might reasonably be selected as a prison. They planned to get the girl as far as that point and then stage their act of being overcome by fear, allowing her to escape.

Stage an act? Travis was not two feet along that corridor before he knew that there would be little acting needed on his part. The thing which pervaded the ship did not attack sharply, rather it seeped into his mind and body as if he drew in poison with every breath, sent it racing along his veins with every beat of a laboring heart. Yet he could not put any name to his feelings, except an awful, weakening fear which weighted him heavier with every step he took.

Kaydessa screamed. Not this time in rage, but with such fervor that Travis lost his hold, staggered back to the wall. She whirled about, her face contorted, and sprang at him.

It was indeed like trying to fight a wildcat and after the first second or two he was hard put to protect his eyes, his face, his side, without injuring her in return. She scrambled over him, running for the break in the wall, and disappeared. Travis gasped, and started to crawl for the break. Eskelta loomed over him, pulled him up in haste.

They reached the opening but did not climb through. Travis was uncertain as to whether he could make that descent yet, and Eskelta was obeying orders in not venturing out too soon.

Below, the ground was bare. There was no sign of the Apaches, though they were in hiding there—and none of Kaydessa. Travis was amazed that she had vanished so quickly.

Still uneasy from the emanation within, they perched within the shadow of the break until Travis thought that the fugitive had a good five-minute start. Then he nodded a signal to Eskelta.

By the time they reached ground level Travis felt a warm wetness spreading under his shielding palm and he knew the wound had opened. He spoke a word or two in hot protest against that mishap, knowing it would keep him from the trail. Kaydessa must be covered all the way back across the pass, not only to be shepherded away from her people and toward the plains where she could be picked up by a Red patrol, but also to keep her from danger. And he had planned from the first to be one of those shepherds.

Now he was about as much use as a trail-lame pony. However, he could send deputies. He thought out his call, and Nalik'ideyu's head appeared in a frame of bush.

“Go, both of you and run with her! Guard—!” He said the words in a whisper, thought them with a fierce intensity as he centered his gaze on the yellow eyes in the pointed coyote face. There was a feeling of assent, and then the animal was gone. Travis sighed.

The Apache scouts were subtle and alert, but the coyotes could far outdo any man. With Nalik'ideyu and Naginlta flanking her flight, Kaydessa would be well guarded. She would probably never see her guards or know that they were running protection for her.

“That was a good move,” Jil-Lee said, coming out of concealment. “But what have you done to yourself?” He stepped closer, pulling Travis' hand away from his side. By the time Lupe came to report, Travis was again wound in a strapping bandage pulled tightly about his lower ribs, and reconciled to the fact that any trailing he would do must be well to the rear of the first party.

“The towers,” he said to Jil-Lee. “If our plan works, we can catch part of the Reds here. But we still have their ship to take, and for that we need help which we may find at the towers. Or at least we can be on guard there if they return with Kaydessa on that path.”

Lupe dropped down lightly from an upper ledge. He was grinning.

“That woman is one who thinks. She runs from the ship first as a rabbit with a wolf at her heels. Then she begins to think. She climbs—” He lifted one finger to the slope behind them. “She goes behind a rock to watch under cover. When Fox comes from the ship with Eskelta, again she climbs. Buck lets himself be seen, so she moves east, as we wish—”

“And now?” questioned Travis.

“She is keeping to the high ways; almost she thinks like one of the People on the war trail. Nolan believes she will hole up for the night somewhere above. He will make sure.”

Travis licked his lips. “She has no food or water.”

Jil-Lee's lips shaped a smile. “They will see that she comes upon both as if by chance. We have planned all of this, as you know, younger brother.”

That was true. Travis knew that Kaydessa would be guided without her knowledge by the “accidental” appearance now and then of some pursuer—just enough to push her along.

“Then, too, she is now armed,” Jil-Lee added.

“How?” demanded Travis.

“Look to your own belt, younger brother. Where is your knife?”

Startled, Travis glanced down. His sheath was empty, and he had not needed that blade since he had drawn it to cut meat at the morning meal. Lupe laughed.

“She had steel in her hand when she came out of that ghost ship.”

“Took it from me while we struggled!” Travis was openly surprised. He had considered the frenzy displayed by the Tatar girl as an outburst of almost mindless terror. Yet Kaydessa had had wit enough to take his knife! Could this be another case where one race was less affected by a mind machine than the other? Just as the Apaches had not been governed by the Red caller, so the Tatars might not be as sensitive to the Redax.

“She is a strong one, that woman—one worth many ponies.” Eskelta reverted to the old measure of a wife’s value.

“That is true!” Travis agreed emphatically and then was annoyed at the broadening of Jil-Lee’s smile. Abruptly he changed the subject.

“Manulito is setting the booby trap in the ship.”

“That is well. He and Eskelta will remain here, and you with them.”

“Not so! We must go to the towers——” Travis protested.

“I thought,” Jil-Lee cut in, “that you believed the weapons of the old ones too dangerous for us to use.”

“Maybe they will be forced into our hands. But we must be sure the towers are not entered by the Reds on their way here.”

“That is reasonable. But for you, younger brother, no trailing today, perhaps not tomorrow. If that wound opens again, you might have much bad trouble.”

Travis was forced to accept that, in spite of his worry and impatience. And the next day when he did move on he had only the report that Kaydessa had sheltered beside a pool for the night and was doggedly moving back across the mountains.

Three days later Travis, Jil-Lee, and Buck came into the tower valley. Kaydessa was in the northern foothills, twice turned back from the west and the freedom of the outlaws by the Apache scouts. And only half an hour before, Tsoay had reported by mirror what should have been welcome news: the Red helicopter was cruising as it had on the day they watched the hunters enter the uplands. There was an excellent chance of the fugitive’s being sighted and picked up soon.

Tsoay had also spotted a party of three Tatars watching the helicopter. But after one wide sweep of the flyer they had taken to their ponies and ridden away at the fastest pace their mounts could manage in this rough territory.

On a stretch of smooth earth Buck scratched a trail, and they studied it. The Reds would have to follow this route to seek the wrecked ship—a route covered by Apache sentinels. And following the chain of communication the result of the trap would be reported to the party at the towers.

The waiting was the most difficult; too many imponderables did not allow for unemotional thinking. Travis was down to the last shred of patience when word came on the second morning at the hidden valley that Kaydessa had been picked up by a Red patrol—drawn out to meet them by the caller.

“Now—the tower weapons!” Buck answered the report with an imperative order to Travis. And the other knew he could no longer postpone the inevitable. And only by action could he blot out the haunting mental picture of Kaydessa once more drawn into the bondage she so hated.

Flanked by Jil-Lee and Buck, he climbed back through the tower window and faced the glowing pillar.

He crossed the room, put out both hands to the sleek pole, uncertain if the weird transport would work again. He heard the sharp gasp from the others as his body was sucked against the pillar and carried downward through the well. Buck followed him, and Jil-Lee came last. Then Travis led the way along the underground corridor to the room with the table and the reader.

He sat down on the bench, fumbled with the pile of tape disks, knowing that the other two were watching him with almost hostile intentness. He snapped a disk into the reader, hoping he could correctly interpret the directions it gave.

He looked up at the wall before him. Three ... four steps, the correct move—and then an unlocking....

“You know?” Buck demanded.

“I can guess——”

“Well?” Jil-Lee moved to the table. “What do we do?”

“This——” Travis came from behind the table, walked to the wall. He put out both hands, flattened his palms against the green-blue-purple surface and slid them slowly along. Under his touch, the material of the wall was cool and hard, unlike the live feel the pillar had. Cool until—

One palm, held at arm’s length had found the right spot. He slid the other hand along in the opposite direction until his arms were level with his shoulders. His fingers were able now to press on those points of warmth. Travis tensed and pushed hard with all ten fingers.



## 16

At first, as one second and then two passed and there was no response to the pressure, Travis thought he had mistaken the reading of the tape. Then, directly before his eyes, a dark line cut vertically down the wall. He applied more pressure until his fingers were half numb with effort. The line widened slowly. Finally he faced a slit some eight feet in height, a little more than two in width, and there the opening remained.

Light beyond, a cold, gray gleam—like that of a cloudy winter day on Terra—and with it the chill of air out of some arctic wasteland. Favoring his still bandaged side, Travis scraped through the door ahead of the others, and came into the place of gray cold.

“Wauggh!” Travis heard that exclamation from Jil-Lee, could have echoed it himself except that he was too astounded by what he had seen to say anything at all.

The light came from a grid of bars set far above their heads into the native rock which roofed this storehouse, for storehouse it was. There were orderly lines of boxes, some large enough to contain a tank, others no bigger than a man’s fist. Symbols in the same blue-green-purple lights of the outer wall shone from their sides.

“What—?” Buck began one question and then changed it to another: “Where do we begin to look?”

“Toward the far end.” Travis started down the center aisle between rows of the massed spoils of another time and world—or worlds. The same tape which had given him the clue to the unlocking of the door, emphasized the importance of something stored at the far end, an object or objects which must be used first. He had wondered about that tape. A sensation of urgency, almost of despair, had come through the gabble of alien words, the quick sequence of diagrams and pictures. The message might have been taped under a threat of some great peril.

There was no dust on the rows of boxes or on the floor underfoot. A current of cold, fresh air blew at intervals down the length of the huge chamber. They could not see the next aisle across the barriers of stored goods, but the only noise was a whisper and the faint sounds of their own feet. They came out into an open space backed by the wall, and Travis saw what had been so important.

“No!” His protest was involuntary, but his denial loud enough to echo.

Six—six of them—tall, narrow cases set upright against the wall; and from their depths, five pairs of dark eyes staring back at him in cold measurement. These were the men of the ships—the men Menlik had dreamed of—their bald white heads, their thin bodies with the skintight covering of the familiar blue-green-purple. Five of them were here, alive—watching ... waiting....

Five men—and six boxes. That small fact broke the spell in which those eyes held Travis. He looked again at the sixth box to his right. Expecting to meet another pair of eyes this time, he was disconcerted to face only emptiness. Then, as his gaze traveled downward, he saw what lay on the floor there—a skull, a tangle of bones, tattered material cobwebbed into dusty rags by time. Whatever had preserved five of the star men intact, had failed the sixth of their company.

“They are alive!” Jil-Lee whispered.

“I do not think so,” Buck answered. Travis took another step, reached out to touch the transparent front of the nearest coffin case. There was no change in the eyes of the alien who stood within, no indication that if the Apaches could see him, he would be able to return their interest. The five stares which had bemused the visitors at first, did not break to follow their movements.

But Travis knew! Whether it was some message on the tape which the sight of the sleepers made clear, or whether some residue of the driving purpose which had set them there now reached his mind, was immaterial. He knew the purpose of this room and its contents, why it had been made and the reason its six guardians had been left as prisoners—and what they wanted from anyone coming after them.

“They sleep,” he said softly.

“Sleep?” Buck caught him up.

“They sleep in something like deep freeze.”

“Do you mean they can be brought to life again!” Jil-Lee cried.

“Maybe not now—it must be too long—but they were meant to wait out a period and be restored.”

“How do you know that?” Buck asked.

“I don’t know for certain, but I think I understand a little. Something happened a long time ago. Maybe it was a war, a war between whole star systems, bigger and worse than anything we can imagine. I think this planet was an outpost, and when the supply ships didn’t come any more, when they knew they might be cut off for some length of time, they closed down. Stacked their supplies and machines here and then went to sleep to wait for their rescuers....”

“For rescuers who never came,” Jil-Lee said softly. “And there is a chance they could be revived even now?”

Travis shivered. “Not one I would want to take.”

“No,” Buck’s tone was somber, “that I agree to, younger brother. These are not men as we know them, and I do not think they would be good *dalaanbiyat’i*—allies. They had *go’ndi* in plenty, these star men, but it is not the power of the People. No one but a madman or a fool would try to disturb this sleep of theirs.”

“The truth you speak,” Jil-Lee agreed. “But where in this,” he turned his shoulder to the sleeping star men and looked back at the filled chamber—“do we find anything which will serve us here and now?”

Again Travis had only the scippiest information to draw upon. “Spread out,” he told them. “Look for the marking of a circle surrounding four dots set in a diamond pattern.”

They went, but Travis lingered for a moment to look once more into the bleak and bitter eyes of the star men. How many planet years ago had they sealed themselves into those boxes? A thousand, ten thousand? Their empire was long gone, yet here was an outpost still waiting to be revived to carry on its mysterious duties. It was as if in Saxon-invaded Britain long ago a Roman garrison had been frozen to await the return of the legions. Buck was right; there was no common ground today between Terran man and these unknowns. They must continue to sleep undisturbed.

Yet when Travis also turned away and went back down the aisle, he was still aware of a persistent pull on him to return. It was as though those eyes had set locking cords to will him

back to release the sleepers. He was glad to turn a corner, to know that they could no longer watch him plunder their treasury.

“Here!” That was Buck’s voice, but it echoed so oddly across the big chamber that Travis had difficulty in deciding what part of the warehouse it was coming from. And Buck had to call several times before Travis and Jil-Lee joined him.

There was the circle-dot-diamond symbol shining on the side of a case. They worked it out of the pile, setting it in the open. Travis knelt to run his hands along the top. The container was an unknown alloy, tough, unmarked by the years—perhaps indestructible.

Again his fingers located what his eyes could not detect—the impressions on the edge, oddly shaped impressions into which his finger tips did not fit too comfortably. He pressed, bearing down with the full strength of his arms and shoulders, and then lifted up the lid.

The Apaches looked into a set of compartments, each holding an object with a barrel, a hand grip, a general resemblance to the sidearms of their own world and time, but sufficiently different to point up the essential strangeness. With infinite care Travis worked one out of the vise-support which held it. The weapon was light in weight, lighter than any automatic he had ever held. Its barrel was long, a good eighteen inches—the grip alien in shape so that it didn’t fit comfortably into his hand, the trigger nonexistent, but in its place a button on the lower part of the barrel which could be covered by an outstretched finger.

“What does it do?” asked Buck practically.

“I’m not sure. But it is important enough to have a special mention on the tape.” Travis passed the weapon along to Buck and worked another loose from its holder.

“No way of loading I can see,” Buck said, examining the weapon with care and caution.

“I don’t think it fires a solid projectile,” Travis replied. “We’ll have to test them outside to find out just what we do have.”

The Apaches took only three of the weapons, closing the box before they left. And as they wriggled back through the crack door, Travis was visited again by that odd flash of compelling, almost possessive power he had experienced when they had lain in ambush for the Red hunting party. He took a step or two forward until he was able to catch the edge of the reading table and steady himself against it.

“What is the matter?” Both Buck and Jil-Lee were watching him; apparently neither had felt that sensation. Travis did not reply for a second. He was free of it now. But he was sure of its source; it had not been any backlash of the Red caller! It was rooted here—a compulsion triggered to make the original intentions of the outpost obeyed, a last drag from the sleepers. This place had been set up with a single purpose: to protect and preserve the ancient rulers of Topaz. And perhaps the very presence here of the intruding Terrans had released a force, started an unseen installation.

Now Travis answered simply: “They want out...”

Jil-Lee glanced back at the slit door, but Buck still watched Travis.

“They call?” he asked.

“In a way,” Travis admitted. But the compulsion had already ebbed; he was free. “It is gone now.”

“This is not a good place,” Buck observed somberly. “We touch that which should not be held by men of our earth.” He held out the weapon.

“Did not the People take up the rifles of the Pinda-lick-o-yi for their defense when it was necessary?” Jil-Lee demanded. “We do what we must. After seeing that,” his chin indicated the slit and what lay behind it—“do you wish the Reds to forage here?”

“Still,” Buck’s words came slowly, “this is a choice between two evils, rather than between an evil and a good—”

“Then let us see how powerful this evil is!” Jil-Lee headed for the corridor leading to the pillar.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was late afternoon when they made their way through the swirling mists of the valley under the archway giving on the former site of the outlaw Tatar camp. Travis sighted the long barrel of the weapon at a small bush backed by a boulder, and he pressed the firing button. There was no way of knowing whether the weapon was loaded except to try it.

The result of his action was quick—quick and terrifying. There was no sound, no sign of any projectile ... ray-gas ... or whatever might have issued in answer to his finger movement. But the bush—the bush was no more!

A black smear made a ragged outline of the extinguished branches and leaves on the rock which had stood behind. The earth might still enclose roots under a thin coating of ash, but the bush was gone!

“The breath of Naye’nezyani—powerful beyond belief!” Buck broke their horrified silence first. “In truth evil is here!”

Jil-Lee raised his gun—if gun it could be called—aimed at the rock with the bush silhouette plain to see and fired.

This time they were able to witness disintegration in progress, the crumble of the stone as if its substance was no more than sand lapped by river water. A pile of blackened rubble remained—nothing more.

“To use this on a living thing?” Buck protested, horror basing the doubt in his voice.

“We do not use it against living things,” Travis promised, “but against the ship of the Reds—to cut that to pieces. This will open the shell of the turtle and let us at its meat.”

Jil-Lee nodded. “Those are true words. But now I agree with your fears of this place, Travis. This is a devil thing and must not be allowed to fall into the hands of those who—”

“Will use it more freely than we plan to?” Buck wanted to know. “We reserve to ourselves that right because we hold our motives higher? To think that way is also a crooked trail. We will use this means because we must, but afterward...”

Afterward that warehouse must be closed, the tapes giving the entrance clue destroyed. One part of Travis fought that decision, right though he knew it to be. The towers were the menace he had believed. And what was more discouraging than the risk they now ran, was the belief that the treasure was a poison which could not be destroyed but which might spread from Topaz to Terra.

Suppose the Western Conference had discovered that storehouse and explored its riches, would they have been any less eager to exploit them? As Buck had pointed out, one’s own ideals could well supply reasons for violence. In the past Terra had been racked by wars of religion, one fanatically held opinion opposed to another. There was no righteousness in such struggles, only fatal ends. The Reds had no right to this new knowledge—but neither did they. It must be locked against the meddling of fools and zealots.

“Taboo—” Buck spoke that word with an emphasis they could appreciate. Knowledge must be set behind the invisible barriers of taboo, and that could work.

“These three—no more—we found no other weapons!” Jil-Lee added a warning suggestion.

“No others,” Buck agreed and Travis echoed, adding:

“We found tombs of the space people, and these were left with them. Because of our great need we borrowed them, but they must be returned to the dead or trouble will follow. And they may only be used against the fortress of the Reds by us, who first found them and have taken unto ourselves the wrath of disturbed spirits.”

“Well thought! That is an answer to give the People. The towers are the tombs of dead ones. When we return these they shall be taboo. We are agreed?” Buck asked.

“We are agreed!”

Buck tried his weapon on a sapling, saw it vanish into nothingness. None of the Apaches wanted to carry the strange guns against their bodies; the power made them objects of fear, rather than arms to delight a warrior. And when they returned to their temporary camp, they laid all three on a blanket and covered them up. But they could not cover up the memories of what had happened to bush, rock, and tree.

“If such are their small weapons,” Buck observed that evening, “then what kind of things did they have to balance our heavy armament? Perhaps they were able to burn up worlds!”

“That may be what happened elsewhere,” Travis replied. “We do not know what put an end to their empire. The capital-planet we found on the first voyage had not been destroyed, but it had been evacuated in haste. One building had not even been stripped of its furnishings.” He remembered the battle he had fought there, he and Ross Murdock and the winged native, standing up to an attack of the ape-things while the winged warrior had used his physical advantage to fly above and bomb the enemies with boxes snatched from the piles....

“And here they went to sleep in order to wait out some danger—time or disaster—they did not believe would be permanent,” Buck mused.

Travis thought he would flee from the eyes of the sleepers throughout his dreams that night, but on the contrary he slept heavily, finding it hard to rouse when Jil-Lee awakened him for his watch. But he was alert when he saw a four-footed shape flit out of the shadows, drink water from the stream, and shake itself vigorously in a spray of drops.

“Naginlta!” he greeted the coyote. Trouble? He could have shouted that question, but he put a tight rein on his impatience and strove to communicate in the only method possible.

No, what the coyote had come to report was not trouble but the fact that the one he had been set to guard was headed back into the mountains, though others came with her—four others. Nalik’ideyu still watched their camp. Her mate had come for further orders.

Travis squatted before the animal, cupped the coyote’s jowls between his palms. Naginlta suffered his touch with only a small whine of uneasiness. With all his power of mental suggestion, Travis strove to reach the keen brain he knew was served by the yellow eyes looking into his.

The others with Kaydessa were to be led on, taken to the ship. But Kaydessa must not suffer harm. When they reached a spot near-by—Travis thought of a certain rock beyond the pass—then one of the coyotes was to go ahead to the ship. Let the Apaches there know....

Manulito and Eskelta should also be warned by the sentry along the peaks, but additional alerting would not go amiss. Those four with Kaydessa—they must reach the trap!

“What was that?” Buck rolled out of his blanket.

“Naginlta—” The coyote sped back into the dark again. “The Reds have taken the bait, a party of at least four with Kaydessa are moving into the foothills, heading south.”

But the enemy party was not the only one on the move. In the light of day a sentry’s mirror from a point in the peaks sent another warning down to their camp.

Out in their mountain meadows the Tatar outlaws were on horseback, moving toward the entrance of the tower valley. Buck knelt by the blanket covering the alien weapons.

“Now what?”

“We’ll have to stop them,” Travis replied, but he had no idea of just how they would halt those determined Mongol horsemen.

## 17

There were ten of them riding on small, wiry steppe ponies—men and women both, and well armed. Travis recalled it was the custom of the Horde that the women fought as warriors when necessary. Menlik—there was no mistaking the flapping robe of their leader. And they were singing! The rider behind the shaman thumped with violent energy a drum fastened beside his saddle horn, its heavy boom, boom the same call the Apache had heard before. The Mongols were working themselves into the mood for some desperate effort, Travis deduced. And if they were too deeply under the Red spell, there would be no arguing with them. He could wait no longer.

The Apache swung down from a ledge near the valley gate, moved into the open and stood waiting, the alien weapon resting across his forearm. If necessary, he intended to give a demonstration with it for an object lesson.

“*Dar-u-gar!*” The war cry which had once awakened fear across a quarter of Terra. Thin here, and from only a few throats, but just as menacing.

Two of the horsemen aimed lances, preparing to ride him down. Travis sighted a tree midway between them and pressed the firing button. This time there was a flash, a flicker of light, to mark the disappearance of a living thing.

One of the lancers’ ponies reared, squealed in fear. The other kept on his course.

“Menlik!” Travis shouted. “Hold up your man! I do not want to kill!”

The shaman called out, but the lancer was already level with the vanished tree, his head half turned on his shoulders to witness the blackened earth where it had stood. Then he dropped his lance, sawed on the reins. A rifle bullet might not have halted his charge, unless it killed or wounded, but what he had just seen was a thing beyond his understanding.

The tribesmen sat their horses, facing Travis, watching him with the feral eyes of the wolves they claimed as forefathers, wolves that possessed the cunning of the wild, cunning enough not to rush breakneck into unknown danger.

Travis walked forward. “Menlik, I would talk—”

There was an outburst from the horsemen, protests from Hulagur and one or two of the others. But the shaman urged his mount into a walking pace toward the Apache until they stood only a few feet from each other—the warrior of the steppes and the Horde facing the warrior of the desert and the People.

“You have taken a woman from our yurts,” Menlik said, but his eyes were more on the alien gun than on the man who held it. “Brave are you to come again into our land. He who sets foot in the stirrup must mount into the saddle; he who draws blade free of the scabbard must be prepared to use it.”

“The Horde is not here—I see only a handful of people,” Travis replied. “Does Menlik propose to go up against the Apaches so? Yet there are those who are his greater enemies.”

“A stealer of women is not such a one as needs a regiment under a general to face him.”

Suddenly Travis was impatient of the ceremonious talking; there was so little time.

“Listen, and listen well, Shaman!” He spoke curtly now. “I have not your woman. She is already crossing the mountains southward,” he pointed with his chin—“leading the Reds into a trap.”

Would Menlik believe him? There was no need, Travis decided, to tell him now that Kaydessa’s part in this affair was involuntary.

“And you?” The shaman asked the question the Apache had hoped to hear.

“*We*,” Travis emphasized that, “march now against those hiding behind in their ship out there.” He indicated the northern plains.

Menlik raised his head, surveying the land about them with disbelieving, contemptuous appraisal.

“You are chief then of an army, an army equipped with magic to overcome machines?”

“One needs no army when he carries this.” For the second time Travis displayed the power of the weapon he carried, this time cutting into shifting rubble an outcrop of cliff wall. Menlik’s expression did not change, though his eyes narrowed.

The shaman signaled his small company, and they dismounted. Travis was heartened by this sign that Menlik was willing to talk. The Apache made a similar gesture, and Jil-Lee and Buck, their own weapons well in sight, came out to back him. Travis knew that the Tatar had no way of knowing that the three were alone; he well might have believed an unseen troop of Apaches were near-by and so armed.

“You would talk—then talk!” Menlik ordered.

This time Travis outlined events with an absence of word embroidery. “Kaydessa leads the Reds into a trap we have set beyond the peaks—four of them ride with her. How many now remain in the ship near the settlement?”

“There are at least two in the flyer, perhaps eight more in the ship. But there is no getting at them in there.”

“No?” Travis laughed softly, shifted the weapon on his arm. “Do you not think that this will crack the shell of that nut so that we can get at the meat?”

Menlik’s eyes flickered to the left, to the tree which was no longer a tree but a thin deposit of ash on seared ground.

“They can control us with the caller as they did before. If we go up against them, then we are once more gathered into their net—before we reach their ship.”

“That is true for you of the Horde; it does not affect the People,” Travis returned. “And suppose we burn out their machines? Then will you not be free?”

“To burn up a tree? Lightning from the skies can do that.”

“Can lightning,” Buck asked softly, “also make rock as sand of the river?”

Menlik’s eyes turned to the second example of the alien weapon’s power.

“Give us proof that this will act against their machines!”

“What proof, Shaman?” asked Jil-Lee. “Shall we burn down a mountain that you may believe? This is now a matter of time.”

Travis had a sudden inspiration. “You say that the ‘copter is out. Suppose we use that as a target?”



“That—that can sweep the flyer from the sky?” Menlik’s disbelief was open.

Travis wondered if he had gone too far. But they needed to rid themselves of that spying flyer before they dared to move out into the plain. And to use the destruction of the helicopter as an example, would be the best proof he could give of the invincibility of the new Apache arms.

“Under the right conditions,” he replied stoutly, “yes.”

“And those conditions?” Menlik demanded.

“That it must be brought within range. Say, below the level of a neighboring peak where a man may lie in wait to fire.”

Silent Apaches faced silent Mongols, and Travis had a chance to taste what might be defeat. But the helicopter must be taken before they advanced toward the ship and the settlement.

“And, maker of traps, how do you intend to bait this one?” Menlik’s question was an open challenge.

“You know these Reds better than we,” Travis counterattacked. “How would you bait it, Son of the Blue Wolf?”

“You say Kaydessa is leading the Reds south; we have but your word for that,” Menlik replied. “Though how it would profit you to lie on such a matter—” He shrugged. “If you do speak the truth, then the ‘copter will circle about the foothills where they entered.”

“And what would bring the pilot nosing farther in?” the Apache asked.

Menlik shrugged again. “Any manner of things. The Reds have never ventured too far south; they are suspicious of the heights—with good cause.” His fingers, near the hilt of his tulwar, twitched. “Anything which might suggest that their party is in difficulty would bring them in for a closer look—”

“Say a fire, with much smoke?” Jil-Lee suggested.

Menlik spoke over his shoulder to his own party. There was a babble of answer, two or three of the men raising their voices above those of their companions.

“If set in the right direction, yes,” the shaman conceded. “When do you plan to move, Apaches?”

“At once!”

But they did not have wings, and the cross-country march they had to make was a rough journey on foot. Travis’ “at once” stretched into night hours filled with scrambling over rocks, and an early morning of preparations, with always the threat that the helicopter might not return to fly its circling mission over the scene of operations. All they had was Menlik’s assurance that while any party of the Red overlords was away from their well-defended base, the flyer did just that.

“Might be relaying messages on from a walkie-talkie or something like that,” Buck commented.

“They should reach our ship in two days ... three at the most ... if they are pushing,” Travis said thoughtfully. “It would be a help—if that flyer is a link in any com unit—to destroy it before its crew picks up and relays any report of what happens back there.”

Jil-Lee grunted. He was surveying the heights above the pocket in which Menlik and two of the Mongols were piling brush. "There ... there ... and there...." The Apache's chin made three juts. "If the pilot swoops for a quick look, our cross fire will take out his blades."

They held a last conference with Menlik and then climbed to the perches Jil-Lee had selected. Sentries on lookout reported by mirror flash that Tsoay, Deklay, Lupe, and Nolan were now on the move to join the other three Apaches. If and when Manulito's trap closed its jaws on the Reds at the western ship, the news would pass and the Apaches would move out to storm the enemy fort on the prairie. And should they blast any caller the helicopter might carry, Menlik and his riders would accompany them.

There it was, just as Menlik had foretold: The wasp from the open country was flying into the hills. Menlik, on his knees, struck flint to steel, sparking the fire they hoped would draw the pilot to a closer investigation.

The brush caught, and smoke, thick and white, came first in separate puffs and then gathered into a murky pillar to form a signal no one could overlook. In Travis' hands the grip of the gun was slippery. He rested the end of the barrel on the rock, curbing his rising tension as best he could.

To escape any caller on the flyer, the Tatars had remained in the valley below the Apaches' lookout. And as the helicopter circled in, Travis sighted two men in its cockpit, one wearing a helmet identical to the one they had seen on the Red hunter days ago. The Reds' long undisputed sway over the Mongol forces would make them overconfident. Travis thought that even if they sighted one of the waiting Apaches, they would not take warning until too late.

Menlik's bush fire was performing well and the flyer was heading straight for it. The machine buzzed the smoke once, too high for the Apaches to trust raying its blades. Then the pilot came back in a lower sweep which carried him only yards above the smoldering brush, on a level with the snipers.

Travis pressed the button on the barrel, his target the fast-whirling blades. Momentum carried the helicopter on, but at least one of the marksmen, if not all three, had scored. The machine plowed through the smoke to crack up beyond.

Was their caller working, bringing in the Mongols to aid the Reds trapped in the wreck?

Travis watched Menlik make his way toward the machine, reach the cracked cover of the cockpit. But in the shaman's hand was a bare blade on which the sun glinted. The Mongol wrenched open the sprung door, thrust inward with the tulwar, and the howl of triumph he voiced was as worldless and wild as a wolf's.

More Mongols flooding down ... Hulagur ... a woman ... centering on the helicopter. This time a spear plunged into the interior of the broken flyer. Payment was being extracted for long slavery.

The Apaches dropped from the heights, waiting for Menlik to leave the wild scene. Hulagur had dragged out the body of the helmeted man and the Mongols were stripping off his equipment, smashing it with rocks, still howling their war cry. But the shaman came to the dying smudge fire to meet the Apaches.

He was smiling, his upper lip raised in a curve suggesting the victory purr of a snow tiger. And he saluted with one hand.

"There are two who will not trap men again! We believe you now, *andas*, comrades of battle, when you say you can go up against their fort and make it as nothing!"

Hulagur came up behind the shaman, a modern automatic in his hand. He tossed the weapon into the air, caught it again, laughing—disclaiming something in his own language.

“From the serpents we take two fangs,” Menlik translated. “These weapons may not be as dangerous as yours, but they can bite deeper, quicker, and with more force than our arrows.”

It did not take the Mongols long to strip the helicopter and the Reds of what they could use, deliberately smashing all the other equipment which had survived the wreck. They had accomplished one important move: The link between the southbound exploring party and the Red headquarters—if that was the role the helicopter had played—was now gone. And the “eyes” operating over the open territory of the plains had ceased to exist. The attacking war party could move against the ship near the Red settlement, knowing they had only controlled Mongol scouts to watch for. And to penetrate enemy territory under those conditions was an old, old game the Apaches had played for centuries.

While they waited for the signals from the peaks, a camp was established and a Mongol dispatched to bring up the rest of the outlaws and all extra mounts. Menlik carried to the Apaches a portion of the dried meat which had been transported Horde fashion—under the saddle to soften it for eating.

“We do not skulk any longer like rats or city men in dark holes,” he told them. “This time we ride, and we shall take an accounting from those out there—a fine accounting!”

“They still have other controllers,” Travis pointed out.

“And you have that which is an answer to all their machines,” blazed Menlik in return.

“They will send against us your own people if they can,” Buck warned.

Menlik pulled at his upper lip. “That is also truth. But now they have no eyes in the sky, and with so many of their men away, they will not patrol too far from camp. I tell you, *andas*, with these weapons of yours a man could rule a world!”

Travis looked at him bleakly. “Which is why they are taboo!”

“Taboo?” Menlik repeated. “In what manner are these forbidden? Do you not carry them openly, use them as you wish? Are they not weapons of your own people?”

Travis shook his head. “These are the weapons of dead men—if we can name them men at all. These we took from a tomb of the star race who held Topaz when our world was only a hunting ground of wild men wearing the skins of beasts and slaying mammoths with stone spears. They are from a tomb and are cursed, a curse we took upon ourselves with their use.”

There was a strange light deep in the shaman’s eyes. Travis did not know who or what Menlik had been before the Red conditioner had returned him to the role of Horde shaman. He might have been a technician or scientist—and deep within him some remnants of that training could now be dismissing everything Travis said as fantastic superstition.

Yet in another way the Apache spoke the exact truth. There was a curse on these weapons, on every bit of knowledge gathered in that warehouse of the towers. As Menlik had already noted, that curse was power, the power to control Topaz, and then perhaps to reach back across the stars to Terra.

When the shaman spoke again his words were a half whisper. “It will take a powerful curse to keep these out of the hands of men.”

“With the Reds gone or powerless,” Buck asked, “what need will anyone have for them?”

“And if another ship comes from the skies—to begin all over again?”

“To that we shall have an answer, also, if and when we must find it,” Travis replied. That could well be true ... other weapons in the warehouse powerful enough to pluck a spaceship out of the sky, but they did not have to worry about that now.

“Arms from a tomb. Yes, this is truly dead men’s magic. I shall say so to my people. When do we move out?”

“When we know whether or not the trap to the south is sprung,” Buck answered.

The report came an hour after sunrise the next morning when Tsoay, Nolan, and Deklay padded into camp. The war chief made a slight gesture with one hand.

“It is done?” Travis wanted confirmation in words.

“It is done. The Pinda-lick-o-yi entered the ship eagerly. Then they blew it and themselves up. Manulito did his work well.”

“And Kaydessa?”

“The woman is safe. When the Reds saw the ship, they left their machine outside to hold her captive. That mechanical caller was easily destroyed. She is now free and with the *mba’a* she comes across the mountains, Manulito and Eskelta with her also. Now—” he looked from his own people to the Mongols, “why are you here with these?”

“We wait, but the waiting is over,” Jil-Lee said. “Now we go north!”

## 18

They lay along the rim of a vast basin, a scooping out of earth so wide they could not sight its other side. The bed of an ancient lake, Travis speculated, or perhaps even the arm of a long-dried sea. But now the hollow was filled with rolling waves of golden grass, tossing heavy heads under the flowing touch of a breeze with the exception of a space about a mile ahead where round domes—black, gray, brown—broke the yellow in an irregular oval around the globular silver bead of a spacer: a larger ship than that which had brought the Apaches, but of the same shape.

“The horse herd ... to the west.” Nolan evaluated the scene with the eyes of an experienced raider. “Tsoay, Deklay, you take the horses!”

They nodded, and began the long crawl which would take them two miles or more from the party to stampede the horses.

To the Mongols in those domelike yurts horses were wealth, life itself. They would come running to investigate any disturbance among the grazing ponies, thus clearing the path to the ship and the Reds there. Travis, Jil-Lee, and Buck, armed with the star guns, would spearhead that attack—cutting into the substance of the ship itself until it was a sieve through which they could shake out the enemy. Only when the installations it contained were destroyed, might the Apaches hope for any assistance from the Mongols, either the outlaw pack waiting well back on the prairie or the people in the yurts.

The grass rippled and Naginlta poked out a nose, parting stems before Travis. The Apache beamed an order, sending the coyotes with the horse-raiding party. He had seen how the animals could drive hunted split-horns; they would do as well with the ponies.

Kaydessa was safe, the coyotes had made that clear by the fact that they had joined the attacking party an hour earlier. With Eskelta and Manulito she was on her way back to the north.

Travis supposed he should be well pleased that their reckless plan had succeeded as well as it had. But when he thought of the Tatar girl, all he could see was her convulsed face close to his in the ship corridor, her raking nails raised to tear his cheek. She had an excellent reason to hate him, yet he hoped....

They continued to watch both horse herd and domes. There were people moving about the yurts, but no signs of life at the ship. Had the Reds shut themselves in there, warned in some way of the two disasters which had whittled down their forces?

“Ah—!” Nolan breathed.

One of the ponies had raised its head and was facing the direction of the camp, suspicion plain to read in its stance. The Apaches must have reached the point between the herd and the domes which had been their goal. And the Mongol guard, who had been sitting cross-legged, the reins of his mount dangling close to his hand, got to his feet.

“Ahhhuuuuu!” The ancient Apache war cry that had sounded across deserts, canyons, and southwestern Terran plains to ice the blood, ripped just as freezingly through the honey-hued air of Topaz.

The horses wheeled, racing upslope away from the settlement. A figure broke from the grass, flapped his arms at one of the mounts, grabbed at flying mane, and pulled himself up on the

bare back. Only a master horseman would have done that, but the whooping rider now drove the herd on, assisted by the snapping and snarling coyotes.

“Deklay—” Jil-Lee identified the reckless rider, “that was one of his rodeo tricks.”

Among the yurts it was as if someone had ripped up a rotten log to reveal an ants’ nest and sent the alarmed insects into a frenzy. Men boiled out of the domes, the majority of them running for the horse pasture. One or two were mounted on ponies that must have been staked out in the settlement. The main war party of Apaches skimmed silently through the grass on their way to the ship.

The three who were armed with the alien weapons had already tested their range by experimentation back in the hills, but the fear of exhausting whatever powered those barrels had curtailed their target practice. Now they snaked to the edge of the bare ground between them and the ladder hatch of the spacer. To cross that open space was to provide targets for lances and arrows—or the superior armament of the Reds.

“A chance we can hit from here.” Buck laid his weapon across his bent knee, steadied the long barrel of the burner, and pressed the firing button.

The closed hatch of the ship shimmered, dissolved into a black hole. Behind Travis someone let out the yammer of a war whoop.

“Fire—cut the walls to pieces!”

Travis did not need that order from Jil-Lee. He was already beaming unseen destruction at the best target he could ask for—the side of the sphere. If the globe was armed, there was no weapon which could be depressed far enough to reach the marksmen at ground level.

Holes appeared, irregular gaps and tears in the fabric of the ship. The Apaches were turning the side of the globe into lacework. How far those rays penetrated into the interior they could not guess.

Movement at one of the holes, the chattering burst of machine-gun fire, spatters of soil and gravel into their faces; they could be cut to pieces by that! The hole enlarged, a scream ... cut off....

“They will not be too quick to try that again,” Nolan observed with cold calm from behind Travis’ post.

Methodically they continued to beam the ship. It would never be space-borne again; there were neither the skills nor materials here to repair such damage.

“It is like laying a knife to fat,” Lupe said as he crawled up beside Travis. “Slice, slice—!”

“Move!” Travis reached to the left, pulled at Jil-Lee’s shoulder.

Travis did not know whether it was possible or not, but he had a heady vision of their combined fire power cutting the globe in half, slicing it crosswise with the ease Lupe admired.

They scurried through cover just as someone behind yelled a warning. Travis threw himself down, rolled into a new firing position. An arrow sang over his head; the Reds were doing what the Apaches had known they would—calling in the controlled Mongols to fight. The attack on the ship must be stepped up, or the Amerindians would be forced to retreat.

Already a new lacing of holes appeared under their concentrated efforts. With the gun held tight to his middle, Travis found his feet, zigzagged across the bare ground for the nearest of

those openings. Another arrow clanged harmlessly against the fabric of the ship a foot from his goal.

He made it in, over jagged metal shards which glowed faintly and reeked of ozone. The weapons' beams had penetrated well past both the outer shell and the wall of insulation webbing. He climbed a second and smaller break into a corridor enough like those of the western ship to be familiar. The Red spacer, based on the general plan of the alien derelict ship as his own had been, could not be very different.

Travis tried to subdue his heavy breathing and listen. He heard a confused shouting and the burr of what might be an alarm system. The ship's brain was the control cabin. Even if the Reds dared not try to lift now, that was the core of their communication lines. He started along the corridor, trying to figure out its orientation in relation to that all-important nerve center.

The Apache shoved open each door he passed with one shoulder, and twice he played a light beam on installations within cabins. He had no idea of their use, but the wholesale destruction of each and every machine was what good sense and logic dictated.

There was a sound behind. Travis whirled, saw Jil-Lee and beyond him Buck.

"Up?" Jil-Lee asked.

"And down," Buck added. "The Tatars say they have hollowed a bunker beneath."

"Separate and do as much damage as you can," Travis suggested.

"Agreed!"

Travis sped on. He passed another door and then backtracked hurriedly as he realized it had given on to an engine room. With the gun he blasted two long lines cutting the fittings into ragged lumps. Abruptly the lights went out; the burr of the alarms was silenced. Part of the ship, if not all, was dead. And now it might come to hunter and hunted in the dark. But that was an advantage as far as the Apaches were concerned.

Back in the corridor again, Travis crept through a curiously lifeless atmosphere. The shouting was stilled as if the sudden failure of the machines had stunned the Reds.

A tiny sound—perhaps the scrape of a boot on a ladder. Travis edged back into a compartment. A flash of light momentarily lighted the corridor; the approaching figure was using a torch. Travis drew his knife with one hand, reversed it so he could use the heavy hilt as a silencer. The other was hurrying now, on his way to investigate the burned-out engine cabin. Travis could hear the rasp of his fast breathing. Now!

The Apache had put down the gun, his left arm closed about a shoulder, and the Red gasped as Travis struck with the knife hilt. Not clean—he had to hit a second time before the struggles of the man were over. Then, using his hands for eyes, he stripped the limp body on the floor of automatic and torch.

With the Red's weapon in the front of his sash, the burner in one hand and the torch in the other, Travis prowled on. There was a good chance that those above might believe him to be their comrade returning. He found the ladder leading to the next level, began to climb, pausing now and then to listen.

Shock preceded sound. Under him the ladder swayed and the globe itself rocked a little. A blast of some kind must have been set off at or under the level of the ground. The bunker Buck had mentioned?

Travis clung to the ladder, waited for the vibrations to subside. There was a shouting above, a questioning.... Hurriedly he ascended to the next level, scrambled out and away from the ladder just in time to avoid the light from another torch flashed down the well. Again that call of inquiry, then a shot—the boom of the explosion loud in the confined space.

To climb into the face of that light with a waiting marksman above was sheer folly. Could there be another way up? Travis retreated down one of the corridors raying out from the ladder well. A quick inspection of the cabins along that route told him he had reached a section of living quarters. The pattern was familiar; the control cabin would be on the next level.

Suddenly the Apache remembered something: On each level there should be an emergency opening giving access to the insulation space between the inner and outer skins of the ship through which repairs could be made. If he could find that and climb up to the next level....

The light shining down the well remained steady, and there was the echoing crack of another shot. But Travis was far enough away from the ladder now to dare use his own torch, seeking the door he needed on the wall surface. With a leap of heart he sighted the outline—his luck was in! The Russian and western ships were alike.

Once the panel was open he flashed his torch up, finding the climbing rungs and, above, the shadow outline of the next level opening. Securing the alien gun in his sash beside the automatic and holding the torch in his mouth, Travis climbed, not daring to think of the deep drop below. Four ... five ... ten rungs, and he could reach the other door.

His fingers slid over it, searching for the release catch. But there was no answering give. Balling his fist, he struck down at an awkward angle and almost lost his balance as the panel fell away beneath his blow. The door swung and he pulled through.

Darkness! Travis snapped on the torch for an instant, saw about him the relays of a com system, and gave it a full spraying as he pivoted, destroying the eyes and ears of the ship—unless the burnout he had effected below had already done that. A flash of automatic fire from his left, a searing burn along his arm an inch or so below the shoulder—

Travis' action was purely reflex. He swung the burner around, even as his mind gave a frantic No! To defend himself with automatic, knife, arrow—yes; but not this way. He huddled against the wall.

An instant earlier there had been a man there, a living, breathing man—one of his own species, if not of his own beliefs. Then because his own muscles had unconsciously obeyed warrior training, there was this. So easy—to deal death without really meaning to. The weapon in his hands was truly the devil gift they were right to fear. Such weapons were not to be put into the hands of men—any men—no matter how well intentioned.

Travis gulped in great mouthfuls of air. He wanted to throw the burner away, hurl it from him. But the task he could rightfully use it for was not yet done.

Somehow he reeled on into the control cabin to render the ship truly a dead thing and free himself of the heavy burden of guilt and terror between his hands. That weight could be laid aside; memory could not. And no one of his kind must ever have to carry such memories again.

\*\*\*\*\*

The booming of the drums was like a pulse quickening the blood to a rhythm which bit at the brain, made a man's eyes shine, his muscles tense as if he held an arrow to bow cord or arched his fingers about a knife hilt. A fire blazed high and in its light men leaped and



whirled in a mad dance with tulwar blades catching and reflecting the red gleam of flames. Mad, wild, the Mongols were drunk with victory and freedom. Beyond them, the silver globe of the ship showed the black holes of its death, which was also the death of the past—for all of them.

“What now?” Menlik, the dangling of amulets and charms tinkling as he moved, came up to Travis. There was none of the wild fervor in the shaman’s face; instead, it was as if he had taken several strides out of the life of the Horde, was emerging into another person, and the question he asked was one they all shared.

Travis felt drained, flattened. They had achieved their purpose. The handful of Red overlords were dead, their machines burned out. There were no controls here any more; men were free in mind and body. What were they to do with that freedom?

“First,” the Apache spoke his own thoughts—“we must return these.”

The three alien weapons were lashed into a square of Mongol fabric, hidden from sight, although they could not be so easily shut out of mind. Only a few of the others, Apache or Mongol, had seen them; and they must be returned before their power was generally known.

“I wonder if in days to come,” Buck mused, “they will not say that we pulled lightning out of the sky, as did the Thunder Slayer, to aid us. But this is right. We must return them and make that valley and what it holds taboo.”

“And what if another ship comes—one of *yours*?” Menlik asked shrewdly.

Travis stared beyond the Tatar shaman to the men about the fire. His nightmare dragged into the open.... What if a ship did come in, one with Ashe, Murdock, men he knew and liked, friends on board? What then of his guardianship of the towers and their knowledge? Could he be as sure of what to do then? He rubbed his hand across his forehead and said slowly:

“We shall take steps when—or if—that happens—”

But could they, would they? He began to hope fiercely that it would not happen, at least in his lifetime, and then felt the cold bleakness of the exile they must will themselves into.

“Whether we like it or not,” (was he talking to the others or trying to argue down his own rebellion?) “we cannot let what lies under the towers be known ... found ... used ... unless by men who are wiser and more controlled than we are in our time.”

Menlik drew his shaman’s wand, twiddled it between his fingers, and beneath his drooping lids watched the three Apaches with a new kind of measurement.

“Then I say to you this: Such a guardianship must be a double charge, shared by my people as well. For if they suspect that you alone control these powers and their secret, there will be envy, hatred, fear, a division between us from the first—war ... raids.... This is a large land and neither of our groups numbers many. Shall we split apart fatally from this day when there is room for all? If these ancient things are evil, then let us both guard them with a common taboo.”

He was right, of course. And they would have to face the truth squarely. To both Apache and Mongol any off-world ship, no matter from which side, would be a menace. Here was where they would remain and set roots. The sooner they began thinking of themselves as people with a common bond, the better it would be. And Menlik’s suggestion provided a tie.

“You speak well,” Buck was saying. “This shall be a thing we share. We are three who know. Do you be three also, but choose well, Menlik!”

“Be assured that I will!” the Tatar returned. “We start a new life here; there is no going back. But as I have said: The land is wide. We have no quarrel with one another, and perhaps our two peoples shall become one; after all, we do not differ too greatly....” He smiled and gestured to the fire and the dancers.

Among the Mongols another man had gone into action, his head thrown back as he leaped and twirled, voicing a deep war cry. Travis recognized Deklay. Apache, Mongol—both raiders, horsemen, hunters, fighters when the need arose. No, there was no great difference. Both had been tricked into coming here, and they had no allegiance now for those who had sent them.

Perhaps clan and Horde would combine or perhaps they would drift apart—time would tell. But there would be the bond of the guardianship, the determination that what slept in the towers would not be roused—in their lifetime or many lifetimes!

Travis smiled a bit crookedly. A new religion of sorts, a priesthood with sacred and forbidden knowledge ... in time a whole new life and civilization stemming from this night. The bleak cold of his early thought cut less deep. There was a different kind of adventure here.

He reached out and gathered up the bundle of the burners, glancing from Buck to Jil-Lee to Menlik. Then he stood up, the weight of the burden in his arms, the feeling of a greater weight inside him.

“Shall we go?”

To get the weapons back—that was of first importance. Maybe then he could sleep soundly, to dream of riding across the Arizona range at dawn under a blue sky with a wind in his face, a wind carrying the scent of piñon pine and sage, a wind which would never caress or hearten him again, a wind his sons and sons’ sons would never know. To dream troubled dreams, and hope in time those dreams would fade and thin—that a new world would blanket out the old. Better so, Travis told himself with defiance and determination—better so!

# Voodoo Planet

## 1

Talk of heat—or better not—on Xecho. This water-logged world combined all the most unattractive features of a steam bath and one could only dream of coolness, greenness—more land than a stingy string of islands.

The young man on the promontory above the crash of the waves wore the winged cap of a spaceman with the insignia of a cargo-master and not much else, save a pair of very short shorts. He wiped one hand absently across his bare chest and brought it away damp as he studied, through protective sun goggles, the treacherous promise of the bright sea. One *could* swim—if he wanted to lose most of his skin. There were minute organisms in that liquid that smacked their lips—if they had lips—every time they thought of a Terran.

Dane Thorson licked his own lips, tasting salt, and plodded back through the sand of the spaceport to the berth of the *Solar Queen*. This had been a long day, and one with more snarl-ups than he cared to count, keeping him on a constant, dogged trot between the ship and the fitting yard where riggers labored with the slowest motions possible to the human body—or so it seemed to the exasperated acting-Cargo-Master of the Free Trader. Captain Jellico had long ago taken refuge in his cabin to preserve the remnants of his temper. Dane had been allowed no such escape.

The *Queen* had a schedule for refitting to serve as a mail ship, and that time allowance did not allow for humidity playing the devil with the innards of robot fitters. She *had* to be ready to lift when the Combine ship now plying that run set down and formally signed off in her favor. Luckily, most of the work was done and Dane had given a last searching inspection before signing the rigger's book and reporting to his captain.

The air-conditioned interior of the *Queen* comforted him as he climbed to his quarters. Ship air was flat, chemically pure but unappetizing stuff. Today it was a relief to breathe. Dane went on to the bather. At least there was no lack of water—with the local skimmers filtered out. It was chill but relaxing on his gaunt young body.

He was sealing on his lightest tunic when the ramp buzzer sounded. A visitor—oh, not the supervisor-rigger again! Dane went to answer with dragging feet. For the crew of the *Queen* at the moment numbered exactly four, with himself for general errand boy. Captain Jellico was in his quarters two levels above, Medic Tau was presumably overhauling his supplies, and Sindbad, ship's cat, asleep in some empty cabin.

Dane jerked his tunic into place, very much on his guard as he came to the head of the ramp. But it was not the supervisor-rigger. Dane, thoroughly used to unusual-appearing strangers, both human and alien, was impressed by this visitor.

He was tall, this quiet man, his great height accented by a fit leanness, a narrowness of waist and hip, a length of leg and arm. His main article of clothing was the universal shorts of the Xecho settler. But, being fashioned of saffron yellow, they were the more brilliant because of his darkness of skin. For he was not the warm brown of the Terran Negroes Dane had served beside, though he shared their general features. His flesh was really black, black with an almost bluish sheen. Instead of shirt or tunic, his deep chest was crossed by two wide straps, the big medallion marking their intersection giving forth flashes of gem fire when he breathed. He wore at his belt not the standard stun gun of a spaceman, but a weapon which resembled the more deadly Patrol blaster, as well as a long knife housed in a jeweled and

fringed sheath. To the eye he was an example of barbaric force tamed and trimmed to civilized efficiency.

He saluted, palm out, and spoke Galactic Basic with only a suggestion of accent.

“I am Kort Asaki. I believe Captain Jellico expects me.”

“Yes, sir!” Dane snapped to attention. So this was the Chief Ranger from fabulous Khatka, Xecho’s sister planet.

The other ascended the cat ladder easily, missing no detail of the ship’s interior as he passed. His expression was still one of polite interest as his guide rapped on the panel door of Jellico’s cabin. And a horrible screech from Queex, the captain’s pet hoobat, drowned out any immediate answer. Then followed that automatic thump on the floor of the blue-feathered, crab-parrot-toad’s cage, announcing that its master was in residence.

Since the captain’s cordial welcome extended only to his guest, Dane regretfully descended to the mess cabin to make unskilled preparations for supper—though there was not much you could do to foul up concentrates in an automatic cooker.

“Company?” Tau sat beyond the cooking unit nursing a mug of Terran coffee. “And do you *have* to serve music with the meals, especially that particular selection?”

Dane flushed, stopped whistling in mid-note. “Terra Bound” *was* old and pretty well worn out; he didn’t know why he always unconsciously sounded off with that.

“A Chief Ranger from Khatka just came on board,” he reported, carefully offhand, as he busied himself reading labels. He knew better than to serve fish or any of its derivatives in disguise again.

“Khatka!” Tau sat up straighter. “Now there’s a planet worth visiting.”

“Not on a Free Trader’s pay,” commented Dane.

“You can always hope to make a big strike, boy. But what I wouldn’t give to lift ship for there!”

“Why? You’re no hunter. How come you want to heat jets for that port?”

“Oh, I don’t care about the game preserves, though they’re worth seeing, too. It’s the people themselves—”

“But they’re Terran settlers, or at least from Terran stock, aren’t they?”

“Sure,” Tau sipped his coffee slowly. “But there are settlers and settlers, son. And a lot depends upon when they left Terra and why, and who they were—also what happened to them after they landed out here.”

“And Khatkans are really special?”

“Well, they have an amazing history. The colony was founded by escaped prisoners—and just one racial stock. They took off from Earth close to the end of the Second Atomic War. That was a race war, remember? Which made it doubly ugly.” Tau’s mouth twisted in disgust. “As if the color of a man’s skin makes any difference in what lies under it! One side in that line-up tried to take over Africa—herded most of the natives into a giant concentration camp and practiced genocide on a grand scale. Then they were cracked themselves, hard and heavy. During the confusion some survivors in the camp staged a revolt, helped by the enemy. They captured an experimental station hidden in the center of the camp and made a break into space in two ships which had been built there. That voyage must have been a

nightmare, but they were desperate. Somehow they made it out here to the rim and set down on Khatka without power enough to take off again—and by then most of them were dead.

“But we humans, no matter what our race, are a tough breed. The refugees discovered that climatically their new world was not too different from Africa, a lucky chance which might happen only once in a thousand times. So they thrived, the handful who survived. But the white technicians they had kidnaped to run the ships didn’t. For they set up a color bar in reverse. The lighter your skin, the lower you were in the social scale. By that kind of selective breeding the present Khatkans are very dark indeed.

“They reverted to the primitive for survival. Then, about two hundred years ago, long before the first Survey Scout discovered them, something happened. Either the parent race mutated, or, as sometimes occurs, a line of people of superior gifts emerged—not in a few isolated births, but with surprising regularity in five family clans. There was a short period of power struggle until they realized the foolishness of civil war and formed an oligarchy, heading a loose tribal organization. With the Five Families to push and lead, a new civilization developed, and when Survey came to call they were no longer savages. Combine bought the trade rights about seventy-five years ago. Then the Company and the Five Families got together and marketed a luxury item to the galaxy. You know how every super-jet big shot on twenty-five planets wants to say he’s hunted on Khatka. And if he can point out a graz head on his wall, or wear a tail bracelet, he’s able to strut with the best. To holiday on Khatka is both fabulous and fashionable—and very, very profitable for the natives and for Combine who sells transportation to the travelers.”

“I hear they have poachers, too,” Dane remarked.

“Yes, that naturally follows. You know what a glam skin brings on the market. Wherever you have a rigidly controlled export you’re going to have poachers and smugglers. But the Patrol doesn’t go to Khatka. The natives handle their own criminals. Personally, I’d cheerfully take a ninety-nine-year sentence in the Lunar mines in place of what the Khatkans dish out to a poacher they net!”

“So that rumor has spread satisfactorily!”

Coffee slopped over the brim of Tau’s mug and Dane dropped the packet of steak concentrate he was about to feed into the cooker. Chief Ranger Asaki loomed in the doorway of the mess as suddenly as if he had been teleported to that point.

The medic arose to his feet and smiled politely at the visitor.

“Do I detect in that observation, sir, the suggestion that the tales I have heard were deliberately set to blast where they would do the most good as deterrents?”

A fleeting grin broke the impassive somberness of the black face.

“I was informed you are a man skilled in ‘magic,’ Medic. You certainly display the traditional sorcerer’s quickness of wit. But this rumor is also truth.” The quirk of good humor had gone again, and there was an edge in the Chief Ranger’s voice which cut. “Poachers on Khatka would welcome the Patrol in place of the attention they now receive.”

He came into the mess cabin, Jellico behind him, and Dane pulled down two of the snap seats. He was holding a mug under the spout of the coffee dispenser as the captain made introductions.

“Thorson—our acting-cargo-master.”

“Thorson,” the Khatkan acknowledged with a grave nod of his head, and then glanced down to floor level with a look of surprise. Weaving a pattern about his legs, purring loudly, Sindbad was offering an unusually fervent welcome of his own. The Ranger went down on one knee, his hand out for Sindbad’s inquiring sniff. Then the cat butted that dark palm, batted at it playfully with claw-sheathed paw.

“A Terran cat! It is of the lion family?”

“Far removed,” Jellico supplied. “You’d have to add a lot of bulk to Sindbad to promote him to the lion class.”

“We have only the old tales.” Asaki sounded almost wistful as the cat jumped to his knee and clawed for a hold on his chest belts. “But I do not believe that lions were ever so friendly toward my ancestors.”

Dane would have removed the cat, but the Khatkan arose with Sindbad, still purring loudly, resting in the crook of his arm. The Ranger was smiling with a gentleness which changed the whole arrogant cast of his countenance.

“Do not bring this one to Khatka with you, Captain, or you will never take him away again. Those who dwell in the inner courts would not let him vanish from their sight. Ah, so this pleases you, small lion?” He rubbed Sindbad gently under the throat and the cat stretched his neck, his yellow eyes half closed in bliss.

“Thorson,” the Captain turned to Dane, “that arrival report on my desk was the final one from Combine?”

“Yes, sir. There’s no hope of the *Rover* setting down here before that date.”

Asaki sat down, still holding the cat. “So you see, Captain, fortune has arranged it all. You have two tens of days. Four days to go in my cruiser, four days for your return here, and the rest to explore the preserve. We could not ask for better luck, for I do not know when our paths may cross again. In the normal course of events I will not have another mission to Xecho for a year, perhaps longer. Also—” He hesitated and then spoke to Tau. “Medic, Captain Jellico has informed me that you have made a study of magic on many worlds.”

“That is so, sir.”

“Do you then believe that it is real force, or that it is only a superstition for child-people who set up demons to howl petitions to when some darkness falls upon them?”

“Some of the magic I have seen is trickery, some of it founded upon an inner knowledge of men and their ways which a shrewd witch doctor can use to his advantage. There always remains”—Tau put down his mug, “—there always remains a small residue of happenings and results for which we have not yet found any logical explanations—”

“And I believe,” Asaki interrupted, “it is also true that a race can be conditioned from birth to be sensitive to forms of magic so that men of that blood are particularly susceptible.” That was more of a statement than a question, but Tau answered it.

“That is very true. A Lamorian, for example, can be ‘sung’ to death. I have witnessed such a case. But upon a Terran or another off-world man the same suggestion would have no effect.”

“Those who settled Khatka brought such magic with them.” The Chief Ranger’s fingers still moved about Sindbad’s jaw and throat soothingly, but his tone was chill, the coldest thing in the cramped space of the mess cabin.

“Yes, a highly developed form of it,” Tau agreed.

“More highly developed perhaps than even you can believe, Medic!” That came in a hiss of cold rage. “I think that its present manifestation—death by a beast that is not a beast—could be worth your detailed study.”

“Why?” Tau came bluntly to the point.

“Because it is a killing magic and it is being carefully used to rid my world of key men, men we need badly. If there is a weak point in this cloudy attack shaping against us, we must learn it, and soon!”

It was Jellico who added the rest. “We are invited to visit Khatka and survey a new hunting range as Chief Ranger Asaki’s personal term guests.”

Dane drew a deep breath of wonder. Guest rights on Khatka were jealously guarded—they were too valuable to their owners to waste. Whole families lived on the income from the yearly rental of even half a one. But the Rangers, by right of office, had several which they could grant to visiting scientists or men from other worlds holding positions similar to their own. To have such an opportunity offered to an ordinary Trader was almost incredible.

His wonder was matched by Tau’s and must have been plain to read for the Chief Ranger smiled.

“For a long time Captain Jellico and I have exchanged biological data on alien life-forms—his skill in photographing such, his knowledge as an xenobiologist are widely recognized. And so I have permission for him to visit the new Zoboru preserve, not yet officially opened. And you, Medic Tau, your help, or at least your diagnosis, we need in another direction. So, one expert comes openly, another not so openly. Though, Medic, your task is approved by my superiors. And”—he glanced at Dane—”perhaps to muddle the trail for the suspicious, shall we not ask this young man also?”

Dane’s eyes went to the captain. Jellico was always fair and his crew would have snapped into action on his word alone—even if they were fronting a rain of Thorkian death darts and that order was to advance. But, on the other hand, Dane would never have asked a favor, and the best he hoped for was to be able to perform his duties without unfavorable comment upon their commission. He had no reason to believe Jellico was willing to agree to this.

“You have two weeks’ planet-side leave coming, Thorson. If you want to spend it on Khatka....” Jellico actually grinned then. “I take it that you do. When do we up-ship, sir?”

“You said that you must wait for the return of your other crew members—shall we say mid-afternoon tomorrow?” The Chief Ranger stood up and put Sindbad down though the cat protested with several sharp meows.

“Small lion,” the tall Khatkan spoke to the cat as to an equal, “this is your jungle, and mine lies elsewhere. But should you ever grow tired of traveling the stars, there is always a home for you in my courts.”

When the Chief Ranger went out the door, Sindbad did not try to follow, but he uttered one mournful little cry of protest and loss.

“So he wants a trouble shooter, does he?” Tau asked. “All right, I’ll try to hunt out his goblins for him; it’ll be worth that to visit Khatka!”

Dane, remembering the hot glare of the Xecho spaceport, the sea one could not swim in, contrasted that with the tri-dees he had seen of the green hunters’ paradise on the next planet of the system. “Yes, sir!” he echoed and made a haphazard choice for the cooker.



“Don’t be too lighthearted,” Tau warned. “I’ll say that any stew which was too hot for that Ranger to handle might give us burned fingers—and quick. When we land on Khatka, walk softly and look over your shoulder, and be prepared for the worst.”

## 2

Lightning played along the black ridges above them, and below was a sheer drop to a river which was only a silver thread. Under their boots, man-made and yet dominating the wildness of jungle and mountain, was a platform of rock slabs, fused to support a palace of towering yellow-white walls and curved cups of domes, a palace which was also half fortress, half frontier post.

Dane set his hands on the parapet of the river drop, blinked as a lightning bolt crackled in a sky-splitting glare of violet fire. This was about as far from the steaming islands of Xecho as a man could imagine.

“The demon graz prepare for battle.” Asaki nodded toward the distant crackling.

Captain Jellico laughed. “Supposed to be whetting their tusks, eh? I wouldn’t care to meet a graz that could produce such a display by mere tusk whetting.”

“No? But think of the reward for the tracker who discovers where such go to die. To find the graveyard of the graz herds would make any man wealthy beyond dreams.”

“How much truth is there in that legend?” Tau asked.

The Chief Ranger shrugged. “Who can say? This much *is* true: I have served my life in the forests since I could walk. I have listened to the talk of Trackers, Hunters, Rangers in my father’s courtyards and field camps since I could understand their words. Yet never has any man reported the finding of a body of a graz that died a natural death. The scavengers might well account for the bulk of flesh, but the tusks and the bones should be visible for years. And this, too, I have seen with my own eyes: a graz close to death, supported by two of its kind and being urged along to the big swamps. Perhaps it is only that the suffering animal longs for water at its end, or perhaps in the heart of that morass there does lie the graz graveyard. But no man has found a naturally dead graz, nor has any returned from exploring the big swamps....”

Lightning on peaks which were like polished jet—bare rock above, the lush overgrowth of jungle below. And between, this fortress held by men who dared both the heights and the depths. The wildly burgeoning life of Khatka had surrounded the off-worlders since they had come here. There was something untameable about Khatka; the lush planet lured and yet repelled at the same time.

“Zoboru far from here?”

The Chief Ranger pointed north in answer to the captain’s question.

“About a hundred leagues. It is the first new preserve we have prepared in ten years. And it is our desire to make it the best for tri-dee hunters. That is why we are now operating taming teams—”

“Taming teams?” Dane had to ask.

The Chief Ranger was ready enough to discuss his project.

“Zoboru is a no-kill preserve. The animals, they come to learn that after a while. But we cannot wait several years until they do. So we make them gifts.” He laughed, evidently recalling some incident. “Sometimes, perhaps, we are too eager. Most of our visitors who wish to make tri-dees want to picture big game—graz, amplet, rock apes, lions—”

“Lions?” echoed Dane.

“Not Terran lions, no. But my people, when they landed on Khatka, found a few animals that reminded them of those they had always known. So they gave those the same names. A Khatkan lion is furred, it is a hunter and a great fighter, but it is not the cat of Terra. However, it is in great demand as a tri-dee actor. So we summon it out of lurking by providing free meals. One shoots a poli, a water rat, or a landeer and drags the carcass behind a low-flying flitter. The lion springs upon the moving meat, which it can also scent, and the rope is cut, leaving a free dinner.

“The lions are not stupid. In a very short time they connect the sound of a flitter cutting the air with food. So they come to the banquet and those on the flitter can take their tri-dee shots at ease. Only there must also be care taken in such training. One forest guard on the Komog preserve became too enterprising. He dragged his kill at first. Then, to see if he could get the lions to forget man’s presence entirely, he hung the training carcasses on the flitter, encouraging them to jump for their food.

“For the guard that was safe enough, but it worked too too well. A month or so later a Hunter was escorting a client through Komog and they swung low to get a good picture of a water rat emerging from the river. Suddenly there was a snarl behind them and they found themselves sharing the flitter with a lioness annoyed at finding no meat waiting on board.

“Luckily, they both wore stass belts; but they had to land the flitter and leave until the lioness wandered off, and she seriously damaged the machine in her irritation. So now our guards play no more fancy tricks while on taming runs. Tomorrow—no,” he corrected himself, “the day after tomorrow I will be able to show you how the process works.”

“And tomorrow?” inquired the captain.

“Tomorrow my men make hunting magic.” Asaki’s voice was expressionless.

“Your chief witch doctor being?” questioned Tau.

“Lumbrilo.” The Chief Ranger did not appear disposed to add to that but Tau pursued the subject.

“His office is hereditary?”

“Yes. Does that make any difference?” For the first time there was a current of repressed eagerness in the other’s tone.

“Perhaps a vast amount of difference,” Tau replied. “A hereditary office may carry with it two forms of conditioning, one to influence its holder, one to affect the public-at-large. Your Lumbrilo may have come to believe deeply in his own powers; he would be a very remarkable man if he did not. It is almost certain that your people unquestionably accept him as a worker of wonders?”

“They do so accept.” Once more Asaki’s voice was drained of life.

“And Lumbrilo does not accept something you believe necessary?”

“Again the truth, Medic. Lumbrilo does not accept his proper place in the scheme of things!”

“He is a member of one of your Five Families?”

“No, his clan is small, always set apart. From the beginning here, those who spoke for gods and demons did not also order men.”

“Separation of church and state,” commented Tau thoughtfully. “Yet in our Terran past there have been times when church and state were one. Does Lumbrilo desire that?”

Asaki raised his eyes to the mountain peaks, to the northward where lay his beloved work.

“I do not know what Lumbrilo wants, save that it makes mischief—or worse! This I tell you: hunting magic is part of our lives and it has at its core some of those unexplainable happenings which you have acknowledged do exist. I have used powers I can neither explain nor understand as part of my work. In the jungle and on the grasslands an off-worlder must guard his life with a stass belt if he goes unarmed. But I—any of my men—can walk unharmed if we obey the rules of our magic. Only Lumbrilo does other things which his forefathers did not. And he boasts that he can do more. So he has a growing following of those who believe—and those who fear.”

“You want me to face him?”

The Chief Ranger’s big hands closed upon the rim of the parapet as if they could exert enough pressure to crumble the hard stone. “I want you to see whether there is trickery in this. Trickery I can fight, for that there are weapons. But if Lumbrilo truly controls forces for which there is no name, then perhaps we must patch up an uneasy peace—or go down in defeat. And, off-worlder, I come from a line of warriors—we do not drink defeat easily!”

“That I also believe,” Tau returned quietly. “Be sure, sir, if there is trickery in this man’s magic and I can detect it, the secret shall be yours.”

“Let us hope that so it shall be.”

Subconsciously, Dane had always associated the practice of magic with darkness and the night. But the next morning the sun was high and hot when he made one of the party coming down to a second and larger walled terrace where the Hunters, Trackers, Guards and other followers of the Chief Ranger were assembled in irregular rows.

There was a low sound which was more a throb in the clear air about them, getting into a man’s blood and pumping in rhythm there. Dane tracked the sound to its source: four large drums standing waist high before the men who tapped them delicately with the tips of all ten fingers.

The necklaces of claws and teeth about those dusky throats, the kilts of fringed hide, the crossed belts of brilliantly spotted or striped fur were in contrast to the very efficient and modern side arms each man wore, to the rest of the equipment sheathed and strapped at their belts.

There was a carved stool for the Chief Ranger, another for Captain Jellico. Dane and Tau settled themselves on the less comfortable seats of the terrace steps. Those tapping fingers increased their rate of beat, and the notes of the drums rose from the low murmur of hived bees to the mutter of mountain thunder still half a range away. A bird called from those inner courts of the palace from which the women never ventured.

Da—da—da—da.... Voices took up the thud-thud of the drums, the heads of the squatting men moved in a slow swing from side to side. Tau’s hand closed about Dane’s wrist and the younger man looked around, startled, to see that the medic’s eyes were alight, that he was watching the assembly with the alertness of Sindbad approaching prey.

“Calculate the stowage space in Number One hold!”

That amazing order, delivered in a whisper, shocked Dane into obeying it. Number One hold ... there were three divisions now and the stowage was—He became aware that for a small space of time he had escaped the net being woven by the beat of the drum, the drone of voices, the nodding of heads. He moistened his lips. So that was how it worked! He had heard

Tau speak often enough about self-hypnotism under such conditions, but this was the first time the meaning of it had been clear.

Two men were shuffling out of nowhere, wearing nothing on their dark bodies but calf-length kilts of tails, black tails with fluffy white tips, which swayed uniformly in time to their pacing feet. Their heads and shoulders were masked by beautifully cured and semi-mounted animal heads displaying half-open jaws with double pairs of curved fangs. The black-and-white striped fur, the sharply pointed ears, were neither canine nor feline, but a weird combination of the two.

Dane gabbled two trading formulas under his breath and tried to think of the relation of Samantine rock coinage to galactic credits. Only this time his defenses did not work. From between the two shuffling dancers padded something on four feet. The canine-feline creature was more than just a head; it was a loose-limbed, graceful body fully eight feet in length, and the red eyes in the prick-eared head were those of a confident killer. It walked without restraint, lazily, with arrogance, its white-tufted tail swinging. And when it reached the mid-point of the terrace, it flung up its head as if to challenge. But words issued from between those curved fangs, words which Dane might not understand but which undoubtedly held meaning for the men nodding in time to the hypnotic cadence of that da—da—da....

“Beautiful!” Tau spoke in honest admiration, his own eyes almost as feral as those of the talking beast as he leaned forward, his fists on his knees.

Now the animal was dancing also, its paws following the pace set by the masked attendants. It must be a man in an animal skin. But Dane could hardly believe that. The illusion was too perfect. His own hands went to the knife sheath at his belt. Out of deference to local custom they had left their stun rods in the palace, but a belt knife was an accepted article of apparel. Dane slid the blade out surreptitiously, setting its point against the palm of his hand and jabbing painfully. This was another of Tau’s answers for breaking a spell. But the white and black creature continued to dance; there was no blurring of its body lines into those of a human being.

It sang on in a high-pitched voice, and Dane noted that those of the audience nearest the stools where Asaki and the captain were seated now watched the Chief Ranger and the space officer. He felt Tau tense beside him.

“Trouble coming....” The warning from Tau was the merest thread of sound. Dane forced himself to look away from the swaying cat-dog, to watch instead the singers who were now furtively eying their lord and his guest. The Terran knew that there were feudal bonds between the Ranger and his men. But suppose this was a showdown between Lumbrilo and Asaki—whose side would these men take?

He watched Captain Jellico’s hand slide across his knee, his fingers drop in touching distance of knife hilt. And the hand of the Chief Ranger, hanging lax at his side, suddenly balled into a fist.

“So!” Tau expelled the word as a hiss. He moved with sure-footed speed. Now he passed between the stools to confront the dancing cat-dog. Yet he did not look at that weird creature and its attendants. Instead his arms were flung high as if to ward off—or perhaps welcome—something on the mountain side as he shouted:

*“Hodi, eldama! Hodi!”*

As one, those on the terrace turned, looked up toward the slope. Dane was on his feet, holding his knife as he might a sword. Though of what use its puny length would be against that huge bulk moving in slow majesty toward them, he did not try to think.

Gray-dark trunk curled upward between great ivory tusks, ears went wide as ponderous feet crunched volcanic soil. Tau moved forward, his hands still upraised, clearly in greeting. That trunk touched skyward as if in salute to the man who could be crushed under one foot.

“*Hodi, eldama!*” For the second time Tau hailed the monster elephant and the trunk raised in silent greeting from one lord of an earth to another he recognized as an equal. Perhaps it had been a thousand years since man and elephant had stood so, and then there had been only war and death between them. Now there was peace and a current of power flowing from one to the other. Dane sensed this, saw the men on the terrace likewise drawing back from the unseen tie between the medic and the bull he had so clearly summoned.

Then Tau’s upheld hands came together in a sharp clap and men held their breath in wonder. Where the great bull had stood there was nothing—except rocks in the sun.

As Tau swung around to face the cat-dog, that creature had no substance either. For he fronted no animal but a man, a small, lean man whose lips wrinkled back from his teeth in a snarl. His attendant priests fell back, leaving the spaceman and the witch doctor alone.

“Lumbrilo’s magic is great,” Tau said evenly. “I hail Lumbrilo of Khatka.” His hand made the open-palmed salute of peace.

The snarl faded as the man brought his face under control. He stood naked, but he was clothed in inherit dignity. And there was power with that dignity, power and a pride before which even the more physically impressive Chief Ranger might have to give place.

“You have magic also, outlander,” he replied. “Where walks this long-toothed shadow of yours now?”

“Where once the men of Khatka walked, Lumbrilo. For it was men of your blood who long, long past hunted this shadow of mine and made its body their prey.”

“So that it now might have a blood debt to settle with us, outlander?”

“That you said, not I, man of power. You have shown us one beast, I have shown another. Who can say which of them is stronger when it issues forth from the shadows?”

Lumbrilo pattered forward, his bare feet making little sound on the stones of the terrace. Now he was only an arm’s-length away from the medic.

“You have challenged me, off-world man.” Was that a question or a statement? Dane wondered.

“Why should I challenge you, Lumbrilo? To each race its own magic. I come not to offer battle.” His eyes held steady with the Khatkan’s.

“You have challenged me.” Lumbrilo turned away and then looked back over his shoulder.

“The strength you depend upon may become a broken staff, off-worlder. Remember my words in the time when shadows become substance, and substance the thinnest of shadows!”

## 3

“You are truly a man of power!”

Tau shook his head in answer to that outburst from Asaki.

“Not so, sir. Your Lumbrilo is a man of power. I drew upon his power and you saw the results.”

“Deny it not! What we saw never walked this world.”

Tau slung the strap of a trail bag over his shoulder. “Sir, once men of your blood, men who bred your race, hunted the elephant. They took his tusks for their treasure, feasted upon his flesh—yes, and died beneath the trampling of his feet when they were unlucky or unwary. So there is that within you which can even now be awakened to remember *eldama* in his might when he was king of the herd and need fear nothing save the spears and cunning of small, weak men. Lumbrilo had already awakened your minds to see what he willed you to see.”

“How does he do this?” asked the other simply. “Is it magic that we see not Lumbrilo but a lion before us?”

“He weaves his spell with the drums, with the chant, by the suggestion his mind imposes upon yours. And, having woven his spell, he cannot limit it to just the picture he suggests if ancient racial memories raise another. I merely used the tools of Lumbrilo to show you yet another picture your people once knew well.”

“And in so doing made an enemy.” Asaki stood before a rack of very modern weapons. Now he made his selection, a silver tube with a stock curved to fit a man’s shoulder. “Lumbrilo will not forget.”

Tau laughed shortly. “No, but then I have merely done as you wished, have I not, sir? I have focused on myself the enmity of a dangerous man, and now you hope I shall be forced, in self-defense, to remove him from your path.”

The Khatkan turned slowly, resting the weapon across his forearm. “I do not deny that, spaceman.”

“Then matters here are indeed serious—”

“They are so serious,” Asaki interrupted, speaking not only to Tau but to the other off-worlders as well, “that what happens now may mean the end of the Khatka that I know. Lumbrilo is the most dangerous game I have faced in a lifetime as a hunter. He goes, or we draw his fangs—or else all that I am, all I have labored here to build, will be swept away. To preserve this I will use any weapon.”

“And I am now your weapon, which you hope will be as successful as that needler you are carrying.” Tau laughed again, without much humor. “Let us hope I shall prove as effective.”

Jellico moved out of the shadows. It was just after dawn, and the grayness of the vanishing night still held in the corners of the armory. Deliberately he took his own stand before the arms racks and chose a short-barreled blaster. Only when its butt was cupped in his hand did he glance at his host.

“We came guesting, Asaki. We have eaten salt and bread under this roof.”

“On my body and my blood it is,” returned the Khatkan grimly. “I shall go down to the blackness of Sabra before you do, if the flames of death are against us.” From his belt he

flipped loose his knife and offered the hilt to Jellico. “My body for a wall between you and the dark, Captain. But also understand this: to me, what I do now is greater than the life of any one man. Lumbrilo and the evil behind him must be rooted out. There was no trickery in my invitation!”

They stood eye to eye, equal in height, in authority of person, and that indefinable something which made them both masters in their own different worlds. Then Jellico’s hand went out, his fingertip flicked the hilt of the bared blade.

“There was no trickery,” he conceded. “I knew that your need was great when you came to the *Queen*.”

Since both the captain and Tau appeared to accept the situation, Dane, not quite understanding it all, was prepared to follow their lead. And for the moment they had nothing more in plan than to visit the Zoboru preserve.

They went by flitter—Asaki, one of his Hunter pilots, and the three from the *Queen*—lifting over the rim of mountains behind the fortress-palace and speeding north with the rising sun a flaming ball to the east. Below, the country was stark—rocks and peaks, deep purple shadows marking the veins of crevices. But that was swiftly behind and they were over a sea of greens, many shades of green, with yellow, blue, even red cutting into the general verdant carpet of treetops. Another chain of heights and then open land, swales of tall grass already burnt yellow by the steady sun. There was a river here, a crazy, twisted stream coiling nearly back upon itself at times.

Once more broken land, land so ravished by prehistoric volcanic action that it was a grotesque nightmare of erosion-whittled outcrops and mesas. Asaki pointed to the east. There was a dark patch widening out into a vast wedge.

“The swamp of Mygra. It has not yet been explored.”

“You could air map it,” Tau began.

The Chief Ranger was frowning. “Four flitters have been lost trying that. Com reports fail when they cross that last mountain ridge eastward. There is some sort of interference which we do not yet understand. Mygra is a place of death; later we may be able to travel along its fringe and then you shall see. Now—” He spoke to the pilot in his own tongue and the flitter pointed up-nose at an angle as they climbed over the highest peak they had yet seen in this mountainous land, to reach at last a country of open grass dotted with small forest stands. Jellico nodded approvingly.

“Zoboru?”

“Zoboru,” Asaki assented. “We shall go up to the northern end of the preserve. I wish to show you the roosts of the fastals. This is their nesting season and the sight is one you will long remember. But we shall take an eastern course; I have two Ranger stations to check on the way.”

It was after they left the second station that the flitter swung farther out eastward, again climbing over the chain of heights to sight one of the newly discovered wonders the staff at the last station had reported—a crater lake.

And the flitter skimmed down across water which was a rich emerald in hue, filling the crater from one rock wall to the other with no beach at the foot of those precipitant cliffs. As the machine arose to clear the far wall, Dane tensed. One of his duties aboard the *Queen* was flitter pilot for planetwise trips. And ever since they had taken off that morning he had unconsciously flown with the Khatkan pilot, anticipating each change or adjustment of the



controls. Now he felt that sluggish response to the other's lift signal, and instinctively his own hand went out to adjust a power feed lever.

They made the rise, were well above the danger of the cliff wall. But the machine was not responding properly. Dane did not need to watch the pilot's swiftly moving hands to guess that they were in trouble. And his slight concern deepened into something else as the flitter began to drop nose again. In front of him, Captain Jellico shifted uneasily, and Dane knew that he, too, was alerted.

Now the pilot had plunged the power adjuster to the head against the control board. But the nose of the flitter acted as if it were overweighted or magnetically attracted by the rocks below. The best efforts of the man flying it could not keep it level. They were being drawn earthward, and all the pilot could do only delayed the inevitable crack-up. The Khatkan was turning the machine north to avoid what lay below, for here a long arm of the Mygra swamp clasped about the foot of the mountain.

The Chief Ranger spoke into the mike of the com unit while the pilot continued to fight against the pull which was bringing them down. Now the small machine was below the level of the volcanic peak which cradled the lake, and the mountain lay between them and the preserve.

Asaki gave a muffled exclamation, slapped the com box, spoke more sharply into the mike. It was apparent he was not getting the results he wanted. Then with a quick glance about he snapped an order:

"Strap in!"

His Terran companions had already buckled the wide webbing belts intended to save them from crash shock. Dane saw the pilot push the button to release fend cushions. In spite of his pounding heart, a small fraction of his brain recognized the other's skill as the Khatkan took a course to bring them down on a relatively level patch of sand and gravel.

Dane raised his head from the shelter of his folded arms. The Chief Ranger was busy with the pilot, who lay limply against the controls. Captain Jellico and Tau were already pulling at the buckles of their protective crash belts. But one look at the front of the flitter told Dane that it would not take to the air again without extensive repairs. Its nose was bent up and back, obscuring the forward view completely. However, the pilot had made a miraculously safe landing considering the terrain.

Ten minutes later, the pilot restored to consciousness and the gash in his head bandaged, they held a council of war.

"The com was off, too. I did not have a chance to report before the crash," Asaki put the situation straightly. "And our exploring parties have not yet mapped this side of the range; it has a bad reputation because of the swamp."

Jellico measured the heights now to their west with resigned eyes. "Looks as if we climb."

"Not here," the Chief Ranger corrected him. "There is no passing through the crater lake region on foot. We must travel south along the edge of the mountain area until we do find a scalable way into the preserve region."

"You seem very certain we are not going to be rescued if we stay right here," Tau observed. "Why?"

"Because I'm inclined to believe that any flitter that tries to reach us may run into the same trouble. Also, they have no com fix on us. It will be at least a day or more before they will

even begin to count us missing, and then they will have the whole northern portion of the preserve to comb; there are not enough men here—I can give you a multitude of reasons, Medic.”

“One of which might be sabotage?” demanded Jellico.

Asaki shrugged. “Perhaps. I am not loved in some quarters. But there may also be something fatal to flitters here as there is over Mygra. We thought the crater lake district safely beyond the swamp influence, but it may not be so.”

But you took the chance of traveling over it, Dane thought, though he did not comment aloud. Was this another of the Chief Ranger’s attempts to involve them in some private trouble of his own? Though to deliberately smash up a flitter and set them all afoot in this wilderness was a pretty drastic move.

Asaki had started to unload emergency supplies from the flitter. They each had a trail bag for a pack. But when the pilot staggered over to pull out a set of stass belts and Jellico began to uncoil them, the Chief Ranger shook his head.

“With the feeder beam shut off by the mountains, I fear those will no longer work.”

Jellico tossed one on the crumpled nose of the flitter and punched its button with the tip of the needler barrel. Then he threw a rock at the dangling belt. The stone landed, taking the wide protective band with it to the ground. That force field which should have warded off the missile was not working.

“Oh, fine!” Tau opened his trail bag to pack concentrates. Then he smiled crookedly. “We aren’t signed in for killing licenses, sir. Do you pay our fines if we are forced to shoot a hole through something that disputes the right of way?”

To Dane’s surprise, the Chief Ranger laughed. “You are off preserve now, Medic Tau. The rules do not cover wild land. But I would suggest we now hunt a cave before nightfall.”

“Lions?” asked Jellico.

Dane, remembering the black and white beast Lumbrilo had presented, did not enjoy that thought. They had—his gaze went from man to man checking weapons—the needler Asaki carried, and another the pilot had slung by its carrying strap over his shoulder. Tau and the captain both were armed with blasters and he had a fire ray and a force blade, both considered small arms but deadly enough perhaps even to dampen a lion’s enthusiasm for the chase.

“Lions, graz, rock apes,” Asaki fastened the mouth of his trail bag. “All are hunters or killers. The graz send out scouts, and they are big and formidable enough to have no enemies. Lions hunt with intelligence and skill. Rock apes are dangerous, but luckily they cannot keep silent when they scent their prey and so give one warning.”

As they climbed up-slope from the flitter, Dane, looking back, saw that perhaps Asaki was right in his belief that they had better try to help themselves rather than wait for rescue. Putting aside the excuse of fearing another crack-up, the wrecked flitter made no outstanding mark on the ground. The higher they climbed, the less it could be distinguished from the tumble of rocks about it.

He had lagged a little behind and, when he hurried to catch up, found Jellico standing with his distance vision lenses to his eyes, directing them toward that shadow marking the swamp. As the younger spaceman reached him, the captain lowered the glasses and spoke:

“Take your knife, Thorson, and hold it close to that rock—over there.” He pointed to a rounded black knob protruding from the soil a little off their path.

Dane obeyed, only to have the blade jerk in his hand. And when he loosened his hold in amazement, the steel slapped tight against the stone.

“Magnetic!”

“Yes. Which might explain our crash. Also this.” Jellico held out a field compass to demonstrate that its needle had gone completely mad.

“We can use the mountain range itself for a guide,” Dane said with more confidence than he felt.

“True enough. But we may have trouble when we head west again.” Jellico let the lenses swing free on their cord about his neck. “If we were wrecked on purpose”—his mouth tightened and the old blaster burn on his cheek stretched as did his jaw set—“then someone is going to answer a lot of questions—and fast!”

“The Chief Ranger, sir?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know!” The captain grunted as he adjusted his pack and started on.

If fortune had failed them earlier, she smiled on them now. Asaki discovered a cave before sundown, located not too far from a mountain stream. The Ranger sniffed the air before that dark opening as the Hunter pilot shed his equipment and crept forward on his hands and knees, his head up and his nostrils expanding as he, too, tested the scent from the cave mouth.

Scent? It was closer to a stench, and one ripe enough to turn the stomach of an off-worlder. But the Hunter glanced back over his shoulder and nodded reassuringly.

“Lion. But old. Not here within five days at least.”

“Well enough. And even old lion scent will keep away rock apes. We’ll clean some and then we can rest undisturbed,” was his superior’s comment.

The cleaning was easy for the brittle bedding of dried bracken and grass the beast had left burned quickly, cleansing with both fire and smoke. When they raked the ashes out with branches, Asaki and Nymani brought in handfuls of leaves which they crumpled and threw on the floor, spreading an aromatic odor which banished most of the foulness.

Dane, at the stream with the canteens to fill, chanced upon a small pool where there was a spread of smooth yellow sand. Knowing well the many weird booby traps one might stumble into on a strange world, the Terran prospected carefully, stirring up the sand with a stick. Sighting not so much as a water insect or a curious fish, he pulled off his boots, rolled up his breeches and waded in. The water was cool and refreshing, though he dared not drink it until the purifier was added. Then, with the filled canteens knotted together by their straps, he put on his boots and climbed to the cave where Tau waited with water tablets.

Half an hour later Dane sat cross-legged by the fire, turning a spit strung with three small birds Asaki had brought in. One foot closer to the heat began to tingle and he eased off his boot; his cramped toes suddenly seeming to have doubled in size. He was staring wide-eyed at these same toes, puffed, red, and increasingly painful to the touch, when Nymani squatted beside him, inspected his foot closely, and ordered him to take off his other boot.

“What is it?” Dane found that shedding the other boot was a minor torture in itself.

Nymani was cutting tiny splinters, hardly thicker than a needle, from a stick.

“Sand worm—lays eggs in flesh. We burn them out or you have bad foot.”

“Burn them out!” Dane echoed, and then swallowed as he watched Nymani advance a splinter to the fire.

“Burn them,” the Khatkan repeated firmly. “Burn tonight, hurt some tomorrow; all well soon. No burn—very bad.”

Dane ruefully prepared to pay the consequences of his first brush with the unpleasant surprises Khatka had to offer.

## 4

Dane regarded his throbbing feet morosely. Nymani's operations with burning splinters had been hard to take, but he had endured them without disgracing himself before the Khatkans, who appeared to regard such a mishap as just another travel incident. Now, with Tau's salve soothing the worst of the after affects, the Terran was given time to reflect upon his own stupidity and the fact that he might now prove a drag on the whole party the next morning.

"That's queer...."

Dane was startled out of the contemplation of his misery to see the medic on his knees before their row of canteens, the vial of water purifier held to the firelight for a closer inspection.

"What's the matter?"

"We must have hit with a pretty hard thump back there. Some of these pills are powder! Have to guess about the portion to add." With the tip of his knife blade Tau scraped a tiny amount of pill fragments into each waiting canteen. "That should do it. But if the water tastes a little bitter, don't let it bother you."

Bitter water, Dane thought, trying to flex his still swollen toes, was going to be the least of his worries in the morning. But he determined that his boots should go on at daybreak, and he would keep on his feet as long as the others did, no matter how much it cost him.

And when they set out shortly after daybreak, wanting to move as far as they could before the heat hours when they must rest, the going was not too bad. Dane's feet were tender to the touch, but he could shuffle along at the tail of the procession with only Nymani playing rear guard behind him.

Jungle lay before them and bush knives began to swing, clearing their path. Dane took his turn with the rest at that chore, thankful that the business of cutting their way through that mass of greenery slowed them to a pace he could match—if not in comfort, then by willpower.

But the sand worms were not the only troubles one could encounter on Khatka. Within an hour Captain Jellico stood sweating and speaking his mind freely in the native tongues of five different planets while Tau and Nymani worked as a team with skinning knives. They were not flaying the spaceman, but they came near to that in places as they worried a choice selection of tree thorns out of his arm and shoulder. The captain had been unfortunate enough to trip and fall into the embrace of a very unfriendly bush.

Dane inspected a fallen tree for evidence of inimical wild life, and then rested his blanket between him and it as a protecting cushion before he sat down. These trees were not the towering giants of the true forests, but rather oversized bushes which had been made into walls by twined vines. Brilliant bursts of flowers were splotches of vivid color, and the attendant insect life was altogether too abundant. Dane tried to tally his immunity shots and hoped for the best. At the moment he wondered why anyone would want to visit Khatka, let alone pay some astronomical sum for the privilege. Though he could also guess that the plush safari arranged for a paying client might be run on quite different lines from their own present trek.

How *could* a tracker find his way through this? With the compasses playing crazy tricks into the bargain! Jellico knew that the compasses were off, yet the captain had followed Asaki's

lead without question, so he must trust the Ranger's forest craft. But Dane wished they were clear on the mountain side again.

Time had little meaning in that green gloom. But when they worked through to meet rock walls again, the sun said it was well into the after part of the day. They sheltered for a breather under the drooping limbs of one of the last trees.

"Amazing!" Jellico, his torn arm in a sling across his chest, came down-slope from the higher point where he had been using the distance lenses. "We struck straight across and cut off about ten miles by that jungle jog. Now I believe all that I've heard of your people's ability to cross wilderness and not lose their built in 'riding beams,' sir. With the compasses out, I'll admit I've been nourishing a healthy set of doubts."

Asaki laughed. "Captain, I do not question your ability to flit from world to world, or how you have learned to set up trade with strange humans and non-humans alike. To each his own mystery. On Khatka every boy before he becomes a man must learn to navigate the jungle, and with no instruments to help him, only what lies in here." He touched his thumb to his forehead. "So through generations we have developed our homing instincts. Those who did not, also did not live to father others who might have had the same lack. We are hounds who can run on a scent, and we are migrators who have better than a compass within our own bodies."

"Now we take to climbing again?" Tau surveyed the way before them critically.

"Not at this hour. That sun on the upward slopes can cook a man's skin were he to touch any rock. We wait..."

Waiting for the Khatkans was a chance to sleep. They curled up on their light blankets. But the three spacemen were restless. Dane would have liked to have taken off his boots, but feared he could not replace them; and he could tell from the way the captain shifted his position that Jellico was in pain too. Tau sat quietly, staring at nothing Dane could see, unless it was a tall rock thrust out of the slope like a finger pointing skyward.

"What color is that rock?"

Surprised, Dane gave the stony finger closer attention. To him it was the same color as most of the other rocks, a weathered black which in certain lights appeared to carry a brownish film.

"Black, or maybe dark brown?"

Tau looked past him to Jellico. The captain nodded.

"I'd agree with that."

Tau cupped his hands over his eyes for a moment and his lips moved as if he were counting. Then he took his hands away and stared up-slope. Dane watched the medic's eyelids blink slowly. "Nothing but black or brown?" Tau pressed.

"No." Jellico supported his injured arm upon his knees, leaning forward, as intent upon the designated rock as if he expected it to assume some far more startling appearance.

"Queer," Tau said to himself, and then added briskly, "You're right, of course. That sun can play tricks with one's eyes."

Dane continued to watch the finger rock. Maybe strong sunlight could play tricks, but he could see nothing odd about that rough lump. And since the captain asked no questions of Tau, he did not quite want to either.

It was perhaps a half-hour later, and the medic and Jellico had both succumbed to the quiet, the heat, and their own fatigue, when Dane did sight a movement up-slope. The throbbing in his feet was worse now that he had nothing to occupy his mind but his own troubles, and he was sitting facing the finger rock.

Was that what Tau had seen earlier? That quick movement around the side of the rough pillar? But if so, why the question of color? There it was again! And now, centering all his attention on that one point, the Terran picked out the outline of a head—a head grotesque enough to be something conjured out of Lumbrilo's sorcerer's imagination. Had Dane not seen its like among the tri-dee prints in Captain Jellico's collection, he would have believed that his eyes were playing tricks.

It was a bullet-shaped head, embellished by two out-sized prick ears, the hair-tufted pointed tips of which projected well above the top of the skull. Round eyes were set deeply in sunken pits. The mouth was a swinish snout from which lolled a purple tongue, though the rest of that gargoyle head was very close in color to the rock against which it half rested.

Dane had no doubts that the rock ape was spying upon the small camp. Having heard tales of those semi-intelligent animals—the most intelligent native creatures of Khatka—most of which were concerned with their more malignant characteristics, Dane was alarmed. That lurker could be an advance scout of some pack. And a pack of rock apes, if able to surprise their prey, were formidable opponents.

Asaki stirred, sat up. And that round head above turned to follow the Chief Ranger's every move.

“Above ... by the finger rock ... to the right....” Dane kept his voice close to a whisper. When he saw the sudden constriction of muscle across the Khatkan's bare shoulders, he knew that the other had heard and understood.

Only, if Asaki had spotted the rock ape, he did not betray his knowledge. The Khatkan got lithely to his feet. Then one of those feet stirred Nymani into the instant wakefulness of the wilderness-trained man.

Dane slid his hand about the bole of the tree and touched Jellico, watched the captain's gray eyes open with a similar awareness. Asaki picked up his needler. Weapon in hand, he whirled and fired almost in one connected movement. It was the fastest shot Dane had ever seen.

The gargoyle head lifted away from the rock, and then turned to one side as its body, somehow vaguely obscene in its resemblance to the human form, fell away, to sprawl limply down-slope.

Though the dead rock ape had not had a chance to give tongue, there came a cry from above, a coughing, deep-throated hawking. Down the steep incline bumped a round white ball, bouncing past the tumbled carcass of the ape, sailing up into the air, to strike and burst open a few feet away.

“Back!” With one arm Asaki sent Jellico, his nearest neighbor, tumbling back into the jungle. Then the Chief Ranger pumped a stream of needle rays into the remains of the ball. A shrill, sweet humming arose as red motes, vivid as molten copper in the sunlight, climbed on wings beating too fast to be seen.

The debris of the nest smoked into nothing. But no needle ray could hope to stop all the poisonous army issuing forth from it, fighting mad, to seek any warm-blooded creature within scenting distance. The men threw themselves into the brush, rolling in the thick mold

of the vegetable decay on the ground, rubbing its moist plaster over their bodies in frantic haste.

Red-hot fire, far worse than any of the splinter torment Dane had undergone the night before, pierced between his shoulders. He rolled on his back, shoving himself along, both to kill the fire-wasp and coat the sting with cooling mold. Cries of pain told him that he was not the only sufferer, as all dug hands into the slimy stuff under them and slapped it over their faces and heads.

“Apes....” That half shout got through to alert the men on the jungle floor. True to their nature, the rock apes, now streaming downhill, were coughing their challenges, advertising their attack. And it was only that peculiarity of their species which saved their intended victims.

The apes came forward, partially erect, at a shambling run. The first two, bulls close to six feet, went down under fire from Asaki’s needler. A third somehow escaped, swerving to the left, and came bounding at an angle toward Dane. The Terran jerked free his force blade as that swine snout split wide to show greenish tusks and the horrible stench of the creature’s body made him gasp.

A taloned paw clawed at him eagerly, slipped from his slime-covered body just as he brought the force blade up. Foul breath coughed in his face and he stumbled back as the heavy body of the ape crashed against him, cut in half by the weapon. To Dane’s sickened horror the paws still clawed for him, the fangs still gnashed as he rolled free of the mangled body and somehow got to his feet.

The roar of a blaster, of two blasters, drowned out the clamor of the apes as Dane drew his fire ray, set his shoulders against a tree bole and prepared to fight it out. He fired, saw a smaller and more nimble enemy go down screeching. Then there were none left on their shaggy feet, though some on the ground dragged themselves forward, still striving to reach the men.

Dane slapped a fire-wasp from his leg. He was glad of the support of the tree at his back as the smell of the ape’s blood drenching him from chest level down, and the mess on the ground, made his stomach churn.

When he could control his retching, he straightened. To his relief he saw that all the others were on their feet, apparently unharmed. But Tau, catching sight of the younger spaceman, gasped and started for him.

“Dane! What did they do?”

His junior laughed a little hysterically. “Not mine....” He swabbed with a handful of grass at his bloodied breeches and blundered on into the sunlight.

Nymani found them a foam-flecked stream below a miniature falls where the swift current prevented the lurking of sand worms. They stripped eagerly, cleaning first themselves and then their fouled clothing while Tau tended the wealth of fire-wasp stings. There was little he could do to relieve the swelling and pain, until Asaki produced a reed-like plant which, chopped in sections, yielded a sticky purple liquid that dried on the skin as a tar gum—the native remedy. So, glued and plastered, they climbed away from the water and prepared to spend the night in a hollow between two leaning rocks, certainly not as snug as the cave but a fortress of sorts.



“And credit-happy space hoppers pay a fortune for an outing like this!” Tau commented bitterly, hunching well forward so that a certain stung portion of his anatomy would not come in contact with the rock beneath him.

“Hardly for this,” Jellico replied, and Dane saw Nymani grin one-sidedly, his other cheek puffed and painted sticky purple.

“We do not always encounter apes and fire-wasps in the same day,” supplied the Chief Ranger. “Also, guests at the preserves wear stass belts.”

Jellico snorted. “I don’t think you’d get any repeats from your clients otherwise! What do we meet tomorrow? A herd of graz on stampede, or something even more subtle and deadly?”

Nymani got up and walked a little way from their rock shelter. He turned down-slope and Dane saw his nostrils expand as they had when he had investigated the cave.

“Something is dead,” he said slowly. “A very large something. Or else—”

Asaki strode down to join his men. He gave a curt nod and Nymani skidded on down the mountain side.

“What is it?” Jellico asked.

“It might be many things. There is one I hope it is not,” was the Chief Ranger’s somewhat evasive reply. “I will hunt a labbla—there was fresh spoor at the stream.” He set off along their back trail to return a half hour later, the body of his kill slung across one shoulder. He was skinning it when Nymani trotted back.

“Well?”

“Death pit,” supplied the Hunter.

“Poachers?” Jellico inquired.

Nymani nodded. Asaki continued his task, but there was a glint in his dark eyes as he butchered with sure and expert strokes. Then he glanced at the shadow extending beyond the rocks.

“I, too, would see,” he told Nymani.

Jellico arose, and Dane, interested, followed. Some five minutes later none of them needed the native keenness of smell to detect the presence of some foulness ahead. The odor of corruption was almost tangible in the sultry air. And it grew worse until they stood on the edge of a pit. Dane retreated hurriedly. This was as bad as the battlefield of the rock apes. But the captain and the two Khatkans stood calmly assessing the slaughter left by the hide poachers.

“Glam, graz, hoodra,” Jellico commented. “Tusks and hides—the full line of trade stuff.”

Asaki, his expression bleak, stepped back from the pit. “Day old calves, old ones, females—all together. They kill wantonly and leave those they do not choose to pelt.”

“Trail—” Nymani pointed eastward. “Leads to Mygra swamp.”

“The swamps!” Asaki was shaken. “They must be mad!”

“Or know more about this country than your men do,” Jellico corrected.

“If poachers can enter Mygra, then we can follow!”

But not now, Dane protested silently. Certainly Asaki did not mean that *they* were to track outlaws into swamps the Khatkan had already labeled unexplored death traps!

## 5

Sitting up, Dane stared wide-eyed into the dark. A handful of glowing coals, guarded by rocks, was the center of their camp. He hunched up to that hardly knowing why he moved. His hands were shaking, his skin damp with sweat no heat produced. Yet, now that he was conscious of the night, the Terran could not remember the nightmare from which he had just awakened, though he was left with a growing apprehension which he could not define. What prowled out there in that dark? Walked the mountain side? Listened, spied and waited?

Dane half started to his feet as a form did move into the dim light of the fire. Tau stood there, regarding him with sober intensity.

“Bad dream?”

The younger man admitted to that with a nod, partly against his will.

“Well, you aren’t the only one. Remember any of it?”

With an effort, Dane looked away from the encircling dark. It was as if the fear which had shaken him awake, now embodied, lurked right there.

“No.” He rubbed sleep-smarting eyes.

“Neither did I,” Tau remarked. “But both of ‘em must have been jet-powered.”

“I suppose one could expect to have nightmares after yesterday.” Dane advanced the logical explanation, yet at the same time something deep inside him denied every word of it. He had known nightmares before; none of them had left this aftertaste. And he wanted no return of sleep tonight. Reaching to the pile of wood he fed the fire as Tau settled down beside him.

“There is something else....” the medic began, and then fell silent. Dane did not press him. The younger man was too busy fighting a growing desire to whirl and aim the fire ray into that darkness, to catch in its withering blast that lurking thing he could *feel* padded there, biding its time.

Despite his efforts Dane did drowse again before morning, waking unrefreshed, and, to his secret dismay, with no lessening of his odd dislike for the country about them.

Asaki did not suggest that they trail the poachers into the morass of Mygra. Instead the Chief Ranger was eager to press on in the opposite direction, find a way over the range to the preserve where he could assemble a punitive force to deal with the outlaws. So they began an upward climb which took them away from the dank heat of the lowlands, into the parched blaze of the sunbaked ledges above.

The sun was bright, far too bright, and there were few shadows left. Yet Dane, stopping to drink sparingly from his canteen, could not lose that sense of eyes upon him, of being tracked. Rock apes? Cunning as those beasts were, it was against their nature to trail in utter silence, to be able to carry through a long-term project. Lion, perhaps?

He noted that Nymani and Asaki took turns at rear guard today, and that each was alert. Yet, oddly enough, none of them mentioned the uneasiness they must all share.

They had a dry climb, finding no mountain stream to renew their water supply. All being experienced in wilderness travel, they made a mouthful of liquid go a long way. When the party halted slightly before midday, canteens were still half full.

“*Haugh!*”

They jerked up, hands on weapons. A rock ape, its hideous body clearly seen here, capered, coughed, spat. Asaki fired from the hip and the thing screeched, clawed at its chest where the dark blood spewed out, and raced for them. Nymani cut the beast down and they waited tensely for the attack of the thing's tribe, which should have followed the abortive lunge on the part of their scout. But there was nothing—neither sound nor movement.

What did follow froze them all momentarily. That mangled body began to move again, drew itself together, crawled toward them. Dane knew that it was impossible that the creature could live with such wounds. Yet the beast advanced, its head lolling on its hunched shoulders so that the eyes were turned blindly up to the full glare of the sun, while it crawled to reach the man it could not see.

“Demon!” Nymani dropped his needler, shrank back against the rocks.

As the thing advanced, before their eyes the impossible happened. Those gaping wounds closed, the head straightened on the almost invisible neck, the eyes glared once more with life, and slaver dripped from the swine snout.

Jellico caught up the needler Nymani had dropped. With a coolness Dane envied, the captain shot. And for the second time the rock ape collapsed, torn to ribbons.

Nymani screamed, and Dane tried to choke back his own cry of horrified protest. The dead thing put on life for the second time, crawled, got somehow to its feet, healed itself, and came on. Asaki, his face greenish-pale, stepped out stiffly as if each step he took was forced by torture. He had dropped his needler. Now he caught up a rock as large as his own head, raised it high with arms on which the muscles stood out like ropes. He hurled the stone, and Dane heard as well as saw the missile go home. The rock ape fell for the third time.

When one of those taloned paws began to move again, Nymani broke. He ran, his screams echoing thinly in the air, as the thing lurched up, the gory mess of its head weaving about. If his feet would have obeyed him, Dane might have followed the Khatkan. As it was, he drew his ray and aimed it at that shambling thing. Tau struck up the barrel.

The medic's face was livid; there was the same horror in his eyes. But he moved out to front that monster.

A spot of shadow coalesced on the ground, deepened in hue, took on substance. Crouched low facing the rock ape, its haunches quivering for a deadly spring, narrowed green eyes holding on its prey, was a black leopard.

The tiny forward and backward movements of its body steadied, and it arched through the air, brought down the ape. A pitting, snarling tangle rolled across the slope—and was gone!

Asaki's hands shook as he drew them down his sweating face. Jellico readied a second clip in the needler mechanically. But Tau was swaying so that Dane leaped to take the shock of the other's weight as he collapsed. Only for a moment did the medic hang so, then he struggled to stand erect.

“Magic?” Jellico's voice, as controlled as ever, broke the silence.

“Mass hallucination,” Tau corrected him. “Very strong.”

“How!” Asaki swallowed and began again. “How was it done?”

The medic shook his head. “Not by the usual methods, that is certain. And it worked on us—on me—when we weren't conditioned. I don't understand that!”

Dane could hardly believe it yet. He watched Jellico stride to where the tangle of struggling beasts had rolled, saw him examine bare ground on which no trace of the fight remained. They must accept Tau's explanation; it was the only sane one.

Asaki's features were suddenly convulsed with a rage so stark that Dane realized how much a veneer was the painfully built civilization of Khatka.

"*Lumbrilo!*" The Chief Ranger made of that name a curse. Then with a visible effort he controlled his emotions and came to Tau, looming over the slighter medic almost menacingly.

"How?" he demanded for the second time.

"I don't know."

"He will try again?"

"Not the same perhaps—"

But Asaki had already grasped the situation, was looking ahead.

"We shall not know," he breathed, "what is real, what is not."

"There is also this," Tau warned. "The unreal can kill the believer just as quickly as the real!"

"That I know also. It has happened too many times lately. If we could only find out how! Here are no drums, no singing—none of the tricks to tangle a man's mind that he usually uses to summon his demons. So without Lumbrilo, without his witch tools, how does he make us see what is not?"

"That we must discover and speedily, sir. Or else we shall be lost among the unreal and the real."

"You also have the power. You can save us!" Asaki protested.

Tau drew his arm across his face. Very little of the normal color had returned to his thin, mobile features. He still leaned against Dane's supporting arm.

"A man can do only so much, sir. To battle Lumbrilo on his own ground is exhausting and I can not fight so very often."

"But will he not also be exhausted?"

"I wonder..." Tau gazed beyond the Khatkan to the barren ground where leopard and rock ape had ceased to be. "This magic is a tricky thing, sir. It builds and feeds upon a man's own imagination and inner fears. Lumbrilo, having triggered ours, need not strive at all, but let us ourselves raise that which will attack us."

"Drugs?" demanded Jellico.

Tau gave a start sufficient to take him out of Dane's loose hold. His hand went to the packet of aid supplies which was his own care, his eyes round with wonder and then shrewdly alert.

"Captain, we disinfected those thorn punctures of yours. Thorson, your foot salve.... But, no, I didn't use anything—"

"You forget, Craig, we all had scratches after that fight with the apes."

Tau sat down on the ground. With feverish haste he unsealed his medical supplies, laid out some containers. Then delicately he opened each, examined its contents closely by eye, by smell, and two by taste. When he was done he shook his head.

“If these have been in any way meddled with, I would need laboratory analysis to detect it. And I don’t believe that Lumbrilo could hide traces of his work so cleverly. Or has he been off-planet? Had much to do with off-worlders?” he asked the Chief Ranger.

“By the nature of his position he is forbidden to space voyage, to have any close relationship with any off-worlder. I do not think, medic, he would choose your healing substances for his mischief. There would only be chance to aid him then in producing the effects he wants. Though there is often call for first aid in travel, he could not be *certain* you would use any of your drugs on this trip to the preserve.”

“And Lumbrilo *was* certain. He threatened something such as this,” Jellico reminded them.

“So it would be something which we would all use, which we had to depend upon...”

“The water!” Dane had been holding his own canteen ready to drink. But as that possible explanation dawned in his mind, he smelled instead of tasted the liquid sloshing inside. There was no odor he could detect. But he remembered Tau commenting on the powdered purifier pills at their first camp.

“That’s it!” Tau dug further into his kit, brought out the vial of white powder with its grainy lumps. Pouring a little into the palm of his hand he smelled it, touched it with the tip of his tongue. “Purifier and something else,” he reported. “It could be one of half a dozen drugs, or some native stuff from here which we’ve never classified.”

“True. There are drugs we have found here.” Asaki scowled down at the green mat of jungle. “So our water is poisoned?”

“Do you always purify it?” Tau asked the Chief Ranger. “Surely during the centuries since your ancestors landed on Khatka you must have adapted to native water. You couldn’t have lived otherwise. We must use the purifier, but must you?”

“There is water and water.” Asaki shook his own canteen, his scowl growing fiercer as the gurgle from its depths was heard. “From springs on the other side of the mountains we drink—yes. But over here, this close to the Mygra swamps, we have not done so. We may have to chance it.”

“Do you think we are literally poisoned?” Jellico bored directly to the heart of their private fears.

“None of us have been drinking too heavily,” Tau observed thoughtfully. “And I don’t believe Lumbrilo had outright killing in mind. How long the effect will last I have no way of telling.”

“If we saw one rock ape,” Dane wondered, “why didn’t we see others? And why here and now?”

“That!” Tau pointed ahead on the trail Asaki had picked for their ascent. For a long moment Dane could see nothing of any interest there and then he located it—a finger of rock. It did not point directly skyward this time, in fact it slanted so that its tip indicated their back trail. Yet in outline the spire was very similar to that outcrop from which the real rock ape had charged them the day before.

Asaki exclaimed in his own tongue and slapped his hand hard against the stock of the needler.

“We saw that and so again we saw an ape also! Had earlier we been charged by graz or jumped by a lion in such a place, then again we would have been faced by graz or lion here!”

Captain Jellico gave a bark of laughter colored only by the most sardonic humor. “Clever enough. He merely leaves it to us to select our own ghost and then repeat the performance in the next proper setting. I wonder how many rocks shaped like that one there are in these mountains? And how long will a rock ape continue to pop out from behind each one we do find?”

“Who knows? But as long as we drink this water we’re going to continue to have trouble; I feel safe in promising that,” Tau replied. He put the vial of doctored purifier into a separate pocket of his medical kit. “It may be a problem of how long we can go without water.”

“Perhaps,” Asaki said softly. “Only not all the water on Khatka comes running in streams.”

“Fruit?” Tau asked.

“No, trees. Lumbrilo is not a hunter, nor could he be certain when and where his magic would go to work. Unless the flitter was deliberately sabotaged, he was planning for us to use our canteens in the preserve. That is lion country and there are long distances between springs. This is jungle below us and there is a source there I think we can safely tap. But first I must find Nymani and prove to him that this is truly deviltry of a sort, but not demon inspired.”

He was gone, running lightly down-slope in the direction his hunter had taken, and Dane spoke to Captain Jellico.

“What’s this about water in trees, sir?”

“There is a species of tree here, not too common, with a thickened trunk. It stores water during the rainy season to live on in the hot months. Since we are in the transition period between rains, we could tap it—if we locate one of the trees. How about that, Tau? Dare we drink that without a purifier?”

“Probably a choice of two evils, sir. But we have had our preventive shots. Personally, I’d rather battle disease than take a chance on a mind-twisting drug. You can go without water just so long....”

“I’d like to have a little talk with Lumbrilo,” remarked Jellico, the mildness in his voice very deceptive.

“I’m *going* to have a little talk with Lumbrilo, if and when we see him again!” promised Tau.

“What are our chances, sir?” Dane asked. He screwed the cap back on his canteen, his mouth feeling twice as dry since he knew he dared not drink.

“Well, we’ve faced gambles before.” Tau sealed the medical kit. “I’d like to see one of those trees before sundown. And I don’t want to face another pointed rock today!”

“Why the leopard?” asked Jellico reflectively. “Another case of using flame to fight fire? But Lumbrilo wasn’t among those present to be impressed.”

Tau rubbed his hand across his forehead. “I don’t really know, sir. Maybe I could have made the ape vanish without a counter projection, but I don’t think so. With these hallucinations it is better to battle one vision against another for the benefit of those involved. And I can’t even tell you why I selected a leopard—it just flashed into mind as about the fastest and most deadly animal fighter I could recall at that moment.”

“You’d better work out a good list of such fighters.” Jellico’s grim humor showed again. “I can supply a few if you need them. Not that I don’t share your hope we won’t see any more trigger rocks. Here comes Asaki with his wandering boy.”

The Chief Ranger was half-leading, half-supporting his hunter, and Nymani seemed only half-conscious. Tau got to his feet and hurried to meet them. It would appear that their search for the water tree would be delayed.

## 6

They withdrew to a spot hacked from the edge of the jungle, leaving a screen of green between them and the traitorous up-slope. But within the few hours of daylight left them, it was proven that Asaki had been overly optimistic in his hopes of discovering a water tree. They were now in a narrow tongue of land between the range and the swamps, and this territory was limited. Nymani, still shaken, was of little help, and the spacemen did not dare to strike out into unexplored land alone.

So they mouthed dry concentrates and dared not drink. Dane was tempted to pour out the liquid in his canteen. Water so close to hand was a continual torment. And, now that they were away from the heights and the possibility of more finger-shaped rocks, surely the threat in that moisture was small in comparison to the needs of his body. Only that caution which was drilled into every Free Trader supplied a brake to his thirst.

Jellico drew the back of his hand across cracked lips. "Suppose we should draw lots—some of us drink, one or two not. Could we manage that way until we were over the mountains?"

"I wouldn't want to chance it, unless we are left with no other choice. There is no way of telling how long the drug works. Frankly, right now I'm not even sure I could detect a hallucination for very long under these conditions," was Tau's discouraging verdict.

If any of them slept that night, they did so only in snatches. The apprehension which had come with the previous night was back, intensified, and that lurking, indefinable fear rode them hard.

They were shaken out of their private terrors shortly after dawn. There were always sounds to be heard in the jungle: the cries of unseen birds, the crash of some tree eaten alive by parasitic sapping. But what broke now was no bird call, no isolated tree falling. A trumpeting roar, the crackling smash of vegetation, heralded a real menace. Asaki spun to face northward, though there was nothing to be seen there except the unshaken wall of the jungle.

"Graz! Graz on stampede!" Nymani joined his superior.

Jellico arose swiftly and Dane read on the captain's face the seriousness of this. The off-worlder turned to his own men with a sharp order. "On your feet! We may have to move on the double. Up-mountain?" he demanded of the Chief Ranger.

The other was still listening, not only with his ears but with the whole of his tense body. Three of the deer-like creatures they had hunted for food broke out of the green wall, fled past the men as if the latter was invisible. And behind them, the hunted now and not the hunter, came a lion, its strikingly marked black-and-white hide dramatic in the light of the morning. It showed fangs in a snarl and then was gone in one huge bound. More deer things, scurrying of other small creatures, moving too fast for clear identification, and behind them the fury of destruction which marked the headlong advance of Khatka's largest mammals slamming through the jungle.

They had started up-slope when Nymani cried out. A white bulk, hard to distinguish in that light against the gray of the earth, headed after them. Dane had a fleeting glimpse of curled tusks, of an open mouth, raw-red and wide enough to engulf his whole head, of shaggy legs driving at an unbelievable pace. Asaki snapped a beam from the needler. The white monster roared and came on. They dived for the scant cover offered as the graz bull died, not two



yards away from the Chief Ranger, its heavy body skidding along the earth with the force of its speed as it went down.

“That did it!” Jellico sighted coolly with his blaster as a second bull, fighting mad, tore from the jungle and pounded at them. Behind it a third tusked head thrust out of the brush, large eyes searched for an enemy. Dane studied the dead bull, but the animal did not come to life this time. These were not hallucinations. And the malignancy of the rock apes, the cunning of the native Khatkan lion, were pallid things compared to a graz herd on the rampage.

The second bull yelped with an almost canine complaint as Jellico’s blaster caught it head-on. Blinded, the beast blundered ahead, climbing the mountain side. The third met a ray from Nymani’s needler. But the Chief Ranger leaped from behind his sheltering rock to the one where the captain had taken refuge and pulled him into the open.

“They must not corner us here!”

Jellico agreed to that. “Come on!” he barked to Tau and Dane.

They fled along a rough way, trying to gain altitude, but finding a rising cliff wall which could not be easily climbed. Two more graz went down, one badly wounded, one safely dead. Behind them more white heads came from the brush. What original cause had started the stampede the fugitives could not guess, but now the fear and anger of the animals were centering upon them.

And, in spite of their efforts, the party was being herded into a pocket between the jungle below, where the main body of graz crashed along, and a steep wall. Given time to find the necessary finger and toe holds, a man might climb that wall, but they could not attempt it now. The portion of ledge on which they ran, stopped to fire, and then ran on again, angled to the southeast. And so they came to its end quickly, a drop ending in a plain of yellow-gray mud studded with clumps of bleached vegetation which led, like steppingstones, toward a tangle of matted, sickly looking plants and reeds.

“All right,” Tau faced around, “what do we do now? Space lift? And using what for wings or jets?”

As if the graz could sense that they now had their victims safely cornered, what must have been a goodly segment of the herd hooked their way from the jungle and started up. Puffing, digging in those sturdy legs which had to take the massive weight of their barrel-shaped bodies, they made their way determinedly up-grade. One might almost believe that they had intelligently planned this end for their drive.

“We go down!” Asaki yelled, and used his needler on the leader of that climbing platoon.

“The brush islands,” Nymani amended. “I show you!” He thrust his needler at Jellico and was over the edge of the ledge, hanging by his hands and swinging his weight back and forth like a pendulum. At the up-swing of his body to the right, he let go and plunged out, landing half across one of the reed islets. The Khatkan clawed his way to his knees, gained his feet, and leaped for the next bit of solid ground.

“You, Thorson!” Jellico jerked his head at Dane and the younger spaceman holstered his fire ray, slipped gingerly over the drop and prepared to repeat Nymani’s feat as best he could.

He was not quite as successful with his sidewise swing, landing with only his forearms across the islet, the rest of his body being swiftly embedded in what was ooze covered only with a thin crust of dried matter. The stench of the stuff was sickening, but the fear of being entrapped in it gave him the necessary impetus to push forward, though what was meant to be a swift half-dive was more of a worm’s progress. He grabbed frantically at brittle stems, at

coarse grass which cut like knives at his hands. But some of the material held and he lay face down on a lump which did not give under his weight.

There was no time to linger; he had to get to the next patch, to free this dubious landing place for the men embattled on the rise above. Stumbling up, Dane judged the distance with a space-trained eye and jumped to a knob Nymani had already quitted. The Khatkan was more than halfway along toward that promise of solid ground which the tangled mass of leprous vegetation led to, zigzagging expertly from islet to islet.

There was a crash and a roar behind. Dane balanced on the third of the minute islands to look back. He saw the lash of blaster fire on the top of the cliff, Tau on his knees on the first of their chain of steppingstones, and a graz sprawled head and forequarters in the sucking muck where it had dived past the two defenders above. Needler and blaster fired together again, and then Jellico swung over the cliff rim. Tau waved vigorously and Dane took off for the next islet, just making it by lucky chance.

The rest of the journey he took in a rush, trying not to think of anything but the necessity of landing on some spot of firm ground. His last leap of all was too short, so that he went knee deep in a particularly evil-smelling pool where yellow scum splattered his breeches and he experienced the insidious pull of the bottomless stuff. A stout branch whipped across his shoulder and he caught it. With Nymani's wiry strength on the other end, Dane worked free and sat, white-faced and shivering, on a mat of brush, while the Khatkan hunter turned his attention to the safety of Tau, the next arrival.

More fortunate, or more skillful than Dane, the medic made the hop from the last tuft without mishap. But he was blowing heavily as he collapsed beside the other spaceman. Together they watched the progress of their captain.

Safe on the second tussock from the shore, Jellico halted, edged carefully around and used the needler Nymani had left with him. A shaggy head tossed and the bull fronting Asaki on the cliff went down. The Chief Ranger dodged quickly to the right and a second beast rushed out and over, to join its mired comrade in the swamp below. As Jellico shot again, the Khatkan slung his needler and went over to gain the first islet.

One more graz was wounded but luckily it hunched about, turning its formidable tusks on those that followed, thus keeping the path clear for its enemies. Jellico was making the journey, sure-footedly, with the Chief Ranger only one hillock behind. Tau sighed.

"Someday maybe this will be just another tall tale and we'll all be thought liars when we spout it," he observed. "That is if we survive to tell it. So now which way do we go? If I had my choice it would be up!"

When Dane pulled himself to his feet and surveyed their small refuge, he was ready to agree to that. For the space, packed with dead and dying vegetable matter until one sank calf deep, was a triangle with a narrow point running east into the swamp.

"They don't give up easily, do they?" Jellico looked back to the shore and the cliff. Though the wounded graz bull still held the heights against its fellows, there were others breaking from the jungle on the lower level, wandering back and forth to paw the earth, rip up soil with their tusks, and otherwise threaten anyone who would try to return to the strip they patrolled.

"They will not," Asaki answered bleakly. "Arouse a graz and it will trail you for days; kill any of the herd and you have little hope of escaping them on foot."

It would seem now that the swamp was a deterrent to pursuit. The two beasts that had fallen in the mire moaned in a pitiful rising note. They had ceased to struggle and several of their

kind clustered on the shore near them, calling entreatingly. Asaki took careful aim with the needler and put one animal after another out of its misery. But the flash of those shots angered those on shore to a higher pitch of rage.

“No going back,” he said. “At least not for several days.”

Tau slapped a black, four-winged insect which had settled on his arm, its jaws wide open for a sampling bite. “We can’t very well perch here until they forget all about us,” he pointed out. “Not without water we can trust, and with the local wild life ready to test us for tasty eating.”

Nymani had prowled along the swampward point of their island, and now he made his report.

“There is more high land to the east. Perhaps it will give us a bridge across.”

At that moment Dane doubted his ability to make any more leaps from island to island. And it would seem Tau shared his discouragement.

“I don’t suppose you could discourage our friends on shore there with a few more shots?”

Asaki shook his head. “We do not have clips enough to settle a whole herd. These might retreat from sight but they would be waiting for us in the bush, and that would mean certain death. We shall have to take the swamp road.”

If Dane had considered their earlier march misery, this was sheer torture. Since footing was never secure, falls were frequent, and within a quarter-hour they were all plastered with evil-smelling slime and mud which hardened to rock consistency when exposed to the air. Painful as this was, it did protect a portion of their bodies from the insects with which the swamp was well stocked.

And, in spite of their efforts to find a way out, the only possible paths led them deeper into the center of the unexplored morass. At last Asaki called a halt and a council to consider retreat. To locate an island from which they could at least watch the shore appealed very strongly indeed.

“We have to have water.” Tau’s voice was a harsh croak, issuing out of a mask of green mud festooned with trailing weeds.

“This ground is rising.” Asaki smacked the stock of his needler against the surface on which he crouched. “I think perhaps there may be clean land soon to come.”

Jellico hitched his way up a sapling, now bending under his weight. Through the vision lenses he studied the route ahead.

“You’re right about that,” he called to the Chief Ranger. “There’s a showing of the right sort of green to the left, about half a mile on. And,” he glanced about at the westering sun, “we have about an hour yet of good light in which to make it. I wouldn’t try such a run after dark.”

That promise of green bolstered their weary spirits for a last exhausting effort. Once again they were faced with a series of islet leaps, and now they carried with them brush culled from the bigger tussocks to aid in times of need.

When Dane scrambled up the last pull, staggered, and went down to his knees again, he knew he was done. He did not even move at an excited cry from Nymani, echoed a moment later by Asaki. It was not until the latter leaned over him, a canteen open in his hand, that Dane aroused a little.

“Drink!” the Khatkan urged. “We have found a water tree. This is fresh.”

The liquid might have been fresh, but it also had a peculiar taste, which Dane did not note until he had gulped down a generous swallow. At that moment he was past caring about anything but the fact that he did have a portion of drinkable stuff in hand.

Here the stunted, unnatural growth of the swamplands had given away to the more normal vegetation of the jungle-clad lowlands. Had they come clear across the swamp, Dane wondered dully, or was this only a large island in the midst of the stinking boglands?

He drank again and regained strength enough to crawl to where his shipmates lay. It was some time before he was interested in much besides the fact that he could drink when he wished. Then he watched Jellico waver to his feet, his head turned eastward. Tau, too, sat up as if alerted by the *Queen's* alarm buzzer.

The Khatkans were gone, perhaps back to the water tree. But all three of the spacemen heard that sound, a far off throbbing rhythm which was a vibration as well. Jellico looked to Tau.

“Drums?”

“Could be.” The medic screwed the cap back on his canteen. “I’d say we have company—only I’d like to know what kind!”

They might have been mistaken about the drums, but none of them could have been mistaken about the bolt which came out of nowhere to slice through a tree trunk as a knife might slash wet clay. Blaster—and a particular type of blaster!

“Patrol issue!” Tau lay flat, squeezing himself against the earth as if he wished he could ooze into it. Jellico wriggled toward the bush in answer to a low call from Asaki, and the others made a worm’s progress in his wake. Under cover they found the Chief Ranger readying his needler.

“Poacher camp here,” he explained bleakly. “And they know about us.”

“A perfect end to a stinking day,” remarked Tau dispassionately. “We might have guessed something of this sort was waiting.” He tried to rub away some of the dried clay coating his chin. “But do poachers use drums?”

The Chief Ranger scowled. “That is what Nymani has gone to find out.”

## 7

Darkness closed in while they waited for Nymani's return. There had been no further attack from the blaster wielder; perhaps he was only trying to pin them down where they were. Out over the swamp, weird patches of phosphorescence moved in small ghostly clouds, and bright dots of insects with their own built-in lighting systems flashed spark-fashion or sailed serenely on regular flight plans. At night the wonder of the place was far removed from the squalid reality of the day. They chewed on their rations, drank sparingly of the water, and tried to keep alert to any sight or sound.

That monotonous undertone, which might or might not be drums, continued as a basic hum to the noises of the night, drowned out at intervals by a splash, a mutter or cry from some swamp creature. Beside Dane, Jellico stiffened, moved his blaster, as someone wriggled through the brush, trilling softly.

"Off-worlders," Nymani reported in gasps to Asaki, "and outlaws, too. They make a hunting sing—tomorrow they march for a killing."

Asaki rested his chin on his broad forearm. "Outlaws?"

"They show no lord's badge. But each I saw wears a bracelet of three, five, or ten tails. They are Trackers indeed, and Hunters of the best!"

"They have huts?"

"Not so. There are no dwellers in the inners courts here." Out of habit Nymani used the polite term for the women of his race. "I would say they tarry only for the space of a hunt. And on the boots of one I saw salt crust."

"Salt crust!" Asaki snapped and half arose. "So that is the type of lure they use. There must be a saline mire near here to pull game—"

"How many off-worlders?" Jellico broke in.

"Three who are Hunters, one who is different."

"How different?" questioned Asaki.

"He wears upon his body garments which are strange; on his head a round covering such as we see upon the off-worlders of the ships—"

"A spaceman!"

Asaki laughed harshly. "Why not? They must have some method of transporting their hides."

"You can't tell me," Jellico returned, "that anyone is able to set a ship down in this muck. It would simply be buried for all time."

"But, Captain, what type of a spaceport does a Free Trader need? Do you not planet your own ship on worlds where there are no waiting cradles, no fitter shops, none of the conveniences such as mark the field Combine maintains on Xecho?"

"Of course I do. But one does need a reasonably smooth stretch of territory, open enough so the tail flames won't start a forest fire. You don't ever ride a tail push down in a swamp!"

"Which testifies to a trail out of here, fairly well-traveled, and some kind of a usable landing space not too far away," Asaki replied. "And that could very well serve us."

“But they know we are here,” Tau pointed out.

It was Nymani’s turn to laugh. “Man from the stars, there is no trail so well-hidden that a Ranger of the preserves cannot nose it out, nor any Hunter—be he a two or five bracelet veteran—who can keep pinned down a determined man of the forest service!”

Dane lost interest in the argument at that moment. He was at the edge of their line, the nearest to the swamp, and he had been watching patches of ghostly light flitting above the rank water-weeds. For the past few moments those wisps of faded radiance had been gathering into a growing anthropomorphic blot hanging over the morass several yards away. And the misty outlines were now assuming more concrete shape. He watched, unable to believe in what he was seeing. At first the general outline, non-defined as it was, made him think of a rock ape. But there were no pointed ears above the round skull, no snout on the visage turned in profile toward him.

More and more patches of swamp luminescence were drawn to that glowing figure. What balanced there now, as if walking the treacherous surface of the swampland, was no animal. It was a man, or the semblance of one, a small, thin man—a man he had seen once before, on the terrace of Asaki’s mountain fortress.

The thing stood almost complete, its head cocked in what was an attitude of listening.

“Lumbrilo!” Dane identified it, still knowing that the witch doctor could not be standing there listening for them. But, to shake him still farther, the head turned at his cry. Only there were no eyes, no features on the white expanse which should have been a face. And somehow that made the monster more menacing, convincing Dane against sane logic that the thing *was* spying on them.

“Demon!” That was Nymani; and over his sudden quaver, robbed of all the confidence which had been there only moments earlier, came Asaki’s demand:

“What stands there, Medic? Tell us that!”

“A whip to drive us out of hiding, sir. As you know as well as I. If Nymani spied upon them, then they have spied upon us in turn. And this, I think, also answers another question. If there is a canker of trouble on Khatka, then Lumbrilo is close to its root.”

“Nymani!” The Chief Ranger’s voice was the crack of a lash. “Will you forget again that you are a man, and run crying for shelter against a shaft of light? As this off-world Medic says, Lumbrilo fashions such as that to drive us into our enemies’ hands!”

The shadow thing in the swamp moved, putting its foot forward on surface which would not bear the weight of a human body, taking a deliberate step and then another, heading for the concealing brush where the fugitives lay.

“Can you get rid of it, Tau?” Jellico asked in his usual crisp voice. He might have been inquiring about some problem aboard the *Queen*.

“I’d rather get at the source.” There was a grim note in the Medic’s reply. “And to do that I want to look at their camp.”

“Well enough!” Asaki crept back in the brush.

The ghost of that which was not a man had reached the shore of the island, stood there, its blank head turned toward them. Weird as it was, now that the first shock of sighting it was over, the spacemen could accept and dismiss it as they had not been so able to dismiss the phantom rock ape.

“If that thing was sent to drive us,” Dane ventured, “wouldn’t we be playing their game by going inland now?”

The Chief Ranger did not pause in his crawl to the left. “I think not. They do not expect us to arrive with our wits about us. Panic-stricken men are easy to pull down. This time Lumbrilo has overreached himself. Had he not played that game with the rock ape, he might have been able to stampede us now.”

Though the white thing continued to move inland, it did not change course to fall in behind them on the new route. Whatever it was, it did not possess a mind.

There was a rustling, faint but distinguishable. Then Dane caught Nymani’s whisper.

“The one left to watch the inland trail does so no longer. We need not fear an alarm from *him*. Also, here is another blaster for our use.”

Away from the open by the swamp, the gloom was deeper. Dane was guided only by the noises of the less-experienced Jellico and Tau made in their progress.

They edged down into a small cut, floored with reeds and mud, where some of the moisture from the soggy land about them gathered into a half pool. Straight through this swale the Khatkans set course.

The drum beat grew louder. Now there was a glow against the dark—fire ahead? Dane squirmed forward and at last gained a vantage point from which to survey the poachers’ camp.

There were shelters erected there, three of them, but they were mainly roofs of leaves and branches. In two of them were stored bales of hides sewn into plastic cloth, ready to ship. Before the third hut lounged four off-worlders. And Nymani was very right; one of them wore ship’s uniform.

To the right of the fire was a ring of natives and another man, slightly apart, who beat the drum. But of the witch doctor there was no sign. And Dane, thinking of that mist-born thing at the swamp’s edge, shivered. He could believe Tau’s explanation of the drug which produced hallucinations back on the mountain side. But how that likeness fashioned of phosphorescence had been sent by an absent man to hunt his enemies was a eerie puzzle.

“Lumbrilo is not here.” Nymani’s thoughts must have been moving along the same path.

Dane could hear movements in the dark beside him.

“There’s a long-distance com unit in that third hut,” Tau observed.

“So I see,” Jellico snapped. “Could you reach your men over the mountain with that, sir?”

“I do not know. But if Lumbrilo is not here, how can he make his image walk the night?” the Chief Ranger demanded impatiently.

“We shall see. If Lumbrilo is not here—he shall come.” And the promise in Tau’s tone was sure. “Those off-worlders will have to be out of action first. And with that walking thing sent to drive us in, they must be waiting for us.”

“If they have sentries out, I will silence them!” promised Nymani.

“You have a plan?” Asaki’s wide shoulders and upheld head showed for an instant against the light from the camp.

“You want Lumbrilo,” Tau replied. “Very well, sir, I believe I can give him to you, and in the doing discredit him with your Khatkans. But not with the off-worlders free to move.”

The program was not going to be easy, Dane decided. Every one of the poachers was armed with a Patrol blaster of the latest type, and a small part of his mind speculated as to what would be the result of that information conveyed to official quarters. Free Traders and Patrolmen did not always see eye-to-eye over the proper action to be taken on the galactic frontier. The *Queen's* crew had had one such brush with authority in the immediate past. But each realized that the other had an important role in the general scheme of things, and if it came to a clash between the law and outlaws, Free Traders fought beside the Patrol.

“Why not give them what they expect—with reservations?” inquired Jellico. “They’ve set us up to be stampeded into camp, flying ahead of that tame ghost of theirs. Suppose we do stampede—after Nymani has removed any sentries—stampede so well we sweep right over them? I want to get at that com unit.”

“You don’t think they’ll just mow us down as we come in?”

“You delivered a blow to Lumbrilo’s pride; he won’t be satisfied with just your burning,” the captain answered Tau, “not if I’m any judge of character. And we’d furnish hostages of a sort—especially the Chief Ranger. No, if they had wanted to kill us they would have shot us off those islands when we came here. There would have been no playing around with ghosts and goblins.”

“There is reason in your words. And it is true they would like to have me, those outlaws down there,” Asaki commented. “I am of the Magawaya and we have pressed always for stronger security methods to be used against such as they. But I do not see how we can take the camp.”

“We won’t go in from the front—as they expect us to do. But a try from the north, getting at the off-worlders first.... Three men causing enough disturbance to cover operations of the other two....”

“So?” There was a moment of silence as the Chief Ranger evaluated that. Then he added a few comments of his own.

“That off-worlder who wears spaceman’s clothing, his weapon is not drawn, though the others are ready. But I believe that you are right in thinking they expect to be warned by sentries. Those we can see to. Suppose then, Captain, you and I play the fear-crazed men running from demons. Nymani will cover us from the dark and your two men—”

Tau spoke up, “Give me leave to flush out our other quarry, sir. I believe I can keep him occupied. Dane, you’ll take the drum.”

“Drum?” With his mind on blasters, it was startling to be offered a noise-maker.

“It’s your business to get that drum. And when you get it I want you to beat out ‘Terra Bound.’ You certainly can play that, can’t you?”

“I don’t understand,” Dane began and then swallowed the rest of his protest, knowing that Tau was not going to explain why he needed to have the hackneyed popular song of the spaceways played in a Khatkan swamp. As a Free Trader he had had quite a few odd jobs handed him during the past couple of years, but this was the first time he had been ordered to serve as a musician.

They waited for Nymani through dragging minutes. Surely those in the camp would expect their arrival soon now? Dane’s fire ray was in his hand as he measured the distance to the drummer’s stand.



“It is done,” Nymani whispered from the darkness behind them. Jellico and the Chief Ranger moved to the left; Tau crept to the right and Dane pushed level with the medic.

“When they move,” Tau’s lips were beside his ear, “jump for that drum. I don’t care how you get it, but get it and keep it!”

“Yes, sir!”

There was a wailing cry from the north, a howl of witless fear. The singers stopped in mid-note, the drummer paused, his hand uplifted. Dane darted forward in a plunge which carried him to that man. The Khatkan did not have time to rise from his knees as the barrel of the fire rod struck his head, sending him spinning. Then the drum was cradled in the spaceman’s arm, close to his chest, his weapon aimed across it at the startled natives.

The crackle of blaster fire, the shrill whine of needlers in action, raised a bedlam from the other end of the camp. Backing up a little, Dane went down on one knee, his weapon ready to sweep over the bewildered natives, the drum resting on the earth against his body. Keeping the fire rod steady, his left hand went to work, not in the muted cadence the Khatkan drummer had chosen, but in hard and vigorous thumps which rolled across the clamor of the fight. There was no forgetting the beat of “Terra Bound” and he delivered it with force, so that the familiar da-dah-da-da droned loud enough to awaken the whole camp.

Dane’s move appeared to completely baffle the Khatkan outlaws. They stared at him, the whites of their eyes doubly noticeable in their dark faces, their mouths a little agape. As usual the unexpected had driven them off guard. He dared not look away from that gathering to see how the fight at the other end of the camp was progressing. But he did see Tau’s advance.

The medic came into the light of the fire, not with his ordinary loose-limbed spaceman’s stride, but mincingly, with a dancing step, and he was singing to the drum beat of “Terra Bound.” Dane could not understand the words, but he knew that they patterned in and out of the drum beats, weaving a net between singer and listeners as Lumbrilo had woven his net on the mountain terrace.

Tau had them! Had every one of the native outlaws ensnared, so that Dane rested his weapon across his knee and took up the lower beat with the fingers of his right hand as well.

*Da-dah-da-da....* The innocuous repetitive refrain of the original song which had been repeating itself in his mind faded, and somehow he caught the menace in the new words Tau was mouthing.

Twice the medic shuffled about a circle of his own making. Then he stooped, took a hunting knife from the belt of the nearest Khatkan and held it point out toward the dark east. Dane would not have believed the medic knew the drill he now displayed, for with no opponent save the dancing firelight he fought a knife duel, feinting, striking, twisting, retreating, attacking, all in time to the beat of the drum Dane was no longer conscious of playing. And as he strove it was very easy to picture another fighting against him. So that when the knife came up in a vicious thrust which was the finish of his last attack, Dane stared stupidly at the ground, half expecting to see a body lying there.

Once more Tau ceremoniously saluted with his blade to the east. Then he laid it on the ground and stood astride its gleaming length.

“Lumbrilo!” His confident voice arose above the call of the drum. “Lumbrilo—I am waiting.”

## 8

Vaguely aware that the clamor at the other end of the camp had died away, Dane muted the sound of his drum. Over its round top he could watch the Khatkan outlaws; their heads bobbed and swayed in time to the beat of his fingers. He, too, could feel the pull of Tau's voice. But what would come in answer? That shadowy thing which had been loosed to drive them here? Or the man himself?

To Dane, the ruddy light of the fire dimmed, yet there was no actual dying of those flames which coiled and thrust around the wood. And the acrid scent of burning was thick. How much of what followed was real, how much the product of his tense nerves, Dane was never afterwards able to tell. In fact, whether all the witnesses there saw the same sights could be questioned. Did each man, Khatkan and off-worlder, see only what his particular set of emotions and memories dictated?

Something swept in from the east, something which was not as tangible as the creature born of swamp mist. Rather it came as an unseen menace to the fire, and all that fire signifies to human kind—security, comradeship, a weapon against the age-old forces of the dangerous night. Was that threat, too, only in their minds? Or had Lumbrilo some power to so shape his hatred?

The unseen was cold; it sapped a man's strength, bit at his brain, weighted his hands and feet, weakened him. It strove to soften him into clay another could remold. Nothingness, darkness, all that was opposed to life and warmth and reality, arose in the night, gathered together against them.

Yet still Tau fronted that invisible wave, his head high. And between his sturdily planted feet the knife gleamed bright with a radiance of its own.

"Ahhh—" Tau's voice curled out, to pierce that creeping menace. Then he was singing again, the cadence of his unknown words rising a little above the pattern wrought by the drum.

Dane forced his heavy hands to continue the beat, his wrists to rise and fall in defiance of that which crept to eat their strength and make them less than men.

"Lumbrilo! I, Tau, of another star, another sky, another world, bid you come forth and range your power against mine!" Now there was a sharper note in that demand, the snap of an order.

He was answered by another wave of the black negation—stronger, rolling up to smash them down, as a wave in the heavy surf of a wild ocean pounds its force against the beach. This time Dane thought he could see that dark mass. He tore his eyes away before it took on substance, concentrating on the movements of his hands against the drum head, refusing to believe that hammer of power was rising to flatten them all. He had heard Tau describe such things in the past. But told in familiar quarters on board the *Queen*, such experiences were only stories. Here was danger unleashed. Yet the medic stood unbowed as the wave broke upon him in full.

And, advancing under the crest of that lick of destruction, came its controller. This was no ghost drawn from the materials of the swamp; this was a man, walking quietly, his hands as empty as Tau's, yet grasping weapons none of them could see.

In the firelight, as the wave receded sullenly, men moaned, lay face down upon the ground, beat their hands feebly against the earth. But, as Lumbrilo came on from the shadows, one of

them got to his hands and knees, moving with small tortured jerks. He crawled toward Tau, his head lolling on his shoulders as the head of the dead rock ape had done. Dane patted the drum with one hand while, with the other, he groped for his fire ray. He tried to shout in warning and found that he could not utter a sound.

Tau's arm moved, raised from his side, made a circling motion.

The creeping man, his eyes rolled up in his head until only the whites gleamed blindly in the limited light, followed that gesture. He drew level with the medic, passed beyond toward Lumbrilo, whining as a hound prevented from obeying his master might lament.

"So be it, Lumbrilo," Tau said. "This is between you and me. Or do you not dare to risk your power against mine? Is Lumbrilo so weak a one that he must send another to do his will?"

Raising both hands again the medic brought them down, curling inward, until he stooped and touched them to the ground. When he straightened once again the knife was in his grasp and he tossed it behind him.

The smoke from the fire swirled out in a long tongue, coiled about Lumbrilo and was gone. A black and white beast stood where the man had been, its tufted tail lashing, its muzzle a mask of snarling hate and blood lust.

But Tau met that transformation with laughter which was like the lash of a whip.

"We both be men, you and I, Lumbrilo. Meet me as a man and keep those trickeries for those who have not the clear sight. A child plays as a child, so—" Tau's voice came in a rumble, but Tau was gone. The huge, hairy thing which swayed in his place turned a gorilla's beast visage to his enemy. For a breathless moment Terran ape confronted Khatkan lion. Then the spaceman was himself again. "The time for games is over, man of Khatka. You have tried to hunt us to our deaths, have you not? Therefore death shall be the portion of the loser now."

Lion vanished, man stood watching, alertly, as swordsman might face swordsman with a blood feud lying on their blades. To Dane's eyes the Khatkan made no move. Yet the fire leaped high, as if freshly fed, and flames burst from the wood, flew into the air, red and perilous birds, darting at Tau until they outlined him from the ground under his boots to an arch over his head. They united and spun faster until Dane, watching with dazzled eyes, saw the wheel become a blur of light, hiding Tau within its fiery core. His own wrists ached with the strain of his drumming as he lifted one hand and tried to shield his sight from the glare of that pillar of fire.

Lumbrilo was chanting—a heavy blast of words. Dane stiffened; his traitorous hands were falling into the rhythm of that other song! Straightaway he raised both from the drum head, brought them down in a discordant series of thumps which bore no relation to either the song Tau wanted or that which Lumbrilo was now crooning. *Thump—thump—thump*—Dane beat it out frantically, belaboring the drum head as he wanted to sink his fists home on the body of the Khatkan witch doctor.

The pillar of fire swayed, fluttered as if a wind drove it—and was gone. Tau, unmarked, smiled.

"Fire!" He pointed his fingers at Lumbrilo. "Would you try earth, and water, and air also, wizard? Call hither your whirlwind, up your flood, summon the land to quake. None of those shall bring me down!"

Shapes came flooding out of the night, some monstrous, some human, streaming past Lumbrilo to crowd into the circle of firelight. Some Dane thought he knew, some were

strangers. Men wearing space uniforms, or the dress of other worlds, women—they strode, wept, mingled with the monsters to laugh, curse, threaten.

Dane guessed that Lumbrilo sent now against the Terran the harvest of the medic's own memories. He shut his eyes against this enforced intrusion upon another's past, but not before he saw Tau's face, strained, fined to the well-shaped bones beneath the thin flesh, holding still a twisted smile as he met each memory, accepted the pain it held for him, and set it aside unshaken.

"This, too, has no power any longer, man who walks in the dark."

Dane opened his eyes. Those crowding wraiths were fading, losing substance. Lumbrilo crouched, his lips drawn back from his teeth, his hatred plain to read.

"I am not clay to be molded by your hands, Lumbrilo. And now I say that the time has come to call an end—"

Tau raised his hands slowly once again, holding them away from his body, palms pointing earthward. And beneath them, on either side of the spaceman, two black shadows gathered on the surface of the ground.

"You have fettered yourself with your own bounds. As you have been the hunter, so shall you now be the hunted."

Those shadows were growing as plants might issue from the packed soil of the camping ground. When his hands were shoulder high, Tau held them steady. Now on either side of his tautly held body crouched one of the black-and-white lions with which Lumbrilo had identified his own brand of magic throughout the year.

Lumbrilo's "lion" had been larger than life, more intelligent, more dangerous, subtly different from the normal animal it counterfeited. So now were these. And both of them raised their heads to gaze intently into the medic's face.

"Hunt well, brothers in fur," he said slowly, almost caressingly. "Him whom you hunt shall grant you sport in the going."

"Stop it!" A man leaped from the shadows behind the witch doctor. Firelight made plain his off-world dress, and he swung up a blaster, aiming at the nearest of the waiting beasts. That flash struck true, but it neither killed nor even singed the fine fur of the animal's pelt.

As the blaster's aim was swung from beast to man, Dane fired first. His ray brought a scream from the other, who dropped his weapon from a badly seared hand to reel back, cursing.

Tau waved his hands gently. The great animal heads turned obediently, until the red eyes were set on Lumbrilo. Facing them, the witch doctor straightened, spat out his hate at the medic:

"I do not run to be hunted, devil man!"

"I think you do, Lumbrilo. For you must taste fear now as you have made other men drink of it, so that it fills your blood and races through your body, clouds your mind to make of you less than a man. You have hunted out those who doubted your power, who stood in your chosen path, whom you wanted removed from the earth of Khatka. Do you doubt that they wait in the last dark for you now, ready to greet you, witch doctor? What they have known, you shall also know. This night you have shown me all that lies in my past that is weak, that was evil, that I may regret or find sorrow for. So shall you also remember through the few hours left you. Aye, you *shall* run, Lumbrilo!"

As he spoke, Tau approached the other, the two black-and-white hunters pacing beside him. Now he stooped and caught up a pinch of soil and spat upon it three times. Then he threw the tiny clod of earth at the witch doctor. It struck Lumbrilo just above the heart and the man reeled under what might have been a murderous blow.

The Khatkan broke then, completely. With a wailing cry he whirled and ran, crashing into the brush as one who runs blindly and without hope. Behind him the two beasts leaped noiselessly together and all three were gone.

Tau swayed, put his hand to his head. Dane kicked away the drum, arose from his cramped position stiffly to go to him. But the medic was not yet done. He returned to stand over the prostrate native hunters and he clapped his hands sharply.

“You are men, and you shall act as men henceforth. That which was, is no longer. Stand free, for the dark power follows him who misused it, and fear no longer eats from your basins, drinks from your cups, or lies beside you on the sleep mats.”

“Tau!” Jellico’s shout reached them over the cries of the rousing Khatkans. But Dane was there first, catching the medic before he slumped to the ground; but he was dragged with that dead weight until he sat with the medic’s head on his shoulder, the other’s body resting heavily against him. For one horror-filled moment Dane feared that he did indeed hold a dead man, that one of the outlaw Hunters must have struck a last blow for his discredited leader. Then Tau sighed and began to breathe deeply. Dane glanced up, amazed, at the captain.

“He’s asleep!”

Jellico knelt and his hand went to test heart beat, then to touch the medic’s worn and dirty face. “Best thing for him,” he said briskly. “He’s had it.”

It took some time to get the facts of their triumph sorted out. Two of the off-worlder poachers were dead. The other and the spaceman were prisoners, while Nymani rounded up in addition the man Dane had burned to save Tau. When the younger spaceman returned from making the medic comfortable in the shelter, he found Asaki and Jellico holding an impromptu court of inquiry.

The dazed native Hunters had been expertly looped together by Nymani and, a little apart from them, the off-worlders were under examination.

“An I-C man, eh?” Jellico, smoothing a mud-spattered chin with a grimed hand, regarded the latest arrival measuringly. “Trying to run in and break a Combine charter, were you? You’d better spill the facts; your own head office will disown you, you ought to know that. They never back any failures in these undercover deals.”

“I want medical attention,” snapped the other, cradling his seared hand to his chest. “Or do you plan to turn me over to these savages?”

“Seeing as how you tried to blast our medic,” replied the captain with a grin which was close to shark-like, “he may not feel much like patching up those fingers of yours. Stick ‘em in where they have no business, and they’re apt to get burned. At any rate he’s not going to look at ‘em until he’s had a chance to rest. I’ll give you first aid. And while I’m working we’ll talk. I-C going into the poaching trade now? That news is going to please Combine; they have no use for you boys anyway.”

His answer was lurid and uninformative. But the uniform tunic the other wore could not be so easily explained away. Dane, worn out, stretched his aching length on a pile of mats and lost all interest in the argument.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two days later they stood once more on the same terrace where Lumbrilo had wrought his magic and met his first defeat. This time no lightning played along the mountain ridges and the blaze of the sun was so bright and clear that one could hardly believe in the fantastic happenings of that swamp clearing where men had fought with weapons not made by hands. The three from the *Queen* moved away from the parapet to meet the Chief Ranger as he came down the stairs.

“A messenger has just arrived. The hunter was hunted indeed, and his going was witnessed by many—though they did not see those which hunted him. Lumbrilo is dead; he came to his end by the Great River.”

Jellico started. “But that is almost fifty miles from the swamp, on this side of the mountain!”

“He was hunted and he fled—as you promised,” Asaki said to Tau. “You made strong magic, off-world man.”

The medic shook his head slowly. “I but turned his own methods against him. Because he believed in his power, that same power, reflected back, broke him. Had I been facing one who did not believe....” He shrugged. “Our first meeting set the pattern. From that moment he feared a little that I could match him, and his uncertainty pierced a hole in his armor.”

“Why on earth did you want ‘Terra Bound?’” burst out Dane, still seeking an explanation for that one small mystery among the others.

Tau chuckled. “In the first place, that blasted tune has haunted us all for so long that I knew its rhythm was probably the one you could keep to without hardly knowing that you were beating it out. And, in the second place, its alien pattern was a part of our particular background, to counteract Lumbrilo’s native Khatkan music, which was certainly a big factor in *his* stage setting. He must have believed that we would not find out about the drugged water and so would be prepared for any fantasy he cared to produce. When they saw us coming out over the swamp they counted us easy takings. His practice had always been with Khatkans, and he judged us by their reactions to stimuli he knew well how to use. So he failed....”

Asaki smiled. “Which was good for Khatka but ill for Lumbrilo and those using him to make mischief here. The poacher and the outlaw Hunters will meet with our justice, which I do not believe they will relish. But the other two, the spaceman and the company agent, are to be sent to Xecho to face Combine authorities. It is my thought that those will not accept kindly the meddling of another company in their territory.”

Jellico grunted. “Kindness and Combine are widely separated in such matters. But we can now take passage on the same ship as your prisoners—”

“But, my friend, you have not yet seen the preserve. I assure you that *this* time there shall be no trouble. We have several days yet before you must return to your ship—”

The captain of the *Queen* held up his hand. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to inspect the Zoboru preserve, sir—next year. As it is, my holiday is over and the *Queen* is waiting for us on Xecho. Also, permit me to send you some tapes dealing with the newest types of flitters—guaranteed against flight failures.”

“Yes, guaranteed,” Tau added guilelessly, “not to break down, lose course, or otherwise disrupt a pleasant excursion.”

The Chief Ranger threw back his head and his deep-chested laughter was echoed from the heights above them. “Very well, Captain. Your mail run will bring you back to Xecho at intervals. Meanwhile I shall study your sales tapes concerning the non-expendable flitters. But you *shall* visit Zoboru—and pleasantly, very pleasantly, I assure you, Medic Tau!”

“I wonder,” Tau muttered and Dane heard. “Just now the quiet of deep space is a far, far more entrancing proposition!”

# **The People Of The Crater**



# 1. Through the Blue Haze

Six months and three days after the Peace of Shanghai was signed and the great War of 1965-1970 declared at an end by an exhausted world, a young man huddled on a park bench in New York, staring miserably at the gravel beneath his badly worn shoes. He had been trained to fill the pilot's seat in the control cabin of a fighting plane and for nothing else. The search for a niche in civilian life had cost him both health and ambition.

A newcomer dropped down on the other end of the bench. The flyer studied him bitterly. *He* had decent shoes, a warm coat, and that air of satisfaction with the world which is the result of economic security. Although he was well into middle age, the man had a compact grace of movement and an air of alertness.

"Aren't you Captain Garin Featherstone?"

Startled, the flyer nodded dumbly.

From a plump billfold the man drew a clipping and waved it toward his seat mate. Two years before, Captain Garin Featherstone of the United Democratic Forces had led a perilous bombing raid into the wilds of Siberia to wipe out the vast expeditionary army secretly gathering there. It had been a spectacular affair and had brought the survivors some fleeting fame.

"You're the sort of chap I've been looking for," the stranger folded the clipping again, "a flyer with courage, initiative and brains. The man who led that raid is worth investing in."

"What's the proposition?" asked Featherstone wearily. He no longer believed in luck.

"I'm Gregory Farson," the other returned as if that should answer the question.

"The Antarctic man!"

"Just so. As you have probably heard, I was halted on the eve of my last expedition by the sudden spread of war to this country. Now I am preparing to sail south again."

"But I don't see—"

"How you can help me? Very simple, Captain Featherstone. I need pilots. Unfortunately the war has disposed of most of them. I'm lucky to contact one such as yourself—"

\*\*\*\*\*

And it was as simple as that. But Garin didn't really believe that it was more than a dream until they touched the glacial shores of the polar continent some months later. As they brought ashore the three large planes, he began to wonder at the driving motive behind Farson's vague plans.

When the supply ship sailed, not to return for a year, Farson called them together. Three of the company were pilots, all war veterans, and two were engineers who spent most of their waking hours engrossed in the maps Farson produced.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Tomorrow," the leader glanced from face to face, "we start inland. Here—" On a map spread before him he indicated a line marked in purple.

"Ten years ago I was a member of the Verdane expedition. Once, when flying due south, our plane was caught by some freakish air current and drawn off its course. When we were totally

off our map, we saw in the distance a thick bluish haze. It seemed to rise in a straight line from the ice plain to the sky. Unfortunately our fuel was low and we dared not risk a closer investigation. So we fought our way back to the base.

“Verdane, however, had little interest in our report and we did not investigate it. Three years ago that Kattack expedition, hunting oil deposits by the order of the Dictator, reported seeing the same haze. This time we are going to explore it!”

“Why,” Garin asked curiously, “are you so eager to penetrate this haze?—I gather that’s what we’re to do—”

Farson hesitated before answering. “It has often been suggested that beneath the ice sheeting of this continent may be hidden mineral wealth. I believe that the haze is caused by some form of volcanic activity, and perhaps a break in the crust.”

Garin frowned at the map. He wasn’t so sure about that explanation, but Farson was paying the bills. The flyer shrugged away his uneasiness. Much could be forgiven a man who allowed one to eat regularly again.

Four days later they set out. Helmly, one of the engineers, Rawlson, a pilot, and Farson occupied the first plane. The other engineer and pilot were in the second and Garin, with the extra supplies, was alone in the third.

He was content to be alone as they took off across the blue-white waste. His ship, because of its load, was loggy, so he did not attempt to follow the other two into the higher lane. They were in communication by radio and Garin, as he snapped on his earphones, remembered something Farson had said that morning:

“The haze affects radio. On our trip near it the static was very bad. Almost,” with a laugh, “like speech in some foreign tongue.”

As they roared over the ice Garin wondered if it might have been speech—from, perhaps, a secret enemy expedition, such as the Kattack one.

In his sealed cockpit he did not feel the bite of the frost and the ship rode smoothly. With a little sigh of content he settled back against the cushions, keeping to the course set by the planes ahead and above him.

Some five hours after they left the base, Garin caught sight of a dark shadow far ahead. At the same time Farson’s voice chattered in his earphones.

“That’s it. Set course straight ahead.”

The shadow grew until it became a wall of purple-blue from earth to sky. The first plane was quite close to it, diving down into the vapor. Suddenly the ship rocked violently and swung earthward as if out of control. Then it straightened and turned back. Garin could hear Farson demanding to know what was the matter. But from the first plane there was no reply.

As Farson’s plane kept going Garin throttled down. The actions of the first ship indicated trouble. What if that haze were a toxic gas?

“Close up, Featherstone!” barked Farson suddenly.

He obediently drew ahead until they flew wing to wing. The haze was just before them and now Garin could see movement in it, oily, impenetrable billows. The motors bit into it. There was clammy, foggy moisture on the windows.

Abruptly Garin sensed that he was no longer alone. Somewhere in the empty cabin behind him was another intelligence, a measuring power. He fought furiously against it—against the

very idea of it. But, after a long, terrifying moment while it seemed to study him, it took control. His hands and feet still manipulated the ship, but *it* flew!

On the ship hurtled through the thickening mist. He lost sight of Farson's plane. And, though he was still fighting against the will which over-rode his, his struggles grew weaker. Then came the order to dive into the dark heart of the purple mists.

\*\*\*\*\*

Down they whirled. Once, as the haze opened, Garin caught a glimpse of tortured gray rock seamed with yellow. Farson had been right: here the ice crust was broken.

Down and down. If his instruments were correct the plane was below sea level now. The haze thinned and was gone. Below spread a plain cloaked in vivid green. Here and there reared clumps of what might be trees. He saw, too, the waters of a yellow stream.

But there was something terrifyingly alien about that landscape. Even as he circled above it, Garin wrested to break the grip of the will that had brought him there. There came a crackle of sound in his earphones and at that moment the Presence withdrew.

The nose of the plane went up in obedience to his own desire. Frantically he climbed away from the green land. Again the haze absorbed him. He watched the moisture bead on the windows. Another hundred feet or so and he would be free of it—and that unbelievable world beneath.

Then, with an ominous sputter, the port engine conked out. The plane lurched and slipped into a dive. Down it whirled again into the steady light of the green land.

Trees came out of the ground, huge fern-like plants with crimson scaled trunks. Toward a clump of these the plane swooped.

Frantically Garin fought the controls. The ship steadied, the dive became a fast glide. He looked for an open space to land. Then he felt the landing gear scrape some surface. Directly ahead loomed one of the fern trees. The plane sped toward the long fronds. There came a ripping crash, the splintering of metal and wood. The scarlet cloud gathering before Garin's eyes turned black.

## 2. The Folk of Tav

Garin returned to consciousness through a red mist of pain. He was pinned in the crumpled mass of metal which had once been the cabin. Through a rent in the wall close to his head thrust a long spike of green, shredded leaves still clinging to it. He lay and watched it, not daring to move lest the pain prove more than he could bear.

It was then that he heard the pattering sound outside. It seemed as if soft hands were pushing and pulling at the wreck. The tree branch shook and a portion of the cabin wall dropped away with a clang.

Garin turned his head slowly. Through the aperture was clambering a goblin figure.

It stood about five feet tall, and it walked upon its hind legs in human fashion, but the legs were short and stumpy, ending in feet with five toes of equal length. Slender, shapely arms possessed small hands with only four digits. The creature had a high, well-rounded forehead but no chin, the face being distinctly lizard-like in contour. The skin was a dull black, with a velvety surface. About its loins it wore a short kilt of metallic cloth, the garment being supported by a jeweled belt of exquisite workmanship.

For a long moment the apparition eyed Garin. And it was those golden eyes, fixed unwinkingly on his, which banished the flyer's fear. There was nothing but great pity in their depths.

The lizard-man stooped and brushed the sweat-dampened hair from Garin's forehead. Then he fingered the bonds of metal which held the flyer, as if estimating their strength. Having done so, he turned to the opening and apparently gave an order, returning again to squat by Garin.

Two more of his kind appeared to tear away the ruins of the cockpit. Though they were very careful, Garin fainted twice before they had freed him. He was placed on a litter swung between two clumsy beasts which might have been small elephants, except that they lacked trunks and possessed four tusks each.

They crossed the plain to the towering mouth of a huge cavern where the litter was taken up by four of the lizard-folk. The flyer lay staring up at the roof of the cavern. In the black stone had been carved fronds and flowers in bewildering profusion. Shining motes, giving off faint light, sifted through the air. At times as they advanced, these gathered in clusters and the light grew brighter.

Midway down a long corridor the bearers halted while their leader pulled upon a knob on the wall. An oval door swung back and the party passed through.

They came into a round room, the walls of which had been fashioned of creamy quartz veined with violet. At the highest point in the ceiling a large globe of the motes hung, furnishing soft light below.

Two lizard-men, clad in long robes, conferred with the leader of the flyer's party before coming to stand over Garin. One of the robed ones shook his head at the sight of the flyer's twisted body and waved the litter on into an inner chamber.

Here the walls were dull blue and in the exact center was a long block of quartz. By this the litter was put down and the bearers disappeared. With sharp knives the robed men cut away furs and leather to expose Garin's broken body.

They lifted him to the quartz table and there made him fast with metal bonds. Then one of them went to the wall and pulled a gleaming rod. From the dome of the roof shot an eerie blue light to beat upon Garin's helpless body. There followed a tingling through every muscle and joint, a prickling sensation in his skin, but soon his pain vanished as if it had never been.

The light flashed off and the three lizard-men gathered around him. He was wrapped in a soft robe and carried to another room. This, too, was circular, shaped like the half of a giant bubble. The floor sloped toward the center where there was a depression filled with cushions. There they laid Garin. At the top of the bubble, a pinkish cloud formed. He watched it drowsily until he fell asleep.

Something warm stirred against his bare shoulder. He opened his eyes, for a moment unable to remember where he was. Then there was a plucking at the robe twisted about him and he looked down.

If the lizard-folk had been goblin in their grotesqueness this visitor was elfin. It was about three feet high, its monkey-like body completely covered with silky white hair. The tiny hands were human in shape and hairless, but its feet were much like a cat's paws. From either side of the small round head branched large fan-shaped ears. The face was furred and boasted stiff cat whiskers on the upper lip. These *Anas*, as Garin learned later, were happy little creatures, each one choosing some mistress or master among the Folk, as this one had come to him. They were content to follow their big protector, speechless with delight at trifling gifts. Loyal and brave, they could do simple tasks or carry written messages for their chosen friend, and they remained with him until death. They were neither beast nor human, but rumored to be the result of some experiment carried out eons ago by the Ancient Ones.

After patting Garin's shoulder the Ana touched the flyer's hair wonderingly, comparing the bronze lengths with its own white fur. Since the Folk were hairless, hair was a strange sight in the Caverns. With a contented purr, it rubbed its head against his hand.

With a sudden click a door in the wall opened. The Ana got to its feet and ran to greet the newcomers. The chieftain of the Folk, he who had first discovered Garin, entered, followed by several of his fellows.

The flyer sat up. Not only was the pain gone but he felt stronger and younger than he had for weary months. Exultingly, he stretched wide his arms and grinned at the lizard-being who murmured happily in return.

Lizard-men busied themselves about Garin, girding on him the short kilt and jewel-set belt which were the only clothing of the Caverns. When they were finished, the chieftain took his hand and drew him to the door.

They traversed a hallway whose walls were carved and inlaid with glittering stones and metalwork, coming, at last, into a huge cavern, the outer walls of which were hidden by shadows. On a dais stood three tall thrones and Garin was conducted to the foot of these.

The highest throne was of rose crystal. On its right was one of green jade, worn smooth by centuries of time. At the left was the third, carved of a single block of jet. The rose throne and that of jet were unoccupied, but in the seat of jade reposed one of the Folk. He was taller than his fellows, and in his eyes, as he stared at Garin, was wisdom—and a brooding sadness.

"It is well!" The words resounded in the flyer's head. "We have chosen wisely. This youth is fit to mate with the Daughter. But he will be tried, as fire tries metal. He must win the Daughter forth and strive with Kepta—"

A hissing murmur echoed through the hall. Garin guessed that hundreds of the Folk must be gathered there.

“Urg!” the being on the throne commanded.

The chieftain moved a step toward the dais.

“Do you take this youth and instruct him. And then will I speak with him again. For—” sadness colored the words now—“we would have the rose throne filled again and the black one blasted into dust. Time moves swiftly.”

The Chieftain led a wondering Garin away.

### 3. Garin Hears of the Black Ones

Urg brought the flyer into one of the bubble-shaped rooms which contained a low, cushioned bench facing a metal screen—and here they seated themselves.

What followed was a language lesson. On the screen appeared objects which Urg would name, to have his sibilant uttering repeated by Garin. As the American later learned, the ray treatment he had undergone had quickened his mental powers, and in an incredibly short time he had a working vocabulary.

Judging by the pictures the lizard folk were the rulers of the crater world, although there were other forms of life there. The elephant-like *Tand* was a beast of burden, the squirrel-like *Eron* lived underground and carried on a crude agriculture in small clearings, coming shyly twice a year to exchange grain for a liquid rubber produced by the Folk.

Then there was the *Gibi*, a monstrous bee, also friendly to the lizard people. It supplied the cavern dwellers with wax, and in return the Folk gave the Gibi colonies shelter during the unhealthful times of the Great Mists.

Highly civilized were the Folk. They did no work by hand, except the finer kinds of jewel setting and carving. Machines wove their metal cloth, machines prepared their food, harvested their fields, hollowed out new dwellings.

Freed from manual labor they had turned to acquiring knowledge. Urg projected on the screen pictures of vast laboratories and great libraries of scientific lore. But all they knew in the beginning, they had learned from the Ancient Ones, a race unlike themselves, which had preceded them in sovereignty over *Tav*. Even the Folk themselves were the result of constant forced evolution and experimentation carried on by these Ancient Ones.

All this wisdom was guarded most carefully, but against what or whom, Urg could not tell, although he insisted that the danger was very real. There was something within the blue wall of the crater which disputed the Folk's rule.

As Garin tried to probe further a gong sounded. Urg arose.

"It is the hour of eating," he announced. "Let us go."

They came to a large room where a heavy table of white stone stretched along three walls, benches before it. Urg seated himself and pressed a knob on the table, motioning Garin to do likewise. The wall facing them opened and two trays slid out. There was a platter of hot meat covered with rich sauce, a stone bowl of grain porridge and a cluster of fruit, still fastened to a leafy branch. This the Ana eyed so wistfully that Garin gave it to the creature.

The Folk ate silently and arose quietly when they had finished, their trays vanishing back through the wall. Garin noticed only males in the room and recalled that he had, as yet, seen no females among the Folk. He ventured a question.

Urg chuckled. "So, you think there are no women in the Caverns? Well, we shall go to the Hall of Women that you may see."

To the Hall of Women they went. It was breath-taking in its richness, stonework worth a nation's ransom sparkling from its domed roof and painted walls. Here were the matrons and maidens of the Folk, their black forms veiled in robes of silver net, each cross strand of which was set with a tiny gem, so that they appeared to be wrapped in glittering scales.

There were not many of them—a hundred perhaps. And a few led by the hand smaller editions of themselves, who stared at Garin with round yellow eyes and chewed black fingertips shyly.

The women were intrusted with the finest jewel work, and with pride they showed the stranger their handiwork. At the far end of the hall was a wonderous thing in the making. One of the silver nets, which were the foundations of their robes, was fastened there and three of the women were putting small rose jewels into each microscopic setting. Here and there they had varied the pattern with tiny emeralds or flaming opals, so that the finished portion was a rainbow.

One of the workers smoothed the robe and glanced up at Garin, a gentle teasing in her voice as she explained:

“This is for the Daughter when she comes to her throne.”

The Daughter! What had the Lord of the Folk said? “This youth is fit to mate with the Daughter.” But Urg had said that the Ancient Ones had gone from Tav.

“Who is the Daughter?” he demanded.

“Thrala of the Light.”

“Where is she?”

The woman shivered and there was fear in her eyes. “Thrala lies in the Caves of Darkness.”

“The Caves of Darkness!” Did she mean Thrala was dead? Was he, Garin Featherstone, to be the victim of some rite of sacrifice which was designed to unite him with the dead?

Urg touched his arm. “Not so. Thrala has not yet entered the Place of Ancestors.”

“You know my thoughts?”

Urg laughed. “Thoughts are easy to read. Thrala lives. Sera served the Daughter as handmaiden while she was yet among us. Sera, do you show us Thrala as she was.”

The woman crossed to a wall where there was a mirror such as Urg had used for his language lesson. She gazed into it and then beckoned the flyer to stand beside her.

The mirror misted and then he was looking, as if through a window, into a room with walls and ceiling of rose quartz. On the floor were thick rugs of silver rose. And a great heap of cushions made a low couch in the center.

“The inner chamber of the Daughter,” Sera announced.

\*\*\*\*\*

A circular panel in the wall opened and a woman slipped through. She was very young, little more than a girl. There were happy curves in her full crimson lips, joyous lights in her violet eyes.

She was human of shape, but her beauty was unearthly. Her skin was pearl white and other colors seemed to play faintly upon it, so that it reminded Garin of mother-of-pearl with its lights and shadows. The hair, which veiled her as a cloud, was blue-black and reached below her knees. She was robed in the silver net of the Folk and there was a heavy girdle of rose-shaded jewels about her slender waist.

“That was Thrala before the Black Ones took her,” said Sera.

Garin uttered a cry of disappointment as the picture vanished. Urg laughed.



“What care you for shadows when the Daughter herself waits for you? You have but to bring her from the Caves of Darkness—”

“Where are these Caves—” Garin’s question was interrupted by the pealing of the Cavern gong. Sera cried out:

“The Black Ones!”

Urg shrugged. “When they spared not the Ancient Ones how could we hope to escape? Come, we must go to the Hall of Thrones.”

Before the jade throne of the Lord of the Folk stood a small group of the lizard-men beside two litters. As Garin entered the Lord spoke.

“Let the outlander come hither that he may see the work of the Black Ones.”

Garin advanced unwillingly, coming to stand by those struggling things which gasped their message between moans and screams of agony. They were men of the Folk but their black skins were green with rot.

The Lord leaned forward on his throne. “It is well,” he said. “You may depart.”

As if obeying his command, the tortured things let go of the life to which they had clung and were still.

“Look upon the work of the Black Ones,” the ruler said to Garin. “Jiv and Betv were captured while on a mission to the Gibi of the Cliff. It seems that the Black Ones needed material for their laboratories. They seek even to give the Daughter to their workers of horror!”

A terrible cry of hatred arose from the hall, and Garin’s jaw set. To give that fair vision he had just seen to such a death as this—!

“Jiv and Betv were imprisoned close to the Daughter and they heard the threats of Kepta. Our brothers, stricken with foul disease, were sent forth to carry the plague to us, but they swam through the pool of boiling mud. They have died, but the evil died with them. And I think that while we breed such as they, the Black Ones shall not rest easy. Listen now, outlander, to the story of the Black Ones and the Caves of Darkness, of how the Ancient Ones brought the Folk up from the slime of a long dried sea and made them great, and of how the Ancient Ones at last went down to their destruction.”

## 4. The Defeat of the Ancient Ones

“In the days before the lands of the outer world were born of the sea, before even the Land of the Sun (Mu) and the Land of the Sea (Atlantis) arose from molten rock and sand, there was land here in the far south. A sere land of rock plains, and swamps where slimy life mated, lived and died.

“Then came the Ancient Ones from beyond the stars. Their race was already older than this earth. Their wise men had watched its birth-rending from the sun. And when their world perished, taking most of their blood into nothingness, a handful fled hither.

“But when they climbed from their space ship it was into hell. For they had gained, in place of their loved home, bare rock and stinking slime.

“They blasted out this Tav and entered into it with the treasures of their flying ships and also certain living creatures captured in the swamps. From these, they produced the Folk, the Gibi, the Tand, and the land-tending Eron.

“Among these, the Folk were eager for wisdom and climbed high. But still the learning of the Ancient Ones remained beyond their grasp.

“During the eons the Ancient Ones dwelt within their protecting wall of haze the outer world changed. Cold came to the north and south; the Land of Sun and the Land of Sea arose to bear the foot of true man. On their mirrors of seeing the Ancient Ones watched man-life spread across the world. They had the power of prolonging life, but still the race was dying. From without must come new blood. So certain men were summoned from the Land of the Sun. Then the race flourished for a space.

“The Ancient Ones decided to leave Tav for the outer world. But the sea swallowed the Land of Sun. Again, in the time of the Land of Sea, the stock within Tav was replenished and the Ancient Ones prepared for exodus; again the sea cheated them.

“Those men left in the outer world reverted to savagery. Since the Ancient Ones would not mingle their blood with that of almost beasts, they built the haze wall stronger and remained. But a handful of them were attracted by the forbidden, and secretly they summoned the beast men. Of that monstrous mating came the Black Ones. They live but for the evil they may do, and the power which they acquired is debased and used to forward cruelty.

“At first their sin was not discovered. When it was, the others would have slain the offspring but for the law which forbids them to kill. They must use their power for good or it departs from them. So they drove the Black Ones to the southern end of Tav and gave them the Caves of Darkness. Never were the Black Ones to come north of the River of Gold—nor were the Ancient Ones to go south of it.

“For perhaps two thousand years the Black Ones kept the law. But they worked, building powers of destruction. While matters rested thus, the Ancient Ones searched the world, seeking men by whom they could renew the race. Once there came men from an island far to the north. Six lived to penetrate the mists and take wives among the Daughters. Again, they called the yellow-haired men of another breed, great sea rovers.

“But the Black Ones called too. As the Ancient Ones searched for the best, the Black Ones brought in great workers of evil. And, at last, they succeeded in shutting off the channels of sending thought so that the Ancient Ones could call no more.

“Then did the Black Ones cross the River of Gold and enter the land of the Ancient Ones. Thran, Dweller in the Light and Lord of the Caverns, summoned the Folk to him.

“‘There will come one to aid you,’ he told us. ‘Try the summoning again after the Black Ones have seemed to win. Thrala, Daughter of the Light, will not enter into the Room of Pleasant Death with the rest of the women, but will give herself into the hands of the Black Ones, that they may think themselves truly victorious. You of the Folk withdraw into the Place of Reptiles until the Black Ones are gone. Nor will all the Ancient Ones perish—more will be saved, but the manner of their preservation I dare not tell. When the sun-haired youth comes from the outer world, send him into the Caves of Darkness to rescue Thrala and put an end to evil.’

“And then the Lady Thrala arose and said softly, ‘As the Lord Thran has said, so let it be. I shall deliver myself into the hands of the Black Ones that their doom may come upon them.’

“Lord Thran smiled upon her as he said: ‘So will happiness be your portion. After the Great Mists, does not light come again?’

“The women of the Ancient Ones then took their leave and passed into the place of Pleasant Death while the men made ready for battle with the Black Ones. For three days they fought, but a new weapon of the Black Ones won the day, and the chief of the Black Ones set up this throne of jet as proof of his power. Since, however, the Black Ones were not happy in the Caverns, longing for the darkness of their caves, they soon withdrew and we, the Folk, came forth again.

“But now the time has come when the dark ones will sacrifice the Daughter to their evil. If you can win her free, outlander, they shall perish as if they had not been.”

“What of the Ancient Ones?” asked Garin—“those others Thran said would be saved?”

“Of those we know nothing save that when we bore the bodies of the fallen to the Place of Ancestors there were some missing. That you may see the truth of this story, Urg will take you to the gallery above the Room of Pleasant Death and you may look upon those who sleep there.”

Urg guiding, Garin climbed a steep ramp leading from the Hall of Thrones. This led to a narrow balcony, one side of which was clear crystal. Urg pointed down.

They were above a long room whose walls were tinted jade green. On the polished floor were scattered piles of cushions. Each was occupied by a sleeping woman and several of these clasped a child in their arms. Their long hair rippled to the floor, their curved lashes made dark shadows on pale faces.

“But they are sleeping!” protested Garin.

Urg shook his head. “It is the sleep of death. Twice each ten hours vapors rise from the floor. Those breathing them do not wake again, and if they are undisturbed they will lie thus for a thousand years. Look there—”

He pointed to the closed double doors of the room. There lay the first men of the Ancient Ones Garin had seen. They, too, seemed but asleep, their handsome heads pillowed on their arms.

“Thran ordered those who remained after the last battle in the Hall of Thrones to enter the Room of Pleasant Death that the Black Ones might not torture them for their beastly pleasures. Thran himself remained behind to close the door, and so died.”

There were no aged among the sleepers. None of the men seemed to count more than thirty years and many of them appeared younger. Garin remarked upon this.

“The Ancient Ones appeared thus until the day of their death, though many lived twice a hundred years. The light rays kept them so. Even we of the Folk can hold back age. But come now, our Lord Trar would speak with you again.”

## 5. Into the Caves of Darkness

Again Garin stood before the jade throne of Trar and heard the stirring of the multitude of the Folk in the shadows. Trar was turning a small rod of glittering, greenish metal around in his soft hands.

“Listen well, outlander,” he began, “for little time remains to us. Within seven days the Great Mists will be upon us. Then no living thing may venture forth from shelter and escape death. And before that time Thralla must be out of the Caves. This rod will be your weapon; the Black Ones have not its secret. Watch.”

Two of the Folk dragged an ingot of metal before him. He touched it with the rod. Great flakes of rust appeared to spread across the entire surface. It crumpled away and one of the Folk trod upon the pile of dust where it had been.

“Thralla lies in the heart of the Caves but Kepta’s men have grown careless with the years. Enter boldly and trust to fortune. They know nothing of your coming or of Thran’s words concerning you.”

Urg stood forward and held out his hands in appeal.

“What would you, Urg?”

“Lord, I would go with the outlander. He knows nothing of the Forest of the Morgels or of the Pool of Mud. It is easy to go astray in the woodland—”

Trar shook his head. “That may not be. He must go alone, even as Thran said.”

The Ana, which had followed in Garin’s shadow all day, whistled shrilly and stood on tiptoe to tug at his hand. Trar smiled. “That one may go, its eyes may serve you well. Urg will guide you to the outer portal of the Place of Ancestors and set you upon the road to the Caves. Farewell, outlander, and may the spirits of the Ancient Ones be with you.”

Garin bowed to the ruler of the Folk and turned to follow Urg. Near the door stood a small group of women. Sera pressed forward from them, holding out a small bag.

“Outlander,” she said hurriedly, “when you look upon the Daughter speak to her of Sera, for I have awaited her many years.”

He smiled. “That I will.”

“If you remember, outlander. I am a great lady among the Folk and have my share of suitors, yet I think I could envy the Daughter. Nay, I shall not explain that,” she laughed mockingly. “You will understand in due time. Here is a packet of food. Now go swiftly that we may have you among us again before the Mists.”

So a woman’s farewell sped them on their way. Urg chose a ramp which led downward. At its foot was a niche in the rock, above which a rose light burned dimly. Urg reached within the hollow and drew out a pair of high buskins which he aided Garin to lace on. They were a good fit, having been fashioned for a man of the Ancient Ones.

The passage before them was narrow and crooked. There was a thick carpet of dust underfoot, patterned by the prints of the Folk. They rounded a corner and a tall door loomed out of the gloom. Urg pressed the surface, there was a click and the stone rolled back.

“This is the Place of Ancestors,” he announced as he stepped within.

They were at the end of a colossal hall whose domed roof disappeared into shadows. Thick pillars of gleaming crystal divided it into aisles, all leading inward to a raised dais of oval shape. Filling the aisles were couches and each soft nest held its sleeper. Near to the door lay the men and women of the Folk, but closer to the dais were the Ancient Ones. Here and there a couch bore a double burden, upon the shoulder of a man was pillowed the drooping head of a woman. Urg stopped beside such a one.

“See, outlander, here was one who was called from your world. Marena of the House of Light looked with favor upon him and their days of happiness were many.”

The man on the couch had red-gold hair and on his upper arm was a heavy band of gold whose mate Garin had once seen in a museum. A son of pre-Norman Ireland. Urg traced with a crooked finger the archaic lettering carved upon the stone base of the couch.

“Lovers in the Light sleep sweetly. The Light returns on the appointed day.”

“Who lies there?” Garin motioned to the dais.

“The first Ancient Ones. Come, look upon those who made this Tav.”

On the dais the couches were arranged in two rows and between them, in the center, was a single couch raised above the others. Fifty men and women lay as if but resting for the hour, smiles on their peaceful faces but weary shadows beneath their eyes. There was an un-human quality about them which was lacking in their descendents.

Urg advanced to the high couch and beckoned Garin to join him. A man and a woman lay there, the woman’s head upon the man’s breast. There was that in their faces which made Garin turn away. He felt as if he had intruded roughly where no man should go.

“Here lies Thran, Son of Light, first Lord of the Caverns, and his lady Thrala, Dweller in the Light. So have they lain a thousand thousand years, and so will they lie until this planet rots to dust beneath them. They led the Folk out of the slime and made Tav. Such as they we shall never see again.”

They passed silently down the aisles of the dead. Once Garin caught sight of another fair-haired man, perhaps another outlander, since the Ancient Ones were all dark of hair. Urg paused once more before they left the hall. He stood by the couch of a man, wrapped in a long robe, whose face was ravaged with marks of agony.

Urg spoke a single name: “Thran.”

So this was the last Lord of the Caverns. Garin leaned closer to study the dead face but Urg seemed to have lost his patience. He hurried his charge on to a panel door.

“This is the southern portal of the Caverns,” he explained. “Trust to the Ana to guide you and beware of the boiling mud. Should the morgels scent you, kill quickly, they are the servants of the Black Ones. May fortune favor you, outlander.”

The door was open and Garin looked out upon Tav. The soft blue light was as strong as it had been when he had first seen it. With the Ana perched on his shoulder, the green rod and the bag of food in his hands, he stepped out onto the moss sod.

Urg raised his hand in salute and the door clicked into place. Garin stood alone, pledged to bring the Daughter out of the Caves of Darkness.

There is no night or day in Tav since the blue light is steady. But the Folk divide their time by artificial means. However Garin, being newly come from the rays of healing, felt no fatigue. As he hesitated, the Ana chattered and pointed confidently ahead.

Before them was a dense wood of fern trees. It was quiet in the forest as Garin made his way into its gloom and for the first time he noted a peculiarity of Tav. There were no birds.

The portion of the woodland they had to traverse was but a spur of the forest to the west. After an hour of travel they came out upon the bank of a sluggish river. The turbid waters of the stream were a dull saffron color. This, thought Garin, must be the River of Gold, the boundary of the lands of the Black Ones.

He rounded a bend to come upon a bridge, so old that time itself had worn its stone angles into curves. The bridge gave on a wide plain where tall grass grew sere and yellow. To the left was a hissing and bubbling, and a huge wave of boiling mud arose in the air. Garin choked in a wind, thick with chemicals, which blew from it. He smelled and tasted the sulphur-tainted air all across the plain.

And he was glad enough to plunge into a small fern grove which half-concealed a spring. There he bathed his head and arms while the Ana pulled open Sera's food bag.

Together they ate the cakes of grain and the dried fruit. When they were done the Ana tugged at Garin's hand and pointed on.

Cautiously Garin wormed his way through the thick underbrush until, at last, he looked out into a clearing and at its edge the entrance of the Black Ones' Caves. Two tall pillars, carved into the likeness of foul monsters, guarded a rough-edged hole. A fine greenish mist whirled and danced in its mouth.

The flyer studied the entrance. There was no life to be seen. He gripped the destroying rod and inched forward. Before the green mist he braced himself and then stepped within.

## 6. Kepta's Second Prisoner

The green mist enveloped Garin. He drew into his lungs hot moist air faintly tinged with a scent of sickly sweetness, as from some hidden corruption. Green motes in the air gave forth little light and seemed to cling to the intruder.

With the Ana pattering before him, the American started down a steep ramp, the soft soles of his buskins making no sound. At regular intervals along the wall, niches held small statues. And about each perverted figure was a crown of green motes.

The Ana stopped, its large ears outspread as if to catch the faintest murmur of sound. From somewhere under the earth came the howls of a maddened dog. The Ana shivered, creeping closer to Garin.

Down led the ramp, growing narrower and steeper. And louder sounded the insane, coughing howls of the dog. Then the passage was abruptly barred by a grill of black stone. Garin peered through its bars at a flight of stairs leading down into a pit. From the pit arose snarling laughter.

Padding back and forth were things which might have been conceived by demons. They were sleek, rat-like creatures, hairless, and large as ponies. Red saliva dripped from the corners of their sharp jaws. But in the eyes, which they raised now and then toward the grill, there was intelligence. These were the morgels, watchdogs and slaves of the Black Ones.

From a second pair of stairs directly across the pit arose a moaning call. A door opened and two men came down the steps. The morgels surged forward, but fell back when whips were cracked over their heads.

The masters of the morgels were human in appearance. Black loin cloths were twisted about them and long, wing-shaped cloaks hung from their shoulders. On their heads, completely masking their hair, were cloth caps which bore ragged crests not unlike cockscombs. As far as Garin could see they were unarmed except for their whips.

A second party was coming down the steps. Between two of the Black Ones struggled a prisoner. He made a desperate and hopeless fight of it, but they dragged him to the edge of the pit before they halted. The morgels, intent upon their promised prey, crouched before them.

Five steps above were two figures to whom the guards looked for instructions. One was a man of their race, of slender, handsome body and evil, beautiful face. His hand lay possessively upon the arm of his companion.

It was Thrala who stood beside him, her head proudly erect. The laughter curves were gone from her lips; there was only sorrow and resignation to be read there now. But her spirit burned like a white flame in her eyes.

“Look!” her warder ordered. “Does not Kepta keep his promises? Shall we give Dandtan into the jaws of our slaves, or will you unsay certain words of yours, Lady Thrala?”

The prisoner answered for her. “Kepta, son of vileness, Thrala is not for you. Remember, beloved one,” he spoke to the Daughter, “the day of deliverance is at hand—”

Garin felt a sudden emptiness. The prisoner had called Thrala “beloved” with the ease of one who had the right.



“I await Thrala’s answer,” Kepta returned evenly. And her answer he got.

“Beast among beasts, you may send Dandtan to his death, you may heap all manner of insult and evil upon me, but still I say the Daughter is not for your touch. Rather will I cut the line of life with my own hands, taking upon me the punishment of the Elder Ones. To Dandtan,” she smiled down upon the prisoner, “I say farewell. We shall meet again beyond the Curtain of Time.” She held out her hands to him.

“Thrala, dear one—!” One of his guards slapped a hand over the prisoner’s mouth putting an end to his words.

But now Thrala was looking beyond him, straight at the grill which sheltered Garin. Kepta pulled at her arm to gain her attention. “Watch! Thus do my enemies die. To the pit with him!”

The guards twisted their prisoner around and the morgels crept closer, their eyes fixed upon that young, writhing body. Garin knew that he must take a hand in the game. The Ana was tugging him to the right, and there was an open archway leading to a balcony running around the side of the pit.

Those below were too entranced by the coming sport to notice the invader. But Thrala glanced up and Garin thought that she sighted him. Something in her attitude attracted Kepta, he too looked up. For a moment he stared in stark amazement, and then he thrust the Daughter through the door behind him.

“Ho, outlander! Welcome to the Caves. So the Folk have meddled—”

“Greeting, Kepta.” Garin hardly knew whence came the words which fell so easily from his tongue. “I have come as was promised, to remain until the Black Throne is no more.”

“Not even the morgels boast before their prey lies limp in their jaws,” flashed Kepta. “What manner of beast are you?”

“A clean beast, Kepta, which you are not. Bid your two-legged morgels loose the youth, lest I grow impatient.” The flyer swung the green rod into view.

Kepta’s eyes narrowed but his smile did not fade. “I have heard of old that the Ancient Ones do not destroy—”

“As an outlander I am not bound by their limits,” returned Garin, “as you will learn if you do not call off your stinking pack.”

The master of the Caves laughed. “You are as the Tand, a fool without a brain. Never shall you see the Caverns again—”

“You shall own me master yet, Kepta.”

The Black Chief seemed to consider. Then he waved to his men. “Release him,” he ordered. “Outlander, you are braver than I thought. We might bargain—”

“Thrala goes forth from the Caves and the black throne is dust, those are the terms of the Caverns.”

“And if we do not accept?”

“Then Thrala goes forth, the throne is dust and Tav shall have a day of judging such as it has never seen before.”

“You challenge me?”

Again words, which seemed to Garin to have their origin elsewhere, came to him. "As in Yu-Lac, I shall take—"

Before Kepta could reply there was trouble in the pit. Dandtan, freed by his guards, was crossing the floor in running leaps. Garin threw himself belly down on the balcony and dropped the jeweled strap of his belt over the lip.

A moment later it snapped taut and he stiffened to an upward pull. Already Dandtan's heels were above the snapping jaws of a morgel. The flyer caught the youth around the shoulders and heaved. They rolled together against the wall.

"They are gone! All of them!" Dandtan cried, as he regained his feet. He was right; the morgels howled below, but Kepta and his men had vanished.

"Thrala!" Garin exclaimed.

Dandtan nodded. "They have taken her back to the cells. They believe her safe there."

"Then they think wrong." Garin stooped to pick up the green rod. His companion laughed.

"We'd best start before they get prepared for us."

Garin picked up the Ana. "Which way?"

Dandtan showed him a passage leading from behind the other door. Then he dodged into a side chamber to return with two of the wing cloaks and cloth hoods, so that they might pass as Black Ones.

They went by the mouths of three side tunnels, all deserted. None disputed their going. All the Black Ones had withdrawn from this part of the Caves.

Dandtan sniffed uneasily. "All is not well. I fear a trap."

"While we can pass, let us."

The passage curved to the right and they came into an oval room. Again Dandtan shook his head but ventured no protest. Instead he flung open a door and hurried down a short hall.

It seemed to Garin that there were strange rustlings and squeakings in the dark corners. Then Dandtan stopped so short that the flyer ran into him.

"Here is the guard room—and it is empty!"

Garin looked over his shoulder into a large room. Racks of strange weapons hung on the walls and the sleeping pallets of the guards were stacked evenly, but the men were nowhere to be seen.

They crossed the room and passed beneath an archway.

"Even the bars are not down," observed Dandtan. He pointed overhead. There hung a portcullis of stone. Garin studied it apprehensively. But Dandtan drew him on into a narrow corridor where were barred doors.

"The cells," he explained, and withdrew a bar across one door. The portal swung back and they pushed within.

## 7. Kepta's Trap

Thrala arose to face them. Forgetting the disguise he wore, Garin drew back, chilled by her icy demeanor. But Dandtan sprang forward and caught her in his arms. She struggled madly until she saw the face beneath her captor's hood, and then she gave a cry of delight and her arms were about his neck.

"Dandtan!"

He smiled. "Even so. But it is the outlander's doing."

She came to the American, studying his face. "Outlander? So cold a name is not for you, when you have served us so." She offered him her hands and he raised them to his lips.

"And how are you named?"

Dandtan laughed. "Thus the eternal curiosity of women!"

"Garin."

"Garin," she repeated. "How like—" A faint rose glowed beneath her pearl flesh.

Dandtan's hand fell lightly upon his rescuer's shoulder. "Indeed he is like him. From this day let him bear that other's name. Garan, Son of Light."

"Why not?" she returned calmly. "After all—"

"The reward which might have been Garan's may be his? Tell him the story of his namesake when we are again in the Caverns—"

Dandtan was interrupted by a frightened squeak from the Ana. Then came a mocking voice.

"So the prey has entered the trap of its own will. How many hunters may boast the same?"

Kepta leaned against the door, the light of vicious mischief dancing in his eyes. Garin dropped his cloak to the floor, but Dandtan must have read what was in the flyer's mind, for he caught him by the arm.

"On your life, touch him not!"

"So you have learned that much wisdom while you have dwelt among us, Dandtan? Would that Thrala had done the same. But fair women find me weak." He eyed her proud body in a way that would have sent Garin at his throat had Dandtan not held him. "So shall Thrala have a second chance. How would you like to see these men in the Room of Instruments, Lady?"

"I do not fear you," she returned. "Thran once made a prophecy, and he never spoke idly. We shall win free—"

"That will be as fate would have it. Meanwhile, I leave you to each other." He whipped around the door and slammed it behind him. They heard the grating of the bar he slid into place. Then his footsteps died away.

"There goes evil," murmured Thrala softly. "Perhaps it would have been better if Garin had killed him as he thought to do. We must get away...."

Garin drew the rod from his belt. The green light-motes gathered and clung about its polished length.

"Touch not the door," Thrala advised; "only its hinges."

Beneath the tip of the rod the stone became spongy and flaked away. Dandtan and the flyer caught the door and eased it to the floor. With one quick movement Thrala caught up Garin's cloak and swirled it about her, hiding the glitter of her gem-encrusted robe.

There was a curious cold lifelessness about the air of the corridor, the light-bearing motes vanishing as if blown out.

"Hurry!" the Daughter urged. "Kepta is withdrawing the living light, so that we will have to wander in the dark."

When they reached the end of the hall the light was quite gone, and Garin bruised his hands against the stone portcullis which had been lowered. From somewhere on the other side of the barrier came rippling laughter.

"Oh, outlander," called Kepta mockingly, "you will get through easily enough when you remember your weapon. But the dark you can not conquer so easily, nor that which runs the halls."

Garin was already busy with the rod. Within five minutes their way was clear again. But Thrala stopped them when they would have gone through. "Kepta has loosed the hunters."

"The hunters?"

"The morgels and—others," explained Dandtan. "The Black Ones have withdrawn and only death comes this way. And the morgels see in the dark...."

"So does the Ana."

"Well thought of," agreed the son of the Ancient Ones.

"It will lead us out."

As if in answer, there came a tug at Garin's belt. Reaching back, he caught Thrala's hand and knew that she had taken Dandtan's. So linked they crossed the guard room. Then the Ana paused for a long time, as if listening. There was nothing to see but the darkness which hung about them like the smothering folds of a curtain.

"Something follows us," whispered Dandtan.

"Nothing to fear," stated Thrala. "It dare not attack. It is, I think, of Kepta's fashioning. And that which has not true life dreads death above all things. It is going—"

There came sounds of something crawling slowly away.

"Kepta will not try that again," continued the Daughter, disdainfully. "He knew that his monstrosities would not attack. Only in the light are they to be dreaded—and then only because of the horror of their forms."

Again the Ana tugged at its master's belt. They shuffled into the narrow passage beyond. But there remained the sense of things about them in the dark, things which Thrala continued to insist were harmless and yet which filled Garin with loathing.

Then they entered the far corridor into which led the three halls and which ended in the morgel pit. Here, Garin believed, was the greatest danger from the morgels.

The Ana stopped short, dropping back against Garin's thigh. In the blackness appeared two yellow disks, sparks of saffron in their depths. Garin thrust the rod into Thrala's hands.

"What do you?" she demanded.

“I’m going to clear the way. It’s too dark to use the rod against moving creatures....” He flung the words over his shoulder as he moved toward the unwinking eyes.

## 8. Escape from the Caves

Keeping his eyes upon those soulless yellow disks, Garin snatched off his hood, wadding it into a ball. Then he sprang. His fingers slipped on smooth hide, sharp fangs ripped his forearm, blunt nails scraped his ribs. A foul breath puffed into his face and warm slaver trickled down his neck and chest. But his plan succeeded.

The cap was wedged into the morgel's throat and the beast was slowly choking. Blood dripped from the flyer's torn flesh, but he held on grimly until he saw the light fade from those yellow eyes. The dying morgel made a last mad plunge for freedom, dragging his attacker along the rock floor. Then Garin felt the heaving body rest limply against his own. He staggered against the wall, panting.

"Garin!" cried Thrala. Her questing hand touched his shoulder and crept to his face. "It is well with you?"

"Yes," he panted, "let us go on."

Thrala's fingers had lingered on his arm and now she walked beside him, her cloak making whispering sounds as it brushed against the wall and floor.

"Wait," she cautioned suddenly. "The morgel pit...."

Dandtan slipped by them. "I will try the door."

In a moment he was back. "It is open," he whispered.

"Kepta believes," mused Thrala, "that we will keep to the safety of the gallery. Therefore let us go through the pit. The morgels will be gone to better hunting grounds."

Through the pit they went. A choking stench arose from underfoot and they trod very carefully. They climbed the stairs on the far side unchallenged, Dandtan leading.

"The rod here, Garin," he called; "this door is barred."

Garin pressed the weapon into the other's hand and leaned against the rock. He was sick and dizzy. The long, deep wounds on his arm and shoulder were stiffening and ached with a biting throb.

When they went on he panted with effort. They still moved in darkness and his distress passed unnoticed.

"This is wrong," he muttered, half to himself. "We go too easily—"

And he was answered out of the blackness. "Well noted, outlander. But you go free for the moment, as does Thrala and Dandtan. Our full accounting is not yet. And now, farewell, until we meet again in the Hall of Thrones. I could find it in me to applaud your courage, outlander. Perhaps you will come to serve me yet."

Garin turned and threw himself toward the voice, bringing up with bruising force against rock wall. Kepta laughed.

"Not with the skill of the bull Tand will you capture me."

His second laugh was cut cleanly off, as if a door had been closed. In silence the three hurried up the ramp. Then, as through a curtain, they came into the light of Tav.

Thrala let fall her drab cloak, stood with arms outstretched in the crater land. Her sparkling robe sheathed her in glory and she sang softly, rapt in her own delight. Then Dandtan put his arm about her; she clung to him, staring about as might a beauty-bewildered child.

Garin wondered dully how he would be able to make the journey back to the Caverns when his arm and shoulder were eaten with a consuming fire. The Ana crept closer to him, peering into his white face.

They were aroused by a howl from the Caves. Thrala cried out and Dandtan answered her unspoken question. "They have set the morgels on our trail!"

The howl from the Caves was echoed from the forest. Morgels before and behind them! Garin might set himself against one, Dandtan another, and Thrala could defend herself with the rod, but in the end the pack would kill them.

"We shall claim protection from the Gibi of the cliff. By the law they must give us aid," said Thrala, as, turning up her long robe, she began to run lightly. Garin picked up her cloak and drew it across his shoulder to hide his welts. When he could no longer hold her pace she must not guess the reason for his falling behind.

Of that flight through the forest the flyer afterward remembered little. At last the gurgle of water broke upon his pounding ears, as he stumbled along a good ten lengths behind his companions. They had come to the edge of the wood along the banks of the river.

Without hesitation Thrala and Dandtan plunged into the oily flood, swimming easily for the other side. Garin dropped the cloak, wondering if, once he stepped into the yellow stream, he would ever be able to struggle out again. Already the Ana was in, paddling in circles near the shore and pleading with him to follow. Wearily Garin waded out.

The water, which washed the blood and sweat from his aching body, was faintly brackish and stung his wounds to life. He could not fight the sluggish current and it bore him downstream, well away from where the others landed.

But at last he managed to win free, crawling out near where a smaller stream joined the river. There he lay panting, face down upon the moss. And there they found him, water dripping from his bedraggled finery, the Ana stroking his muddied hair. Thrala cried out with concern and pillowed his head on her knees while Dandtan examined his wounds.

"Why did you not tell us?" demanded Thrala.

He did not try to answer, content to lie there, her arms supporting him. Dandtan disappeared into the forest, returning soon, his hands filled with a mass of crushed leaves. With these he plastered Garin's wounds.

"You'd better go on," Garin warned.

Dandtan shook his head. "The morgels can not swim. If they cross, they must go to the bridge, and that is half the crater away."

The Ana dropped into their midst, its small hands filled with clusters of purple fruit. And so they feasted, Garin at ease on a fern couch, accepting food from Thrala's hand.

There seemed to be some virtue in Dandtan's leaf plaster for, after a short rest, Garin was able to get to his feet with no more than a twinge or two in his wounds. But they started on at a more sober pace. Through mossy glens and sunlit glades where strange flowers made perfume, the trail led. The stream they followed branched twice before, on the edge of meadow land, they struck away from the guiding water toward the crater wall.

Suddenly Thrala threw back her head and gave a shrill, sweet whistle. Out of the air dropped a yellow and black insect, as large as a hawk. Twice it circled her head and then perched itself on her outstretched wrist.

Its swollen body was jet black, its curving legs, three to a side, chrome yellow. The round head ended in a sharp beak and it had large, many-faceted eyes. The wings, which lazily tested the air, were black and touched with gold.

Thrala rubbed the round head while the insect nuzzled affectionately at her cheek. Then she held out her wrist again and it was gone.

“We shall be expected now and may pass unmolested.”

Shortly they became aware of a murmuring sound. The crater wall loomed ahead, dwarfing the trees at its base.

“There is the city of the Gibi,” remarked Dandtan.

Clinging to the rock were the towers and turrets of many eight-sided cells.

“They are preparing for the Mists,” observed Thrala. “We shall have company on our journey to the Caverns.”

They passed the trees and reached the foot of the wax skyscrapers which towered dizzily above their heads. A great cloud of the Gibi hovered about them. Garin felt the soft brush of their wings against his body. And they crowded each other jealously to be near Thrala.

The soft *hush-hush* of their wings filled the clearing as one large Gibi of outstanding beauty approached. The commoners fluttered off and Thrala greeted the Queen of the cells as an equal. Then she turned to her companions with the information the Gibi Queen had to offer.

“We are just in time. Tomorrow the Gibi leave. The morgels have crossed the river and are out of control. Instead of hunting us they have gone to ravage the forest lands. All Tav has been warned against them. But they may be caught by the Mist and so destroyed. We are to rest in the cliff hollows, and one shall come for us when it is time to leave.”

The Gibi withdrew to the cell-combs after conducting their guests to the rock-hollows.



## 9. Days of Preparation

Garin was awakened by a loud murmuring. Dandtan knelt beside him.

“We must go. Even now the Gibi seal the last of the cells.”

They ate hurriedly of cakes of grain and honey, and, as they feasted, the Queen again visited them. The first of the swarm were already winging eastward.

With the Gibi nation hanging like a storm cloud above them, the three started off across the meadow. The purple-blue haze was thickening and, here and there, curious formations, like the dust devils of the desert, arose and danced and disappeared again. The tropic heat of Tav increased; it was as if the ground itself were steaming.

“The Mists draw close; we must hurry,” panted Dandtan.

They traversed the tongue of forest which bordered the meadow and came to the central plain of Tav. There was a brooding stillness there. The Ana, perched on Garin’s shoulder, shivered.

Their walk became a trot; the Gibi bunched together. Once Thrالا caught her breath in a half sob.

“They are flying slowly because of us. And it’s so far—”

“Look!” Dandtan pointed at the plain. “The morgels!”

The morgel pack, driven by fear, ran in leaping bounds. They passed within a hundred yards of the three, yet did not turn from their course, though several snarled at them.

“They are already dead,” observed Dandtan. “There is no time for them to reach the shelter of the Caves.”

Splashing through a shallow brook, the three began to run. For the first time Thrالا faltered and broke pace. Garin thrust the Ana into Dandtan’s arms and, before she could protest, swept the girl into his arms.

The haze was denser now, settling upon them as a curtain. Black hair, finer than silk, whipped across Garin’s throat. Thrالا’s head was on his shoulder, her heaving breasts arched as she gasped the sultry air.

“They—keep—watch...!” shouted Dandtan.

Piercing the gloom were pin-points of light. A dark shape grazed Garin’s head—one of the Gibi Queen’s guards.

Then abruptly they stumbled into a throng of the Folk, one of whom reached for Thrالا with a crooning cry. It was Sera welcoming her mistress.

Thrala was borne away by the women, leaving Garin with a feeling of desolation.

“The Mists, Outlander.” It was Urg, pointing toward the Cavern mouth. Two of the Folk swung their weight on a lever. Across the opening a sheet of crystal clicked into place. The Caverns were sealed.

The haze was now inky black outside and billows of it beat against the protecting barrier. It might have been midnight of the blackest, starless night.

“So will it be for forty days. What is without—dies,” said Urg.

“Then we have forty days in which to prepare,” Garin spoke his thought aloud. Dandtan’s keen face lightened.

“Well said, Garin. Forty days before Kepta may seek us. And we have much to do. But first, our respects to the Lord of the Folk.”

Together they went to the Hall of Thrones where, when he saw Dandtan, Trar arose and held out his jade-tipped rod of office. The son of the Ancient Ones touched it.

“Hail! Dweller in the Light, and Outlander who has fulfilled the promise of Thran. Thrala is once more within the Caverns. Now send you to dust this black throne....”

Garin, nothing loath, drew the destroying rod from his belt, but Dandtan shook his head. “The time is not yet, Trar. Kepta must finish the pattern he began. Forty days have we and then the Black Ones come.”

Trar considered thoughtfully. “So that be the way of it. Thran did not see another war....”

“But he saw an end to Kepta!”

Trar straightened as if some burden had rolled from his thin shoulders. “Well do you speak, Lord. When there is one to sit upon the Rose Throne, what have we to fear? Listen, O ye Folk, the Light has returned to the Caverns!”

His cry was echoed by the gathering of the Folk.

“And now, Lord—” he turned to Dandtan with deference—“what are your commands?”

“For the space of one sleep I shall enter the Chamber of Renewing with this outlander, who is no longer an outlander but one, Garin, accepted by the Daughter according to the Law. And while we rest let all be made ready....”

“The Dweller in the Light has spoken!” Trar himself escorted them from the Hall.

They came, through many winding passages, to a deep pool of water, in the depths of which lurked odd purple shadows. Dandtan stripped and plunged in, Garin following his example. The water was tinglingly alive and they did not linger in it long. From it they went to a bubble room such as the one Garin had rested in after the bath of light rays, and on the cushions in its center stretched their tired bodies.

When Garin awoke he experienced the same exultation he had felt before. Dandtan regarded him with a smile. “Now to work,” he said, as he reached out to press a knob set in the wall.

Two of the Folk appeared, bringing with them clean trappings. After they dressed and broke their fast, Dandtan started for the laboratories. Garin would have gone with him, but Sera intercepted them.

“There is one would speak with Lord Garin....”

Dandtan laughed. “Go,” he ordered the American. “Thrala’s commands may not be slighted.”

The Hall of Women was deserted. And the corridor beyond, roofed and walled with slabs of rose-shot crystal, was as empty. Sera drew aside a golden curtain and they were in the audience chamber of the Daughter.

A semi-circular dais of the clearest crystal, heaped with rose and gold cushions, faced them. Before it, a fountain, in the form of a flower nodding on a curved stem, sent a spray of water into a shallow basin. The walls of the room were divided into alcoves by marble pillars, each one curved in semblance of a fern frond.

From the domed ceiling, on chains of twisted gold, seven lamps, each wrought from a single yellow sapphire, gave soft light. The floor was a mosaic of gold and crystal.

Two small Anas, who had been playing among the cushions, pattered up to exchange greetings with Garin's. But of the mistress of the chamber there was no sign. Garin turned to Sera, but before he could phrase his question, she asked mockingly:

"Who is the Lord Garin that he can not wait with patience?" But she left in search of the Daughter.

Garin glanced uneasily about the room. This jeweled chamber was no place for him. He had started toward the door when Thralla stepped within.

"Greetings to the Daughter." His voice sounded formal and cold, even to himself.

Her hands, which had been outheld in welcome, dropped to her sides. A ghost of a frown dimmed her beauty.

"Greetings, Garin," she returned slowly.

"You sent for me—" he prompted, eager to escape from this jewel box and the unattainable treasure it held.

"Yes," the coldness of her tone was an order of exile. "I would know how you fared and whether your wounds yet troubled you."

He looked down at his own smooth flesh, cleanly healed by the wisdom of the Folk. "I am myself again and eager to be at such work as Dandtan can find for me..."

Her robe seemed to hiss across the floor as she turned upon him. "Then go!" she ordered. "Go quickly!"

And blindly he obeyed. She had spoken as if to a servant, one whom she could summon and dismiss by whim. Even if Dandtan held her love, she might have extended him her friendship. But he knew within him that friendship would be a poor crumb beside the feast his pulses pounded for.

There was a pattering of feet behind him. So, she would call him back! His pride sent him on. But it was Sera. Her head thrust forward until she truly resembled a reptile.

"Fool! Morgel!" she spat. "Even the Black Ones did not treat her so. Get you out of the Place of Women lest they divide your skin among them!"

Garin broke free, not heeding her torrent of reproach. Then he seized upon one of the Folk as a guide and sought the laboratories. Far beneath the surface of Tav, where the light-motes shone ghostly in the gloom, they came into a place of ceaseless activity, where there were tables crowded with instruments, coils of glass and metal tubing, and other equipment and supplies. These were the focusing point for ceaseless streams of the Folk. On a platform at the far end, Garin saw the tall son of the Ancient Ones working on a framework of metal and shining crystal.

He glanced up as Garin joined him. "You are late," he accused. "But your excuse is a good one. Now get you to work. Hold this here—and here—while I fasten these clamps."

So Garin became extra hands and feet for Dandtan, and they worked feverishly to build against the lifting of the Mists. There was no day or night in the laboratories. They worked steadily without rest, and without feeling fatigue.

Twice they went to the Chamber of Renewing, but except for these trips to the upper ways they were not out of the laboratories through all those days. Of Thralla there was no sign, nor did any one speak of her.

The Cavern dwellers were depending upon two defenses: an evil green liquid, to be thrown in frail glass globes, and a screen charged with energy. Shortly before the lifting of the Mists, these arms were transported to the entrance and installed there. Dandtan and Garin made a last inspection.

“Kepta makes the mistake of under-rating his enemies,” Dandtan reflected, feeling the edge of the screen caressingly. “When I was captured, on the day my people died, I was sent to the Black Ones’ laboratories so that their seekers after knowledge might learn the secrets of the Ancient Ones. But I proved a better pupil than teacher and I discovered the defense against the Black Fire. After I had learned that, Kepta grew impatient with my supposed stupidity and tried to use me to force Thralla to his will. For that, as for other things, shall he pay—and the paying will not be in coin of his own striking. Let us think of that...” He turned to greet Urg and Trar and the other leaders of the Folk, who had approached unnoticed.

Among them stood Thralla, her gaze fixed upon the crystal wall between them and the thinning Mist. She noticed Garin no more than she did the Anas playing with her train and the women whispering behind her. But Garin stepped back into the shadows—and what he saw was not weapons of war, but cloudy black hair and graceful white limbs veiled in splendor.

Urg and one of the other chieftains bore down upon the door lever. With a protesting squeak, the glass wall disappeared into the rock. The green of Tav beckoned them out to walk in its freshness; it was renewed with lusty life. But in all that expanse of meadow and forest there was a strange stillness.

“Post sentries,” ordered Dandtan. “The Black Ones will come soon.”

He beckoned Garin forward as he spoke to Thralla:

“Let us go to the Hall of Thrones.”

But the Daughter did not answer his smile. “It is not meet that we should spend time in idle talk. Let us go instead to call upon the help of those who have gone before us.” So speaking, she darted a glance at Garin as chill as the arctic lands beyond the lip of Tav, and then swept away with Sera bearing her train.

Dandtan stared at Garin. “What has happened between you two?”

The flyer shook his head. “I don’t know. No man is born with an understanding of women—”

“But she is angered with you. What has happened?”

For a moment Garin was tempted to tell the truth: that he dared not break any barrier she chose to raise, lest he seize what in honor was none of his. But he shook his head mutely. Neither of them saw Thralla again until Death entered the Caverns.

## 10. Battle and Victory

Garin stood with Dandtan looking out into the plain of Tav. Some distance away were two slender, steel-tipped towers, which were, in reality, but hollow tubes filled with the Black Fire. Before these dark-clad figures were busy.

“They seem to believe us already defeated. Let them think so,” commented Dandtan, touching the screen they had erected before the Cavern entrance.

As he spoke Kepta swaggered through the tall grass to call a greeting:

“Ho, rock dweller, I would speak with you—”

Dandtan edged around the screen, Garin a pace behind.

“I see you, Kepta.”

“Good. I trust that your ears will serve you as well as your eyes. These are my terms: Give Thrالا to me to dwell in my chamber and the outlander to provide sport for my captains. Make no resistance but throw open the Caverns so that I may take my rightful place in the Hall of Thrones. Do this and we shall be at peace....”

“And this is our reply:”—Dandtan stood unmovingly before the screen—”Return to the Caves; break down the bridge between your land and ours. Let no Black One come hither again, ever....”

Kepta laughed. “So, that be the way of it! Then this shall we do: take Thrالا, to be mine for a space, and then to go to my captains—”

Garin hurled himself forward, felt Kepta’s lips mash beneath his fist; his fingers were closing about the other’s throat as Dandtan, who was trying to pull him away from his prey, shouted a warning: “Watch out!”

A morgel had leaped from the grass, its teeth snapping about Garin’s wrist, forcing him to drop Kepta. Then Dandtan laid it senseless by a sharp blow with his belt.

On hands and knees Kepta crawled back to his men. The lower part of his face was a red and dripping smear. He screamed an order with savage fury.

Dandtan drew the still raging flyer behind the screen. “Be a little prudent,” he panted. “Kepta can be dealt with in other ways than with bare hands.”

The towers were swinging their tips toward the entrance. Dandtan ordered the screen wedged tightly into place.

Outside, the morgel Dandtan had stunned got groggily to its feet. When it had limped half the distance back to its master, Kepta gave the order to fire. The broad beam of black light from the tip of the nearest tower caught the beast head on. There was a chilling scream of agony, and where the morgel had stood gray ashes drifted on the wind.

A hideous crackling arose as the black beam struck the screen. Green grass beneath seared away, leaving only parched earth and naked blue soil. Those within the Cavern crouched behind their frail protection, half blinded by the light from the seared grass, coughing from the chemical-ridden fumes which curled about the cracks of the rock.

Then the beam faded out. Thin smoke plumed from the tips of the towers, steam arose from the blackened ground. Dandtan drew a deep breath.

“It held!” he cried, betraying at last the fear which had ridden him.

Men of the Folk dragged engines of tubing before the screen, while others brought forth the globes of green liquid. Dandtan stood aside, as if this matter were the business of the Folk alone, and Garin recalled that the Ancient Ones were opposed to the taking of life.

Trar was in command now. At his orders the globes were posed on spoon-shaped holders. Loopholes in the screen clicked open. Trar brought down his hand in signal. The globes arose lazily, sliding through the loopholes and floating out toward the towers.

One, aimed short, struck the ground where the fire had burned it bare, and broke. The liquid came forth, sluggishly, forming a gray-green gas as the air struck it. Another spiral of gas arose almost at the foot of one of the towers—and then another ... and another.

There quickly followed a tortured screaming, which soon dwindled to a weak yammering. They could see shapes, no longer human or animal, staggering about in the fog.

Dandtan turned away, his face white with horror. Garin’s hands were over his ears to shut out that crying.

At last it was quiet; there was no more movement by the towers. Urg placed a sphere of rosy light upon the nearest machine and flipped it out into the camp of the enemy. As if it were a magnet it drew the green tendrils of gas, to leave the air clear. Here and there lay shrunken, livid shapes, the towers brooding over them.

One of the Folk burst into their midst, a woman of Thrala’s following.

“Haste!” She clawed at Garin. “Kepta takes Thrala!”

She ran wildly back the way she had come, with the American pounding at her heels. They burst into the Hall of Thrones and saw a struggling group before the dais.

Garin heard someone howl like an animal, became aware the sound came from his own throat. For the second time his fist found its mark on Kepta’s face. With a shriek of rage the Black One threw Thrala from him and sprang at Garin, his nails tearing gashes in the flyer’s face. Twice the American twisted free and sent bone-crushing blows into the other’s ribs. Then he got the grip he wanted, and his fingers closed around Kepta’s throat. In spite of the Black One’s struggles he held on until a limp body rolled beneath him.

Panting, the American pulled himself up from the blood-stained floor and grabbed the arm of the Jade Throne for support.

“Garin!” Thrala’s arms were about him, her pitying fingers on his wounds. And in that moment he forgot Dandtan, forgot everything he had steeled himself to remember. She was in his arms and his mouth sought hers possessively. Nor was she unresponsive, but yielded, as a flower yields to the wind.

“Garin!” she whispered softly. Then, almost shyly, she broke from his hold.

Beyond her stood Dandtan, his face white, his mouth tight. Garin remembered. And, a little mad with pain and longing, he dropped his eyes, trying not to see the loveliness which was Thrala.

“So, Outlander, Thrala flies to your arms—”

Garin whirled about. Kepta was hunched on the broad seat of the jet throne.

“No, I am not dead, Outlander—nor shall you kill me, as you think to do. I go now, but I shall return. We have met and hated, fought and died before—you and I. You were a certain Garan, Marshall of the air fleet of Yu-Lac on a vanished world, and I was Lord of Koom.

That was in the days before the Ancient Ones pioneered space. You and I and Thrala, we are bound together and even fate can not break those bonds. Farewell, Garin. And do you, Thrala, remember the ending of that other Garan. It was not an easy one.”

With a last malicious chuckle, he leaned back in the throne. His battered body slumped. Then the sharp lines of the throne blurred; it shimmered in the light. Abruptly then both it and its occupant were gone. They were staring at empty space, above which loomed the rose throne of the Ancient Ones.

“He spoke true,” murmured Thrala. “We have had other lives, other meetings—so will we meet again. But for the present he returns to the darkness which sent him forth. It is finished.”

Without warning, a low rumbling filled the Cavern; the walls rocked and swayed. Lizard and human, they huddled together until the swaying stopped. Finally a runner appeared with news that one of the Gibi had ventured forth and discovered that the Caves of Darkness had been sealed by an underground quake. The menace of the Black Ones was definitely at an end.

## 11. Thrala's Mate

Although there were falls of rock within the Caverns and some of the passages were closed, few of the Folk suffered injury. Gibi scouts reported that the land about the entrance to the Caves had sunk, and that the River of Gold, thrown out of its bed, was fast filling this basin to form a lake.

As far as they could discover, none of the Black Ones had survived the battle and the sealing of the Caves. But they could not be sure that there was not a handful of outlaws somewhere within the confines of Tav.

The Crater itself was changed. A series of raw hills had appeared in the central plain. The pool of boiling mud had vanished and trees in the forest lay flat, as if cut by a giant scythe.

Upon their return to the cliff city, the Gibi found most of their wax skyscrapers in ruins, but they set about rebuilding without complaint. The squirrel farmers emerged from their burrows and were again busy in the fields.

Garin felt out of place in all the activity that filled the Caverns. More than ever he was the outlander with no true roots in Tav. Restlessly, he explored the Caverns, spending many hours in the Place of Ancestors, where he studied those men of the outer world who had preceded him into this weird land.

One night when he came back to his chamber he found Dandtan and Trar awaiting him there. There was a curious hardness in Dandtan's attitude, a somber sobriety in Trar's carriage.

"Have you sought the Hall of Women since the battle?" demanded the son of the Ancient Ones abruptly.

"No," retorted Garin shortly. Did Dandtan accuse him of double dealing?

"Have you sent a message to Thrala?"

Garin held back his rising temper. "I have not ventured where I can not."

Dandtan nodded to Trar as if his suspicions had been confirmed. "You see how it stands, Trar."

Trar shook his head slowly. "But never has the summoning been at fault—"

"You forget," Dandtan reminded him sharply. "It was once—and the penalty was exacted. So shall it be again."

Garin looked from one to the other, confused. Dandtan seemed possessed of a certain ruthless anger, but Trar was manifestly unhappy.

"It must come after council, the Daughter willing," the Lord of the Folk said.

Dandtan strode toward the door. "Thrala is not to know. Assemble the Council tonight. Meanwhile, see that he," he jerked his thumb toward Garin, "does not leave this room."

Thus Garin became a prisoner under the guard of the Folk, unable to discover of what Dandtan accused him, or how he had aroused the hatred of the Cavern ruler. Unless Dandtan's jealousy had been aroused and he was determined to rid himself of a rival.

Believing this, the flyer went willingly to the chamber where the judges waited. Dandtan sat at the head of a long table, Trar at his right hand and lesser nobles of the Folk beyond.



“You know the charge,” Dandtan’s words were tipped with venom as Garin came to stand before him. “Out of his own mouth has this outlander condemned himself. Therefore I ask that you decree for him the fate of that outlander of the second calling who rebelled against the summoning.”

“The outlander has admitted his fault?” questioned one of the Folk.

Trar inclined his head sadly. “He did.”

As Garin opened his mouth to demand a stating of the charge against him, Dandtan spoke again:

“What say you, Lords?”

For a long moment they sat in silence and then they bobbed their lizard heads in assent. “Do as you desire, Dweller in the Light.”

Dandtan smiled without mirth. “Look, outlander.” He passed his hand over the glass of the seeing mirror set in the table top. “This is the fate of him who rebels—”

In the shining surface Garin saw pictured a break in Tav’s wall. At its foot stood a group of men of the Ancient Ones, and in their midst struggled a prisoner. They were forcing him to climb the crater wall. Garin watched him reach the lip and crawl over, to stagger across the steaming rock, dodging the scalding vapor of hot springs, until he pitched face down in the slimy mud.

“Such was his ending, and so will you end—”

The calm brutality of that statement aroused Garin’s anger. “Rather would I die that way than linger in this den,” he cried hotly. “You, who owe your life to me, would send me to such a death without even telling me of what I am accused. Little is there to choose between you and Kepta, after all—except that he was an open enemy!”

Dandtan sprang to his feet, but Trar caught his arm.

“He speaks fairly. Ask him why he will not fulfill the summoning.”

While Dandtan hesitated, Garin leaned across the table, flinging his words, weapon-like, straight into that cold face.

“I’ll admit that I love Thrala—have loved her since that moment when I saw her on the steps of the morgel pit in the caves. Since when has it become a crime to love that which may not be yours—if you do not try to take it?”

Trar released Dandtan, his golden eyes gleaming.

“If you love her, claim her. It is your right.”

“Do I not know,” Garin turned to him, “that she is Dandtan’s. Thran had no idea of Dandtan’s survival when he laid his will upon her. Shall I stoop to holding her to an unwelcome bargain? Let her go to the one she loves....”

Dandtan’s face was livid, and his hands, resting on the table, trembled. One by one the lords of the Folk slipped away, leaving the two face-to-face.

“And I thought to order you to your death.” Dandtan’s whisper was husky as it emerged between dry lips. “Garin, we thought you knew—and, knowing, had refused her.”

“Knew what?”

\*\*\*\*\*

“That I am Thran’s son—and Thrala’s brother.”

The floor swung beneath Garin’s unsteady feet. Dandtan’s hands were warm on his shoulders.

“I am a fool,” said the American slowly.

Dandtan smiled. “A very honorable fool! Now get you to Thrala, who deserves to hear the full of this tangle.”

So it was that, with Dandtan by his side, Garin walked for the second time down that hallway, to pass the golden curtains and stand in the presence of the Daughter. She came straight from her cushions into his arms when she read what was in his face. They needed no words.

And in that hour began Garin’s life in Tav.

# Rebel Spurs

## 1

Even the coming of an autumn dusk could not subdue the color of this land. Shadows here were not gray or black; they were violet and purple. The crumbling adobe walls were laced by strings of crimson peppers, vivid in the torch and lantern light. It had been this way for days, red and yellow, violet—colors he had hardly been aware existed back in the cool green, silver, gray-brown of Kentucky.

So this was Tubacca! The rider shifted his weight in the saddle and gazed about him with watchful interest. Back in '59 this had been a flourishing town, well on its way to prominence in the Southwest. The mines in the hills behind producing wealth, the fact that it was a watering place on two cross-country routes—the one from Tucson down into Sonora of Old Mexico, the other into California—had all fed its growth.

Then the war.... The withdrawal of the army, the invasion of Sibley's Confederate forces which had reached this far in the persons of Howard's Arizona Rangers—and most of all the raiding, vicious, deadly, and continual, by Apaches and outlaws—had blasted Tubacca. Now, in the fall of 1866, it was a third of what it had been, with a ragged fringe of dilapidated adobes crumbling back into the soil. Only this heart core was still alive in the dusk.

Smell, a myriad of smells, some to tickle a flat stomach, others to wrinkle the nose. Under the rider the big stud moved, tossed his head, drawing the young man's attention from the town back to his own immediate concerns. The animal he rode, the two he led were, at first glance, far more noticeable than the dusty rider himself.

His saddle was cinched about the barrel of a big gray colt, one that could not have been more than five years old but showed enough power and breeding to attract attention in any horse-conscious community. Here was a thoroughbred of the same blood which had pounded race tracks in Virginia and in Kentucky to best all comers. Even now, after weeks on the trail, with a day's burden of alkali dust grimed into his coat, the stud was a beautiful thing. And his match was the mare on the lead rope, plainly a lady of family, perhaps of the same line, since her coat was also silver. She crowded closer, nickered plaintively.

She was answered by an anxious bray from the fourth member of the party. The mule bearing the trail pack was in ludicrous contrast to his own aristocratic companions. His long head, with one entirely limp and flopping ear, was grotesquely ugly, the carcass beneath the pack a bone rack, all sharp angles and dusty hide. Looks, however, as his master could have proven, were deceiving.

"Soooo—" The rider's voice was husky from swallowing trail grit, but it was tuned to the soothing croon of a practiced horse trainer. "Sooo—lady, just a little farther now, girl...."

From the one-story building on the rider's right a man emerged. He paused to light a long Mexican cigarillo, and as he held the match to let the sulfur burn away, his eyes fell upon the stallion. A casual interest tightened into open appreciation as he stepped from under the porch-overhang into the street.

"That is some horse, sir." His voice was that of an educated gentleman. The lantern at the end of the porch picked out the fine ruffled linen of his shirt, a vest with a painted design of fighting cocks, and the wink of gold buttons. The rather extravagant color of his clothing matched well with the town.

"I think so." The answer was short and yet not discourteous.

Again the mare voiced her complaint, and the rider turned to the gentleman. "There is a livery stable here, suh?" Unconsciously he reverted in turn to the rather formal speech pattern of another place and time.

The man in the painted vest had transferred his attention from stallion to mare. "Yes. Quickest way is down this alley. Tobe Kells owns it. He's a tolerable vet, too. She's near her time, ain't she?"

"Yes." The rider raised one finger to the straight wide brim of his low-crowned black hat. He was already turning his mount when the townsman added:

"No hotel here, stranger. But the Four Jacks serves a pretty good meal and keeps a couple of beds for overnighters. You're welcome back when you've settled the little lady. She Virginia stock?"

"Kentucky," the rider answered, and then his lips tightened into a compressed line. Was it a mistake to admit even that much? He would have to watch every word he said in this town. He tugged gently at the lead rope and walked Shiloh ahead at a pace which did not urge Shadow to any great effort. The mule, Croaker, fell in behind her so that they were strung out in the familiar pattern which had been theirs clear from Texas.

Minutes later her owner was rubbing down the fretful Shadow, murmuring the soothing words to quiet her. The lean, gray-haired man who had ushered them into the stable stood eyeing the mare's distended sides.

"I'd say, young fellow, you didn't git her here a mite too soon, no, siree. She's due right quick. Carryin' a blood foal, I'm thinkin'—"

"Yes. How soon? Tonight?"

Tobe Kells made a quick examination. The mare, after a first nervous start, stood easy under his sure and gentle hands. "Late, maybe. First foal?"

"Yes." Her owner hesitated and then added, "You give me a hand with her?"

"You bet, son. She's a pretty thing, an' she's been a far piece, I'd say. Now you looky here, boy—you sure look like you could take some curryin' an' corn fodder under your belt too. You git over to th' Four Jacks. Topham's got him a Chineese cookin' there who serves up th' best danged grub in this here town. Fill up your belly an' take some ease. Then if we do have this little lady gittin' us up tonight, you'll be ready for it. I'll see t' th' stud an' th' mule. That colt's not a wild one." Kells surveyed Shiloh knowingly. "No, I seed he was gentle-trained when you come in." He ran his hand down Shiloh's shoulder, touched the brand. "Spur R? That ain't no outfit I heard tell of before."

"From Eastern ... Texas—" That much was true. All three animals had been given the brand in the small Texas town where the wagon train had assembled. And perhaps this was the time when he should begin building up the background one Drew Kirby must present to Tubacca, Arizona Territory. "All right, I'll go eat." He picked up his saddlebags. "You'll call me if—"

"Sure, son. Say, I don't rightly know your name...."

"Drew Kirby."

"Wal, sure, Kirby, Tobe Kells is a man o' his word. Iffen there's any reason to think you'll be needed, I'll send Callie along for you. Callie!"

At Kells' hail a boy swung down the loft ladder. He was wiry thin, with a thick mop of sun-bleached hair and a flashing grin. At the sight of Shiloh and Shadow he whistled.

“Now ain’t they th’ purtiest things?” he inquired of the stable at large. “‘Bout th’ best stock we’ve had here since th’ last time *Don Cazar* brought in a couple o’ hissen. Where’ll I put your plunder, mister?” He was already loosing Croaker’s pack. “You be stayin’ over to th’ Jacks?”

Drew glanced up at the haymow from which Callie had just descended. “Any reason why I can’t bunk up there?” he asked Kells.

“None ‘tall, Kirby, none ‘tall. Know you want to be handy like. Stow that there gear up above, Callie, an’ don’t you drop nothin’. Rest yourself easy, son. These here hosses is goin’ to be treated jus’ like th’ good stuff they is.”

“Croaker, also.” Drew stopped by the mule, patted the long nose, gave a flip to the limp ear. “He’s good stuff, too—served in the cavalry....”

Kells studied the young man by the mule. Cavalry saddle on the stud, two Colt pistols belted high and butt forward, and that military cord on his hat—army boots, too. The liveryman knew the signs. This was not the first veteran to drift into Tubacca; he wouldn’t be the last either. Seems like half of both them armies back east didn’t want to go home an’ sit down peaceful like now that they was through wi’ shootin’ at each other. No, siree, a right big herd o’ ‘em was trailin’ out here. An’ he thought he could put name to the color of coat this young’un had had on his back, too. Only askin’ more than a man volunteered to tell, that warn’t neither manners nor wise.

“He gits th’ best, too, Kirby.” Kells shifted a well-chewed tobacco cud from one cheek to the other.

He could trust Kells, Drew thought. A little of his concern over Shadow eased. He shouldered the saddlebags and made his way back down the alley, beginning to see the merit in the liveryman’s suggestions. Food—and a bath! What he wouldn’t give for a bath! Hay to sleep on was fine; he had had far worse beds during the past four years. But a hot bath to be followed by a meal which was not the jerky, corn meal, bitter coffee of trail cooking! His pace quickened into a trot but slackened again as he neared the Four Jacks and remembered all the precautions he must take in Tubacca.

In the big room of the cantina oil lamps made yellow pools of light. The man in the painted vest was seated at a table laying out cards in a complicated pattern of a solitaire game. And at one side a round-faced Mexican in ornate, south-of-the-border clothing held a guitar across one plump knee, now and then plucking absent-mindedly at a single string as he stared raptly into space. A third man stood behind the bar polishing thick glasses.

“Greetings!” As Drew stood blinking just within the doorway the card player rose. He was a tall, wide-shouldered man, a little too thin for his height. Deep lines in his clean-shaven face bracketed his wide mouth. His curly hair was a silvery blond, and he had dark, deeply set eyes. “I’m Reese Topham, owner of this oasis,” he introduced himself.

“Drew Kirby.” He must remember that always—he was Drew Kirby, a Texan schooled with kinfolk in Kentucky, who served in the war under Forrest and was now drifting west, as were countless other rootless Confederate veterans. Actually the story was close enough to the truth. And he had had months on the trail from San Antonio to Santa Fe, then on to Tucson, to study up on any small invented details. He was Drew Kirby, Texan, not Drew Rennie of Red Springs, Kentucky.

“For a man just off the trail, Kirby, the Four Jacks does have a few of the delights of civilization. A bath....” One of Topham’s dark eyebrows, so in contrast to his silvery hair, slid up inquiringly, and he grinned at Drew’s involuntary but emphatic nod. “One of nature’s gifts

to our fair city is the hot spring. Hamilcar!” His hand met table top in a sharp slap. The Mexican jerked fully awake and looked around. From the back of the cantina emerged a middle-aged Negro.

“Yes, Mistuh Reese, suh?”

“Customer for you, Hamilcar. I would judge he wants the full treatment. This, Mister Kirby, is the best barber, valet, and general aid to comfort in town, the sultan of our bath. Hamilcar, Mister Kirby would like to remove the layers of dust he has managed to pick up. Good luck to you both!”

Drew found himself laughing as he followed Hamilcar to the rear of the building.

Topham had reason to be proud of his bath, Drew admitted some time later. A natural hot spring might be the base of the luxury, but man’s labor had piped the water into stone-slab tubs and provided soap and towels. To sit and soak was a delight he had forgotten. He shampooed his unkempt head vigorously and allowed himself to forget all worries, wallowing in the sheer joy of being really clean again.

Hamilcar had produced a clean shirt and drawers from the saddlebags, even managing to work up a shadow of shine on the scuffed cavalry boots, and had beat the worst of the trail dust from the rest of the traveler’s clothing. Drew had re-dressed except for his gun belt when he heard a voice call from the next cubicle.

“Ham—Ham! You git yourself in here, ‘fore I skin that black hide—”

“Johnny!” Topham’s voice cut through the other’s thickened slur. “You soak that rot-gut out of you, and mind your tongue while you do it!”

“Sure, sure, Reese—” The voice was pitched lower this time, but to Drew the tone was more mocking than conciliatory. Drunk or sober, that stranger did not hold very kindly thoughts of Topham. But that was none of the Kentuckian’s business.

“Yore hat, suh.” Hamilcar brought in the well-brushed headgear, much more respectable looking than it had been an hour ago. The cord on it glistened. Army issue—brave gold bullion—made for a general’s wearing. Drew straightened it, remembering....

Sergeant Rennie of the Scouts, in from an independent foray into enemy-held Tennessee, reporting to the Old Man himself—General Bedford Forrest. And Forrest saying:

“We don’t give medals, Sergeant. But I think a good soldier might just be granted a birthday present without any one gittin’ too excited about how military that is.” Then he had jerked the cord off his own hat and given it to Drew. It was something big to remember when you were only nineteen and had been soldiering three years, three years with a dogged army that refused to be beaten. That hat cord, the spurs on his boots, they were all he had brought home from war—save a tough body and a mind he hoped was as hard.

“Mighty pretty hat trimmin’, that, suh,” Hamilcar admired.

“Mighty big man wore it once.” Drew was still half in the past. “What do I owe you more’n the thanks of a mighty tired man you’ve turned out brand new again?” He smiled and was suddenly all boy.

“Foah bits, suh. An’ it was a pleasure to do fo’ a gentleman. It truly was. Come agin, suh—come, agin!”

Drew went down the corridor, his spurs answering with a chiming ring each time his heels met planking. Worn at Chapultepec by a Mexican officer, they had been claimed as spoils of war in ‘47 by a Texas Ranger. And in ‘61 the Ranger’s son, Anson Kirby, had jingled off in

them to another war. Then Kirby had disappeared during that last scout in Tennessee, vanishing into nowhere when he fell wounded from the saddle, smashing into a bushwhackers' hideout.

On a Sunday in May of '65, back in Gainesville, when Forrest's men had finally accepted surrender and the deadness of defeat, a Union trooper had worn those spurs into church. And Boyd Barrett had sold his horse the same day to buy back those silver bits because he knew what they meant to his cousin Drew. Now here Drew was, half the continent away from Gainesville and Tennessee, wearing Anse's spurs and half of Anse's name—to find a father he had not known was still alive, until last year.

The Kentuckian was sure of only one thing right now, he was not going to enter a town or a stretch of country where Hunt Rennie was *the* big man, and claim to be Rennie's unknown son. Maybe later he could come to a decision about his action. But first he wanted to be sure. There might well be no place for a Drew Rennie in Hunt Rennie's present life. They were total strangers and perhaps it must be left that way.

There was no reason for him to claim the kinship. He was independent. Drew Kirby had a mule and two good horses, maybe three by tomorrow. Aunt Marianna had insisted that he accept part of the Mattock estate, even though his Kentucky grandfather had left him penniless. He'd made his choice without hesitation: the colt Shiloh, the mare Shadow, and she bred to Storm Cloud for what should be a prize foal. His aunt had made him take more—gold in his money belt, enough to give him a start in the west. He was his own man, not Rennie's son, unless he chose....

Two more lamps had been lighted in the cantina. Drew sat down at a table. There was a swish of full skirts, and he looked up at a girl. She smiled as if she liked what she saw of this brown-faced stranger with quiet, disciplined features and eyes older than his years.

"You like, *señor* ... tequila ... whiskey ... food?"

"Food, *señorita*. You see a most hungry man."

She laughed and then frowned anxiously. "Ah, but, *señor*, this is a time when the cupboard is, as you would say, bare! When the wagons come—then what a difference! Now, tortillas, frijoles, maybe some fruit ... sweet for the tongue, like wine in the throat. Perhaps an egg—"

"To me that is a feast." Drew fell into the formal speech which seemed natural here. "You see one who has done his own trail cooking too long."

"Ah—*el pobrete*—poor man! Surely there will be an egg!" She was gone and Drew began covertly to study the other men in the room.

In any western town the cantina, or saloon, was the meeting place for masculine society. Even if Hunt Rennie did not appear bodily in the Four Jacks tonight, Drew could pick up information about his father merely by keeping open ears. As far away as Santa Fe he had heard of Rennie's Range and *Don* Cazar (the name the Mexicans had given its owner, Hunt Rennie).

Escaped from a Mexican prison in 1847, believing his wife and the son he had never seen to be dead, Hunt Rennie had gone west. In contrast to the tragedy of his personal life, whatever Rennie had turned his hand to in the new territory had prospered. A prospector he had grubstaked, found the Oro Cruz, one of the richest mines in the Tubacca hills. Rennie owned two freighting lines, one carrying goods to California, the other up from Sonora. And his headquarters in the fertile Santa Cruz Valley was a ranch which was also a fort, a fort even the Apaches avoided after they had suffered two overwhelming defeats there.



That was Rennie's Range—cultivated fields, fruit orchards, *manadas* of fine horses. *Don Cazar* supplied Tucson and the army posts with vegetables and superb hams. He had organized a matchless company of Pima Indian Scouts after the army pulled out in '61, had fought Apaches, but had sided with neither Union nor Confederate forces. During the war years he had more or less withdrawn within the borders of the Range, offering refuge to settlers and miners fleeing Indian attacks. *Don Cazar* was a legend now, and a man did not quickly claim kinship with a legend.

"Want a room, Kirby?" Topham paused beside his table.

"No. I have to stay close to the mare."

"Yes. I can understand that. Kells is good with horses, so you needn't worry. Ever raced that colt of yours?"

"Not officially." Drew smiled. There was that lieutenant with the supply wagons. The man hadn't talked so loudly about Johnny Rebs after Shiloh showed his heels to the roan the soldiers had bragged up.

"This is a sporting town when the wagons come in, and they're due tomorrow. Johnny Shannon just rode in to report. Might be some racing. You aim to stay on in Tubacca?"

"Have to until Shadow can trail again. How's the prospect for a job?"

"With cattle—horses—teaming?"

"Horses, I guess."

"Well, *Don Cazar*—Rennie—runs the best *manadas*. You might hit him for work. He'll be riding in to meet the wagons. Carmencita, did you bring all that was left of the supplies?" Topham's quizzical eyebrows lifted in greeting to the waitress's loaded tray. "I'd say, young man, that you are facing a full-time job now, getting all that inside of you."

Drew ate steadily, consuming eggs and beans, tortillas, and fruit. Topham joined three men at the next table, substantial town citizens, Drew judged. The owner of the cantina raised his glass.

"Gentlemen, I give you another successful trading trip!"

"Saw Johnny ride in," one of the men returned. "Kid seems to be settlin' down, ain't he? That ought to be good news for Rennie."

"One believes in reformations when they are proven by time, *Señor Cahill*," the man wearing rich but somber Spanish clothing replied.

"It sure must go hard with a man to have his son turn out a wild one," commented the third.

Drew's cup was at his lips, but he did not drink. Whose son? Rennie's?

"No son by blood, that much comfort *Don Cazar* has. But foster ties are also strong. And the boy is still very young—"

"A rattler with only one button on the tail carries as much poison as a ten-button one. Rennie ought to cut losses and give that kid the boot. The way he's going he could involve Hunt in a real mess," Cahill said.

"You are *Don Cazar*'s good friend, *Don Reese*, his *compadre* of many years. Can you not do something?"

“*Don* Lorenzo, all men have blind spots. And Johnny Shannon is Rennie’s. Bob Shannon helped free Hunt out of Mex prison in the war and was killed doing it. Soon as Hunt set up here he sent for the boy and tried to give him a father.”

“It is a great pity he has no child of his own blood. I have seen him stand here in Tubacca giving toys and candy to the little ones. Yet he has only this wild one under his roof, and perhaps that Juanito will break his heart in the end...”

Drew put down his cup. It was very hard not to turn and ask questions. Dropping some coins on the table, he rose and started back to the stable, to the world of Shiloh and Shadow where he was unable to betray Drew Rennie. But there was so much Drew Kirby must learn—and soon!

## 2

Two lighted lanterns hung from pegs along the center of the stable, and Callie had mounted a barrel to put up a third as Drew entered. There were the soft peaceful sounds of horses crunching fodder, hoofs rustling in straw. Shadow turned her head and nickered as Drew came up to her box stall. She was answered by a blowing from Shiloh, a bray out of Croaker.

“It’s all right, girl—pretty lady—” Drew fondled her mane, stroked the satin-smooth arch of neck. Callie dropped from his barrel perch.

“She sure is right purty, Mister Kirby. Mister Kells said as to tell you he’s sleepin’ on a cot in th’ tack room over there, should you be needin’ him.” Callie pointed. “Me, I’m beddin’ down in the last stall. I put your gear up right over here, so’s you can hear if she gits to movin’—”

“Thanks.” Drew felt in a pocket, tossed Callie the coin his fingers found.

The boy caught the piece, his eyes round as he looked at it. “Lordy! Thanks, Mister Kirby! You must be near as shiny as *Don Cazar*—or Mister Topham!”

“Shiny?”

Callie laughed. “Silver-shiny! Ain’t too many men as goes round Tubacca throwin’ out good money thataway. ‘Less it’s ringin’ down on th’ bar, or slidin’ ‘cross some table ‘cause they found out as how they was holdin’ Jacks against some other fella’s Kings. You want anything—you jus’ holler, Mister Kirby!”

“Mister?” Drew thought he did not have the advantage of Callie by more than four or five years.

“Oh—Captain Kirby, maybe? Or Lieutenant? Johnny Shannon—now he was a lieutenant with Howard’s Rangers.” Callie gave Drew a shrewd measuring look.

“Sergeant.” Drew corrected automatically and then asked: “How did you know I’d been in the army?”

“Well, you wear them two shootin’ irons army style, belted high an’ butt to front. Must use a flip-hand draw as do all th’ hoss soldiers. Listen, Mister Kirby, iffen you rode with th’ Rebs, you better keep your lip buttoned up when th’ Blue Bellies hit town. There’s been a pile of fightin’ an’ folks is gittin’ mad ‘bout it—”

“Blue Bellies?” Drew was wrenched back months, a year, by that old army slang. “Union troops stationed here?” He had unconsciously tensed, his body responding nerve and muscle to past training and alarms. But there were no Yanks or Rebs any more, no riders or marchers in blue and gray—just United States troops.

“There’s a garrison out to the Mesa camp. An’ Cap’n Bayliss, he don’t take kindly to Rebs. You see, it’s this way.... Out in th’ breaks there’s a bunch of Rebs-leastways they claim as how they’s Rebs—still holdin’ out. They hit an’ run, raidin’ ranches an’ mines; they held up a coach a while back. An’ so far they’ve ridden rings round th’ cap’n. Now he thinks as how any Reb blowin’ in town could be one of ‘em, comin’ to sniff out some good pickin’s. So anyone as can’t explain hisself proper to th’ cap’n gits locked up at camp till he can—”

“Trifle highhanded, ain’t he?”

“Well, th’ cap’n’s for law an’ order, an’ he’s army. But folks ain’t likin’ it too much. So far he’s been doin’ it though.”

Drew frowned. So even this far away from the scene of old battles the war still smoldered; the black bitterness of defeat was made harder by the victor. Drew's hand rubbed across the bulge beneath his shirt. In one pocket of the money belt were his papers, among them the parole written out in Gainesville which could prove he had ridden with General Forrest's command, far removed from any Arizona guerrilla force. But to produce that would change Drew Kirby to Drew Rennie, and that he did not want to do.

"I rode with General Forrest, attached to General Buford's Scouts," he said absently.

"General Forrest!" Callie glowed. "Lordy, Mister Kirby, that's sure somethin', it sure is! Only don't be sayin' that round Cap'n Bayliss neither. He has him a big hate for General Forrest—seems like Bayliss was a colonel once till th' General outsmarted him back east. An' there was a big smoke-up 'bout it. They cut th' cap'n's spurs for him, an' he ended th' war out here. Now he ain't no patient man; he's th' kind as uses his hooks hard when he's ridin'.

"You know, you sure can tell a lot 'bout a man when you give a look at his hoss after he's come off th' trail. That there Shiloh colt o' yours, an' this here lady hoss, an' that old mule ... anyone can see as how they's always been handled nice an' easy. They ain't got no spite 'gainst nobody as wants to rub 'em down an' give 'em a feed. But some hosses what git brung in here—they's white-eyed an' randy, does you give 'em a straight stare. For that there's always a reason. Mostly you can see what it is when you look good an' steady at th' men who was ridin' 'em!"

Drew laughed. "Glad I passed your test, Callie. Guess I'll turn in now. Been a long day travelin'—"

"Sure thing. An' from up there you can hear this little old mare, does she need you."

The Kentuckian's pack had been hoisted into the mow, and Callie had even humped up the fragrant hay to mattress his bedroll. A window was open to the night, and as Drew stretched out wearily, he could hear the distant tinkle of a guitar, perhaps from the Four Jacks. Somewhere a woman began to sing, and the liquid Spanish words lulled him asleep.

He roused suddenly, his hand flashing under his head before he returned to full consciousness, fingers tightening on the Colt he had placed there. Not the mare—no—rather the pound of running feet and then a cry....

"No, *señor*, no! *No es verdad*—it is not true! Teodoro, he meant no harm—!"

Drew scrambled to the window. Out in the alley below, three figures reeled in the circle of light afforded by the door lantern. The Kentuckian marked the upward swing of a quirt lash, saw a smaller shape fling up an arm in a vain attempt to ward off the blow. Another, the one who cried out, was belaboring the flogger with empty fists, and the voice was that of a girl!

To slide down the loft ladder was again nearer instinct than planned action. Shiloh snorted as Drew's boots rapped on the stable floor. The Kentuckian had no idea of the reason for that fight, but he ran out with the vague notion that an impartial referee was needed.

"You there—what's goin' on!" Sergeant Rennie came to life again in the snapped demand.

The one who fled the quirt came up against the side of the building almost shoulder to shoulder with Drew. And he was only a boy, about Callie's age, his black hair flopping over eyes wide with shock and fright. Drew's hand moved, and the lantern light glinted plainly on the barrel of the Colt. For a moment they were all still as if sight of the weapon had frozen them.

The attacker faced Drew directly. He was young and handsome, if you discounted a darkening bruise already puffing under one eye, a lip cut and swelling, a scowl twisting rather heavy brows and making an ugly square of his mistreated mouth.

“An’ who th’ devil are you?”

His voice was thick and slurred. Drew guessed that he had not only been in a fight but that he was partly drunk. Yet, as he faced the stranger eye to eye, the Kentuckian was as wary as he had been when bellying down a Tennessee ridge crest to scout a Yankee railroad blockhouse. He knew what he fronted; this was more than a drunken bully—a really dangerous man.

That queer little moment of silence lengthened, shutting the two of them up—alone. Drew could not really name the emotion he felt. Deliberately he tried to subdue the sensation as he turned to the girl.

“What’s the matter?”

At first glance he might have thought her a boy, for she wore hide breeches and boots, a man’s shirt now hanging loosely about her hips. She jerked her head, and a thick braid flopped from under her wide-brimmed hat.

“*Señor, por favor*—please—we have done no wrong. We are the Trinfans—Teodoro and me. Teodoro, he finds *Señor* Juanito’s purse in the road, he follows to give it back. He is not a *bandido*—he is not *espía*, a spy one. We are mustangers. Ask of *Don* Reese, of *Señor* Kells. Why, *Señor* Juanito, do you say Teodoro spy on you, why you hit him with the whip?”

“Not thief, not spy!” The boy beside Drew dropped a wealed hand from his face. “The man who says Teodoro Trinfan is *ladrón*—bad one—him I kill!”

Drew’s left arm swept out across the boy’s chest, pinning him back against the stable.

“Now, what’s your story?” the Kentuckian asked the man he fronted.

“An’ jus’ what’s all this smokin’ ‘bout?” Kells came out. “You, Shannon, what’re you doin’ here? Been drinkin’ again, fightin’, too, by th’ look of you.”

“*Señor* Kells.” The girl caught at the older man’s arm. “*Por favor, señor*, we are not thieves, not spies. We come after *Señor* Juanito because he dropped his purse. Then he see Teodoro coming, he not listen—he beat on him with quirt. You know, we are honest peoples!”

“Now then, Faquita, don’t you git so upset, gal!” She was wailing aloud, making no effort to wipe away the tears running down her cheeks. “Johnny, what kinda game you tryin’? You know these kids are straight; them an’ their ol’ man’s come to work th’ Range for wild ones on Rennie’s own askin’. Takin’ a quirt to th’ kid, eh?” Kells’ voice slid up the scale. “You sure have yourself a snootful tonight! Now you jus’ walk yourself outta here on th’ bounce. I’m doin’ th’ sayin’ of what goes on, on my own property.”

“You do a lotta sayin’, Kells.” The scowl was gone; Shannon’s battered mouth was actually smiling. But, Drew decided, he liked the scowl better than the smile and the tone of the voice accompanying it. “Some men oughtta put a hobble on their tongues. Sure, I know these young whelps an’ their pa too. Sniffin’ round where they ain’t wanted. An’ mustangers ain’t above throwin’ a sticky loop when they see a hoss worth it. We ain’t blind on th’ Range.” His head swung a little so he was looking at the girl. “You’d better hold that in mind, gal. Double R hosses have come up missin’ lately. It’s easy to run a few prime head south to do some moonlight tradin’ at th’ border. An’ we don’t take kindly to losin’ good stock!”

The boy lunged against Drew’s pinioning arm. “Now he says we are horse thieves! Tell that to us before the *Don* Cazar!”

Shannon curled the quirt lash about his wrist. “Don’t think I won’t, Mex! He don’t like havin’ his colt crop whittled down. You—” Those blue eyes, brilliant, yet oddly shallow and curtained, met Drew’s for the second time. “Don’t know who you are, stranger, but you had no call to mix in. I’ll be seein’ you. Kinda free with a gun, leastwise at showin’ it. As quick to back up your play?”

“Try me!” The words came out of Drew before he thought.

Why had he said that? He had never been one to pick a fight or take up a challenge. What was there about Shannon that prodded Drew this way? He’d met the gamecock breed before and had never known the need to bristle at their crowing. Now he was disturbed that Shannon could prick him so.

Odd, the other had been successfully turned from his purpose here. Yet now as he swung around and walked away down the alley Drew was left with a nagging doubt, a feeling that in some way or other Shannon had come off even in this encounter.... But how and why?

Teodoro spat. His sister tugged at Kells’ sleeve. “It is not true what he said. Why does he wish to make trouble?”

“Lissen, gal, an’ you, too, Teodoro—jus’ keep clear of Johnny Shannon when he’s on th’ prod that way. I’ve knowed that kid since he didn’t have muscle enough to pull a gun ‘less he took both hands to th’ job. But he’s not needin’ any two hands to unholster now. An’ he’s drinkin’ a lot—mean, ugly drunk, he is. Somethin’ must have riled him good tonight—”

“In the cantina there was a soldier from the camp,” Faquita volunteered. “They call names. He and *Señor* Juanito fight. *Don* Reese, he put them both out in the street. *Señor* Juanito he falls, drops purse. Teodoro picks it up, and we follow. When we try to give it back *Señor* Juanito yell, ‘spy,’ hit with whip. That is the truth, *por Dios*, the truth!”

“Yeah, sounds jus’ like Johnny these days. Him with a snootful an’ somebody yellin’ Reb and Yank. Some men can’t forgit an’ don’t seem to want to. Johnny sure takes it hard bein’ on th’ losin’ side—turned him dirt mean. Now, you kids, you stayin’ in town?”

“*Sí*.” Faquita nodded vigorously. “With *Tía* María.”

“Then you git there an’ stay clear of Johnny Shannon, *sabe*? No more trouble.”

“*Sí, Señor* Kells. You, *señor*,” she spoke to Drew, “to you we owe a big debt. Come, Teodoro!” She caught at her brother and pulled him away.

“What makes a kid go sour?” Kells asked of the shadows beyond rather than of Drew.

“Johnny warn’t no real trouble ‘fore he skinned off to ride with Howard. Sure he was always a wild one, but no more’n a lotta kids. An’ he’d answer th’ lead rein. ‘Course we don’t know what happened to him in Texas after th’ big retreat th’ Rebs made outta here. Could be he larned a lot what was no good. Now he sops up whisky when he hits town an’ picks fights, like he didn’t git his belly full of that in th’ war. You can’t never tell how a kid’s gonna turn out.”

“Hey! Mister Kirby, you better git in here!” Callie hailed from the stable. “Th’ mare ... she’s....”

Drew jammed the Colt under his belt and ran.

The scent of hay, of grain, of horse.... Drew’s head rolled on the pillow improvised from hay and blanket as sun lay hot across his face. He rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes and then came fully awake to remember the night before.

It took only a minute to get down the ladder into Shadow's stall where a broom tail jiggled up and down above absurdly long baby legs and small rounded haunches. Shadow's small daughter breakfasted. Callie squatted on his heels near-by watching the process benignly.

"Ain't she 'bout th' best-favored filly you ever saw?" he asked. "How come all your hosses is grays? Shiloh her pa?"

Drew shook his head. "No, her sire's Storm Cloud. But all that line are grays."

"This Storm Cloud, he's a runnin' hoss?"

"About the runnin'est horse in his part of the country, Callie. This filly ought to pick up her heels some, if she takes after her dam and sire."

"What you namin' her?"

Up to that moment Drew had not really thought about it. The crisp air blowing into the stable, carrying something beside the scents of the town, gave him a suggestion.

"How about Sage, Callie?"

The boy thought seriously and then nodded. "Yeah—Sage. That's gray an' it's purty, smells good, too."

Drew pulled up his shirt, dug into the pocket of the money belt for the horse papers. "Got a pencil—or better—pen and ink around here anywhere?"

"Mister Kells, he keeps ledgers over in th' tack room. Got some ink an' a pen there. How come you need that? You ain't makin' out no bill of sale on her already, are you?" Callie was shocked.

"Hardly. Just want to put her down right and proper on the tally sheet."

The boy followed to watch Drew make the record on the margin of Shadow's papers. As the Kentuckian explained, Callie was deeply interested.

"You mean as how you can tell way back jus' what hosses bred your hosses? That's sure somethin'! Round here we knows a good hoss, but we ain't always sure of his pa, not if he's wild stuff."

"Lots of wild horses hereabouts then?"

"Sure. Some're jus' mustangs; other's good stuff gone wild—run off by th' 'Paches an' broke loose, or got away from a 'wet hoss' band—"

"'Wet horse' band?"

Callie glanced at him a little sharply. "How come you ain't knowin' 'bout 'wet hosses'? Heard tell as how they have 'em that same trouble down Texas way—"

"But I don't come from the border country."

"Well, Texas sure is a great big piece o' country, so maybe you don't know 'bout them river tricks. Wet hosses—they's hosses what is run off up here, driven down to th' border where they's swapped for hosses what some Mex *bandidos* have thrown a sticky loop over. Then th' Mexes take them Anglo hosses south an' sell 'em, where their brands ain't gonna git nobody into noose trouble. An' th' stolen Mex hosses, they's drove up here an' maybe sold to some of th' same fellas what lost th' others. Hosses git themselves lost 'long them back-country trails, specially if they's pushed hard. So them strays join up with th' wild ones. Iffen a mustanger can rope him one an' bring it in ... well, if it's a good one, maybe so he'll git a

reward from th' man what's lost him. Heard tell that *Don* Cazar, he's set some good rewards on a coupla studs as was run off th' Range this summer."

"*Don* Cazar has good horses?"

"'Bout th' best in these here parts. He runs 'em on th' Range th' old style—stud an' twenty—twenty-five mares together in a *manada*, all one color to a band. They sure is a grand sight: band o' roans, then one o' duns, an' some blacks. He's got one *manada* all of grullas. Sells some to th' army, drives more clear to Californy. An' th' old *Dons* down in Sonora come up once in a while to pick them out some fancy saddle stock. He sure would enjoy seem' these grays o' yours. Iffen you ever want to sell, *Don* Cazar'd give you top price."

"But I'm not sellin'." Drew folded the piece of paper he had been waving to dry the ink and put it back in the belt pocket. "What's that?"

He could almost believe he heard an army bugle, but the call it sounded was unlike any cavalry signal he had known. Callie was already on his way to the door.

"Wagon train's comin'!" he cried as he ran out.

Drew lingered by Shadow's box. The filly was resting in the straw, her match-stick legs folded under her, and the mare was munching the extra feed of oats the Kentuckian had tipped in for her. He could hear the sound of other running feet outside. It would seem that all Tubacca was turning out to welcome the wagon train of traders from the south. Drew's curiosity got the better of him. He went on out to the plaza.



## 3

Only a well-armed and convoyed set of wagons with a highly experienced and competent master could dare travel the Apache-infested trails these days. The first of the freighters, pulled by a sixteen-mule team, fairly burst into the plaza, outriders fanning about it. One of the mounted men was dressed in fringed buckskin, his shoulder-length hair and bushy black beard the badge of a frontier already passing swiftly into history. He rode a big black mule and carried a long-barreled rifle, not in the saddle boot, but resting across the horn as if even here in Tubacca there might be reason for instant action.

The mule trotted on to the middle of the plaza. Then the weapon pointed skyward as its owner fired into the air, voicing a whoop as wild as the Rebel Yell from the throat of a charging Texas trooper.

He was answered by cries and shouts from the gathering crowd as five more wagons, each with a trailer hooked to its main bulk, pulled in around the edge of the open area, until the center of the town was full and the din of braying mules was deafening.

Drew retreated to the roofed entrance of the Four Jacks. The extra step of height there enabled him to get a good look at two more horsemen pushing past the end wagon. Both wore the dress of Mexican gentlemen, their short jackets glinting with silver braid and embroidery; their bridles, horse gear, and saddles were rich in scrolls and decorations of the same metal. Navajo blankets lay under the saddles, and serapes were folded over the shoulder of one rider, tied behind the cantle of the other.

They pulled up before the cantina, and one man took the reins of both mounts. If the riders' clothing and horse furnishings were colorful, the horses themselves were equally striking. One was a chestnut, a warm, well-groomed red. But the other ... Drew stared. In all his years about the stables and breeding farms of Kentucky, and throughout his travels since, he had never seen a horse like this. Its coat was pure gold, a perfect match to one of the eagles in his money belt. But the silky locks of mane and tail were night black. Its breeding was plainly Arab, and it walked with a delicate pride as gracefully as a man might foot a dance measure.

Drew had a difficult time breaking his gaze from the horse to the man dismounting. The ranchero was tall, perhaps an inch or so taller than Drew, and his body had the leanness of the men who worked the range country, possessing, too, a lithe youthfulness of carriage. Until one looked directly into his sun-browned face he could pass as a man still in his late twenties.

But he was older, perhaps a decade older than that, Drew thought. Too high and prominent cheekbones with slight hollows below them, and a mouth tight set, made more for strength of will and discipline of feeling than conventional good looks. Yet his was a face not easily forgotten, once seen. Black hair was pepper-salted for a finger-wide space above his ears, which were fronted by long sideburns, and black brows were straight above dark eyes. In spite of his below-the-border dress and his coloring, he was unmistakably Anglo, just as the man looping both horses' reins to the rack was Mexican.

"So, you're still wearing your hair in good order? No trouble this trip?" Topham had come to the door of the cantina, his hand outstretched. "Welcome back, Hunt!"

"Paugh!" The Mexican spat. "Where is there one Indio who is able to face *Don Cazar* on his own ground? The folly of that they learned long ago."

*Don Cazar* smiled. That mask of aloofness was wiped away as if he were ten years younger and twenty years less responsible than he had been only seconds earlier. “And if they did not beware our rifles, Bartolomé here would talk them to death! Is that not so, *amigo*?” His speech was oddly formal, as if he were using a language other than his own, but there was a warmth to the tone which matched that sudden and surprising smile.

Topham’s arm went about the shoulders under the black-and-silver jacket, drawing *Don Cazar* into the light, music, and excitement of the cantina. While Drew watched, the stouter back of Bartolomé cut off his first good look at his father.

So ... *that was Don Cazar*—*Hunt Rennie*! Drew did not know what he had expected of their first meeting. Now he could not understand why he felt so chilled and lost. He had planned it this way—no demands, no claims on a stranger, freedom to make the decision of when or how he would see his father; that was the only path he could take. But now he turned slowly away from that open door, the light, the laughter and singing, and walked back toward the stable, loneliness cutting into him.

Tubacca had slumbered apathetically before; now the town was wide awake. In a couple of days the wagon train would head on north to Tucson, but now the activity in the plaza was a mixture of market day and fiesta. Small traders from Sonora took advantage of the protection afforded by *Don Cazar*’s outriders and had trailed along with their own products, now being spread out and hawked.

Parrots shrieked from homemade cages; brightly woven fabrics were draped to catch the eye. As he wandered about viewing cactus syrup, sweet, brown panocha-candy, fruit, dried meat, blankets, saddles, Drew was again aware of the almost strident color of this country. He fingered appreciatively a horn goblet carved with intricate figures of gods his Anglo eyes did not recognize. The hum of voices, the bray of mules, the baa-ing and naa-ing of sheep and goats, kept up a roar to equal surf on a seacoast. Afternoon was fast fading into evening, but Tubacca, aroused from the post-noon siesta, was in tumult.

A fighting cock tethered to a cart wheel stretched its neck to the utmost in an attempt to peck at Drew’s spurs. He laughed, attracted, wrenched out of his own private world. The smell of spicy foods, of fruit, of animals and people ... the clamor ... the sights....

Drew rounded one end of a wagon and stepped abruptly into yet another world and time. All the stories which had been dinned warningly into his ears since he had left the Mississippi now brought his hand to one of the Colts at his belt. Most of the half-dozen men squatting on their heels about a fire were three-quarters bare, showing dusty, brown bodies. Two had dirty calico shirts loose above hide breech-clouts. Dark-brown eyes, as unreadable as Johnny Shannon’s, surveyed Drew, but none of the Indians moved or spoke.

Common sense took over, and Drew’s hand dropped from the gun butt. Hostiles would not be camping peacefully here in the heart of town. He could not be facing wild Apaches or Navajos. But they were the first Indians he had seen this close since he had ridden out of Texas.

“Somethin’ buggin’ you, boy?”

Drew’s war-trained muscles took over. He was in a half crouch, the Colt flipped over and out, pointing into the shadows where the newcomer emerged. Then the Kentuckian flushed and slammed his weapon back into the holster. This was the buckskinned man who had whooped the train into town that morning.

“Mite quick to show your iron, ain’t you?” There was a chill in the question, and Drew saw that the long rifle was still held at alert by its owner.

“Cat-footin’ up on a man ought to make you expect somethin’ of a reception,” Drew countered.

“Yep, guess some men has sure got ‘em a bellyful of lead doin’ that.” To Drew’s surprise the other was now grinning. “You huntin’ someone?”

“No, just lookin’ around.” Drew longed to ask some things himself, but hesitated. Frontier etiquette was different from Kentucky custom; it was safer to be quiet when not sure.

“Wal, thar’s aplenty to see tonight, right enough. Me—I’m Crow Fenner; I ride scout fur th’ train. An’ these here—they’re Rennie’s Pimas, what o’ ‘em is runnin’ th’ trail this trip.”

So these were the famous Pima Scouts! No wonder they took their ease in the Tubacca plaza. Every man, woman, and child in those adobe buildings had reason to be thankful for their skill and cunning—the web of protection Rennie’s Pima Scouts had woven in this river valley.

“I’m Kirby, Drew Kirby.” He hastened to match one introduction with another. “This is my first time in the valley—”

“From th’ east, eh?”

“Texas.”

“Texas...” Something in the way Fenner repeated that made it sound not like a confirmation but a question. Or was Drew overly suspicious? After all, as Callie had agreed last night, the late Republic of Texas was a very large strip of country, housing a multitude of native sons, from the planting families of the Brazos to the ranchers in crude cabins of the Brasado. There were Texans and Texans, differing greatly in speech, manners, and background. And one did not ask intimate questions of a man riding west of the Pecos. Too often he might have come hunting a district where there was a longer distance between sheriffs. What a man volunteered about his past was accepted as the truth.

“Rode a far piece then,” Fenner commented. “Me, I’ve been trailin’ round this here country since th’ moon was two-bit size. An’ I ain’t set my moccasins on all o’ it yet. Thar’s parts maybe even an Injun ain’t seed neither. You jus’ outta th’ army, son?”

Drew nodded. Apparently he could not escape that part of his past, and there was no reason to deny it.

“Iffen you be huntin’ a job—*Don Cazar*, he’s always ready to hire on wagon guards. Any young feller what knows how to handle a gun, he’s welcome—”

“Can’t leave Tubacca, at least for now. Have me a mare over in the livery that just foaled. I’m not movin’ until she’s ready to travel—”

“Must be right good stock,” Fenner observed. “Me, I has me a ridin’ mule as kin smell Apaches two miles off. Two, three times that thar mule saved m’ skin fur me. Got Old Tar when he turned up in a wild-hoss corral th’ mustangers set over in th’ Red River country—”

“I saw him when you rode into town. Good-lookin’ animal.”

Crow Fenner nodded vigorously. “Shore is, shore is. *Don Cazar*, he’s partial to good stock— favors Tar, too. Th’ *Don* has him a high-steppin’ hoss every hoss thief in this here territory’d like to run off. Bright yaller—”

“Saw that one, too. Unusual colorin’ all right.”

“He put a white stud—white as milk—to run with some light buckskin mares back ‘fore th’ war. First colt out of that thar breedin’ was that Oro hoss. Never got ‘nother like him; he’s

special. Shows his heels good, too. They's gonna race him out on th' flats tomorrow if anyone is fool 'nough to say as he has a hoss as can beat Oro. Thar's always some greenhorn as thinks he has—"

"Oh?" Drew wondered aloud. The black-and-gold horse was beautiful and plainly of good breeding. That he was also a runner was not out of the question. But that Oro could best Gray Eagle-Ariel stock on the track, Drew doubted. There were unbroken records set on eastern tracks by horses in Shiloh's direct blood line. And the local talent that had been matched against Oro in the past had probably not been much competition. The Kentuckian began to speculate about a match between the gray stallion and the horse foaled on the Arizona range.

"Yep, we'll see some race, does anyone turn up with a hoss t' match Oro."

One of the shirted Indians rose to his feet. With rifle sloped over forearm, he padded into the dark. Fenner's relaxed posture tensed into alert readiness. His head turned, his attitude now one of listening concentration. Drew strained to see or hear what lay beyond. But the noise from the plaza and torchlight made a barrier for eye and ear.

Fenner's rifle barrel dropped an inch or so; he stood easy again. Drew heard a jingle of metal, the creak of saddle leather, the pound of shod hoofs.

"Soldiers!" Fenner sniffed. "Wonder what they's doin', hittin' town now. Wal, that ain't no hair off m' skull. Me, I'm gonna git Tar his treat. Promised him some time back he could have a bait o' oats—oats an' salt, an' jus' a smidgen o' corn cake. That thar mule likes t' favor his stomach. Kells, he ought t' have them vittles put together right 'bout now. This mare o' yourn what's so special, young feller.... Me, I'd like t' see a hoss what's got to be took care of like she was a bang-up lady!"

He put two fingers to his lips and whistled. A mule head, attached to a rangy mule body, weaved forward to follow dog-at-heel fashion behind the scout.

A squad of blue coats was riding in—an officer and six men. They threaded their way to the cantina where the officer dismounted and went inside. The troopers continued to sit their saddles and regard the scene about them wistfully.

"Looks like a duty patrol," Fenner remarked. "Maybe Cap'n Bayliss. He's gittin' some biggety idear as how it's up t' him t' police this here town. Does he start t' crow too loud, *Don Cazar* or Reese Topham'll cut his spurs. Maybe he sets up th' war shield an' does th' shoutin' back thar in front o' all them soldier boys. In this town he ain't no gold-lace general!"

"Troops and the town not friendly?" Drew asked.

"Th' soldiers—they ain't no trouble. Some o' 'em have their heads screwed on straight an' know what they's doin' or tryin' t' do. But a lot o' them officers now—they come out here wi' biggety idears 'bout how t' handle Injuns, thinkin' they knows all thar's t' be knowed 'bout fightin'—an' them never facin' up to a Comanche in war paint, let alone huntin' 'Paches. 'Paches, they know this here country like it was part o' their own bodies—can say 'Howdy-an'-how's-all-th'-folks, bub?' t' every lizard an' snake in th' rocks. Ain't no army gonna pull 'em out an' make 'em fight white-man style.

"*Don Cazar*—he goes huntin' 'em when they've come botherin' him an' does it right. But he knows you think Injun, you live Injun, you eat Injun, you smell Injun when you do. They don't leave no more trail than an ant steppin' high, 'less they want you should foller them into a nice ambush as they has all figgered out. Put Greyfeather an' his Pimas on 'em an' then leg it till your belly's near meetin' your backbone an' you is all one big tired ache. Iffen you

kin drink sand an' keep on footin' it over red-hot rocks when you is nigh t' a bag o' bones, then maybe—jus' maybe—you kin jump an Apache. Comanches, now, an' Cheyenne an' Kiowa an' Sioux ride out to storm at you—guns an' arrows all shootin'—wantin' to count coup on a man by hittin' him personal. But th' 'Pache ain't wastin' hisself that way. Nope—git behind a rock an' ambush ... put th' whole hell-fired country t' work fur them. That's how th' 'Pache does his fightin'. An' th' spit-an'-polish officers what come from eastward—they's got t' larn that. Only sometimes they ain't good at larnin', an' then they gits larned—good an' proper. Hey, Kells!"

They were at the stable and Fenner lifted a hand, palm out, in greeting to the liveryman. "Here's Ole Tar wantin' his special grub—"

Drew went on to Shiloh's stall. Reese Topham, the Spaniard *Don* Lorenzo who had been in the cantina last night, the stout Mexican Bartolomé, and *Don* Cazar himself were all there before him.

"Here he is now." Reese Topham waved a hand at Drew. "This is Mister Kirby, from Texas."

"You have a fine horse there, Kirby—the mare, too. Eastern stock, I would judge, perhaps Kentucky breeding?" Rennie asked.

Drew was taut inside. To say the wrong thing, to admit the line of that breeding, might be a bad slip. Yet he could only evade, not lie directly.

"Yes, Kentucky." He answered the first words his father had ever addressed to him.

"And the line?"

To be too evasive would invite suspicion. However, the Gray Eagle get was in more than one Kentucky stable.

"Eclipse...." Drew set back the pedigree several equine generations. Shiloh tossed his head, looked over his shoulder at Drew, who entered the stall and began quieting the stallion with hands drawn gently over the back and up the arch of the neck.

"The mare also?" *Don* Cazar continued.

"Yes." The Kentuckian's answer sounded curt in his own ears, but he could not help it.

"This Eclipse, *amigo*," *Don* Lorenzo turned to Rennie for enlightenment—"he was a notable horse?"

"*Sí*, of the Messenger line. But a gray of that breeding—" *Don* Cazar's forefinger ran nail point along his lower lip. "Ariel blood, perhaps?"

Drew busied himself adjusting Shiloh's hackamore. This was getting close. Hunt Rennie had lived in Kentucky over a year once. He had visited Red Springs many times before he had dared to court Alexander Mattock's daughter and been forbidden the place. His visits to the stable must have familiarized him with the Gray Eagle-Ariel strain bred there. On the other hand, horses of the same combination were the pride of several other families living around Lexington.

"A racing line of high blood," *Don* Lorenzo said thoughtfully. "*Sí*, this one has the pride, the appearance. You have raced him, *señor*?" he asked Drew with formal courtesy.

"Not on any real track, *señor*. During the war there were no races."

"He wasn't a cavalry mount?" *Don* Cazar looked surprised.

“No, suh. Too young for that. He was foaled on April sixth in sixty-two. That’s why they called him Shiloh.”

There was a moment of silence, broken by a hail from the door.

“You there—Rennie!”

Drew saw the involuntary spasm of *Don Cazar*’s lips, the shadow of an expression which might mean he anticipated a distasteful scene to come. But the quirk disappeared as he turned to face the man in the blue uniform.

“Captain Bayliss.” It was acknowledgment rather than a greeting, delivered in a cool tone.

“I want to see you, Rennie!” The officer stamped forward a step or so, to stand in the full light of the first lantern. He was of medium height, and his blue blouse had been cut by a good tailor, though now it was worn. He was a good-looking man, though jowly about the mouth, above which a closely cropped mustache bristled. His color was high under a pink skin which in this hot country must burn painfully. And there was the permanent stamp of uncertain temper in the lines about his prominent eyes.

## 4

“So, you see me, Bayliss,” *Don Cazar* returned evenly. “There is some trouble?”

Bartolomé shifted from one foot to the other, his spurs ringing. *Don Lorenzo*’s expression was one of withdrawal, but on the round countenance of the Mexican was open dislike.

The sun-reddened skin flushed darker. “All right, Rennie!” the captain exploded. “If you want it straight, that’s the way you’re going to get it! You’ve been hiring Rebs again!”

Once before Drew had seen explosive anger curbed visibly by a man who knew the folly of losing control over his emotions. It had been on a hilltop back in Tennessee, with the storm clouds of January overhead. General Bedford Forrest, watching men driven to the limit by necessity and his own orders, had looked just that way when he had rounded on Drew, bearing news of yet another break-through by the Federals. Now it was this Anglo wearing Spanish dress and standing in a dim stable, reining temper to meet the open hostility of the captain.

“Captain Bayliss.” The words sounded as remote as if the speaker bestrode some peak of the Chiricahuas to address a pygmy in a canyon below. “I know of no law which states that I may not employ whom I choose on my own land. If a man does his job and makes no trouble, his past does not matter. I am as ready to fire a former Union soldier as I am a Confederate—”

“I tell you again: I’m not going to have Rebs around here passing on information to Kitchell!”

“And *I* say once again, Captain, that men who ride for me do not in addition ride for Kitchell.”

“*Si—!*” Bartolomé’s face was as flushed as Bayliss’ now. “We do not help those *bandidos*. Do they not also raid us? Two weeks ago Francisco Perez, his horse comes in with blood on the saddle. We ride out and find him—shot, dragged with the rope. That is not Apache trick, that, but the work of Kitchell and his snakes!”

“Peace, *amigo*.” *Don Cazar*’s raised finger silenced his man. “Bartolomé is right, Bayliss. Kitchell is beginning to nibble at the Range. He has not many sources of supply left. Soon he will either have to cross the border to stay or make some reckless raid which will give us a chance at him.”

“These damned Rebs around here will keep him going! You can’t tell me they don’t back him every chance they get. And I’m warning you, Rennie, if you hire any man you can’t answer for, he’s going to the stockade and you’ll hear about it from the army!”

“And you also listen, Captain. I will not be dictated to, and the army had best understand that. I do not want Kitchell in this country any more than you do. He has made a boast of being Confederate leading what he terms Mounted Irregulars. But to my knowledge he never held a commission from the South, and he is nothing but an outlaw trading on the unsettled state of the territory. That is recognized by every decent man in Arizona. And that covers those you call ‘Rebels’ as well as former Union men.”

Bayliss was silent for a long second, and then he jerked his hat farther down on his peeling forehead. “You’ve had notice, Rennie, that’s all I have to say. I’m going to clear all the Rebs out of this section. Then we will be able to get at Kitchell, and the army will settle him for good and all!”

“Bayliss!” The captain had half turned, but *Don Cazar*’s call halted him. “Don’t you try harassing any of my riders. They mind their business and will not make any trouble as long as they are left in peace. If there are any problems in town, *Don Lorenzo Sierra*, here, is the alcalde and they must be referred to him.”

The captain favored Rennie with a last glare and was gone. Tobe Kells spoke first.

“That one’s chewin’ th’ bit an’ gittin’ ready to hump under th’ saddle. This business of tryin’ to run out th’ Rebs, it’ll cause smokin’!”

“He has no right to give such an order,” *Don Cazar* was beginning when the alcalde interrupted:

“*Compadre*, for a man such as that your talk of rights means nothing. He is eaten by the need to impress his will here, and that will bring trouble. I do not like what I have heard, no, I do not like it at all.”

“You know what may be really eating at him this time, Hunt?” Topham spoke from where he was leaning against the wall of Shadow’s box stall. “Johnny was throwing his weight around again last night. Had a set-to in the Jacks with a trooper. Unless the kid quits trying to fight the war over again every time he sees an army blouse—or until he stops pouring whisky down him every time he hits town—there may be shooting trouble. There’re some equal hot-heads in Bayliss’ camp, and if Johnny goes up against one of them, a scuffle could become a battle.”

“Yeah, an’ that warn’t all Johnny was doin’ last night.” Kells shifted his tobacco cud from one cheek to the other. “Iffen Kirby here hadn’t been to hand, Johnny would have skinned th’ Trinfan kid with his quirt—jus’ ‘cause he dropped his purse outside th’ Jacks an’ th’ kid followed him to give it back. Johnny’s meaner than a drunk Injun these days. That’s Bible-swear truth, Rennie.”

“To lose a war makes a man bitter,” *Don Cazar* said slowly. “Johnny was far too young when he ran away to join Howard. And after that defeat at Glorieta, the retreat to Texas was pure hell with the fires roaring. It seems to have done something to the boy—inside.”

“Johnny wasn’t the only boy at Glorieta. From what I’ve heard most of them weren’t old enough to grow a good whisker crop.” Topham’s voice had lost its detached note. “And he sure wasn’t the only Confederate to surrender. Hunt, he’s got to learn that losing a war doesn’t mean that a man has lost the rest of his life. But the way he’s been acting these past months, Johnny might just lose it. Bayliss’ tongue is hanging out a yard or more he’s panting so hard to get back at you. That captain has heady ambitions under his hat, maybe like setting up here as a tinpot governor or something like. If he can discredit you, well, he probably thinks he’s got a chance to rake in the full pot, and it’s a big one. Get Johnny back on the Range, Hunt—put him to work, hard. Sweat that sour temper and whisky out of him. He used to be a promising youngster; now he’s turning bronco fast. All he seems to have learned in the war is how to use those guns of his to lord it over anyone he believes he can push around. And someday he’ll try to push the wrong man—”

*Don Cazar* was staring ahead of him now at Drew and Shiloh. But Drew knew that Hunt Rennie was not seeing either man or horse, but a mental picture which was not too pleasing.

“He’s just a boy.” Rennie did not utter that as an excuse; rather he said it as if to reassure himself. Then his eyes really focused on Drew, and he changed the subject abruptly.

“Kirby, when the train comes in we sometimes set up a race or two. Any thought of trying your colt against some of the local champions?”



“Oro perhaps?” Drew counter-questioned.

Rennie laughed. “Oh, so you’ve been talking, Fenner?”

The scout came away from where Tar was still very audibly munching his treat. “Didn’t know as how th’ younker had him a runnin’ hoss, *Don Cazar*.” He inspected Shiloh critically. “But that thar sure looks a lotta hoss. ‘Course maybe he ain’t used t’ runnin’ out here whar th’ ground ain’t made all nice an’ easy fur his feet. But I dunno, I dunno at all.”

“Anyway he’ll give Oro stiffer competition than he’s had in the last two races. Unless that Lieutenant Spath up at the camp tries again with that long-legged black of his,” Topham added. “What about it, Kirby? You willing to match Shiloh?”

“He’s green, but, yes, I’ll do it.”

Drew’s motives were mixed. His pride in the colt had been pushing him toward such a trial ever since he had heard Fenner speak of Oro. In addition, as the owner of a noted horse, he would take a place in this community, establish his identity as Drew Kirby. And in some way he could not define, this put him, at least in his own mind, on an equal footing with *Don Cazar*.

But by the next morning a few doubts troubled him as he tightened saddle cinches on the stallion. Shiloh’s only races so far had been impromptu matches along the trail. Though the colt had been consistently the victor, none of his rivals had been in his class. And if Oro’s speed was as striking as his coloring, the Range stud would prove a formidable opponent.

“Walk him up and down here by the corral.” The Kentuckian handed the reins to Callie. “Got something I have to do.”

Drew went directly to the Four Jacks. This time the cantina was filled, with a double row of the thirsty demanding attention at the bar. But Topham was seated at a table with *Don Lorenzo* and *Zack Cahill* of the stage line. The Kentuckian went over to them.

“You have come to back your horse, *señor*?” *Don Lorenzo* smiled up at Drew. There were piles of coins on the table as *Cahill* listed bets for the men crowding around.

“Yes, suh.” Drew spun down two double eagles. “What’re the odds?”

“Started six to one for Oro,” Topham told him. “Coasted down after a few of the boys had a look at Shiloh. Can give you four to one now. Anything else we can do for you?”

Drew dropped his voice. “Do you have a safe here?”

Topham’s eyebrows climbed. “Do you foresee a deposit or a withdrawal?”

“Deposit. I want to ride light today.”

“Then I’ll admit possession of a safe, such as it is. *Don Lorenzo*, *por favor*, will you act as banker?” He beckoned Drew after him into a small back room which was in sharp contrast to the main part of the Four Jacks.

On one wall was a fanned display of old daggers and swords which dated a century or so back to the Spanish colonial days. A bookcase crammed with tightly squeezed volumes provided a resting place for pieces of native pottery bearing grotesque animal designs. On the far wall were strips of brightly colored woven materials flanking a huge closed cupboard, a very old one, Drew thought. Its paneled front was carved with deeply incised patterns centering about a shield bearing arms. Only the battered desk and an attendant chair with a laced rawhide seat were of the frontier.

Topham took a chained key from the pocket of his fancy vest and went to fit it into a lock concealed in the carved foliage of the cupboard. The shield split down the middle, revealing shelves of metal boxes and packets of papers. Drew unfastened his money belt and handed it over. As he was tucking his shirt in his belt once more the gambler nodded at the cupboard.

“This is about as near a bank as we boast in Tubacca. Cahill has a strongbox at the stage station, and Stein some kind of a lockup at his store—that’s the total for the town. We haven’t grown to the size for a real banking establishment—”

“Hey, Reese, th’ Old Man about—?”

Shannon was in the doorway. In the full light of day he looked younger. Drew was puzzled. That strange animosity which had flashed between them last night—why had he felt it? There was nothing like that emotion now. But as Johnny Shannon’s gaze flitted from Topham to the Kentuckian, Drew was once more aware that, whatever he might outwardly seem, Johnny Shannon was no boy. Behind that disarmingly youthful façade was another person altogether.

“Kirby, ain’t it?” Shannon smiled. “Understand I got outta line th’ other night ... stepped on a lotta toes.” That gaze flickered for the merest instant to the Colts at the Kentuckian’s belt. “I sure had me a real snootful an’ I guess I was jus’ fightin’ th’ war all over again. No hard feelin’s?”

That guileless confession was very convincing on the surface. How did you assess an emotion you did not understand yourself? Drew was teased by a fleeting memory of the past, of a time when he had faced another pair of eyes such as those, surface eyes behind which you could see nothing. Then he became conscious that the pause was too lengthy, and he replied with a hurry he immediately regretted:

“No hard feelin’s.”

This time he was able to recognize the meaning of that quirk of Shannon’s lips. But prudence controlled the small flare of temper he felt inside him. It did not really matter. Let Shannon think he was backing down. If the time ever came that they did have to have a showdown, Johnny Shannon might be the surprised one.

“You’re sure a trustin’ fella.” Shannon’s fingers hooked to the front of the gun belt riding low on the hip. “Not askin’ for no receipt or nothin’....”

Topham laughed. “We don’t forget what is due a customer, Johnny.” He went to the desk, scribbled a line on a piece of paper, and held it out to Drew. “This should meet all contingencies, such as some patron out there getting downright ornery and putting a couple of extra buttonholes in my vest by the six-gun slug method.”

“Heard tell as how you’re fixin’ to race your plug ‘gainst Oro, Kirby,” Johnny drawled. “Also as how you laid down some good round boys to back his chance. I took me a piece of them—easy pickin’s.” The sneer was plainer in his voice than it had been in his smile.

Drew’s puzzlement grew. Why was Shannon leaning on him this way? Because he had stepped in to stop the quirting of Teodoro? That was the only reason the Kentuckian could think of.

“That’s a matter of opinion.” Topham was studying them both with interest. “I’d say Oro has him some real competition at last. None of the Eclipse blood was ever backward on the track.”

“You ridin’ yourself?” Shannon paid no attention to the gambler’s comment.

Drew nodded. “He knows me, and I ride light—”

“Sure, I suppose you do—now.” Shannon’s eyes flickered again, this time to the locked cupboard. “Heard tell—leastways Callie’s been spoutin’ it around—that you was with General Forrest.”

“Yes.”

“You sure musta pulled outta th’ war better’n th’ rest of us poor Rebs. Got you a couple of blooded hosses an’ a good heavy money belt. A sight more luck than th’ rest of us had—”

“Don’t include yourself in the empty-pocket brigade, Johnny,” Topham rapped out. “I don’t see you going without eating money, drinking money either, more’s a pity. And if you’re really looking for Rennie now, you’ll find him down at the course.”

Shannon’s smile was gone. He straightened away from the door frame which had been supporting his shoulders. “Thanks a lot, Reese.” He left with the same abruptness as he had from the stable alley.

“So you’re riding yourself.” Topham ignored the departure. “León Rivas, Bartolomé’s son, will be up on Oro; he always rides for Rennie. He’s younger than you, but I’d say”—the gambler studied Drew’s lithe body critically—“you’re about matched in weight. I’d shuck that gun belt, though, and anything else you can. And good luck, Kirby. You’ll need all of it you can muster.”

An hour later Drew followed Topham’s advice, leaving gun belt, carbine, and everything else he could unload in Callie’s keeping before he swung up on Shiloh. The big colt was nervous, tending to dance sideways, tossing his head high. Drew concentrated on the business at hand, striving to forget the crowd opening up to let him through, shouting encouragement or disparagement. Ahead was the appointed track, a beaten stretch of earth, part of the old road leading to the mines. The Kentuckian talked to Shiloh as they went, keeping up a stream of words to firm the bond between horse and rider.

There was a knot of men surrounding the golden horse, and as his rider mounted, Oro put on a good show, rearing to paw the air with his forefeet as if he wished nothing better than to meet his gray rival in an impromptu boxing match. Then he nodded his head vigorously, acknowledging the shouts from his enthusiastic supporters. Beside that magnificent blaze of color Shiloh was drab, a shadow about to be put to flight by the sun.

They were to break at a starting shot, head to the big tree which made an excellent landmark in the flat valley, rounding its patch of shade before returning to the starting point. Drew brought Shiloh, still prancing and playing with his bit, up beside Oro. The slim boy on the golden horse shot the Kentuckian a shoulder-side look and grinned, raising his quirt in salute as Drew nodded and smiled back.

Some of the noise died. *Don* Lorenzo pointed a pistol skyward. Drew strove to make his body one with Shiloh’s small easy movements. The big gray knew very well what was in progress, was tensing now for a swift getaway leap. And he made it on the crack of the gun.

But if Shiloh had easily outdistanced all opposition before on those improvised tracks, he was now meeting a far more equal race. The gray colt’s stride was effortless, he was pounding out with power—more than Drew had ever known him to exert. Yet those golden legs matched his pace, reach for reach, hoofbeat for hoofbeat.

“Come on, boy!” Drew’s urging was lost in the wild shouting of the spectators. Some who were mounted were trying to parallel the runners. But Shiloh responded to his rider’s encouragement even if he could not hear or understand. Drew would never use quirt or spur

on the stud. What Shiloh had to give must come willingly and because he delighted in the giving.

They swept in and around the shade of the tree, made the arc to return. That golden head with its tossing crown of black forelock; it *was* slipping back! Oro was no longer nose to nose with Shiloh, rather now nose to neck. Drew could hear Rivas' voice encouraging, pleading....

A mass of men, mounted and on foot, funneled the runners down to where the line of rope lay straight to mark the finish. Oro was creeping up once more, inch by hard-won inch.

Drew's head went up, his throat was rasped raw by the Yell which had taken desperate gray-coated troopers down hedge-bordered roads in Kentucky and steep ravines in Tennessee, sending them, if need be, straight into the mouths of Yankee field guns. And the Yell brought Shiloh home, only a nose ahead of his rival—as if he had been spurred by the now outlawed war cry. Then Drew found he had his hands full trying to pull up the colt and persuade him that the race was indeed over.

## 5

A black mule came up beside Drew as he slowly pulled Shiloh down to a canter. Fenner, a wide grin splitting his beard, bellowed:

“That shore was a race! Need any help, son?”

Drew shook his head, wanting to bring Shiloh under full control at a rate which would quiet the colt before they headed back to the furor about the finish line. And only now did he have time to relish his own excited pride and pleasure.

Since he had first seen Shiloh on that scouting trip back to Kentucky in ‘64, he had known he must someday own the gray colt. He had lain out in the brush for a long time that morning to watch the head groom of Red Springs put the horse through his paces in the training paddock. And watching jealously, Drew had realized that Shiloh was one of those mounts that a man discovers only once in his life-time, though he may breed and love their kind all his years.

Drew would have been content with Shiloh as a mount and a companion, but now he was sure that the colt was more, so much more. This gray was going to be one of the Great Ones, a racer and a sire—to leave his mark in horse history and stamp his own quality on foals throughout miles and years in this southwestern land. Drew licked the grit of dust from his lips, filled his lungs with a deep breath as Shiloh turned under rein pressure.

It was a long time before the Kentuckian was able to separate Shiloh from his ring of new admirers and bring him back to the stable. Drew refused several offers for the colt, some of them so fantastic he could only believe their makers sun-touched or completely carried away by the excitement of the race.

But when he found *Don* Cazar waiting for him at Kells’, he guessed that this was serious.

“You do not wish to sell him, I suppose?” Hunt Rennie smiled at Drew’s prompt shake of head. “No, that would be too much to hope for, you are not a fool. But I have something else to suggest. Reese Topham tells me you are looking for work, preferably with horses. Well, I have a contract to gentle some remounts for the army, and I need some experienced men to help break them—”

Drew could not understand the sudden pinch of—could it be alarm? Here it was: a chance to work on the Range, to know Hunt Rennie, and learn whether *Don* Cazar was to remain a legend or become a father. But now he was not sure.

“I’m no breaker, suh. I’ve gentled, yes—but eastern style.”

“Breaking horses can be brutal, though we don’t ride with red spurs on the Range. Suppose we try some of the eastern methods and see how they work on our wild ones. Do you think you can do it?”

“A man can’t tell what he can do until he tries.” Drew still hedged.

There was a trace of frown now between Rennie’s brows. “You told Topham you wanted work.” His tone implied that he found Drew’s present hesitancy odd. And—  
from *Don* Cazar’s point of view—it was. Tubacca was still in a slump; the rest of the valley held about as many jobs for a man as Drew had fingers on one hand. The Range was the big holding, and to ride there meant security and an established position in the community. Also, perhaps it was not an offer lightly made to an unknown newcomer.

“I can’t promise you blue-grass training, suh. That has to begin with a foal.” He hoped Rennie would credit his wavering to a modest appraisal of his own qualifications.

“Blue-grass training?”

As his father repeated the expression Drew realized the slip of tongue he had made. And if he took the job, there might be other slips, perhaps far more serious ones. But to refuse, after Topham had spoken for him ... he was caught in a pinch with cause for suspicion closing in on either side.

“I was in Kentucky for about a year after the war. I went to stay with a friend—”

“But you *are* from Texas?”

Was Rennie watching him too intently? No, he must ride a tighter rein on his imagination. There was no reason in the wide world why *Don* Cazar should expect him to be anyone except Drew Kirby.

“Yes, suh. Didn’t have anythin’ to go back to there. Thought I’d try for a new start out here.” There was the story of several thousand veterans. Rennie should have heard it a good many times already.

“Well, come and try some blue-grass training on our colts. And should you let this stud of yours run with a picked *manada* of mares, I could promise good fees.”

“Suppose I said yes if the fees were some of the foals—of my own choosing, suh?” Drew asked.

Rennie ran a finger across the brand which scarred the gray’s hide. “Spur R—that’s a new one to me.”

“My own. Heard tell as how there’s a custom of the country that a slick this old can be branded and claimed by anyone bringing him in. I wasn’t going to lose him that way should he do any straying, accidental or intentional.”

*Don* Cazar laughed. “That’s using your head, Kirby. All right. It’s a deal as far as I’m concerned. You draw wrangler’s pay and take stud fees in foals—say one in three, your choosing. Register that brand of yours with *Don* Lorenzo to be on the safe side. Then you’re welcome to run Spur R with the Double R on the Range.”

He held out his hand, and Drew grasped it for a quick shake to seal their agreement. He was committed now—to the Range and to a small partnership with its master. But he still wondered if he had made the right choice.

Two days later he dropped bedroll and saddlebags on the spare bunk at one end of the long adobe-walled room and studied his surroundings with deep curiosity. It was a fort, all right, this whole stronghold of Rennie’s—not just the bunkhouse which formed part of a side wall. Bunkhouse, feed store, and storage room, blacksmith shop, cookhouse, stables, main house, the quarters for the married men and their families—all arranged to enclose a patio into which choice stock could be herded at the time of an attack, with a curbed well in the center.

The roofs of all the buildings were flat, with loopholed parapets to be manned at need. A sentry post on the main house was occupied twenty-four hours a day by relays of Pimas. A loaded rifle leaned at every window opening, ready to be fired through loopholes in the wooden war shutters. The walls were twenty-five inches thick, and mounted on the roof of the stable, facing the hills from which Apache attacks usually came, was a small brass cannon—*Don* Cazar’s legacy from troops marching away in ‘61.

What he saw of the resources of this private fort led Drew to accept the other stories he had heard of the Range, like the one that *Don Cazar*'s men practiced firing blindfolded at noise targets to be prepared for night raids. The place was self-contained and almost self-supporting, with stores of food, good water, its own forge and leather shop, its own craftsmen and experts. No wonder the Apaches had given up trying to break this Anglo outpost and Rennie had accomplished what others found impossible. He had held his land secure against the worst and most unbeatable enemy this country had nourished.

There were other Range forts, smaller, but as stoutly and ingeniously designed, each built beside a water source on Rennie land—defense points for *Don Cazar*'s riders, their garrisons rotated at monthly intervals. And Drew had to thank that system for having taken Johnny Shannon away from the Stronghold before the Kentuckian arrived. Rennie's foster son was now riding inspection between one water-hole fortification and another. But Drew was uncertain just how he would rub along with Shannon in the future.

"*Señor Kirby, Don Cazar*—he would speak with you in the Casa Grande," León Rivas called through one of the patio side windows.

"Coming." Drew left the huddle of his possessions on the bunk.

The Casa Grande of the Stronghold was a high-ceilinged, five-room building about sixty feet long, the kitchen making a right angle to the other rooms and joining the smoke house to form part of another wall for the patio. Mesquite logs, adze-hewn and only partially smoothed, were placed over the doorways, and the plank doors themselves were slung on hand-wrought iron hinges or on leather straps, from oak turning-posts. Drew knocked on the age-darkened surface of the big door.

"Kirby? Come in."

Here in contrast to the brilliant sunlight of the patio was a dusky coolness. There were no glass panes in the windows. Manta, the unbleached muslin which served to cover such openings in the frontier ranches, was tacked taut, allowing in air but only subdued light. The walls had been smoothly plastered, and as in Topham's office, lengths of colorful woven materials and a couple of Navajo blankets served as hangings. Rugs of cougar and wolf skin were scattered on the beaten earth of the floor. There was a tall carved cupboard with a grilled door, a bookcase, and two massive chests shoved back against the walls. And over the stone mantel of the fireplace hung a picture of a morose-looking, bearded man wearing a steel breastplate, the canvas dim and dark with age and smoke.

*Don Cazar* was seated at a table as massive as the chests, a pile of papers before him flanked by two four-branch candelabra of native silver. Bartolomé Rivas' more substantial bulk weighed down the rawhide seat of another chair more to one side.

"Sit down—" Rennie nodded to the seat in front of the table. "Smoke?" He pushed forward a silver box holding the long cigarillos of the border country. Drew shook his head.

"Whisky? Wine?" He gestured to a tray with waiting glasses.

"Sherry." Drew automatically answered without thought.

"What do you think of the stock you saw down in the corral?" *Don Cazar* poured a honey-colored liquid from the decanter into a small glass.

As the Kentuckian raised it to sip, the scent of the wine quirked time for him, making this for a fleeting moment the dining room at Red Springs during a customary after-dinner gathering of the men of the household. The talk there, too, had been of horses—always horses. Then Drew came back in a twitch of eyelid to the here and now, to Hunt Rennie watching him with

a measuring he did not relish, to Bartolomé's round face with its close-to-hostile expression. Deliberately Drew sipped again before answering the question.

"I'd say, suh, if they're but a sample of Range stock, the breed is excellent. However——"

"However what, *señor*?" Bartolomé's eyes challenged Drew. "In this territory, even in Sonora, there are none to compare with the horses of this hacienda."

"That is not what I was about to say, *Señor Rivas*. But if *Don Cazar* wishes to try the eastern methods of training, these horses are too old. You begin with a yearling colt, not three-year-olds."

"To break a foal! What madness!" Now Bartolomé's face expressed shock.

"Not breaking," Drew corrected, "training. It is another method altogether. One puts a weanling on a rope halter, accustoms him to the feel of the hackamore, of being with men. Then he grows older knowing no fear or strangeness."

The Mexican looked from Drew to *Don Cazar*, his shock fading to puzzlement. Rennie nodded.

"*Sí, amigo*, so it is done—in Kentucky and Virginia. But this time we must deal with the older ones. Can you modify those methods, gentle without breaking? A colt with the fire still in him, but saddle-broke, is worth much more——"

"I can try. But you have already said, suh, that you don't allow rough breakin' here." Drew's half suspicion crystallized into belief. *Don Cazar* had not really wanted another wrangler at all; he had wanted Shiloh—and his foals. Well, perhaps he would find he did have a wrangler who could deliver the goods into the bargain.

"No, but it is always well to learn new ways. I have been in Kentucky, Kirby. Perhaps some of their methods would not work on the Range. On the other hand, others might. As you have said—we can but try." He picked up the top sheet of paper and began to read:

"*Bayos-blancos*—light duns—two. *Bayos-azafranados*—saffrons—one. *Bayos-narajados*—orange duns—none——"

"There was one," Bartolomé interrupted. "The mare, she was lost at Cañon del Palomas."

Rennie frowned, "*Sí*, the mare. *Bayos-tigres*—striped ones —three. *Bayos-cebrunos*—smoked duns—two. *Grullas*—blues—four. Roans—six. Blacks—three. Bays—four. Twenty-five three-year-olds. You won't be expected to take on the whole *remuda*, Kirby. Select any six of your own choosing and use your methods of gentling on them. We'll make a test this way."

Bartolomé uttered a sound closer to a snort than anything else. And Drew guessed how he stood with the Mexican foreman. Rennie might have faith, or pretend to have faith, in some new method of training, but *Rivas* was a conservative who preferred the tried and true and undoubtedly considered the Kentuckian an interloper.

"Now, the matter of Shiloh..."

Drew finished the sherry with appreciation. He was beginning to see the amusing side of this conference. Drew's work on the Range settled, Rennie was about to get to what he really wanted. But *Don Cazar*'s first words were a little startling.

"We'll keep him close-in the water corral. To turn a stud of eastern breeding loose is dangerous——"

"You mean he might be stolen, suh?" Drew clicked his empty glass down on the table.



“No, he might be killed!” And Rennie’s tone indicated he meant just that.

“How...why?”

“There are wild-horse bands out there, though we’re trying to capture or run them off the Range. And a wild stud will always try to add mares to his band. Because he has fought many times to keep or take mares, he is a formidable and vicious opponent, one that an imported, tamed stud can rarely best. Right now, coming into Big Rock well for water is a pinto that has killed three other stallions—including a black I imported back in ‘60—and two of them were larger, heavier animals than he.

“The Trinfans are moving down into that section this week. I hope they can break up that band, run down the stud anyway. He has courage and cunning, but his blood is not a line we want for foals on this range. So Shiloh stays here at the Stronghold; don’t risk him loose.”

“Yes, suh. What about these wild ones—they worth huntin’?”

“They’re mixed; some are scrubs, inbred, poor stuff. But a few fine ones turn up. Mostly when they do they’re strays or bred from strays—escaped from horse thieves or Indians. If the mustangers here pick up any branded ones, they’re returned to the owners, if possible, or sold at a yearly auction. By the old Mexican law the hunting season for horses runs from October to March. Foals are old enough then to be branded. Speaking of foals, you left your mare and the filly in town?”

“Kells’ll give them stable room till next month. I can bring them out then.”

“We’ll have a delivery of remounts to make to the camp about then. You can help haze those in and pick up your own stock on return.”

León appeared in the doorway. “*Don Cazar, the mesteneoes—they arrive.*”

“Good. These people are the real wild-horse experts, Kirby. Not much the Trinfans don’t know about horses.” *Don Cazar* was already on his way to the door and Drew fell in behind Bartolomé.

The Trinfan outfit was small, considering the job they intended, Drew thought. A cart pulled by two mules, lightly made and packed high, was the nucleus of their small caravan. Burros—two of them—were roped behind and, to Drew’s surprise, a cow, bawling fretfully and intended, he later learned, to play foster mother to any unweaned foals which might be picked up. The cart was driven by a Mexican in leather breeches and jacket over a red shirt. Behind him rode the boy and girl Drew had seen in the Tubacca alley, mounted on rangy, nervous horses that had speed in every line of their under-fleshed bodies. Each rider trailed four spare mounts roped nose to tail.

“*Buenos días, Don Cazar.*” For so small a man the Mexican on the cart seat produced a trumpet-sized voice. He touched the roll-edged brim of his sombrero, and Drew noted that his arm was crooked as if in the past it had been broken and poorly set.

“*Buenos días, Señor Trinfan.* This house is yours.” Rennie went to the side of the cart. “The west corral is ready for your use as always. Draw on the stores for any need you may have—”

“*Gracias, Don Cazar.*” It was the thanks of equal to equal. “You have some late news of the wild ones?”

“Only that the pinto still runs near the well.”

“That spotted one—*sí*, he is an Apache for cunning, for deviltry of spirit. It may be that this time he will not be the lucky one. There is in him a demon. Did I not see him, with my own

eyes, kill a foal, tear flesh from the flanks of its dam when she tried to drop out of the run? *Sí*—a real *diablo*, that one!”

“Get rid of him one way or another, Trinfan. He is a danger to the Range. He killed another stud this season. I am as sure of that as if I had seen him in action.”

“Ah, the blue one you thought might be a runner to match Oro. *Sí*, that was a great pity, *Don Cazar*. Well, we shall try, we shall try this time to put that *diablo* under!”

An hour later Drew was facing a *diablo* of his own, with far less confidence than Hilario Trinfan had voiced.

Just how stupid could one be?

Around him now were men trained from early childhood to this life, and he could show no skill at their employment. All the way out from Texas he had practiced doggedly with the lariat, and his best fell far short of what a range-bred child could do.

Yet he had an audience waiting down at the corral. Drew’s mouth was a straight line. He would soon confirm their belief that *Don Cazar* had in truth hired Shiloh instead of his owner.

But there was no use trying to duck the ordeal, and the Kentuckian had never been one to put off the inevitable with a pallid hope that something would turn up to save him.

Only this time, apparently, fortune was going to favor him.

“Which one you wish, *señor*?” Teodoro Trinfan, rope in hand, stood there ready to cast for one of the milling colts. Why the boy was making that offer of assistance Drew had no inkling. But to accept would give him a slight chance to prove he could do part of the work.

He had already made his selection in the corral, though he had despaired of ever getting that animal at rope’s end.

“The black—”

## 6

He worked in the dust of the smaller corral, with Croaker's help, adapting his knowledge of eastern gentling the way he had mentally planned it during the days since he had accepted the job. With the excited and frightened colt roped to the steady mule Drew tried to think horse, feel horse, even be horse, shutting out all the rest of the world just as he had on the day of the race. He must sense the colt's terror of the rope, his horror of the strange human smell—the man odor which was so frightening that a blanket hung up at a water hole could keep wild horses away from the liquid they craved.

Drew talked as he had to Shiloh, as if this black could understand every word. He twitched the lead rope, and Croaker paced sedately about in a wide circle, dragging the colt with him. Drew then reached across the bony back of the mule, pressed his hand up and down the sweaty, shivering hide of the black. No hurry, must not rush the steady, mild gesture to the horse that here was a friend.

The Kentuckian had no idea of the passing of time; it was all part of the knowledge that slow movements, not swift ones, would prevent new panic. The blanket was shown, allowing the black to sniff down its surface, before it was flapped back and forth across the colt's back, and finally left there. Now the saddle. And with that cinched into place, the black stood quietly beside Croaker.

Drew mounted the mule and rode. The saddled black, loosened from the twin tie, followed the mule twice around the corral. The rider dismounted from Croaker, was up on the black. For perilous seconds he felt flesh and muscles tense under his weight; then the body relaxed.

His hand went up. "Open the gate!" he called softly.

Seeming to realize he was free of the pole walls, the black exploded in a burst of speed which was close to Shiloh's racing spurt. Drew let him go. Three-quarters of an hour later he rode back, the black blowing foam, but answering the rein.

He found *Don Cazar*, Bartolomé, and Hilario Trinfan waiting for him by the corral. The mustanger walked forward with a lurch, his head thrown far back so he could look up at Drew from under the wide brim of his sombrero.

"This you could not do with a true wild one," he commented.

"I know that, *señor*. This colt was not an enemy, one who has already been hunted by man. He was only afraid..."

"But you have the gift. It is born in one—the gift. A man has it, and the horse always knows, answers to it. Ride with me, *señor*, and try that gift on the wild ones!"

"Someday—" That was true. Someday Drew did want to ride after the wild ones. Anse's stories of horse hunting on the Texas plains had first stirred that desire. Now it was fully awake in him.

*Don Cazar* inspected the black closely. "Well, Bartolomé, what have you to say now?"

"*Señor* Kirby knows his business," the Mexican admitted. "Though I think also that this was no true wild one. He will make a good remount, but he is no fighter such as others I have seen here."

Drew unsaddled and left the black in with Croaker; he fed both animals a bait of oats. In the morning he would be at this again. And he still had not solved the problem of roping. He could not expect Teodoro to come to his aid a second time. He started slowly back to the bunkhouse.

“*Señor*—?”

Drew raised his wet head from the bunkhouse basin and reached out for a sacking towel. “Yes?”

León sat on a near-by bunk. “I have thought of something—”

“Sounds as if it might be important,” Drew commented.

“*Don Cazar*, he has offered money—a hundred dollars in gold—to have off the Range that killer pinto stud. But that one, he is like the Apache; he is not to be caught.”

“Can’t someone pick him off with a rifle?”

“Perhaps. Only that has also been tried several times, *señor*. My father, he thought he had killed him only two months ago. But the very next week did not the pinto come to steal mares from the bay *manada*? It must have been that he was only creased. No, he is a *diablo*, and he hides in the rocks where he cannot easily be seen. But there is a plan I have thought of—” León hesitated, and Drew guessed he was about to make a suggestion which he believed might meet with disapproval.

“And this plan of yours?” Why had León come to him with it? Surely young Rivas had better and closer friends at the Stronghold. Why approach a newcomer?

“That pinto—he is a fighter; he likes to fight. He will not allow another stud on the ground he claims.”

Drew was beginning to understand. Wild ones were sometimes trapped by a belled mare staked out to draw them in. But a stud to catch a fighting stud was another plan altogether.

“You would offer him a fight?”

“*Sí*, but not a real fight. Just allow him to believe that there would be one. Pull him so out of hiding in the rocks—”

“Using what stud for bait?”

“*Señor Juanito*—he said a stud that would fight too, like Shiloh.”

“Shiloh!” Drew wadded the towel in his fist and pitched it across the room. “Shiloh!”

León must have read something of Drew’s blazing anger in his face, for the Mexican’s mouth went a little slack and his hand came up in an involuntary gesture as if to ward off a blow.

“It is a good plan!” His boy’s voice was thin in protest against Drew’s expression.

“It is a harebrained, dangerous scheme,” began Drew; then he switched to a question. “Did Johnny Shannon suggest using Shiloh for bait, or was that your idea?”

“*Señor Juanito*—he said one must have a good horse, a fighter. But such a horse would not be hurt. We would wait with rifles and shoot the pinto quickly before he attacked. There would be no harm to Shiloh, none at all. *Señor Juanito* said that. Only a trick to get the *diablo* where we could shoot. Maybe—” León’s eyes dropped, a flush rose slowly on his brown cheeks—”maybe it was very foolish. But when *Señor Juanito* told it, it sounded well.”

“Did he tell you to ask me about it?”

The flush darkened. “He did not say so, *señor*. But one would not do such a thing without permission. Also, you should be one of the hunters, no? How else could we go?”

“Well, there won’t be any huntin’ of that kind, León. Trinfan knows what he’s doin’, and I don’t think that pinto is goin’ to be runnin’ loose—or alive—much longer.”

Drew pulled a clean shirt over his head. What kind of game was Johnny Shannon trying to play? Apparently he had almost talked León into using Shiloh as bait in this fool stunt. Had he expected the kid to take the horse without Drew’s knowledge? Or for some reason had he wanted León to spill this? A trick to get Shiloh out of the Stronghold? But why?

He buckled on his gun belt, settled the twin holsters comfortably. Shannon—what and why, he repeated silently. Nothing sorted out in his mind. Drew only felt a prickle of uneasiness which began between his shoulder blades and ran a chill down his spine, as if rifle sights were on him.

But Shannon did not return to the Stronghold, and Drew was kept busy at the corrals from dawn to dusk. In a month of hard work it was easy to forget what might only be fancies.

There was an invigorating crispness in the air, and the dun gelding the Kentuckian rode savored the breeze as a desert dweller savors water. Drew was indulgent with his mount’s skittishness as they pounded along at the tail of the horse herd bound for Tubacca.

From a rocky point well before them there was a flash of light. Jared Nye, on Drew’s left, took off his hat and waved a wide-armed signal to answer Greyfeather’s mirror. Two of the Pimas were scouting ahead on this two-day drive, and the Anglo riders were keeping the herd to a trot. Apaches, Kitchell, even *bandidos* from over the border, could be sniffing about the Range, eyeing its riches, ready to pick up anything left unprotected. The men rode with their rifles free of the boot, fastened by a loop of rawhide to the saddle horn, the old Texas precaution which allowed for instant action. And at each halt the six-shooter Colts’ loading was checked.

Nye swerved, sending a lagger on with a sharp crack of quirt in the air. He pulled up to match Drew’s sobered trot.

“That’s the last bad stretch; now it’ll be downhill an’ green fields all th’ way.” Nye nodded at the narrow opening between two hills lying ahead. “Glad to get this band in on all four legs an’ runnin’ easy.”

“You expected trouble?”

“Kid, in this here country you don’t expect nothin’ else but. Last time we brought hosses up th’ trail they jumped us four, five miles back—right close to where we saw that pile of bones this mornin’. ‘Fore he knew what hit us Jim Berry was face down an’ never got up again. An’ th’ Old Man took him a crease ‘crost th’ ribs that made him bleed like a stuck pig. Got him patched up an’ into town; then he keeled over when he tried to git down off his hoss an’ was in bed a week.”

“Apaches?”

“Naw, we figured it was Kitchell. Couldn’t prove it though, an’ after that th’ Old Man made a rule we take Pimas every drive. Ain’t nothin’ able to surprise them. I never had no use for Injuns, but these here are peaceful cusses—iffen they don’t smell an Apache. With them ridin’ point we’re sure slidin’ th’ groove. Me, I’ll be glad to hit town. I’d shore like to keep th’ barkeep busier than a beaver buildin’ hisself a new dam. Though with th’ Old Man off reppin’ for th’ law down along the border and needin’ hands back on the Range, we swallows

down th' dust nice an' easy an' takes it slow. Anyway, this far from payday I kin count up mosta m' roll without takin' it outta m' pocket."

"This Kitchell...think it's true that some of the ranchers are really helpin' him?"

"Don't know. Might be he's tryin' to play th' deuce against th' whole deck. Lessen he lives on th' kind of whisky as would make a rabbit up an' spit in a grizzly's eye hole, he's got somethin'—or someone—to back him. Me...were th' Old Man poundin' th' hills flat lookin' for me, I'd crawl th' nearest bronc an' make myself as scarce as a snake's two ears." Nye shrugged. "Kitchell's got some powerful reason for squattin' out in th' brush playin' cat-eyed with most of th' territory. Maybe so there're some as will sit in on his side, but they've sure got their jaws in a sling an' ain't bawlin' about it none. 'Course lotsa people were red-hot Rebs back in '61 till they saw as how white men fightin' each other jus' naturally gave th' Apaches an' some of th' border ruffraff idears 'bout takin' over. But mosta us now ain't wavin' no flag. Iffen Kitchell has got him some diehards backin' him—" Nye shrugged again. "Git 'long there, you knock-kneed, goat-headed wagon-loafer!" He pushed on to haze another slacker.

They were dusty and dry when they dropped the corral gate in place and watched the horses mill around. Drew headed for Kells' stable. Shadow nickered a greeting and turned around as if to purposefully edge her daughter forward for his inspection.

"Pretty, ma'am," he told her. "Very pretty. She's goin' to be as fine a lady as her ma—I'm willin' to swear to that."

The filly lipped Drew's fingers experimentally and then snorted and did a frisky little dance with her tiny hoofs rustling in the straw. Kells had been as good as his promise, Drew noted. Mother and child had had expert attention, and Shadow's coat had been groomed to a glossy silk; her black mane and tail were rippling satin ribbons.

"Gonna take 'em back to th' Range with you, Mister Kirby?" Callie came down from the loft.

"Yes. I'll need a cart and driver though. We'll have to give the foal a lift. Know anyone for hire, Callie?"

"I'll ask around. Have any trouble comin' up?"

"No. Greyfeather and Runnin' Fox were scoutin' for us."

"Stage was jumped yesterday on th' Sonora road," Callie volunteered. "One men got him a bullet in th' shoulder, but they got away clean. It was Kitchell, th' driver thought. Captain Bayliss took out a patrol right away. You plannin' on goin' back with Kitchell out?"

"Don't know," Drew replied absently. Better leave that decision to Nye; he knew the country and the situation. "You ask about the cart, Callie, but don't make it definite. Have to see how things turn out."

Drew started for the Four Jacks to meet Nye. Back here in Tubacca he was conscious how much he had allowed his personal affairs to drift from day to day. Of course he had seen very little of Hunt Rennie at the Stronghold; his father had ridden south on patrol with his own private posse shortly after his own arrival there. But whenever Drew thought seriously of the future he had that odd sense of dislocation and loss which he had first known on the night he had seen *Don Cazar* arrive at the cantina. *Don Cazar*—Hunt Rennie. Drew Kirby—Drew Rennie. A seesaw to make a man dizzy, or maybe the vertigo he felt was the product of too much sun, dust, and riding.

There was someone at a far table in the cantina, but otherwise the dusky room was empty. Drew went directly to the bar. “Got any coffee, Fowler?”

“Sure thing. Nye was in here ‘bout five minutes ago. Said for you to wait here for him. You hear ‘bout Kitchell holdin’ up th’ stage?”

“Callie told me. Said the army patrol went out after him.”

“Yeah, don’t mean they’ll nail him though. He’s as good as an Apache ‘bout keepin’ undercover. Here’s your coffee. Want some grub, too?”

The smell of coffee revived Drew’s hunger. “Sure could use some. Haven’t eaten since we broke camp at sunup.”

“Sing’s in th’ kitchen. I’ll give him th’ sign to rattle th’ pans. Say—been racin’ that Shiloh of yours lately? Sure am glad I played a hunch an’ backed him against Oro.” Fowler’s red forelock bobbed over his high forehead as he nodded vigorously.

“No racin’ on the Range.”

“Hope you’re keepin’ him closer. That border crew’d sure like to git a rope on him! Down Sonora way one of them Mexes would dig right down to th’ bottom of his money chest to buy a hoss like that. I’ll go an’ tell Sing.”

Drew, coffee mug in hand, sat down at a table where some of the breeze beat in the door now and then. Lord, he was really tired. He stretched out his legs, and the sun made twinkly points of light on the rowels of the Mexican spurs. Sipping the coffee, he allowed himself the luxury of not doing any thinking at all.

Fowler brought a heaping plate and Drew began to eat.

“Oh, there you are!” Nye slammed in, swung one of the chairs about, and sat on it back to front, his arms folded across the back.

“You ridin’ out to tell the army we’re here—with the horses?” Drew asked.

“Nope, caught sight of them ridin’ in. Looked like Sergeant Muller was in command—he’ll come in here. Hey, Fowler, how’s about another plate of fodder?”

“Steady on, fella. Make it straight ahead now!”

Both of them looked up. A burly man wearing sergeant’s stripes steered a slighter figure before him through the open door. Johnny Shannon, a bandage about his uncovered head, lurched as if trying to free himself from the other’s grip and caught at a chair back. Nye and Drew jumped up to ease him into a seat.

“What’s—?” began Nye.

Muller interrupted. “Found him crawlin’ along right near town. Says as how he was took by Kitchell ‘n’ got away, but he ain’t too clear ‘bout what happened or where. Wearin’ a crease ‘longside his skull; maybe that scrambled up his thinkin’ some.”

“Better get Doc Matthews. I think he’s in town.” Fowler came from the bar, a glass in hand.

“Right. I’ll go.” Nye started out.

Johnny had slumped forward, his head on the table encircled by his limp arms. Drew was puzzled. Shannon was supposed to have ridden south on the Range, not north. What was he doing this far away from the water-hole route? Had he found a trail which led him in this direction? Or had he been jumped somewhere by Kitchell’s pack of wolves and forced along for some purpose of their own?

“Was he ridin’, Sergeant?” Drew asked, hardly knowing why.

“No—footin’ it. Said somethin’ about Long Canyon after we gave him a pull at a canteen. Sure came a long way if that’s where he started.”

“I’ll go get Hamilcar. He knows somethin’ ‘bout doctorin’,” Fowler cut in. “Maybe Doc Matthews ain’t here, after all.”

“Hey, Sarge, can I see you a minute?” came a hail from without.

“You manage.” Muller made it more order than request as he left.

Drew sat alone with Shannon, one hand on the boy’s shoulder to steady him. He was aware of movement behind him. If the fellow at the back table had been dozing earlier, he was roused now.

“Where did you git them spurs?”

Drew turned, his lips shaped a name, tried again, and got it out as a hoarse whisper. “Anse! Don’t you know me, Anse?”

He saw eyes lift from the floor level, the scarred cheek under a ragged fringe of beard; and then astonishment in the other’s expression became a flashing grin.

“Drew—Drew Rennie! Lordy, it’s sure enough Drew Rennie!”

Drew was on his feet. His hands on the other’s shoulders pulled him forward into a rough half embrace. “Anse!” He swayed to the joyous pounding of a fist between his shoulder blades. “I thought you were dead!” he somehow gasped.

“An’ I seen *you* go down; a slug got you plumb center!” the Texan sputtered. “Rolled ‘round a bush an’ saw you git it! But for a ghost you’re sure lively!”

“Caught me in the belt buckle,” Drew recounted that miracle of the war. “Knocked me out; didn’t really touch to matter, though.”

Anse pushed away a little, still holding Drew tightly by the upper arms. “Anybody told me I’d see Drew Rennie live an’ kickin’, I’d said straight to his face he was a fork-tongued liar!”

Drew came partly to his senses and the present. Fowler ... Nye ... either one of them could come back on this reunion. “Anse—listen! This is important. I ain’t Drew Rennie—not here, not now—”

“Had to draw a new name outta th’ deck?” Anse’s grin faded; his eyes narrowed. “All right, what’s the goin’ handle?”

“Kirby, Drew Kirby ... I’ll explain later.” He had given the warning only just in time. Fowler and Hamilcar were coming from the back room of the cantina, and there was a stir at the table.

Johnny was sitting up, his head swaying from side to side, his eyes on Drew and Anse. But the stare was unfocused; he must still be only half conscious. Drew had a fleeting prick of worry. Had Shannon heard anything he would remember? There was nothing to be done about that now.



## 7

“... and that’s the way it is.” Drew sat on the stool which was the only other furnishing in the bath cubicle while Anse splashed and wallowed in the slab tub.

The Texan swiped soap from his cheek. “An’ ain’t you gonna tell?”

“I don’t know. Would you?”

“Go with m’ hat in hand an’ say, ‘Well, Pa, here’s your wanderin’ boy’? No, I dunno as how I’d be makin’ that kinda play neither. Never was one to unspool th’ bedroll till I was sure o’ th’ brand I was ridin’ for. An’ you an’ me’s kinda hide-matched there. Glad you wised me up in time.”

“Maybe I didn’t,” Drew admitted.

“You mean that Shannon? I know you think he’s filin’ his teeth for you, but I’d say he was too busy countin’ stars from that skull beltin’ to make sense out of our hurrawin’. I’ll give him th’ eye though. Lissen now, you’re Kirby—so am I called for a rebrandin’, too? Seems like two Kirbys turnin’ up in a town this size is gonna make a few people ask some questions.”

“You’re my cousin—Anson Kirby.” Drew had already thought that out. “Now, you’ve some tall talkin’ to do your ownself. I saw you roll out of your saddle back in Tennessee. How come you turn up here and now?”

Anse sluiced water over his head and shoulders with cupped hands.

“Do I tell it jus’ like it happened, you’ll think I’m callin’ up mountains outta prairie-dog hills, it’s that crazy. But it’s range truth. Yeah, I landed outta that saddle on some mighty hard ground. If you’ll remember, I had me a hole in the shoulder big enough to let th’ wind whistle through. I rolled between th’ bushes jus’ in time to see you get it—plumb center an’ final, so I thought. Then ... well, I don’t remember too good for a while. Next time I was able to take a real interest I was lyin’ on a bed with about a mountain of quilts on top me, weaker’n a yearlin’ what’s jus’ been dragged outta a bog hole. Seems like them Yankees gathered me up with th’ rest of them bushwacker scrubs, but when they got me a mile or so down th’ road they decided as how I’d had it good an’ there was no use wastin’ wagon room on me. So they let me lie....

“Only,” the Texan paused and then continued more soberly, “Drew, sometimes—sometimes it seems like a hombre can have a mite more’n his share of luck; or else he’s got him Someone as is line ridin’ for him. We had us friends in Tennessee, an’ it jus’ happened as how I was dropped where one of them families found me. They sure was good folks; patched me up an’ saw me through like I was their close kin. Hid me out by sayin’ as how I had th’ cholera.

“An’ most of th’ time I didn’t know a rope from a saddle—outta my head complete. First there was that shoulder hole; then I got me a good case of lung fever. It was two months ‘fore I could crawl round better’n a sick calf what lost its ma too early. Then, jus’ as I got so I could stamp m’ boots on th’ ground an’ expect to stand straight up in ‘em, this here Yankee patrol came ‘long an’ dogged me right into a bunch o’ our boys they had rounded up. I had me some weeks in a prison stockade, which ain’t, I’m tellin’ you, no way for to spend any livin’ time. Then this here war was over, an’ I was loose. No hoss, no nothin’. Some of th’ boys got to talkin’ ‘bout trailin’ back to Texas, tryin’ out some ranchin’ in the bush country.

A lotta wild stuff down there—nobody’s been runnin’ brands on anythin’ much since ‘61. We planned to get a herd of mavericks, drive up into Kansas or Missouri, an’ sell. A couple of th’ boys had run stuff in that way for th’ army, even swum ‘em across the Mississippi. It would maybe give us a start. An’—well, there weren’t nothin’ else to do. So we tried it.” Anse sat staring down at the water lapping at his lean middle. His was a very thin body, the ribs standing out beneath the skin almost as harshly as did the weal of the scar on his shoulder.

“And it didn’t work?”

“Well, it might’ve. I ain’t sayin’ it won’t for some hambres. Only we run into trouble. Texas ain’t Texas no more; it’s th’ Fifth Military District. Any man what fought for th’ Confederacy ain’t got any rights. It’s worse’n an Injun war. We got us our herd, leastwise th’ beginnin’ of one. An’ that was back-breakin’ work—we was feelin’ as beat as when we run out of Tennessee after Franklin. Only we kept to it, ‘cause it would give us a stake. So we started drivin’ north, an’ they jumped us.”

“Who?”

“Yankees—th’ brand what probably set at home an’ let others do th’ real fightin’—ready to come in an’ take over once th’ shootin’ was done with. They grabbed th’ herd. Shot Will Bachus when he stood up to ‘em, an’ made it all legal ‘cause they had a tin-horn deputy ridin’ with ‘em. Well, we got him anyway an’ two or three of th’ others. But then they called in th’ army, an’ we had to ride for it. Scattered so they had more’n one trail to follow. But they posted us as ‘wanted’ back there. So I come whippin’ a mighty tired hoss outta Texas, an’ I ain’t plannin’ on goin’ back to any Fifth Military District!”

“Any chance they’ll push a star after you here?”

“No. I’m jus’ small stuff, not worth botherin’ ‘bout by their reckonin’, now I ain’t got anythin’ left them buzzards can pick offen m’ bones. They’s sittin’ tight an’ gittin’ fat right there.”

“Then it’s all set.” Drew tossed Anse a towel. “Climb out and we’ll get started!”

“Doin what?”

“You’ve worked horses, and they can use another wrangler on the Range. Right now they’ve a lot to be topped—want to gentle ‘em some and trade ‘em south into Mexico. If you ride for *Don Cazar*, nobody’s goin’ to ask too many questions.”

“How d’you know he’ll sign me on?” Anse studied his own unkempt if now clean reflection in the shaving mirror on the wall. “I sure don’t look like no bargain.”

“You will when we’re through with you,” Drew began. The Texan swung around.

“Looky here, you thinkin’ of grub stakin’? I ain’t gonna—”

“Suppose you had yourself a stack of cart wheels and my pockets were to let?” Drew retorted. “I think I remember me some times when we had one blanket and a hunk of hardtack between us, and there weren’t any ‘yours’ or ‘mine’ about it! Or don’t you think back that far?”

Anse laughed. “All right, *compadre*, pretty me up like a new stake rope on a thirty-dollar pony. If I don’t agree, likely you’ll trip up m’ foreleg an’ reshoe me anyway. Right now—I’ll say it out good’n clear—I’m so pore m’ backbone rattles when I cough.”

“Mistuh Kirby—” Hamilcar came in. “Mistuh Nye says to tell you he’ll be back. Mistuh Shannon’s in bed at th’ doctuh’s; he’s gonna be all right soon’s he gets ovah a mighty big headache.”

He had actually forgotten Shannon! Hastily Drew expressed his satisfaction at the news and added:

“This is my cousin from Texas, Hamilcar. He hit town ridin’ light. I’m goin’ over to pick him up a new outfit at Stein’s. You give him all the rest, will you?”

“Yes, suh.”

Blue blouses—a corporal’s guard of troopers—were pulling up by the cantina hitch rail as Drew came out into the plaza. Muller’s men probably, he thought. But now he was more intent on Anse’s needs.

Few people had ever broken through the crust of self-sufficiency the Kentuckian had begun to grow in early childhood. His grandfather’s bitter hatred of his father had made Drew an outsider at Red Springs from birth and had finally driven him away to join General Morgan in ‘62. Those he had ever cared about he could list on the fingers of one sun-browned, rein-hardened hand: Cousin Meredith; her son Shelly—he had died at Chickamauga between one short breath and the next—Shelly’s younger brother Boyd, who had run away to join Morgan, too, in the sunset of the raider’s career; and Anse, whom he had believed dead until this past hour.

Drew was breathing as fast as if he had charged across the sun-baked plaza at a run, when he came into the general store which supplied Tubacca with nine-tenths of the materials necessary for frontier living. He made his selection with care.

“You planning a trip, Mister Kirby?” Stein peered at him over a pair of old-fashioned, steel-bowed spectacles which perched on his sharp parrot’s beak of a nose.

“No. My cousin just rode in; he lost his gear on the road and needs a new outfit complete.”

Stein nodded, patted smooth the top shirt on a growing pile. “Anything else?”

“Add those up. I’ll look around.” Drew paused to glance into the single small, glass-fronted case which was Stein’s claim to fame in the surrounding territory. The exotic wares on display were a strange mixture: a few pieces of jewelry, heavy Spanish things which might be a century or more old, several six-guns—one with an ornate ivory handle.... Drew stopped and pulled a finger across the dusty surface of the glass case. Spurs—silver spurs—not quite so elaborate as those he now wore, but of the same general workmanship.

“I’d like to look at those spurs.”

Stein unlocked the case and took them out. As Drew unstrapped those he wore and fitted the new pair to his boots, a brown, calf-bound book thudded to the floor. Books—here in Stein’s?

Weighing the volume in his hand, the Kentuckian straightened up. There were two more books lying on the top of the case. The leather bindings were scuffed and one was scored clear across the back, yet they had been handsome, undoubtedly treasured. Drew turned them up to read the scrolled gold titles on their spines.

“*History of the Conquest of Mexico, The Three Musketeers, The Count of Monte Cristo ...* Where’d these come from, Mister Stein?” Drew’s curiosity was aroused.

“That is a story almost as fanciful as the ones inside them.” Stein rested his bony elbows on the counter as he talked. “Would you believe, Mister Kirby, these were brought to me by Amos Lutterfield?”

“Lutterfield? Who’s he?”

“I forget, you have not been in Tubacca long. Amos Lutterfield—he is what one might term a character, a strange one. He goes out into the wilds alone, seeking always the gold.”

“In Apache country?” Drew demanded.

“The Apaches, they do not touch a man they believe insane, and Amos has many peculiarities: peculiarities of dress, of speech, of action. He roams undisturbed, sometimes coming in with relics from the old cliff houses to trade for supplies. Last month he told me a story of a cave where he found a trunk. Where it had come from or why it was hidden he did not know, but these books were in it. Like some men who have no formal education, Amos is highly respectful of the printed word. He thought the books of great value and so brought them here.”

Drew opened the top volume. Back home books as well bound as these would have carried a personal bookplate or at least the written name of the owner, but the fly leaf was bare. They had the look of well-read, cherished volumes but no mark of possession.

“You have perhaps read these?” Stein asked.

Drew picked up *The Three Musketeers*. “Not likely to forget this one,” he said, grinning. “Earned me a good ten with the cane when I read it instead of dealing faithfully with Caesar’s campaigns in Gaul. I did get to finish it before I was caught out.” The pages separated stiffly under his exploring fingers as if the volume had not been opened for a long time. He did not notice that Stein was eyeing him with new appraisal.

“These for sale?”

“In Stein’s everything is for sale.” The storekeeper named a price, and Drew bargained. When he left, the three books reposed on the top of his armload of clothing, and a half hour later he dropped them down on a cantina table. Anse came from the bathhouse and sat down in the opposite chair. His booted foot moved, but now rowel points flashed in the sun. The Texan regarded the Mexican spurs joyfully, stooped to jingle them with his finger tip.

“Can’t believe it ... how they came back to you,” he marveled. “One of them Yankees musta took ‘em off me, thinkin’ I was cashin’ in m’ chips. Sure feels good to git ‘em back on my heels agin, sorta like they was m’ luck. Pa, he set a right lot by them spurs. Gave ‘em to me when I gentle broke a wild one none o’ th’ other boys could back. Was I turkey-cock proud th’ first day I rode into town with ‘em playin’ pretty tunes, even though I strapped ‘em on over boots as was only three pieces of leather hangin’ to each other restless like. Yeah, Pa, he got ‘em in the Mexican War, an’ me, I wore ‘em mostly through this past ruckus. They’s sure seen a lotta history bein’ made by men climbin’ up an’ down from saddles!”

“Let’s hope ... no more wars.” Drew set the three books in a pile and regarded them attentively. Stein’s story of their origin—out of a trunk hidden in a desert cave—was most intriguing. What else had been in that trunk?

“Anse,” he asked, “why would anyone hide a trunk in a cave?” “Might depend on what was in it,” the Texan replied promptly.

“Well, these were—”

Anse took up the top book. His finger traced each word as he read. “*The Three Mus—Musketeers*. Whatever kinda critter is that?”

“A soldier. They used to have them over in France a long time ago.”

“Army manual, eh? Maybe so the trunk was an army cache—”

Drew shook his head. “No, this is just a story. A good one with lots of prime fightin’ in it. This one’s a story, too. I’ve heard about it ... never got a chance to read it though.” He set *The Count of Monte Cristo* upright on the table. Anse took the third volume.

“... *Con—Conquest of Mexico*. Hey, conquest means winnin’ th’ country, don’t it? This about the Mex War which our pa’s fought?” He flicked open the pages eagerly.

“No, the earlier one—when the Spanish came in under Cortés and broke up the Aztec empire ... back in the 1500’s.”

“Kinda stiff readin’ ... looks interestin’ though.” Anse gave his verdict. “We had us two books. Pa learned us to read outta them. One was th’ Bible Ma brought long when she was married. T’other—that sure was kinda queer how we got that. Pa was in th’ Rangers, an’ he had this run-in with some Comanches—” Anse’s eyes were suddenly bleak, and Drew remembered the few stark sentences the Texan had once spoken to explain his reason for being in the army—a return to a frontier ranch to find nothing left, nothing he wanted to remember, after the Comanches had swept across the countryside.

“Well,” Anse broke that short pause, “Pa shot him one big buck as was ridin’ straight into th’ Ranger line, wantin’ to count one o’ them coups by whangin’ some white man personal with his lance, or some such foolishness. This buck had him a war shield an’ Pa picked it up when all th’ smoke blew away. What’d you think that there shield was packed with? Well, this one had a book all tore apart an’ stuffed in between th’ front an’ back layers of hide. Th’ boys in th’ company, they got right interested in sortin’ out all them pages an’ puttin’ ‘em in order agin, kinda like a game, Pa said. Pa, he never had much schoolin’, but he could read good an’ write an’ figger. He sure liked to read, so he claimed that there book when it was all tied up together agin—’cause he shot th’ buck as was carryin’ th’ shield. So he made a buckskin case and kept all th’ pages together. That was ‘bout soldiers of th’ old time, too—parts of it. Romans they was called. Wonder now—did it maybe go back into a shield agin afterward?” He gazed beyond Drew’s shoulder into the world outside the cantina door.

“Why would anyone want to store books in a trunk in a cave?” Drew changed the subject quickly to break that unseeing stare. He outlined what Stein had told him, and Anse’s attention was all his again.

“Might catch up with this Lutterfield an’ ask a few questions—”

“Stein couldn’t get anythin’ out of him. Guess the old man is a little addled. Maybe someone was storin’ stuff, hopin’ to come back when the war was over. Anyway, there’s no way to identify the owner or owners—”

Anse picked up *The Three Musketeers*. “You say this is good—’bout fightin’ an’ such?”

Drew nodded. “Try it ...”

“Somethin’ like this is good t’ have. A hombre gits tired readin’ labels on cans. I’d like to see how much Pa pushed into m’ thick head. Good coverin’ this book has. Wouldn’t you say as th’ hombre that had it was kinda heavy in th’ pocket?”

“Yes. In fact, these were bound to order.”

“How can you tell that?”

“These two might have come bound alike.” Drew pointed to the book Anse held and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. “They were written by the same author and could have been part of a matched set. But this one is on a totally different subject and by another writer—Prescott. Yet

it is uniformly bound to match the others. I'd say they came from the personal library of a man able to indulge himself in pretty expensive tastes."

"Makes you think," Anse agreed. "Wonder what else was in that trunk."

"Looky what we've got us here! Regular li'l schoolhouse right in this cantina!"

The table moved an inch or so as a thick body brought up with a rush against it. A hand, matted with sun-bleached hair, made a grab for the book Drew had just laid down. Before the startled Kentuckian could pull it back from that grasp, hand and book were gone, and the trooper who had taken it was reeling back to the bar, waving the trophy over his head.

"Schoolhouse ... right here ..." he mouthed. "Sittin' there ... two li'l boys, studyin' their lessons. Now, ain't that somethin'?"

A chair went over with a crash. Anse was on his feet, had taken two steps in the direction of the soldier. Drew jumped after him, trying to assess the situation even as his hand closed restrainingly on the Texan's shoulder.

There were four troopers. Wide grins on the faces of the three still against the bar suggested they were ready to back their companion in any form of horseplay he intended to try.

"Sam, one o' them thar schoolboys is breathin' down yore neck kinda hot like," the tallest of the bar row observed.

Anse jerked against Drew's hold. There was no expression on his thin face, but the old saber scar from lip to eye on his left cheek was suddenly twice as noticeable.

Sam reached up against the bar, squirmed around, the book still in his hand.

"Wal, now, sonny, you ain't really wantin' this here book back? Never knowed any li'l boy what warn't glad to see th' last o' a book. Better git away from a real man 'fore you gits yore backside warmed. That's what th' teacher does to smarty kids, ain't it?"

"You'd better watch out, Sam." Again the tall man cut in. Sam was still grinning, but there was a curve of lip which was far from any real humor, even that provoked by the practical jokes of a barracks bully. "One of them kids had been sayin' as how he rode with Forrest, regular li'l red-hot Reb, he is. Stomp all over us ... that's what you Rebs has been promisin' to do, ain't it? Gonna stomp all over any Blue Bellies as comes into this town? Well, we ain't bein' booted—not easy—an' not by you, Reb!"

A second, perhaps more—that much warning Drew had before the speaker lurched from the bar straight for him. What had happened, how this had sprung up out of nothing, the Kentuckian could not understand. But he knew well that he was under an attack delivered with a purpose, and with all the dirty tricks of a no-rules, back-alley fighter.

## 8

Only once before, when some river toughs had ganged up on the scouts, had Drew had to use fists to beat his way out of an argument. But that had been a round dance at Court House Day compared to this. Within moments the Kentuckian knew that he was no match for the trooper, that he would be lucky if he could get out of this unmaimed. The fellow knew every dirty trick and was eager to use them all. Drew tried only to keep on his feet and out of the other's grip. Once down, he knew he would have no chance at all.

Then he was jerked back, off balance, staggering on to bring up against the wall. He caught at the solid backing and somehow remained upright, seeing hazily through one eye. The other was puffing closed, and his lip was torn, a trickle of blood rising there to drip down his chin. He put both hands to his middle where more than one of the pile-driver knocks had landed, and tried to understand what was happening.

Sergeant Muller ... that was Muller standing over the man on the floor. And Nye ... Reese Topham ... suddenly the cantina was very well populated. Drew turned his head cautiously to see on his blind side. Anse was down! The Kentuckian stood away from the wall, lurched out to fall to his knees. He rolled the Texan over on his back. Anse's eyes fluttered open, and he looked up dazedly. There was an angry red mark on his chin just an inch or so away from the point of his jaw.

"Now, just what devil's business is goin' on here?" The sergeant's voice was a roar to hurt the ears. Somehow Drew got an arm under Anse's shoulders and tried to hoist him up. The Kentuckian swallowed blood from his lip and glared at Muller.

"Suppose you ask those high-binders of yours!" he snapped. And once more it was Sergeant Rennie who spoke.

Other hands joined his to boost Anse. With Topham's aid Drew regained his feet and got the staggering Texan, still half unconscious, onto a chair.

"I'm interested, too." The cantina owner's drawl was as slow as ever, but it held a note of a whiplash.

"Them soldiers..." Fowler appeared, the bar-side shotgun across his arm—"they jumped th' boys. I saw it, myself."

"Yeah, told yuh these town buzzards're all th' same. Stick together an' have it in for th' army!"

Drew could not see which of the troopers had burst out with that, but in his present mood all bluecoats were the enemy.

"Dirty Yanks!" Anse's eyes were fully focused now—right on the sergeant. Anse struggled to get up, but Topham's hands on his shoulders held him down. His hand went to his holster, and Drew's fist came down on the Texan's wrist, hard.

"See that thar, Sarge! Th' stinkin' polecat of a Reb was gonna draw on you! Told you, they's all alike. Th' war ain't over; we jus' gotta keep on lickin' 'em. Give us room, an' we'll do it again—now!"

Anse's face was green-white under the weathering, save for the wound on his jaw. He was watching Muller as if the sergeant, rather than his men, was the focal point of any future attack.

“You—Stevens—shut your trap!” Muller’s roar brought silence. Drew could actually hear the panting breaths of the men now.

“Mitchell, what happened here?” Muller turned to the man at his far right.

The trooper was younger than the rest, his face still holding something of a boyish roundness. His eyes shifted under the sergeant’s steady, boring stare, and he glanced at the rest of his companions, the two disheveled fighters, the lanky man picking up a forage cap and handing it to one of them.

“I dunno, Sergeant. Th’ boys ... they was jus’ funnin’. They didn’t meant nothin’, jus’ funnin’. Then these here Rebs, they come right after Helms, was gonna jump him from behind. An’ Danny waded in jus’ to keep that one”—the boy pointed straight at Drew—”offa Helms. That’s what happened. Th’ boys didn’t mean no harm—jus’ havin’ a little fun—when these Rebs jumped ‘em!”

Drew pulled up his neckerchief and dabbed at his cut lip. Anse had subsided, though he was still watching the sergeant with an unrelenting gaze. The Kentuckian tried to remember where Fowler had been during the fracas. He had spoken up for them already, but would Muller accept his testimony over that of his own men? There was already ill feeling between the army and the town. Drew remembered *Don Cazar’s* encounter with Bayliss at Kells’ stable. What had Reese Topham said then? That the captain was only waiting to make trouble for Rennie. And now here he was himself—one of Rennie’s riders—involved in a saloon fight with troopers. Drew began to realize that this could be even worse than the physical punishment he and Anse had suffered.

“You ... bartender—” The sergeant now looked to Fowler. “What’d you see?”

“You ain’t gonna take his word for it, for anythin’ in this mudhole of a town, are you, Sarge? They’d all lie their heads off to git a trooper into trouble. Wouldn’t you now?” The lanky man sidled along the bar to snarl at Fowler.

“Stevens, shut that big mouth of yours, an’ I ain’t gonna say that agin! All right, Fowler, tell me what *you* saw!”

Fowler slid the shotgun out of sight, apparently sure that an armistice, at least, was assured.

“Th’ boys”—he nodded at Drew and Anse—”were sittin’ at that table, mindin’ their own business. Helms, he went over an’ picked up a book——”

“A book!” Muller’s craggy features mirrored astonishment. “What book? Why?”

Topham moved and suddenly they were all watching him. He stooped, picked up the dark-brown volume, and a torn page fluttered to the floor. He gathered that up, too, and tucked it back in the proper place.

“It would seem, Sergeant,” he remarked, “that there *was* a book involved. And if your men didn’t bring it in here, then Kirby or his friend must have. This is certainly not a cantina fixture. Hmm, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*,” he read the title on the cracked spine. “There are more books, I see.” He stepped to the side of the overturned table, gathered the other two volumes, and placed them together in a neat pile on the bar. All of the men continued to watch him as if his actions were highly significant.

“So—” he turned to face Muller. “We have established that there was a book, in fact, three books.”

“What’d you want with that book, Helms?” Muller demanded.



He was met by a scowl. “Nothin’. I was jus’ funnin’—like Ben said. Then them Rebs started playin’ rough, an’ we jus’ gave ‘em a lesson.”

Fowler snorted. “I say Helms started it, an’ th’ jumpin’ went th’ other way ‘round, Sergeant. An’ that’s all I got to say.”

“Well, it isn’t all I have to say! Sergeant, just what is going on here?”

Whoever, having once heard that turkey cock crow, could ever forget it, thought Drew. Captain Bayliss strode in, powdery white dust graying his blue blouse, his face redder and more sun peeled than ever. The troopers behind Muller stiffened into wooden soldiers, all expression vanishing from their features until they matched each other in exact anonymity.

“Sergeant, take those two men into custody.” A jerk of the head indicated Drew and Anse. The Kentuckian straightened.

“On what charge, Captain?” he got out.

“Attacking a United States soldier.”

“In performance of his duty, Captain?” Reese Topham cut in. “I hardly think you can say that. Your men were apparently off duty. At least they were in here, drinking, too. You *did* serve them, Fowler?”

“Sure did, boss! Let’s see now ... Helms, he had whisky; so did Stevens. Mitchell, now, he had a beer——”

“It remains that they were attacked while wearing the uniform!” Bayliss’ glare now included the full company before him.

“From what I’ve heard, they did the attacking,” Topham pointed out. “At least Helms seems to have given provocation. No, Captain Bayliss, your men were in here drinking. They started a brawl. Your sergeant very rightly broke it up. That’s the sum of the matter!”

Bayliss’ high color was fading. “You want it left that way, Topham?” he asked icily. “This only confirms my contention that matters in Tubacca are completely out of control, that the Rebel element has the backing of the citizens. I shall so report it.”

“That is your privilege.” Topham nodded. “But this is still Tubacca and not your camp, Captain. And *my* cantina. If you want to declare my establishment out of bounds for your men, that is also your privilege.”

“I do so—immediately! Sergeant, get these men out of here!”

“What about the prisoners, sir?”

“I think the captain will agree there are no prisoners,” Topham said. “We would be obliged to give evidence at any army hearing, Captain. Kirby here is not a troublemaker. I would unhesitatingly vouch for him.”

Bayliss looked directly at Drew.

“You have a job? A reason for being in town?” He shot the questions as he might have shot slugs from his Colt. Nye answered before Drew could.

“He sure has a job, Cap’n. He’s ridin’ th’ rough string for Rennie. An’ he came to town with them remounts you’re buyin’. An’ what Topham says is true, th’ kid ain’t no troublemaker. He’s ‘bout th’ most peaceful hombre I ever rode with.”

“Rider for Rennie, eh? I might have known!” Bayliss snapped. “And what about this one—he riding for Rennie, too?” He pointed to Anse.

“He’s my cousin,” Drew returned. “He just got into town.”

“Another Rebel?”

Anse stood up. “If you mean was I with th’ Confederate army, Yankee—I sure was, from Shiloh clean through. Got me this to prove it. Do you want to see?” From the inner band of his hat he brought out a much creased paper. “No, you don’t!” He twitched the sheet away when Bayliss reached for it. “I’ll jus’ let Mister Topham read it. I want to keep it safe.” He handed the paper to the gambler.

“Parole, Captain, signed and made out properly,” Topham reported. “Dated in Tennessee for a prisoner of war—June, 1865. I hardly think you can claim this is one of Kitchell’s men, if that is what you have in mind.”

“No, but he’ll be out of this town or he’ll answer to me. Both of you—next time you step over the line, I’m taking you both in!” Bayliss spoke now to Nye. “I heard young Shannon was here, that you had him in tow and that he’s seen Kitchell. I want to talk to him.”

“He’s over to th’ doc’s, an’ Doc’ll have th’ say ‘bout that, Cap’n,” Nye replied. “Johnny took a pretty bad crease ‘longside his skull.”

“He’ll answer a few questions that badly need answering.” Bayliss was already on his way to the door. Nye stepped back and let him pass. He grinned.

“Let him have it out with Doc. Ain’t nobody runnin’ a stampede over Doc Matthews, not even th’ cap’n when he’s got his tail up an’ ready to hook sod with both horns. Only, lissen here, kid, maybe you’d better keep outta sight. Seems like a man who’s waitin’ to catch a fella makin’ his boot mark in th’ wrong pasture can sometimes do it.”

“Nye’s right,” Topham agreed. “Bayliss can either catch you off guard or see you’re provoked again into doing something he can rope you in for. I’d get back to the Range and stay there until things settle down a little and someone else takes the good captain’s mind off you.”

“What about Anse? You take him on, Nye?” Drew asked.

“I ain’t got th’ authority to hire, Kirby. But no reason why he can’t go down th’ trail with us. Old Man is always on lookout for a good rider. Soon as we see how Johnny’s doin’, we’ll head south. I already sent Greyfeather back to tell the Old Man th’ kid’s hurt an’ up here. Reese, what’d you think ‘bout Bayliss? That he’ll try to take over runnin’ the town?”

“Might just,” the gambler replied.

“*Could* he do it?”

“I hardly think so. What he’s really out for is Hunt’s hide. He doesn’t want a powerful civilian ready to face up to him all the time. If he can discredit *Don* Cazar in this country, he figures he has it made.”

Nye laughed shortly. “Lordy, what bottle did he suck out a dream like that? A lizard might jus’ as well try to fight it out with a cougar an’ think he hadda chance of winnin’. This here’s th’ Range, an’ ain’t nobody but th’ Old Man runs th’ Range! Bayliss, he’s ridin’ for a fall as will jar them big grinnin’ teeth of his right outta his jaws!”

“Maybe, only there can be upsets.” Topham looked thoughtful.

“What kind—and how?” Drew asked quickly.

Topham was playing with the three books, setting them up, putting them flat again. “Hunt didn’t take sides during the war, but he did have Southern sympathies in part. After all, he

was Texas-born. And Johnny joined Howard when they raised that Confederate troop here. He retreated with Sibley's force back east and fought through the rest of the war on the Southern side. Yes, Bayliss, given the right circumstances and a sympathetic listening ear in high circles, could make trouble for Rennie. Especially if the good captain had an incident on which to hang such a report."

"You kinda shoved him into that out-of-bounds order for th' Jacks, didn't you now?" Nye pushed his hat to the back of his head and lit a cigarillo.

"Muller and most of the boys can be counted on not to cause any more than the normal pay-night disturbances. But there're some.... What *did* happen here today, Kirby?"

Drew told it straight and flat in as few words as possible. And Topham's face was sober when he had finished. The gambler brought the top book of the pile down on the bar with a thud.

"I don't like it!"

"Jus' ornery meanness, warn't it? There's always a few hombres in any outfit as tries to push when they gits a slug or two under their belts," Nye observed.

"True. Only Helms went out of his way this time. And I'd like to know what triggered him into it. I can understand some roughhousing on his part—Stevens, too—providing these boys were on the prod in the beginning. But this book business was too deliberate. Books—" He held up the volume he was still fingering. "Where'd these come from anyway, Kirby?"

Drew retailed the story he had heard from Stein. Nye walked over to look at the display of reading matter, his interest plainly aroused.

"Lutterfield brought 'em in, eh? Now that's somethin'. Trunk in a cave ... Sounds like these might belong to one of them mine men—a super, maybe. They pulled out fast in '61, right after th' army left. Except for Hodges, an' th' Rebs threw him in jail after they took his business an' what cash he had on hand."

"Could be," Topham agreed. "But where they came from doesn't matter as much as why Helms chose to use them the way he did. However—and now I'm giving it to you straight, Kirby—this is once I'd follow Bayliss' orders. You and your cousin here had better make yourselves scarce."

"An' jus' why?" Anse demanded. "We ain't givin' you any double-tongue wag over this——"

"I'm not saying you are. I'm just saying that Bayliss and probably Helms—maybe others—will be waiting, just as the captain promised. You can be easily suckered into just such another fight. And they'd be smarter about it next time, so you won't have anyone to call their bluff in your favor. Once they get you into the camp stockade, it might be difficult to get you out. And this is something else, stranger, you went for your gun a few minutes ago. Kirby stopped you, but next time that could lead to real trouble."

"I can't see why—" Drew began.

"Well"—Anse was on the defensive—"a man can take jus' so much pushin', an' we had more'n that! Next time anybody lays his dirty hands on me, he's gonna know he's had him trouble, all right!"

"I don't mean that." Drew waved Anse's retort aside. "I don't see why we were jumped in the first place. Unless it was because we happened to be here at a time when they wanted to start trouble?" He made that into a question and looked to Topham for the answer.

"Could be," the gambler admitted.

“Only you’re not sure?” Drew persisted.

“Could be you were handy and they had some kind of a hint to start a ruckus just to show there ain’t any proper law here. Could be that they knew you ride for Hunt and that made you just the game they wanted.”

“Helms’s kinda dumb to play any cute game,” Nye protested. “An’ th’ sarge, he’s always been a good guy, I don’t see him bitin’ happy on any such backhand orders.”

“Not orders, no. Captain Bayliss is still too army to give any such orders. Helms’s always been a troublemaker; he wouldn’t need much more than a suggestion or two of the right sort. Helms, Stevens, Danny Birke, and that kid Mitchell. You’re right so far, Nye.” Topham grinned. “Like as not, I’m imaginin’ things—a greenhorn huntin’ Apaches behind every bush. None of that crew has the brains to see anything beyond the tip of his nose. No, I guess we can take it that you were handy and they had too much red-eye on empty stomachs. Only, I mean it, Kirby, you walk soft and get back to the Range as quick as you can.”

“That suits me,” Drew agreed.

“Come on over an’ let Doc take a look at that face of yours,” Nye ordered. “You look like you came up behind a mule an’ the critter did a mite of dancin’ backwards! You come ‘long, too,” he extended the invitation to include Anse.

His face patched up after a fashion, Drew lay full length on the hay in his old place over Shadow’s stall back at Kells’ stable. Anse sat crosslegged beside him, the bruise now a black shadow on his jaw.

“Somethin’ ‘bout this show’s bad, plain as a black saddle on a white hoss. Nobody could be fannin’ a six-gun for you personal, Drew, ‘less you had a run-in before with one of them Blue Bellies.” The Texan paused and Drew shook his head, wincing at the pain from his numerous cuts and bruises.

Anse went on. “Some hombres are always on th’ peck once they get likkered up, but them troopers weren’t that deep. Looks to me now, thinkin’ it over, they was out to make sod fly. Could be as they had trouble with some other riders an’ we was handy an’ looked peaceable enough to take easy. But I dunno. You know, a fella who’s scouted an’ hunted Injuns an’ popped bush cattle, to say nothin’ of toppin’ wild ones what can look like a nice quiet little pony one minute an’ have a belly full of bedsprings an’ a sky touchin’ back th’ next—a fella who’s had him all that kinda experience an’ a saddlebag full of surprises in his time gits so he can smell a storm comin’ ‘fore th’ first cloud shows. If we had the sense we shoulda been born with, we’d ride hell-to-thunder outta here now!”

“Anse”—Drew wriggled up on one elbow—“you do that. I ain’t going to pull you into anything—”

“So,” the Texan said, nodding, “you’ve been swallowin’ down a whim-wham or two your ownself?”

“Yes, but every one of them could be only a shadow to scare a jackrabbit.”

“Only you plan to go out an’ spit in th’ shadow’s eye?”

“Guess so.”

“Then there’ll be two of us. Providin’ Rennie can use him ‘nother hand. You know, this might be interestin’. ‘Member what they used to say in the army? Don’t go borrowin’ trouble nor try to cross a river till you git th’ water lappin’ at your boots.”

## 9

“Times is gittin’ better.” Crow Fenner rode with one knee cocked up over the horn of his saddle, allowing Tar to drop into a pace at which he seemed to be actually sleep-walking. The wagon train was traveling slow, the wagons riding heavy in the ruts with their burden of northern goods heading south. But they were strung in good order and Drew, having seen the screen of outriders and Pima Scouts, thought that though they offered temptation, they were not to be easily taken by anything less than a small troop, very well armed and reckless.

“Yes, siree, this here’s th’ second time we made th’ trip through without havin’ to burn up a sight of gunpowder! Guess them army boys millin’ around back an’ forth across th’ territory do some good, after all. Pretty soon there won’t be no need for wearin’ guns loose an’ tryin’ to grow eyes in th’ back of yore skull!” But Fenner’s own rifle still rode on guard across his knees, and Drew noted that the scout never broke a searching survey of the countryside.

“Gittin’ downright civilized, eh?” Anse brought his mount up equal with the other two.

Fenner spat. “Now that thar I ain’t cottonin’ to none. Ride ’long without some Injun or *bandido* poppin’ lead at m’back. Yep, that’s what a man kin enjoy. But I ain’t takin’ to have maybe one o’ them thar engine trains snortin’ out dirty smoke an’ sparks hereabouts. Took me a ride on one of them things onct—never agin! Why a man wants to git hisself all stuck up with cinders an’ cover territory faster than th’ Good Lord ever intended him to travel—that’s some stupid thinkin’ I can’t take to. A good hoss, maybe a wagon, does a man want to do some tradin’ like *Don Cazar*—that’s right enough. But them trains, they’s pure pizen an’ a full soppin’ keg o’ it!”

Drew looked about him. The road, rutted deep by the heavy wagons, curled southward. Those wheel tracks had first been cut almost a hundred years earlier when the Spaniards had set up their southwestern outposts. This country was far older than Kentucky, and with just as bloody a history of wars, raids, and battles. Kentucky had been tamed; trains did puff along through the Blue Grass and the mountains there. But here—he shook his head in answer to his own thoughts.

“Ain’t nobody gonna try to run a railroad through here,” Anse replied promptly. “First place, they’re gonna be busy for a while back east puttin’ up new ones for all them what were busted up in th’ war. Our boys an’ theirs, too, got real expert toward th’ end—could heat up a rail an’ tie a regular noose in it, were some tree handy to rope it ‘round. Gonna take th’ Yankees some doin’ to git all them back into place.” He laughed. “Drew, ‘member that time we took them river steamers an’ had us a real feed? Times when I was in that Yankee stockade eatin’ th’ swill they called rations I used to dream ‘bout them pickles an’ canned peaches an’ crackers with long sweetin’ poured on ‘em!”

“Heard tell as you boys don’t think th’ war’s clear over yet,” Fenner observed. “Didn’t you have yoreselves a ruckus with th’ soldiers at th’ Four Jacks?”

Drew’s reminiscent smile faded. But he was not going to keep on protesting about the right or wrong of what happened back in town. The way Nye and Topham had hustled Anse and him out with the wagon train had made it seem as if they were in disgrace, and that rankled a lot. What was expected of them—that they should have let Helms pour it on—maybe serve as butts for a series of practical jokes without raising a finger in their own defense? On the other hand, the Kentuckian could see the sense behind Topham’s arguments. If Bayliss wanted to use Drew’s connection with the Range as a weapon in some scheme against Hunt Rennie,

then Hunt Rennie's son was only too willing to clear out. Perhaps he should clear out even farther and head for California. Drew began to think about that. There was Sage. She couldn't hope to make such a trip for maybe six months. That would mean putting off traveling until next spring or early summer. But six months ... Of course, he *could* go now. *Don Cazar* would buy the foal and Shadow, too, and give him a fair price. That would be relinquishing a dream. No Spur R brand would ever be established here in Arizona. But sometimes dreams were priced too high....

"You're mighty grim-mouthed," Anse commented, glancing at Drew sideways. "Thinkin' of trains runnin' through here git you down that far? Or else that roughenin' up you took in town still sit sour on your stomach?"

"Sits sour all right," Drew admitted. "Sits sourer to think we were suckered into it."

The scout glanced from one to the other of the young men.

"You think there's somethin' in all that talk Topham was givin' lip to?" Anse asked.

"Could be. Can't say as how I'd like to find out the truth. Look here, Fenner, we've heard a lot about Captain Bayliss wantin' to make trouble for *Don Cazar*. Does everybody believe that?"

"Everybody wot ain't blind, deaf, or outta their natural-born wits," Fenner replied. "Bayliss come out here two years ago. 'Fore that, Major Kenny, he was in command between here an' Tucson. Had him an outpost right on th' edge o' th' Range. Him an' *Don Cazar*, they never talked no war, 'cept 'gainst Apaches an' th' *bandidos*. Was there a raid, th' major, he took out th' troops; and *Don Cazar*, he took out his riders an' th' Pimas. 'Tween 'em they give everybody wot wanted a spot of trouble all they could chew off an' a lot more'n they could swallow. Kept things quiet even if a man hadda rest his hand on his rifle 'bout twenty-four hours outta every day.

"But this here Bayliss—he's been like a mule with a burr under his tail ever since he hit th' territory. Wants to have th' say 'bout everything—includin' wot goes on at th' Range—which he ain't never goin' t' have as long as *Don Cazar* kin sit th' saddle an' ride. Back in '62 when th' Rebs came poundin' in here, they spoke soft an' nice to *Don Cazar*. They wanted him to back their play an' see 'em straight on to Californy. He was from Texas an' them Texas boys jus' naturally thought as how he'd saddle up an' ride right 'long wi' 'em. Only he said it loud an' clear—that such ruckusin' round only meant th' whole country here'd go to pot. When th' army pulled out, th' Apaches got it into their heads as how they finally licked us good an' proper an' this here was their country fur th' takin'. Nearly was, too.

"Then th' Rebs got up on their high horse an' said as how iffen *Don Cazar* warn't with 'em, then he was agin 'em, an' they would jus' move in on *him*. He tol' 'em to go ahead an' try. An' seem' as how they was only one company hereabouts—Howard's Rangers—they didn't try. That's when Johnny Shannon had his big bust-up with his pa an'—"

"His father!" Drew could not help that exclamation.

"Wal, *Don Cazar* ain't Johnny's real pa, o' course. But he shore thinks th' world an' all of Johnny, raising him up from a li'l cub. Johnny warn't more'n four o' thereabouts when *Don Cazar* went back to Texas an' got him. *Don Cazar*'s been like a pa to Johnny since, an' a mighty good one, too. But when th' Rangers was round here in '62 Johnny—he had a big row an' run off to join 'em. Jus' a half-growed kid, not big 'nough to raise a good brush o' hair on his chin yet. When th' Yankee boys from Californy came marchin' in an' th' Rebs had to skedaddle—Johnny, he went with 'em. Didn't see Johnny round here agin till last fall when he came ridin' in lookin' mighty beat out an' down in th' mouth. But when th' Union

men came, they was thinkin' th' same 'bout *Don Cazar*. Wanted him to jump right in an' swim 'longside o' them. But he said as how th' safety of his people was what was important. He was fightin' Apaches an' holdin' th' land, an' that was what meant th' most to his thinkin'. Then the Yankees did a lot of fancy cussin' out 'bout him, trying to make out that he was a Reb' cause Johnny lit off with th' Southerners.

"Till they began to discover nothin' much goes on round here lessen *Don Cazar* has a finger in th' pot. An' they had to swaller a lotta them hot an' hasty words—stuck heavy in quite a few craws, I reckon." Fenner grinned. "Only, th' *Don*, he's got agin him now a big list of little men who'd like to be big chiefs. Every once in a while they gits together an' makes war talk. Never quite got up guts 'nough to paint their faces an' hit th' trail, not yet. But did somebody like Bayliss look like he was beginnin' to make things move, then he'd have a lotta willin' hands to help him shove. Up to now Johnny's been their best bet at gittin' th' Range into trouble."

Drew turned his head to look Fenner in the eye. "Now you think we are!" He did not know why he uttered that as a challenge; the words just came out that way.

"Not any more'n any of us wot can be drawn into a fight in town. You keep away from Bayliss. He can't come huntin' you without tippin' his hand so wide he'd never be able to play agin. Hey, here comes somebody poundin' leather so hard he's gonna beat it right intuh th' ground!" Fenner pulled up Tar, flung up his hand to signal the wagons to a halt.

Dust rolled in a cloud with two or three riders at its center. They were pushing the pace all right. Drew jerked his carbine from its saddle boot, saw Anse beat him to that action by a scant second or two. But the newcomers were already drawing rein, bringing their foam-lathered horses to a pawing stop. A buckskin-clad man mounted on a powerful grulla gelding faced Fenner, his whole tense body and snapping eyes backing the demand he made:

"Where's Johnny?"

"Back at town, Rennie, at Doc's. He ain't bad. Got him a head crease wot knocked him silly for a bit. Doc says a day o' two in bed and then he kin come home."

"How did it happen?" That second question was as sharp as the first.

"Nobody's got it straight outta him yet. Army patrol picked him up on th' road close to town—looked like he'd been footin' it quite a spell. An' by that time he didn't know wot he was doin'. Nye got him to Doc's an' they put him to bed. He ain't said much, 'cept Kitchell jumped him down Long Canyon way——"

"Kitchell!" Hunt Rennie repeated the name and nodded. "But ... Long Canyon ..." There was a shade of puzzlement in his voice. "All right, carry on, Crow. I'll try to get back to the Stronghold before you pull south—if Johnny's all right. Maybe I can bring him back with me."

The grulla made what was close to a standing leap into a gallop and Rennie flashed along the line of wagons in the opposite direction toward Tubacca. Fenner signaled once more and the train began the slower trip southward.

Drew sat watching the dust arise again as the trio of riders pounded away. He could no longer make out individual riders, just the rising dust. Rennie on his way to Johnny Shannon ... What had Fenner said—"li'l cub ... warn't more 'n four." Drew Rennie at four—hard to sort out one very early memory from another. There had been that time Uncle Murray had caught him down at the creek, making paper boats. How could a child that young know one kind of paper from another? But Hunt Rennie's son was judged to have torn up a letter with

deliberate malice, not just taken paper found conveniently on the veranda. Was he four then, or even younger? But he could remember the punishment very vividly. And the time he'd run off to see the circus come into town, he and Shelly ... Cousin Jeff, Cousin Merry, they had tried to beg him off from Grandfather's punishment that time, not that they had succeeded. Drew Rennie at four, at six, at twelve, at sixteen—riding out at night with Castleman's Company, weaving a path south through enemy-occupied territory to join General Morgan—few of those would-be cavalymen over twenty-one. Yes, he could remember for Drew Rennie all the way back.

"Hey, you plannin' to claim this here range?" Anse's horse trotted up, and Drew was suddenly aware that the trailer of the last wagon had already pulled past him. He tightened rein, and the well-trained horse broke into a canter.

"Not hardly." He tried to meet Anse's attempt at humor halfway. "Don't look too promisin'."

"Lissen here"—Anse rode so close their spurs were near to hitting—"you sure you got hold of th' right end of th' runnin' iron now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, 'bout Shannon. You heard what Fenner said—Rennie's like a pa to him. An' maybe ..." His voice died away.

"And maybe that's that? He has my place, and it's really his now?" Drew asked bleakly. "Could be."

Yes, it could well be that this was a good time to bow out. Maybe he should not have ridden out of Tubacca at all. Maybe he should have cut out of the game yesterday.... Or never come down into the valley weeks ago ... or left Red Springs.... Those "maybes" stretched as far back and as neatly in line as the railroad tracks they had been talking about earlier, one slipping smoothly into another as if cast in one strong string of doubts. Just as he had had that moment of disappointment the first time he had seen Hunt Rennie, so he felt that identical void now, only twice as wide and deep.

What had he expected, anyway? Some kind of instant recognition on his father's part? That all the welcoming would be on the other side, breaking right through the barrier he had been building for years? His feelings were so illogical he could have laughed at them, only he had no laughter left. He had not tried to open the door, so why did he care that it remained firmly shut?

"Did you ever think about California, Anse? Sounds like a place a man would like to see."

He was conscious that the Texan's horse quickened pace, only to be reined in again.

"You thinkin' about cuttin' out? Yesterday——"

"Yesterday——" Drew tried to think back to how he had felt yesterday about Topham's warning and how he himself had held the absurd belief that if *Don Cazar* was going to be in trouble, Drew himself wanted to be there. That was yesterday. But still he pointed his horse south—to the place where Hunt Rennie would return, bringing Johnny Shannon.

The Kentuckian fell back on the old "wait and see." He had learned long since that time took care of a lot of worries. Now he made himself grin at Anse.

"Was worryin' about wet feet before my boots were in the river again," he confessed.

"Don't let it git to be no habit," the Texan warned. "You try ridin' *with* th' bumps awhile, not agin them!"



“Agreed.” Drew urged his horse on toward the front of the train where they wouldn’t have to breathe the dust.

“... m’ cousin, Anson Kirby ...” Drew made, the introduction to Bartolomé Rivas. The wagons were forted up outside the Stronghold, a second square, smaller but almost as easily defended as the adobe walls. In two or three days the train would pull out again, starting the long trip down into Sonora.

Rivas surveyed Anse none too amicably, his gaze going from man to horse and its gear, then back to the Texan once more.

“You are Tejano,” he said flatly. “From the Neusca——”

Anse showed no surprise at being so accurately identified.

“Been bush poppin’,” he agreed, smiling.

“Not much cattle here,” Rivas returned.

“Run hosses in th’ San Sabe ‘fore th’ war.” Anse’s tone was offhand, he might have been discussing the weather.

“*Don Cazar* decides,” Bartolomé said. “There is work at the corrals, but he will decide.”

“Fair enough,” Anse agreed. When Bartolomé had moved out of hearing, he added for Drew’s benefit:

“I think it’d be ‘no’ if that hombre had th’ sayin’. He plumb don’t like my style.”

“But Rennie does need men—guards for the wagon trains, riders——”

Anse shrugged as he off-saddled. “Will he want one as got into a brawl about his third day in town? Anyway, maybe I’ve a day or so to breathe full before he tells me to roll m’ bed again, if he’s goin’ to.”

During the next three days Drew made a new discovery. Just as he had fallen into an easy, working rhythm with Anse back in the army—so that on occasion their thoughts and actions matched without the need for speech—now they combined operations in the corrals. Drew’s bare and painfully acquired competence with the rope was paired to the Texan’s range training, while Anse’s cruder and faster methods of “toppin’ a wild one” were smoothed by Drew’s more patient gentling process. Both of them were so absorbed by what they were doing that Tubacca and what might be going on there had no more immediate meaning than the words in the books which had ridden to the Stronghold in Drew’s saddlebags.

In the late afternoon of the third day the Kentuckian was walking a long-legged bay on a lead when León climbed to the top pole of the corral.

“The *patrón* comes,” he announced.

Drew faced about. Two riders escorted at hardly more than a fast walk a buckboard in which were two other men. Drew caught a glimpse of a white bandage under the brim of the passenger’s hat and knew that Johnny Shannon was coming home.

“Anse!” Drew raised a hand, suddenly knowing that his fingers were moving in the old scout signal of trouble ahead.

The Texan came across the corral. Drew’s bay snorted, took a dance step or two to the right as if it had picked up sudden tension from the men.

“What’s up?” Anse pushed back his hat, turned up a corner of his neckerchief, and swabbed the lower half of his sweating face.

“Rennie’s back.”

Drew watched León hurry to take the buckboard reins, watched Hunt Rennie give a hand to Johnny. Then he saw Shannon jerk away from that aid, walking stiffly toward Casa Grande while Rennie stood for an instant looking after the younger man before following him.

Croaker tossed his head so high his limber ear bobbed in the murky air. He brayed mournfully. Anse glanced at the mule’s long melancholy face.

“That’s th’ way you think it’s gonna be, Croaker? Well, maybe so ... maybe so.”

## 10

“This waitin’—” Anse sat cross-legged on the bunk next to Drew’s, his thumb spinning the rowel of one spur. “I never did take kindly to waitin’. Is he or ain’t he gonna sign me on?”

Drew, lying flat, stared up at the muslin-covered ceiling which years of dust had turned to yellow-brown. “You ought to be used to it by now—waitin’, I mean. We had us plenty of it in the army.”

“Only that was sorta different, not kinda personal like this here. We was sittin’ round on our heels then, waitin’ for some general to make up his mind as to where he was gonna throw some lead fast. This is waitin’ to know if *we*’re goin’ to be throwed—out!”

“I heard California——” Drew began again.

“You’ve sure taken a shine to Californy lately,” Anse commented. Under his fingers the rowel whirred. “At least you talk about it enough.” He sounded irritated. “Looky here, Drew, if that’s the way you really feel, why don’t you go? I’m sayin’ you don’t feel that way, not by a long sight.”

What if Drew answered with the exact truth, that he did not know how he felt?

Nye came in, trailed by three of the other Rennie riders.

“Johnny’s got him a hoss-size headache an’ maybe so a pair of burnt ears. Th’ Old Man musta lit into him hot an’ heavy, chewed him out good. I’d say they warn’t even talkin’ by th’ time they pulled up here. Seems like th’ kid got an idear to scout north, struck trace near th’ Long Canyon, rode th’ sign on his own an’ was bushwacked. Guess whoever did it thought Johnny was wolf meat, jus’ took his hoss an’ left him there. You gotta give th’ kid credit for havin’ it in him. He kept on goin’ after he came to some——Walked till that patrol picked him up. I’d say he sure had him a run of pure solid luck! There wasn’t much pawin’ an’ bellerin’ left in him when Muller’s boys brought him to town. Been gittin’ a little of it back, though, seems like. But maybe this here will learn him a little hoss sense——”

“It was Kitchell’s men who shot him?” León wanted to know.

“Could be. Warn’t no Apaches, that’s for certain. No Injun would have jus’ shot him down an’ not made sure he was crow bait. Sure a fool thing to do, ridin’ there alone. Anyway, th’ Old Man’ll stick him into bed here, an’ I’ll bet you Johnny ain’t gonna ride out anywhere without an eye on him—not for a good long while.”

“Long Canyon——” Perse Donally, one of the other Anglo riders, paused in shucking his shirt to look inquiringly over his shoulder. “That sure is off th’ trail th’ kid was supposed to be followin’. How come he ever drifted that far north from th’ wells round, anyway?”

“You ask him.” Nye sat down on a bunk, flipped his hat away, and lay back. “Sure feels good jus’ to stretch out a mite,” he observed. “Th’ Old Man, he was movin’ like he warn’t on speakin’ terms with th’ law an’ there was a sheriff behind every rock. Usually he’s calm as a hoss trough on a mild day. Johnny gittin’ his hair cut with a slug sure shook Rennie up some, almost as much as it shook Johnny. As for th’ kid ridin’ north—well, I’d say that was some more of his tryin’ to make a real big brag. Maybe he thought he could run down Kitchell all by hisself. Which is jus’ about as straight thinkin’ as kickin’ a loaded polecat on th’ tail end. But Johnny’s always been like that. Do it now, think ‘bout it later. Got him into more scrapes

‘n I can count me on both hands. Hope th’ Old Man gives it to him this time, hot an’ heavy, both barrels plumb center!”

“*Sí*, it is true that Juanito looks for trouble.” Chino Herrera rolled a cornshuck cigarette with precise, delicate twists of his fingers. “He is *el chivato*—the young billy goat—that one. Ready to take on *el toro* himself and lock horns. Such a one learns from knocks, not from warning words. But he is yet a boy. Give him time.”

“He’d better give himself some time,” Nye announced. “Next time it may be in th’ head, not ‘longside it, that he gits his lead. See you got back in one piece, you two fightin’ wildcats,” Nye said, grinning at Drew and Anse. “Nothin’ like tryin’ to take on th’ army—two to one—with th’ army havin’ th’ advantage. That eye’s fadin’ good, Drew, only two colors now, ain’t it?”

Drew grunted and Nye laughed. “Bet th’ captain is as techy as a teased snake every time he thinks ‘bout you two. Wanted to have you all corralled nice an’ neat out to th’ camp where he could use his hooks an’ make at least three ride mounts outta you. I’d walk soft near him for a while, or you’ll have about as much chance as hens amblin’ into a coyote powwow.”

“Don’t look like they was so tough they had to sneak up on th’ dipper to take a drink, do they now?” Donally asked of the room at large.

“Don’t never judge no hoss by his coat an’ curryin’,” Anse retorted.

“I don’t, son. I never do,” Nye replied. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re both so wild they have to tie a foot up when they give you a haircut. Only, that sort of rep don’t go down good with th’ Old Man.”

“We figured it might not,” Drew agreed. Nye’s warning was only another confirmation of Drew’s fears. Topham, Nye, all the rest, had made it only too plain: no trouble on the Range and no troublemakers.

He gathered up clean underrigging, another shirt. If Rennie did order him up to the big house for firing, Drew was not going to meet him stinking of horse and sweat. In the stream back of the water corral there was a bathing place, and chilly as it was, Drew intended to take advantage of it.

”A mite cold, ain’t it?” Anse demanded from the bank as Drew splashed vigorously to offset the chill. But the Texan was shucking boots and clothing in turn.

There were a lot of shadows this close to twilight. Lamps twinkled in the Stronghold. A horse nickered from the corrals, was answered from the barn. Then a bray—Croaker sounding off. From the hills came the far-off *yip-yip-yip* of a coyote.

“Hey!” Anse stood up knee-high in the water.

“What’s the matter?” Drew called.

“Thought I saw somethin’ movin’ over there!”

Drew took a scrambling leap out of the water to their tangle of clothing, his hand reaching for one of the Colts in the belt he had left carefully on top of the pile. All those stories of Apaches weaseling into touching distance of the guard at the Stronghold.... Why, only last year the younger Rivas boy had had his throat slit out in the hay field within sight of his home!

The Kentuckian crouched, alert, Anse beside him now, both listening for any suspicious sound. At last they huddled into their clothes, hurried back to the bunkhouse. Bartolomé was there waiting for them.

“You Tejanos—” There was no pretense of friendliness in his hail. “The *patrón* will see you, pronto!”

They went, tugging their clothing into order as they paused outside the door. Drew rapped, took the sound from within as an invitation, and pushed aside the heavy oak planks.

Outwardly the room was unchanged. No one had moved those old Spanish chests, the skin rugs, the table, since his last visit there. But he had the feeling that it was chill now, cold, as if a hearth fire had been allowed to die into ashes. Perhaps that thought crossed his mind because Hunt Rennie stood by the fireplace moving the toe of his boot back and forth across a smear of gray powder. His back greeted them unwelcomingly, and the silence lengthened uncomfortably until Drew did as he always had and met the unpleasant head-on.

“You wanted us, suh?” It was like being back in the army. Even his arm twitched as if some muscle was activated by memory to make one of those informal military salutes the scouts favored.

Hunt Rennie did turn now. His eyes leveled on them. In the light of the candles his cheeks looked even more hollow tonight, and he moved stiffly as might a man who was not only bone-tired in body, thought Drew, but weary in mind as well.

“You are Anson Kirby?” he addressed the Texan first.

“Yes, suh.” Anse, too, must be caught up in the same web of memory. That was his old report-to-the-commanding-officer voice.

“I understand you two thought it necessary to take on some troopers in the Jacks.”

What was the proper reply to that? Drew wondered. Probably it was best to follow the old army rule of keep the mouth shut, never volunteer, no explanations. If Hunt Rennie had had the story from Topham or Nye, he already knew how the fight began.

“I won’t have troublemakers on the Range.” Now the voice, too, was tired. The youthfulness which had impressed Drew on their initial meeting had drained from this man tonight. He was taut as if pulled harp-string tight inside. Drew knew that feeling also. But what battle had Rennie emerged from—some struggle with Shannon or Bayliss?

Then the words made sense, penetrating his concern for the man who had said them. Well, this dismissal only matched his gloomiest expectations.

“Can’t any of you young fools get it through your thick heads that the war’s over? Saloon brawling with the army ain’t going to change that. It’ll only get you into worse difficulties around here.”

A spark of protest awoke inside Drew. Rennie was reading this all wrong. He and Anse certainly hadn’t been trying to wipe away the bitter taste of Gainesville by jumping some blue coats in a cantina hundreds of miles and more than a year away from where they had been forced to admit, at last, that bulletless carbines and bare feet could not keep on shooting and marching.

“Must have been mistaken about you, Kirby.” Now Rennie looked at Drew.

The Kentuckian met those dark eyes squarely, his first unvoiced protest stiffening into defiance. But he faced the older man steadily. Anse, watching them both, drew a small, fast breath. Good thing for Drew there were no other witnesses now; the likeness between the two Rennies was unmistakable at this moment.

Hunt Rennie did not follow up his half accusation. He appeared to be expecting some reply. What? A childish promise to be a good boy, not to do it again? Drew's half-unconscious concern for this man burned away speedily, ignited by what he deemed injustice.

Anse broke the too long silence. "I don't know what you heard 'bout that there fight, suh," he drawled. "Can't see as how we could have done no different nohow. But that's no call to saddle it all on Drew. Me, I had a hand—two fists—in it, too. An' if that's what's th' matter, I can pull out——"

"No!" Drew's hand came up in the old gesture to stop the line of march. "We'll both ride, Mr. Rennie. We don't aim to argue the matter any. Only—there's one thing—I brought Shadow and the filly down with the wagon train. The foal's too young to trail on now. They're blooded stock. I've papers for them. I'll sell..."

He loathed saying every word of that. It was not only the thought of giving up Shadow and the foal, though he knew that would cut with a deeper hurt every day. It was having to ask any kind of favor from this man. Not that such a sale was a favor; Rennie ought to be glad to get such blood for the Range.

"You ain't goin' to do that!" Anse was stung into angry protest.

But Drew was unaware of the Texan's outburst, his entire attention for Hunt Rennie. The tall man came over to the table, moved one of the candelabra forward as if to throw more light on Drew.

"That your choice of solutions, boy—to run?"

Drew flushed. The unfairness of that jab pushed him off balance. What *did* this man want of him anyway? Rennie had said it plain that he did not want Drew and Anse on the Range.

"Running never settled anything." Rennie's fingers traced the spread of the candelabra's arms. "Neither does jumping to conclusions. Has anyone said you were through here, unless by your own choice?"

Drew was jarred into an answer. "You said——"

Rennie sighed. "Do any of you young fire-eaters ever listen to more than one tenth of what any of your elders say? I *am* saying and making it plain: If you make a steady practice of trading punches with a trooper or with any one else because you take a dislike to his face, the way his ears stick out, how he walks or talks, or what color coat he wore in the war, then you can roll your beds and ride out—the sooner the better.

"Reese Topham tells me that he explained the local situation to you, and you appeared to understand it then. Any difficulty with the army could have serious consequences, not just for you, but for the Range as well. This time you were not the aggressors. But after being forewarned, if it happens again, I'll be hard to convince that you were in the right. The war's over—keep on remembering that. This is new country where it doesn't, or shouldn't, matter whether a man wore a blue coat or marched under the Stars and Bars. You're far too young to let the past cut off the future. Wars can finish a whole way of life for a man..." His eyes no longer held Drew's; he was looking beyond toward the half-open door or perhaps at something that he alone could see. "You have to learn to throw away broken things, not cherish them. Never look back!" That dry, tired voice took on a fierce intensity. Then he was back with them again.

"Two Kirbys riding for the same spread is going to be rather confusing. You are Drew, and you are Anson—Anson—" He repeated the name. "What part of Texas are you from?"

“Pa had him a spread down near th’ San Sabe ‘fore th’ Comanches came. He was Anson, too—in th’ Rangers for a while, Pa was.”

“Tall man, with a lot of freckles and red hair? Best rider in Miggs’ Company——” It was half question, half assertion.

“You knew Pa!” Anse shouldered past Drew. “That was Pa right enough. He rode with Lieutenant Miggs in the Mex War.”

Hunt Rennie was smiling. Once more years spun away from him. “I ought to know him, son. He toted me across his saddle for a mighty long five miles on a blistering hot day, I having as much to say about the matter as a sack of corn, and being three times as heavy in spite of a starvation diet. Yes, I’ll remember Anson Kirby. He and his squad were the first Americans I ran into after I broke out of a filthy prison. Funny though”——he glanced at Drew——“I don’t remember his mentioning a brother. You *are* his nephew?”

Anse was quick to the rescue. “Pa—he an’ Drew’s Pa—they weren’t too close. Drew’s Pa was town folks. He sent Drew to Kaintuck for schoolin’. Pa, he favored th’ range an’ th’ free land west——”

Rennie nodded. “Well, Anson, if you’re as good a rider as your father, we can use you here. Horse knowledge seems to run in your family. Now, shortly we are expecting a *Coronel* Luis Oliveri who’s to buy horses for the Juarez forces. He may need some assistance in driving them as far as the border. If he does, both of you’ll go.”

“Yes, suh.”

Drew’s agreement was drowned out by a harsh cry from overhead. Rennie went into action, so swiftly that for a startled moment Drew was left gaping at empty space. *Don* Cazar had caught up one of the rifles from under a window and had crossed the doorway to look back at the roof of the Casa Grande, calling out an inquiry in another language.

“Apaches don’t attack at night!” Drew was heading for the door in turn.

“Outlaws do, when it pays,” Anse shot out grimly.

But on a second hail from the rooftop sentry post Rennie swung the rifle over his arm and faced the outer gate of the patio.

“Unbar, Francisco!” he called in Spanish.

One leaf of the massive door folded back to allow in a small party of horsemen.

One saddled but riderless mount galloped along with the rest. Another man held to the high horn with both hands and weaved back and forth while a comrade riding beside him strove to keep him from toppling to the ground. Drew had an impression of bright, almost gaudy uniforms. The men of the Stronghold poured out to take the horses, helping down more than one blood-stained soldier. Their leader, a slender man with dusty gold lace banding his high collar, came directly to Rennie.

“*Don* Cazar.” His Spanish was a flood in which Drew was lost almost immediately, but Anse listened with parted lips and then translated a quick account.

“This here’s th’ *Coronel*. He an’ his men was bushwhacked. Got away ‘cause they met th’ wagon train goin’ south an’ whoever was eatin’ their dust huntin’ them didn’t seem to like the odds. Not Apaches, probably *bandidos*——”

“Kitchell?” Drew asked.

“My guess is they ain’t sure. Got hit quick an’ had to stampede to save their skins.”

Oliveri's men were taken in and Drew saw Rennie himself going from one of the wounded to another, applying bandages and once probing skillfully for a bullet. Drew commented on that, and Nye answered:

"Old Man knows what's he's doin'. He ain't no real doc, of course, but was I totin' me a hunka lead in some serious part, I'd rather have him diggin' for it than a lotta docs I've seen out here. Heard tell as how once he was plannin' to be a real doc hisself. He sure can take care of a fella good. What I'd like to know is how them bushwhackers knew jus' where to lay down an' wait for Oliveri."

"What do you mean?"

"This here *Coronel*, he was comin' to buy hosses an' so he was carryin' money or else somethin' as could pass for money. We all knowed he was comin'. But we didn't know when or what road, an' he wasn't tellin' that his side of th' border neither. Only some jasper had such a good idea as to that what an' where, he an' some *amigos* was squattin' back of rocks jus' waitin' for th' *Coronel* to ride into their little pocket of fire."

"Mexicans could have trailed them up, cut ahead and waited——"

"Sure. Only this operation was too slick for most *bandidos*. They don't go in for timed, planned things; they jus' cut loose when they see a chance. This was different. Only Fenner an' some of the train guards ridin' in spoiled their game."

"Kitchell then?"

"Sounds more like. Don't think Kitchell's some common ridge-ridin' bad man. He'd never've lasted this long was that so—not with th' Old Man an' th' army an' what law there is in th' territory all gunnin' for him. Plans things, Kitchell does, an' so far his plannin' has always paid off.

"There's something else true now, too. Was Kitchell plannin' to make a break south, he'd want him a good big stake to cover him on cold nights an' winter days. I jus' wonder if this here ain't th' first of a lot of fancy raidin' jobs. Could be he'll hit fast an' hard, gather up all th' sweepin's an' light out. Could jus' be...."

"Don't promise us much shadin' times, does it?" Anse remarked. "Sounds like everybody's goin' to have to set up a string an' ride hosses in rotation. That is, always supposin' your supposin' is right."

"Yeah, always supposin' that," Nye agreed.



## 11

“Magnífico!”

Drew glanced over Shiloh’s back to the speaker. *Coronel* Oliveri paused in the doorway of the stable to study the stallion with almost exuberant admiration mirrored on his dark and mobile features.

“*Don Cazar*”—the Mexican officer raised a gloved hand in a beckoning gesture—“*por favor*, Excellency ... this one, he is of the Blood?”

Hunt Rennie joined Oliveri. “You are right. He is indeed of the Blood,” he assented.

“It is past all hope then to offer for him?” Oliveri was smiling, but his eyes held a greedy glint Drew had seen before. Shiloh was apt to produce that reaction in any horseman.

“He is not mine to sell, *Coronel*. He belongs to *Señor* Kirby who stands there with him.”

“So?” Oliveri’s open astonishment irritated Drew. Maybe he did have on rough work clothes and look the part of a range drifter. But then when the *Coronel* had arrived here last night, *he* had not been too neat either.

“A fine horse, *señor*.” Oliveri came on in, now including Drew in his gaze.

“I think so, *Coronel*,” Drew returned shortly. He gave a last brush to flank and smoothed the saddle blanket.

“From a distance you have brought him, *señor*?” Oliveri walked about the stud as Drew went to fetch his saddle.

“From Kentucky.” Was he unduly suspicious or was there a challenge in the Mexican officer’s voice—a faint suggestion that the antecedents of both horse and owner were in question?

“Kentucky ...” Oliveri stumbled in his repetition of the word. “I have heard of Kentucky horses.”

“Most people have.” Drew tightened the cinch. Then his pride in Shiloh banished some of his stiffness. “He is of the line of Eclipse.” Maybe that would not mean much to a Mexican, though. The breeding of eastern American horses probably did not register south of the border.

“*Señor*—such a one—he is not for sale?”

“No.” Drew knew that sounded curt, but Oliveri ruffled him. He added, “One does not sell a friend.”

Oliveri gave what sounded to Drew like an exaggerated sigh. “*Señor*, you have spoiled my day. How can one look at lesser animals when one has seen such a treasure? *Don Cazar*, the Range harbors so many treasures—Oro, and now this one. How is he named, *señor*?”

“Shiloh.”

“Shiloh ...” The *Coronel* made a sibilant hiss of the word. “An Indio name?”

“No, a battle.” Drew prepared to lead out. “In the war.”

“So. And this one is a fighter, too. I think. *Señor*, should you ever wish to sell, *por favor*, remember one Luis Oliveri! For such a horse as this—*sí*, a man might give a fortune! Ah, to

ride into camp before that puffed-up gamecock of a Merinda on such a horse!" Oliveri closed his eyes as if better to imagine the triumph.

"Shiloh's not for sale, *Coronel*," Drew replied.

Oliveri shrugged. "Perhaps now, no. But time changes and chance changes, *señor*. So remember Luis Oliveri will give a fortune—and this is the truth, *señor*!"

"Hunt!" Drew was forced to halt as Johnny Shannon stood straight ahead of him in the stable entrance. "Teodoro Trinfan's come in with some news you oughta hear."

"So? Well. I'm coming. *Coronel*, Johnny can show you the stock we have ready. I will be back as soon as I can."

"Still I say"—Oliveri shook his head as Rennie pushed past Drew and Shiloh and went out—"that after seeing this one, all others will be as pale shadows of nothingness. But since I must have horses, *Señor* Shannon, I will look at horses. *Buenos dias, señor*." He raised a hand to Drew and the Kentuckian nodded.

But Shannon still stood in the doorway, and short of walking straight into him there was no way for Drew to leave. Johnny was smiling a little—just as he had back in Tubacca in Topham's office before the race.

"Seems like you've got you a four-legged gold mine there, Kirby," he said. "Better keep your eyes peeled—gold claims have been jumped before in this country. Kitchell'd give a lot to git a hoss like that to run south."

"He'd have to," Drew said grimly. "In lead—if he wanted it that way."

"Kinda sure of that, ain't you?" The smile had not cracked, nor had it reached those shuttered blue eyes. Why did everyone say Johnny Shannon was a boy? Inside he was older than most of the men Drew had known—as old and cold as the desert rocks in nighttime. Again the Kentuckian was teased by a scrap of memory. Once before he had seen old eyes in a boy's face, when it had meant deadly danger for him.

"When a man has somethin' as belongs to him, he doesn't step aside easy if another makes a play to grab it," he said.

For the first time then he did see a flicker in Shannon's eyes. And his hand tightened so on the reins that some fraction of his reaction must have reached Shiloh. The horse neighed, pawed with a forefoot.

"Just what I've always thought, too, Kirby." Shannon's voice was softer, more drawling than ever. And there was menace in it—but why? What did Shannon have against him? This was more now than the fact that they had both bristled, incompatible, at their first meeting. It was more than just instinctive dislike. No, Johnny Shannon was not a reckless boy; Drew Kirby knew that, if no one else on the Range did.

"*Coronel*"—Shannon stepped aside from the door—"we may not be able to git you somethin' as fine as this here prancer, but we ain't altogether lackin' in mighty good hosses. Come 'long an' look 'em over...."

Drew rode off, out of the patio gate, giving Shiloh his daily workout, trying to guess what Johnny Shannon had against him. Had he been right in his fear that Johnny had not been unconscious back in Tubacca, that he had caught Anse's greeting? Rennie was not too common a name, but he did not see how Johnny could possibly have hit upon the truth.

What if he had, though? To Johnny, Drew could loom as a threat. He might be baffled as to why the Kentuckian had not made a move to claim kinship with Hunt. How much of

Rennie's own past history was known to the people here? His escape from prison during the Mexican War was common knowledge. But, come to think of it, no one had mentioned his youthful marriage or the fact that he was a widower. Perhaps even Johnny had never heard that story, close to Hunt as he was. But Drew dared ask no questions.

He was still puzzling over the situation when he returned an hour later. Nye, Anse, and a couple of the other riders had some of the recently broken mounts out, showing them off to Oliveri. There was shouting, noise, and confusion around the corrals and Drew slipped past without pausing. He had finished with Shiloh and was on his way to the bunkhouse when Hunt Rennie hailed him.

"Drew!" An imperative wave of the hand brought him to join *Don Cazar* and to discover Anse already there, rolling his bed. For a second or two Drew blinked—the occupation fitted in too well with their worries of the night before. But Hunt Rennie was already explaining.

"Teodoro tells me that they've found traces of shod horses being driven back in the canyons. This late the grass is beginning to brown, but there are still some sections where stock can be wintered. I want to know more about this. Since both of you are newcomers—" Rennie paused and then added: "Your riding away from here might appear to others that you had quit, were joining up with the mustangers on your own."

"To hunt horses?" Drew asked.

"Not wild ones."

"Sounds like trouble." Anse tied his bedroll.

"In this country we expect trouble, from any direction—including up and down!" Rennie returned. "But I find it disturbing that broken stock is being herded back there. Such maneuvers can mean only one thing—stolen animals are being gathered for a run to the border. And some of them could be army owned; a remount corral was raided just before I left town. I would not care, just now, to have any army mounts located on this Range—no matter where they were hidden or by whom. If they are there, I want to be the one to find them and return them to the proper owners. It would please certain parties to find stolen stock hereabouts—particularly army.

"Now"—he gave an order he obviously expected to be obeyed—"if you do find anything, don't try to take over yourselves. That's final. This is nothing to rush into just to burn powder. And above all I want no mixing it up with any army patrol riding south. Do you both understand?"

Drew nodded.

"Yes, suh," Anse replied promptly. "We jus' git high behind an' take care. What the mustangers got to do with this?"

"Nothing. Except they can show you the tracks, and with them you can cover a good part of the country in question. There's been no Apache sign down there, and Running Fox will accompany you—only not so openly as to be noticed."

"You think someone may be watchin' the Stronghold?" Drew asked as he buckled his saddlebags.

"I don't know anything for sure. But a couple of incidents lately have suggested that someone knows a lot more about what's going on here than I like. It would be easy enough to lie out in the hills and keep field glasses on us down here. And when a man is familiar with the general routine of a place, he can guess a sight too much and too close just by watching the comings

and goings. So—you're going to ride out within the hour and be well along before you camp tonight. We can't waste time."

The nights were chill and the cold made them huddle turtle fashion into the upturned collars of their short riding coats and jam their hats down as far as possible on their heads. Winter breathed across the land now with the coming of dark.

They traveled at an angle, the pace set by Teodoro who led a pack mule. Somewhere out there in the dark the Pima Scout was prowling. But he had had his orders: no contact with the three travelers unless there was fear of attack. And both Anse and Drew were alert, knowing that the farther one went from the Stronghold the less one relaxed guard.

"Kinda nippy, ain't it?" Anse said. In the very dim light Drew could just make out that the Texan was holding his gloved hand to his mouth, puffing at the crooked fingers. "Ain't as bad as ridin' out a norther, though. I 'mind me how jus' 'fore th' war—I was ridin' for wages for Old Man Shaw then—we had a norther hit. I'm tellin' you, it was so cold th' ramrod came out to give th' mornin' orders an' his words, they jus' naturally froze up solid. Us boys, we hadda go git th' wood ax an' chop 'em apart 'fore we knew what we was all to do. Now that's what I call bein' cold!"

Drew laughed. "Don't think it ever gets quite that cold hereabouts."

It was good being away from the Stronghold, out here with Anse. It was as if he had been let out of lessons, or freed from a sense of duty and responsibility which was a growing burden.

"Nope. Texas sure is a lotta country, a whole bag with odds an' ends stuffed in any which way. 'Course this is new range to me. But what I've seen of it, were you jus' able to run off th' *bandidos* an' git th' Apaches offen it for good—why, it might be a right respectable sorta territory. A man could carve hisself out a spread as he could brag on."

"You'd like it?"

Anse blew on his fingers again. "Maybe—all things bein' considered, as they say. I've heard tell as how all a man needs to start his own brand is a loose rope, a runnin' iron, an' th' guts to use them. It's been done, an' is bein' done all th' time. Only I don't think as how th' Old Man would take to havin' any such big-ideared neighbor here. Not much cattle, though, to interest a wide loop man. Now hosses—everyone says as how they's plenty of wild stuff. You got you Shiloh, Drew, an' you said you made a foal deal with th' Old Man. Git some more good-lookin' an' actin' wild ones an' you're in business—runnin' your Spur R brand. Three-four years, an' th' luck a man has always got to hope for, an' you've more'n jus' a stake—you've got roots an' a spread!"

"*We* have," Drew corrected. "Why'd you suppose I wanted that foal deal? There's free land to be had in the valley. Some of the ranchers cleared out when the Apaches started raidin' and they're not comin' back. We might look over what Trinfan has picked up as long as we are out here. I know the Old Man hasn't contracted for anything but gettin' rid of that Pinto stud. We could make an offer for any good slicks—put the Spur R on them and run them in on the Range. Rennie has already said that's all right with him."

"Whoee!" Anse muffled one of the old spirited war yells into a husky whisper. "You an' me, we're goin' to do it! Ain't nobody can put hobbles on a pair of Tejanos as has their chewin' teeth fast on th' bit!"

It was something to think about, all right. But future chances should not take a man's mind off the job immediately ahead. Only tonight, out here, Drew had a feeling of being able to do anything—from touching the sky with his uplifted hand to fighting Kitchell man to man.

That, however, was just what Hunt Rennie did *not* want and what Drew had promised not to do.

Horses to be found back in the rough country, hidden away in the maze of pocket canyons where there was water and enough browning grass to keep them from straying. There must be hundreds of places ready to be used that way. But how come Kitchell could hide out in Apache country? Nothing Drew knew of that tribe fitted in with the idea of a white outlaw band sharing their hunting ground unmolested. It had never mattered to an Apache whether a man rode on the north or south side of the law—if his skin was white, that automatically made him prey. Drew said so now.

Teodoro answered that. “Apaches want guns, *señor*. Their arrows are deadly, but guns are always better.”

“I’d think,” Anse cut in, “that any guns Kitchell’d have he’d be hangin’ on to—needin’ them his ownself. Can’t be easy for *him* to git them, neither.”

“Not here, no,” Teodoro agreed. “But south, that is different. There is big trouble in Mexico—this French emperor fights Juarez, so there is much confusion. In wartime guns can be lost. A party of soldiers are cut off, as was *Coronel* Oliveri almost—men can be killed. But a gun—it is not buried with a man. A gun is still useful, worth money, if he who picks it up from beside the dead does not want it for himself. So—such a *bandido* as this Kitchell, he could take horses, good, trained horses—maybe from the army—and he would run them south. He would sell them for money, *sí*, probably much money. But also he could trade for guns—two, three, five guns at a time. Not as good as those his own men carry—old ones maybe, but good enough for Apaches. He would then bring these north, give them as payment for being left alone.”

“Why wouldn’t the Apaches just kill him and his men and grab what they have?” Drew pointed out what seemed to him the obvious flaw in the system.

“Apaches, they are not stupid. Guns they could take. But once such a gun is broken, where can they get another? They cannot walk into Tubacca or Tucson to buy what they need. Kitchell’s men do, perhaps—it is thought that they do so. Also when he trades at the border it is with men who would meet the Apaches with fire and bullets. Apache war parties are never large. Perhaps in all this part of the country there are not more than half a hundred warriors—and those scattered in small bands. I do not say that this is truth, *Señor* Kirby. I only say that it would explain many things—such as why Kitchell has not been caught.”

“Makes sense,” Anse commented. “Always did hear as how Apaches were meaner’n snakes but they wasn’t stupid. Keep a tame gunrunner to work for ‘em—that sounds like th’ tricky sorta play they cotton to. If it is so, th’ man who gits Kitchell may jus’ rid this country of some of them two-legged wolves into th’ bargain.”

“According to what I’ve heard,” Drew said, “this Kitchell claims to lead a regular Confederate force that hasn’t surrendered. If he wants to make that valid, he wouldn’t dare any such deal!”

“I’ll bet you without waitin’ to see a hole card,” Anse replied, “that if that coyote was ever ridin’ on our side—which I don’t stretch ear to—he cut loose them traces long ago. There were them buzzards we had us a coupla run-ins with back in Tennessee, ‘member? Scum ... some of ‘em wearin’ blue coats, some gray, but they was all jus’ murderin’ outlaws. What did they whine when they was caught? Did th’ Yankees run ‘em in, then they was unlucky Reb scouts. An’ when our boys licked up a nest of th’ varmints—why, we’d taken us a mess o’ respectable Yank ‘Irregulars,’ ‘cordin’ to their story. ‘Course none of their protestin’ kept

'em from stretched necks." His hand went to his own. "I oughta know, seem' as how I was picked up with a parcel of 'em an' was close 'nough to feel th' wind when a noose swung by.

"This here Kitchell—I'm takin' Bible oath he's th' same mangy breed. Maybe so he started out to be Reb, but that was a long time ago an' he crossed over th' river long since. An' some of them beauties back east, they'da lapped muddy water outta an Apache's boot tracks, did it mean savin' their dirty hides. Sounds to me, Teodoro, like you've some plain, straightforward thinkin' there—a mighty interestin' idea. An' maybe we're jus' goin' to attend to th' provin' of it!"

"Not by ourselves," Drew corrected. "We have our orders."

"Sure. But there ain't no order ever given what says a man has to stand up an' be shot at an' he don't shoot back. No, I ain't sniffin' up trouble's hot trail like a bush hound. But neither am I goin' t' sit down an' fold my two hands together when trouble hits as it's like to do out here."

Drew agreed with that, though he did not say so. Rennie must know the circumstances. They would have to defend themselves if it came to a fight. But he could hope that, if Kitchell had stocked some hidden canyons with stolen horses, the outlaw leader had left no guards on duty thereabouts. With Running Fox prowling ahead and with him and Anse using all the scout tricks they had learned in war-time, they should be able to learn just how correct Teodoro's suspicions were.

## 12

“See, señores, the land lies so....” Hilario Trinfan’s crooked body pulled together in a lopsided perch as he squatted range fashion beside the morning campfire. He had smoothed a space of ground the width of his two hands and was setting out twigs and stones to create a miniature relief map of the countryside. “Here is the water hole to which the Pinto comes. Above that we were—moving in from this side. To do so we crossed here.” A black-rimmed nail stabbed into the dust.

“It is then we see the tracks—five ahead—all shod horses, but not ridden, save for one.”

“Apaches could have been running them,” Drew commented.

“No.” Trinfan shook his head. “This far from pursuit the Apaches would not have moved so. The Indio, he eats horseflesh. There would have been signs of a fire. Or one of the animals cut down. These horses were being moved with care—not pushed too hard. We trailed them on to here.” Hilario stabbed his finger into the dust again. “Then—Teodoro, now tell them what you saw.”

The younger mustanger hung over the crude map. “I climbed, *señores*, up over the rocks. It is bad, that ground, high, steep—but with care one can reach a ledge. And along that one can go to look down into the next canyon. A good place for horses—there is water and grass. I stayed there watching with the glasses *Don Cazar* gave my father, the glasses which bring the far close. There were poles set up in the rocks through which they brought those horses—making it like a pen we build for wild ones. But those in it were not wild.”

“How many—an’ what brands?” Anse wanted to know.

Teodoro shrugged. “There are many trees, rocks; one can not see everywhere. I counted twenty head—there is room for more. As to brands, even the glasses could not make those plain to the eyes of one lying above. But there is no other ranchero who would run horses on the Range and *Don Cazar*’s *manadas* are not driven in here—does he want the wild ones to run off his mares? Horses would be kept so for only one reason, that they must be hidden. And in such a place as we found they could be left for maybe a month, or more. *Don Cazar*’s riders do not patrol this far away from the Stronghold. Had it not been that the Pinto causes so much trouble, even we would not be here.”

“What about the Pinto? If he’s all you say, wouldn’t he try to get at this band?” asked Drew.

“No reason if they are saddle stock—no mares among them,” Anse said thoughtfully. “But would those hombres who put ‘em there jus’ leave—no guards or nothin’?”

“That is what we do not know,” Hilario replied. “We took every precaution against being seen when Teodoro climbed to look into the canyon. And—this I believe—we were not suspected if there was any watcher. Otherwise, otherwise, *señores*, we would not have been alive to greet you when you rode in last night! This Kitchell, he is like an Apache—here, there, everywhere. Today I am easier because you have brought the Pima, because we have two more guns in this camp.”

“Why didn’t you pull out yourselves?” Anse asked curiously.

“Because, were we watched, that would have made our discovery as plain as if we stood out in the open and shouted it to the winds. For three days before we found that trail we had been building a pen for wild ones, casting about for the tracks and runs of the Pinto’s band. Having

done so, we would not leave without completing our drive. And, should those out there suspect”—Trinfan shook his head—“we would not have lived to reach the Stronghold, and that is the truth.”

“This is also truth, *padre*.” Faquita came to the fire and picked up the coffeepot, pouring the thick black liquid into the waiting line of tin cups. “It is time for us to finish and be on the move—not to just talk of what must be done.”

Drew looked up in surprise. The girl was wearing breeches, ready to ride. In addition, instead of the gunbelts which all the men wore as a matter of course, Faquita had tucked a pair of derringers in the front of her sash belt. Their small grips showed above the faded silk folds.

“She goin’ with us?” the Kentuckian asked, as the girl kicked dust over the campfire and stowed the empty pot in the cart. “Ain’t that dangerous—for her?”

Hilario got to his feet with a lurch that made his crippled state only too plain. “*Señor*, to hunt the wild ones is dangerous. You see me, twisted like a root, no? Not tall and straight as a man should be. This was done by the wild ones—in one small moment when I was not quick enough. Among us—the mustangers—it is often the daughters who are the best riders. They are quick, eager, riding lighter than their brothers or their fathers. And to some it is a loved life. With Faquita that is true. As for danger—is that not always with us?”

“In war danger is a thing which one man makes for another. In this country the land itself fights man—war or no war. A cloudburst fills an arroyo with a flood without warning, and a man is drowned amidst desert sand where only hours before he could have died for lack of that same water. There is a fall of rocks, a fall of horse, a stampede of cattle, sickness which strikes at a lone traveler out of nowhere. Yet have you not ridden to war, and come now to live on this land? *Sí*, we have danger—but a man can also die in his bed in the midst of a village with strong walls. And to everyone his own way of life. Now we ride....”

They did indeed ride, following a trail which, as far as Drew could see, existed only in the minds of the mustangers. But the three Mexicans swung along so confidently that he and Anse joined without question or argument.

At a distance they circled the waiting pen with walls of entwined brush and sapling, ready to funnel driven horses into a blind canyon. The Pinto’s band must be located, somehow shaken out of the rocky territory their wily leader favored, before that drive could begin. Water, Trinfan said, would be the key. Horses must drink and they were creatures of habit, never ranging far from some one hole they had made their own. Trinfan blankets already flapped about the Pinto’s chosen spring. They had seen the horses approach several times in the past two days and shy away from those flapping things with the fearsome man scent.

“As long as La Bruja is with them,” Faquita said, coming up beside Drew, “they will not come.”

“La Bruja?”

“The Witch, as Anglos would say. We call her so because of her cunning. She is the wise one who keeps lookout. I say she is possessed by the Evil One. It is possible the Pinto is her son. Together they have always outwitted the hunters. But La Bruja is old—she runs more stiffly. Last time in the chase she began to drop behind. She is of no use, only a nuisance. It is the White One I wish to drop rope over!”

“The White One?”

“*Sí*. She is Nieve—the snow of the upper mountains. Among our people you will hear many tales of white ones, without a dark spot on them—the Ghost Stallions that run the plains and



no man may lay rope over. But this mare is the truth! And someday—” Her eyes shone and she seemed to be making some vow Drew would be called to bear witness to. “Someday she will be mine! Not to trail south and sell—no—but to keep, always!”

“She must be very beautiful,” he commented.

“It is not only that, *señor*. You have a fine horse, one which beat *Don Cazar*’s Oro, is that not so?”

“Yes. Shiloh ...”

“And to you that one is above all other horses. If you lost him, you would be—like hungry ... inside you, is that not also so?”

“Yes!” Her earnestness triggered that instant response from him.

“So it is with me since I have seen Nieve. Men find such a horse; for years they follow the band in which it runs to snare it. They will suffer broken bones, as did my father, and hunger, and thirst, because there is one tossing head, one set of flying heels before them. Sometimes they are lucky and they catch that one. If they do not, there is in them a pinch of winter even when the desert sun is hot. Once I loved all horses—now there is this one which I must have!”

“I hope you get her!”

“*Señor*, last season I hoped. This season—this season I have belief that my hopes will come true. Ah, look, the Indio!”

She pointed with quirt and Drew glanced left. He saw what appeared to be an outcrop of rock among many others move, then rise on sturdy legs to meet them.

Running Fox, a brown blanket twisted over one shoulder, the rest of him stripped down to breechclout and moccasins, padded up to Hilario Trinfan and spoke in the guttural Pima. The mustanger translated.

“The horses are still there. But there is a camp of two men on the north slope above the canyon. Both men are Anglos. They are armed with rifles and take turns watching.”

“Can we reach a place from where we can read the brands on the horses?” Drew asked.

Trinfan questioned the Pima.

“*Sí*. But you can not go there by day. You must go in at dusk, wait out the night, and then see what you could in the early morning. Leave before sunup. Otherwise the watchers may be able to locate you. He says”—Trinfan smiled—“that *he* could go at high noon and would not be seen. But for a white man is a different matter.”

“Waste a whole day jus’ waitin’!” Anse protested.

“*Señor*, when one balances time against death, then I would say time is the better choice,” Hilario replied. “But this day will not be wasted. If any watch us—as well as those horses—they will see us about our business and will have no doubt that we hunt wild horses, not stolen ones.”

So Drew and Anse joined the mustangers’ hunting. To Anse this was something he had done before. Drew remembered that the Texan had been working with just such a hunting party when his family had been wiped out by the Comanches in ‘59. But to Drew it was a new experience and he was deeply intrigued by what he saw and the reasons for such action.

All they sighted of the Pinto's now thoroughly thirsty band was the stud himself and a black mare—La Bruja—looking down from a vantage point high on a rocky rim. And the hunters did not try to reach them, knowing that all the wild ones would be long gone before they could reach that lookout.

"This is the fourth day." Hilario Trinfan sat his buckskin at the water hole, watched Teodoro make careful adjustment of the blankets tied on the bushes. "They will be wild with thirst. Tomorrow the blankets will be taken down. There will be no sign of man here. By mid-afternoon the mares will be ready to fight past the Pinto for water. He can not hold them away. So, they will come and drink—too much. Perhaps he will come, too. If he does"—Trinfan snapped his fingers—"I shall be waiting with a rifle. We take no more chances with that one! Anyway, the mares will be heavy and slow with all the water in their bellies. They can be herded into our trap. Then he will come, *sí*, that one will come—no one can take his mares from him! He will be mad with rage, too angry to be any longer so cunning. We shall have him then. And there will be no more killings of studs here."

At dusk Running Fox slipped down to the camp, but not far enough into the circle of firelight to be sighted by any watcher in the night. Then with Drew and Anse he was off again.

Within less than a quarter-hour Drew could have laughed wryly at his past satisfaction in his prowess as a scout. Compared to this flitting shadow he was a bush bull crashing through the brush. Anse was better, much better, but even he was far below the standard set by the Pima. The trio climbed, crept, crouched for long moments waiting for Drew knew not what—some sound, some scent, some sight in the night which Running Fox would accept as assurance of temporary safety.

The Kentuckian had no idea of how long it took them to reach the perch into which they at last pushed. A breastwork of rock was before him; the half circle of a shallow cave cut off a portion of the star-pointed sky above. "Stay—here." The two words were grunted at them out of the dark. Then nothing ... Running Fox had vanished in a way which could make a man believe they had been escorted not by a living Pima, but by a ghost from that long-forgotten race which had left their houses scattered in canyon niches up and down this country.

It was cold, even though the half cave shielded most of the wind. Drew unrolled the blanket he had carried tied about him, and he squeezed down beside Anse. Their combined body warmth ought to keep them fairly comfortable. Drew doubled his hands inside his coat, wriggling his gloved fingers to keep them from stiffening.

"Sure do wish there was some way a fella could bring him a little invisible fire along on a trip like this," Anse commented. "Ain't goin' to be what I'd name right out as a comfortable night."

"Never seems to be any easy way to do a hard thing," Drew assented. He hugged himself, his hands slipped back and forth about his waist. Under his two shirts—he had added the second before he left the Stronghold—the band of his money belt made a lump and now his hands ran along it.

He had had no occasion to open any of those pockets since he had left Tubacca the first time. Now, to take his mind off immediate discomfort, he tried to estimate by touch alone how many coins still remained in the two pockets. The middle section of the three divisions held his papers. There were those for the horses, the parole he had brought from Gainesville, the two letters he had not been able to bring himself to deliver to Hunt Rennie. One was from Cousin Merry, and the other was a formal, close-to-legal statement drawn up by Uncle Forbes' attorney. Both were intended to prove the identity of one Drew Rennie beyond any reasonable doubt.

Drew's fingers stilled above that pocket. It felt too thick, bunched under his pinching. Whatever—? He squirmed around, free of the blanket, and began to pull off his gloves.

“What's th' matter?” the Texan began in a whisper.

“Just a minute!” It was a clumsy business, pulling the belt free from under his layers of heavy clothing. But Drew got it across his knee. His chilled fingers picked at the fastening of the pocket. There was no packet of papers there—neither the sheets for the horse, nor the much-creased strip of the parole, nor the sealed envelope which had held both letters. Instead he plucked out what felt like shreds of grass and leaves, dry and crackling.

“What is it?” Anse leaned forward.

“My papers—they're gone!” Drew rummaged frantically, turning the pocket inside out. When—who?

“What papers, *compadre*?”

Drew explained.

“You've been wearin' that there belt constantly, ain't you?”

“Yes. Except—” He suddenly tensed. “That night, down by the swimmin' hole, when you thought you saw somethin' in the bushes ... remember?”

“I remember. Looky here, who'd want 'em—an' why?”

“Shannon!” And in that moment Drew was as certain of that as if he had actually seen Johnny stripping them out of the belt.

“How'd he know you were carryin' anythin'?”

“He knew I had the belt. I left it with Topham when I raced Shiloh, and he saw me give it to him. And, Anse, he must have heard you call me 'Rennie' in the Jacks! If he did, he'd want to find out more—Rennie's not a common name. And Shannon's not stupid. He'd figure anything valuable I'd be carryin' would be in this belt.”

“How come you didn't know it was gone?”

“I don't know. Seemed just as heavy and that pocket didn't ride any different when I had it on. No reason to open it lately.”

“So—what's he got? Your hoss papers, your parole outta th' army, an' them two letters. Yeah, he's got jus' 'bout all he needs to make one big war smoke for you.”

“And I can't prove he has them,” Drew said bleakly.

“Jus' by makin' him one little private fire,” Anse went on, “he could about put you outta business, *compadre*. There's only one thing to do.”

“Such as?”

“Johnny Shannon has got to do some talkin' his ownself. An' we can't wait too long to invite him to a chin-waggin' party, neither!”

Anse was right. Shannon had only to slip that collection of papers into the nearest fire and he would put an end to Drew Rennie. Of course Drew could obtain duplicates of the letters and horse papers from Kentucky, but that might take months. And he did not know whether the parole could be reissued from army records. Why, at this moment he could not prove that he had served in the east with the Army of Tennessee. Let Bayliss come down on him now and he was defenseless....

“We can’t ride tonight,” Anse added. “But come first light we give a look-see here an’ then we move—straight back to th’ Stronghold an’ Shannon. Also—I’m sayin’ this ‘cause I think it’s good advice, Drew. Now’s th’ time you’ve got to go to th’ Old Man an’ tell him th’ truth, quick as you can. Sure, I know why you didn’t want to claim kin before, but now you’ll have to.”

Drew shook his head. “Not now—not with nothing to back up my story. Shannon could give me the lie direct.”

“I’m thinkin’ you’re showin’ less brains than a dumb cow-critter, *amigo*. But, lissen—I’m backin’ your play. Does Shannon cut up rough, he’s got two of us hitchin’ a holster steady an’ gittin’ ready to loose lead.”

“No, I’m not goin’ to drag you in.”

“Yeah—an’ I mean yeah! We joined trails a long time back, by that there mill pond in Kentucky, and we ain’t splittin’ now. If a storm’s walkin’ up on us slow—or comin’ fast with its tail up—it’s goin’ to be both of us gittin’ under or out together.”

Drew put on the belt again. His impatience bit at him, but what Anse said made sense. They had been sent here to do a job and in the morning they would do it. Then they could ride back to the Stronghold. How he was going to handle Shannon he had no idea, but that he would have to he was sure.

The first light was a gray rim around the world as they lay flat, training the glasses Hilario had loaned them on two horses grazing not too far below.

“Well, that’s it. U.S. As big an’ plain as th’ paint on a Comanche face an’ almost as ugly. Them’s army mounts an’ I don’t see no troopers hereabouts,” Anse said.

Running Fox materialized in his ghostly fashion, and they retraced at a better speed and less effort the path which had brought them to the canyon perch. Just as they were about to top the ridge behind the mustanger camp, the Pima held up a warning hand.

“Long knives....”

“Troopers?” They went to their knees and made a stealthy crawl to the crest of the ridge.

There were troopers down there, all right. The Trinfans sat on their saddles while an officer walked up and down before them. Running Fox put a finger on Drew’s arm and motioned to the left. The horses of the mustangers were browsing in a small dell, their night hobbles unloosed. Together the trio moved in that direction.

The Pima slipped ahead with a speed and efficiency of motion his companions envied. He had the two nearest horses in hand, leading them toward the bushes.

“Looks like we ride bareback.” Anse caught at a hackamore, then mounted.

“Move!” Drew waved Running Fox to the other horse. “We can’t wait to get another horse. You ride for the Stronghold, make it straight to Rennie and report. I’m stayin’ here. I can say we were fired and Trinfan took me on as a hand.”

Anse was the better rider under these circumstances, and the better scout. To wait to pick up a third horse was folly.

“What about Shannon?”

“Shannon’ll have to wait!” Drew slapped the Texan’s horse. It reared and then pounded off. Drew turned to walk back to the camp. He rounded the end of the ridge and stopped short.

The round and deadly mouth of an Army Colt was pointed straight at his middle, covering the disastrously empty pocket of his money belt.

## 13

A lantern provided a very small and smoky light on a table of three boards mounted on boxes. If the furniture was makeshift, the walls of the room were not. Logs and adobe were just as effective for the purpose of confinement as stone blocks. Drew sat up on a bunk shell of board holding straw, and rested his head between his hands. He could follow the action which had brought him here, trace it back almost minute by minute over the past three days. How he had come here was plain enough; why was another matter.

Lieutenant Spath, back in the mustangers' camp, might have accepted the Kentuckian's story. Or he might at least have been uncertain enough not to arrest him, if only Trooper Stevens had not been one of the patrol. Once before Stevens had been most vocal about Rebs who were too free with their fists. Spath's trooper guard, reporting the escape of Running Fox and Anse, had condemned his captive fully as far as the lieutenant was concerned. The troopers had then searched their prisoner and to them a loaded money belt worn by a drifter did not make good sense, either—unless too much sense on the wrong side of the ledger. Drearly Drew had to admit that had he stood in the lieutenant's boots, he would have made exactly the same decision and brought his prisoner back to the camp.

So here he was now—just where Bayliss had promised to see him—in an army detention cell, with no proof of identity and the circumstantial evidence against him piling up by the minute. All they needed was some definite proof to tie him to Kitchell and he was lost. He had to pin his hopes on Anse—and *Don Cazar*.

Drew ground his boot heel into the dirt floor. That was just what he had sworn he would never do—call upon Hunt Rennie for help. Especially now, since the troopers had discovered those army-branded horses back in the canyon and Bayliss would try to use that against Rennie. Anse's escape had been a short-sighted solution, Drew knew. To the captain such action only tied the Range in deeper. The Kentuckian ran his fingers through his hair, trying to think of something which had *not* gone wrong.

The plank door banged open and Drew's head came up with a snap. No use letting these Yankees think they had him worried. The lantern, feeble as it was, picked out the stripes on the blouse of the first man, the tin plate in the hands of the second.

Drew looked down at the plate as it was slid under the bars and across the floor of his cell.

"Stew, Sergeant? Ain't that overfeedin'?" Thought bread and water was more the captain's style for Reb prisoners." Drew was pleased that he was able to sound unconcerned.

"Cocky one, ain't you?" asked the man who had brought in the plate. "All you Rebs is alike—never know when you're licked—"

"Get along, Farley, that's enough," Muller broke in.

Drew picked up the plate and forced himself to spoon up its contents. The stuff was still warm and not too bad. After the second spoonful he discovered that he was hungry—that much he would not have to pretend.

"Kid!"

Sergeant Muller's bulk shut most of the lantern glow out of the cell.

"You young squirts're all alike—never take no advice. But I'm gonna give it, anyway. When th' cap'n sees you, you button your lip! He ain't one as takes kindly to no smart talkin',

‘specially not from a prisoner. As far as he’s concerned he’s got you about dead to rights—hoss thievin’ from th’ army.’”

“I’d like to know what proof he has,” Drew returned sharply. “Your patrol picked me up well away from those horses—in the mustanger camp where I was workin’—and Captain Bayliss can’t prove that’s not true, either. Anyway, what difference does it make to you, Sergeant?”

“Since you ask, I don’t rightly know, kid. Maybe you was spoilin’ for a fight in th’ Jacks an’ did push our boys—”

“But you don’t think so, Sergeant.” Drew put the plate on the bunk and stood up to approach the bars. Muller was the taller; the Kentuckian had to raise his eyes to meet the sergeant’s. The trooper’s face was mostly in the shadow, but it was plain the man did not mean him any ill.

“I got m’ reasons.” Muller did not make any straighter answer. “But you think o’ what th’ cap’n does know about you, kid. You go ridin’ ‘round with gold on you—more money than any drifter ever sees in ten years or more. You’re caught near where some stolen army stock is stashed away, an’ your partner lights out hell-for-leather, breaking through army lines. An’ we only got your story as to who you really are. I ask you—does that read good in the lieutenant’s report when th’ cap’n gets it?”

“No,” Drew answered. “But what do you suggest doin’ about it, Sergeant?”

“Got anybody in town as will speak up for you, Kirby? Reese Topham? He did before.”

“He doesn’t know any more than what he said right then. Trouble is, Sergeant, anybody I could ask to back me up I’d have to bring out from Kentucky—and I don’t believe Captain Bayliss would wait for that.”

“You work for Rennie, don’t you?”

“Hunt Rennie has nothing to do with this. He didn’t know those horses were on the Range—”

“Because you put them there, Kirby?”

Muller made a lightning about-face. He snapped to attention facing the captain.

“And what are you doing here, Sergeant?”

“Prisoner bein’ fed, sir!” Muller reported stolidly.

“And there is no need for conversation. Dismissed, Sergeant!”

The captain watched Muller leave before he turned once more to Drew. “Kirby, do you know the penalty for horse stealing in this country?” he snapped.

“Yes.”

“Then you must know just what you have to face.”

“Captain ...” Drew began slowly, wanting to make his words just right. There was no reason to let Bayliss think he could simply ride right over his prisoner. On the other hand Muller’s advice had been good; it would be dangerous to antagonize the officer. “I had nothing to do with those stolen horses. We found them, yes, but they were already in the canyon. And there were two men guardin’ them—up on the ridge. They must have cleared out when your patrol rode in, but they were there the night before.”

“You saw them?”

“No, our scout did.”

“What scout—that Indian who got away with your partner? I heard rumors that Kitchell had links with bronco Apaches, but I didn’t believe any white man could stoop so low.”

“That Indian”—Drew felt as if he were walking a very narrow mountain ledge in the dark, with a drop straight down to the middle of the world on one side—“was a Pima, one of the Stronghold scouts.”

“So—Hunt Rennie *did* know about those horses!” Bayliss pounced.

“He did not! He sent us to the mustanger camp with a message, and the Pima rode scout for us. It’s a regular order on the Range—take one of the Pimas if you are goin’ any distance from where you can fort up. You can find out that’s true easily enough.” Drew was striving to keep a reasonable tone, to find an answer which *must* pierce through Bayliss’ rancor. After all, Bayliss could not have held his present rank and station so long and been all hot-headed plunger.

“What was this so-important message Rennie had to have delivered to a camp of Mex mustangers?” Bayliss bored in. Even in the lantern’s restricted light Drew could see the flush darkening the other’s face.

“They are havin’ trouble with a wild stud—a killer. Mr. Rennie wants him killed, quick. He sent the two of us out to help—thought with more hands it could be done.”

“Kirby!” Bayliss’ fists were on his hips, his head pushed forward from his shoulders until his sun-peeled face was only inches away from the bars between them. “Do I look like a stupid man, a man to be fed stories? You ride into town on a blooded stud, with a mare of like breeding, and a belt loaded down with gold. You give out that you served with Forrest—Forrest, a looting guerrilla and a murdering butcher! You’ve heard of Fort Pillow, Kirby? That’s what decent men remember when anyone says ‘Forrest’ in their hearing! Only you can’t even prove you were one of that gang of raiders, either, can you? Now I’ll tell you just who and what you are.

“You’re one of Kitchell’s scavengers, come into town with gold for supplies and a chance to contact the people you want to meet. I’ve known for a long time that Topham, Rennie, and probably a dozen other so-called citizens of that miserable outlaws’ roost are backing Kitchell. Now here’s a chance to prove it!”

“Not through me, you don’t,” Drew cut in. “I’m just what I said I was from the beginnin’, Captain. And you can’t prove anything different.”

“I don’t have to prove it; you’ve convicted yourself, Kirby. You can’t account for the gold you’re carrying. And, if you rode with Forrest, where’s your parole? You know you were told to carry it. I can deal with you just as any horse thief is dealt with. Why, I’ll wager you can’t even prove ownership of those horses you brought with you. Where’re your sale papers? On the other hand, Kirby, if you do give us the evidence we need against Kitchell and those who are helping him, then the court might be moved to leniency. How old are you? Nineteen—twenty—? Rather young to hang.”

“Captain, I can prove everything I’ve told you. In Kentucky I have kin. They can——”

“Kentucky!” Bayliss snorted. “Kentucky is far away, Kirby. Do you expect us to sit around waiting for some mythical kin of yours to appear from Kentucky with another set of lies to open this door?” He pounded with one fist against the cell portal. “I’m a reasonable man, Kirby, and I’m not asking too much—you know that. What’re Kitchell, Rennie, Topham to you that you’re willing to face a noose for them?”



“Kitchell I know nothin’ about—except what I’ve heard and that’s not good.” Drew sat down on the bunk, partly because the chill which had crept down his back had poured into his legs and they felt oddly weak under him. “Reese Topham and Mr. Rennie—as far as I’m concerned they’re honest men. I don’t think, Captain, that you can prove I’m not, either.”

“There is such a thing as over-confidence, Kirby, and it always comes to the fore in your kind!” Bayliss returned. “But after you do some serious thinking I believe you’ll begin to see that this is one time you’re not going to be able to lie or ride yourself out!”

He left without a backward glance. Drew picked up the plate, pushed the spoon back and forth through the congealing mess left on it. He could not choke down another mouthful. Just how much power did Bayliss have? Could he try a civilian by court-martial and get away with it? And to whom could Drew possibly appeal? Topham? Rennie? Apparently Bayliss wanted them enough to suggest Drew testify against them. Did he actually believe Drew guilty, or had that been a subtle invitation to perjury? The Kentuckian set the plate on the floor and got up again to make a minute study of the cell. His thought now was that maybe his only chance would be to break out.

But his first appraisal of the detention quarters had been the right one. Given a pickax and a shovel, and an uninterrupted period of, say, a week, he might be able to tunnel under one of the log walls. But otherwise he could not see any other way of getting free—save to walk out through the cell door. Drew threw himself on the bunk and tried to think logically and clearly, but his tired body won over his mind and he slept.

“Hey, you! Kirby, wake up! There’s someone here to see you!”

Drew reached for a Colt which was no longer under his pillow and then rolled over and sat up groggily, rubbing one hand across his smarting eyes. The lantern light had given way to dusty sunshine, one bar of which now caught him straight across the face.

“All right, Kirby, suppose you tell me what this is all about!”

Drew’s head came up, his hand fell. Hunt Rennie and Lieutenant Spath stood side by side beyond the bars. Or rather, not Hunt Rennie, but *Don* Cazar was there—for the owner of the Range was wearing the formal Spanish dress in which Drew had first seen him. And his expression was one of withdrawal.

“They think that I’m one of Kitchell’s men and that I had something to do with those stolen horses we found on the Range.” He blurted it out badly.

“They also showed me about six hundred dollars in gold found on you,” Rennie returned. “I thought you needed a job. You told Topham that, didn’t you?”

“Yes, suh.” Drew’s bewilderment grew stronger. Hunt Rennie sounded as if he believed part of Bayliss’ accusation!

“That money’s rightfully mine,” Drew added.

“You can prove it?”

“Sure. Back in Kentucky....” Drew paused. Back-in-Kentucky proof would not help him here and now in Arizona.

“Kentucky?” Rennie’s withdrawal appeared to increase by a score of miles. “I understood you were from Texas.”

“Told you, Rennie,” the lieutenant said, “his story doesn’t hold together at all. A couple of really good questions and it falls right apart.”

“I came here from Texas.” Drew took stiff hold of himself. He was walking that narrow ledge again, and with a wind ready to push him off into a bottomless gulf. “Rode with a wagon train as far as Santa Fe—from there on with military supply wagons to Tucson. I was in Kentucky after the war; went home with a boy from my scout company....”

“Who gave you two blooded horses and a belt full of gold for a good-by present?” scoffed Spath.

“*Have* you any proof of what you say closer than Kentucky?” Rennie ignored the lieutenant’s aside. “I can account for your time on the Range, or most of it. But you’ll have to answer for this money and where you came from originally. What about your surrender parole? I know you did have papers for the horses—Callie saw them. Produce those....”

“I can’t.” Drew’s hands balled into fists where they rested on his knees.

“Sure you can’t—you never had any!” Spath returned.

“I had them. I don’t have them now.” What was the use of trying to tell Rennie about his suspicions of Shannon? And if Johnny had destroyed the papers as well he might have, Drew could never make them believe him, anyway.

“Kirby, this is serious!” said Rennie. “You ride in from nowhere with two fine horses wearing a brand you say is your own. You have more money than any drifter ever carries. You claim to be a Texan, and yet now you say all the proof of your identity is in Kentucky. And—you are not Anson Kirby’s cousin, are you?” That last question was shot out so suddenly that Drew answered before he thought.

“No.”

“I thought so.” Hunt Rennie nodded. “Education is a polisher, but I don’t think three or four years’ schooling would have made a Texas range rider ask for sherry over whisky—except to experiment with an exotic beverage. There were other things, too, which did not fit with the Kirby background once Anson turned up. Just who are you?”

Drew shrugged. “That doesn’t matter now—as the lieutenant and Captain Bayliss have pointed out—if my only proof is in Kentucky and out of reach.”

“I suppose you have heard of telegraphs?” Rennie’s sarcasm was cold. “Communication with Kentucky is not so impossible as you appear to think. You give me a name and address—or names and addresses—and I’ll do the rest. All you have to do is substantiate background and your army service, proving no possible contact with Kitchell. Then the captain will be forced to admit a mistake.”

Give Hunt Rennie the name of Cousin Meredith Barrett, of Aunt Marianna’s husband, Major Forbes—the addresses of Red Springs or Oak Hill? Drew could not while there was a chance that Anse might find the papers or make Johnny Shannon admit taking them. The Kentuckian could *not* tell Hunt Rennie who he was here and now.

“I want to talk to Anse,” he said out of his own thoughts. “I’ve got to talk to Anse!”

“He’s gone.” Rennie’s two words did not make sense at first. When they did, Drew jumped up and caught at the bars.

“Gone? Where?”

“Cleared out—got clean away.” Again Spath supplied the information. “Or so they tell us. He went back to the Stronghold after he broke through our lines. But when a patrol rode down to get him, he was gone.”

“Why?” Drew asked. “Why pick him up?”

“Why? Because he’s in this, too!” Spath retorted. “Probably rode straight to Kitchell’s hideout. Now, Mr. Rennie, time’s up. The captain authorized this visit because he thought you might just get something out of the prisoner. Well, you did: an admission he’s been passing under a false name. We know *what* he is—a renegade horse thief.”

Drew was no longer completely aware of either man. But, as Rennie turned away, he broke through the mist of confusion which seemed to be enclosing him more tightly than the walls of the cell.

“Shannon. Where’s Shannon?”

Hunt Rennie’s head swung around. “What about Johnny?” he demanded.

“He took my papers—out of my belt!” This was probably the worst thing he could do, to accuse Johnny Shannon without proof.

“What papers, and why should he want them?” If Rennie had been remote before, now he was as chill as the Texas northerners Anse had joked about.

“The parole, the horse papers, some letters....”

“You saw him take them? You know why he should want them?”

Drew shook his head once. He could not answer the second question now.

“Then how do you know Johnny took them?”

How did he know? Drew could give no sane reason for his conviction that it had been Johnny’s fingers which had looted the pocket of papers and stuffed leaves and grass in their place.

“You’ll have to do better than that, kid!” Spath laughed. “You must have known Shannon was gone, too. By the time he’s back from Mexico he won’t need to prove that’s a lie.”

Drew disregarded the lieutenant’s comments—Rennie was the one who mattered. And in that moment the Kentuckian knew that he had made a fatal mistake. Why hadn’t he agreed to telegraph Kentucky? Now there was no hope. As far as *Don Cazar* was concerned, one Drew Kirby could be written off the list. Drew had made an enemy of the very person he most wanted to convince. The Kentuckian swung around and walked to the one small, barred window through which he could see the sun. He walked blindly, trying not to hear those spurred boots moving out of the door ... going away....

## 14

Three good strides one way, four another to measure the cell. Morning sun, gone by noon, daylight outside the window becoming dusk in turn. They fed him army rations, delivered under guard. And the guard never spoke. There was no use asking questions, and Drew had none left to ask, anyway. Except, by the morning of the second day after Rennie's visit, his wonder grew. Why was Bayliss delaying a formal charge against him? This wait could mean that the captain was not finding it so easy to prove he really did have a "renegade horse thief" in custody. But Drew knew he must pin no hopes on a thread that fine.

What had happened to Anse? And Shannon—gone to Mexico? He must have ridden back with the *Colonel*. Drew could expect nothing more from Rennie, or Topham. The Trinfans? Spath had marched them back, too, along with his prisoner, but the lieutenant had not had them under arrest. The mustangers were well known in this district and could prove their reason for being where they were found. And Kitchell had raided one of their corrals last season, so they had no possible tie with the elusive outlaw. Probably by now the Trinfans had returned to their hunt for the Pinto.

No, there was no use thinking that anyone was going to get him out of this—no one but himself, and he had bungled badly so far. Drew, his body tired with pacing the small cell, flung himself down on the bunk and listened to the sounds of the camp. He had pretty well worked out the routine by those sounds. The camp itself was a makeshift affair. Its core, of which this cell was a part, was an old ranch building. There were tents and a few lean-tos, on a plateau bounded on the east by a ravine, on the west by a creek bottom. Huts of stone, rawhide, and planks served as officers' quarters. In fact it was no more a fort than the bivouacs he had known during the war. Unfortunately this room was the most substantial part.

If he could only get out, and pick up his horses, then perhaps he could head for Mexico. There was a war on down there; a soldier could find an anonymous refuge in a foreign army. Shelby's whole Confederate command had crossed the Rio Grande to do just that. That part was easy. To get out of here—that was what he could not accomplish.

Two men always came together when they fed him, and they didn't open the cell door, but just pushed the plate through. A sentry was on duty outside. Drew could beat time to the sound of those footfalls day and night. And suppose he did get free of the cell; he would have to have a horse, supplies, arms....

Drew rolled over on the cot and buried his face on his folded arms. He might as well try to get out of here by using will power alone to turn locks! They left the lantern burning all night to keep a light on him, and the sentry looked in the peephole every time he passed.

The Kentuckian did not know just when it was that he became conscious of the noise overhead. Lizards—maybe even rats—could move about the beams, hidden by the age-browned manta strips. But surely this was too late in the season for a lizard to be so lively by night when the temperature dropped with the rapidity of a weight plunging earth-ward. And rats aloft....

Drew did not change his position on the bunk, but his body tensed. No rat would stay in one place, gnawing with such purpose and concentration at a spot in the darkest corner of the cell roof. Anse? How or why the Texan could be at work there, Drew did not know. But that there was a stealthy attempt being made to reach him from above he was now sure.

His teeth closed on his wrist as he lay listening, to that scratching above, to the regular advance and retreat of the sentry. He heard the man pause by the door and knew he was under inspection. Well, let the Yankee look! He would see his prisoner peacefully sleeping.

Now the trooper was moving on, the noise above became sharper. There was a slight crackle. The linen roofing sagged under a burden, and Drew caught his breath in a gasp. Miraculously the yellow cloth supported the object—a bulge as big as a saddlebag. A portion of the roof which had given way?

The scratching, which had stilled, began again. Then the bulge was gone, pulled away from above. Dust sprinkled down from the disturbed manta. In the next instant Drew moved.

Using his hands on either side of his body, he raked up the straw which filled the box bunk. In a swift moment, timed to the sentry's passing to the farthest point from the spy hole, the Kentuckian rolled to the floor, slapped and pulled the blanket into place over the mounded straw. Not too good—it certainly would not fool any inspection within the room. But in the lantern light and this far from the door, the improvised dummy might satisfy the glance of the sentry for some precious seconds.

Drew was across the cell, flattened against the wall under the still quivering strip of material. More bulges appeared and disappeared, fragments fallen and retrieved. Then a sharp point pierced downward, the tip of a knife slitting the tough stuff. A slash, and the manta peeled back against the wall of the cell.

“*Señor—?*” It was so faint a whisper Drew hardly caught it.

“Yes!” He looked up with desperate eagerness into what he had hoped to see—the dark splotch of a hole.

A rawhide lariat smoothly braided, oiled into supple silkiness, dangled through. Drew got his hands on it, pulled it back against the wall as the sentry returned. He held his breath during that pause beside the spy hole, a pause which lengthened alarmingly. Then his body jerked in answer to a sound a half second before he realized what manner of sound. The sentry had sneezed. He sniffled, too, loudly; then he went on to complete his beat. The blanket and the straw—they had worked!

Drew pulled at the lariat, was answered by a return jerk. He jumped and began to climb. Then, with a wrench he was through the hole, other hands helping to pull.

“Come—pronto!” The hands were pushing, urging. He wriggled forward. Teodoro Trinfan! But why?

There was no time to ask; Drew could only obey directions. They made a worm's progress along the full length of the old ranch building, and dropped the lariat for a ladder to the ground. They crossed the small part of the camp near the ravine with the same caution they had used on the roof.

“*Señor...*” Teodoro's lips were at Drew's ear as the boy pressed against him in a thin cover of shadow. “Left—a big stone—put your hands on it—swing about and down.”

Drew had to take that on blind trust. He had no idea what kind of a drop waited below, and only by firm will power did he follow orders. But his boot soles met a solid surface. Then he was caught about the waist and Hilario's voice whispered to him.

“*Señor*, you stand—so.” Hands fumbled about him, looping him with a supporting lariat. “Now—we go! Your hand, *señor*.” Drew's left hand was caught in a tight grip which pulled

him to the right, face to the wall. So secured, he inched along what he knew must be the face of the ravine, his toes on some small ledge midway between lip and foot.

Somehow the three of them reached ground level, their diagonal course of descent putting some distance between them and the camp. In spite of the cold of the night, Drew was wet with sweat as they threaded through heady sage brush. Now came the scent of horses, the sound of a hoof stamped impatiently on gravel.

“Trinfan?”

Topham! Here?

“Si.”

At Hilario’s hissed assent, a figure detached itself from the utter black of the bushes and moved forward into a sliver of moonlight.

“You got him?”

“I’m here, if that’s what you mean!” Drew answered for himself.

“And you’ll be gone, soon,” the gambler replied. “But there’s one thing I have to know, Kirby. Were you telling the truth to Rennie—do you believe Johnny took your papers?”

What had that to do with the matter at hand? Drew wondered. But from the urgency of the demand he knew it did mean a great deal to Topham.

“Yes, I’m sure. But I can’t prove it—unless I find them with him. He may have destroyed them already.” Drew put into words the black foreboding which had ridden him for days.

“Why? What do they mean to him?”

Evasions and lies had gotten him into this mess; now he would see what stark truth would do.

“Because there were two letters—proof I’m Drew Rennie.”

“Rennie?” Topham repeated. In the light Drew could not see his expression, but his voice was that of a completely baffled man. “Rennie?”

“I’m Hunt Rennie’s son.” There, he had said it—and nothing startling happened. Well, what had he expected—a clap of thunder, a bolt of lightning, the sudden appearance of a cavalry patrol across the nearest hilltop?

“So that’s it!” Topham said slowly. “And Shannon suspected? But why the mystery? And—  
—”

Drew took the questions in turn. “Shannon was at the Jacks when I met Anse. I thought he was unconscious, but he probably wasn’t. Anse called me by my right name. As for why—my father doesn’t know I’m alive. He was told I died at birth, along with my mother. They told *me* he was killed in the Mexican War before I was born. It was all because of an old family feud—too long a story to tell now. I’ve only known for about a year I had a father here in Arizona ... but to make a claim on him, after all these years.... Maybe you don’t understand why I didn’t want to.” He was telling it badly, but he’d been a fool about this from the start.

“Understand ... yes, I think I can. There’s a certain strain of bull-headed independence common to Rennies—I’ve met it head-on several times myself. And your choice was your own to make. But this ... yes, it is just the move Shannon would make, given suspicion to push him into action. And now it may be pushing him even farther.”

Drew was a little bewildered by Topham’s ready acceptance of his story without any proof. But the tone of the last remark caught his full attention.

“What d’ you mean? What’s happened now?”

“I’ve had suspicions, pretty nasty ones, for some time. But I had your trouble—no proof. In the last three days I’ve picked up and sorted out a few very wild cards, and now they make a pat hand. Kitchell has had his contact hereabouts, all right, just as Bayliss has always insisted.”

“You can’t mean Shannon!”

“Johnny Shannon. And if he’s doing what I think he is....” Topham paused. When he continued he had changed the subject. “Last night Nye rode up from the Range. Said that Kitchell made a raid, almost a clean sweep. Among other stock he gathered up was that prize stud of yours.”

“Shiloh!”

And Shannon had the horse papers! The Kentuckian was thinking fast now.

“Yes, if Shannon *is* riding with Kitchell, now he can prove ownership of that stud and sell him anywhere without trouble.” Topham could have been reading Drew’s mind. “But that’s not as important as something else. Hunt went hell-bent-for-leather out of here. He’ll gather up that private army of his and try to trail the raiders. Maybe Kitchell will ride south, or maybe he’ll head directly back into Apache country. Either way that trail’s going to be as easy for anyone after him as walking barefoot through a good roaring fire! Hunt still has blind faith in Johnny.... I was hoping you could help break that.”

“That why you got me out of the camp?” Drew asked.

“Partly. Hunt told me what you said about Johnny taking your papers. I had you sized up as being too smart to make a claim like that unless you really believed it. And I thought maybe you could prove it, given a chance. If you can get to Hunt now ... tell him the real truth before Johnny rigs something of a double-cross....”

“Would he believe me any more than he did when I accused Shannon?” Drew asked bleakly. “I’ll head south, all right. Nobody’s goin’ to lift Shiloh and get away with it as long as I’m able to fork a saddle and push. But if you’re countin’ on my bein’ able to influence my—my father”—he stumbled over the word awkwardly—“don’t!”

“I’m counting on nothing,” Topham returned. “Just hoping now. For a long time we’ve heard about Johnny Shannon being a young hothead who found it hard to settle down after the war. I think there are two Johnnys and we are just beginning to know the real one. You could be his prime target now.”

“Fair of you to point that out.” Drew thought that at last he had found a real motive for Topham’s services. “I’m likely to be bait, ain’t that the truth of it?”

“If you are, the trap is going to be there. But now ... get away from here. Teodoro will ride with you as guide.”

“And the army after me. That’s it!” Drew had mounted. “That’s what you want, isn’t it? Me to pull the troops south? Huntin’ down an escaped horse thief they might slam into Kitchell....”

What a trick! Topham had planned it without asking Drew’s support. But it called for enough audacity, luck, and nerve to be appealing. During the war the Kentuckian had seen such schemes win out time and time again.

“Why ain’t Bayliss already ridin’?” he asked. “Hasn’t he heard about the raid?”

“He’s been heard to say a man can raid his own stock as a cover-up.”

“What’s wrong with him? Is he deaf, dumb, and blind!”

“No, just prejudiced and ridden by envy until he’s not able to think straight any more. But he’ll track you and follow quick enough!”

“He sure will. All right ... we ride.”

They did, Drew depending on the younger Trinfan’s guidance. And, while Teodoro set a meandering trail, it was not one which a determined pursuer would have too much trouble following, come sunup or whenever that sentry discovered he was guarding a straw prisoner.

Once when they pulled up to breathe their horses, dismounting to loose cinches and cool the backs of the mounts, Drew indulged his curiosity further.

“How come you knew just where to make that hole to let me out?”

Teodoro laughed. “That was easy, *señor*. That was the Garza Rancho—only six months has the army been there. Many times we have camped within its walls when we brought in the best of the wild catch for sale. I know those buildings very well. When *Señor* Topham tells my father what must be done, we could plan well and quickly. I have heard what you said to *Señor* Topham, that you are the son of *Don* Cazar. Why did he not know of this? Why have you never lived here with him?”

“He didn’t know I was alive, and I didn’t know that he was. My grandfather—my mother’s father—he hated *Don* Cazar very much, because of a duel and other things. So my father took my mother away secretly, brought her to Texas when they were both very young.

Then *Don* Cazar went to war and the news came that he had been killed. My grandfather went to Texas and took my mother home with him. She died a few months later, when I was born.

“It was only after my grandfather died, two years ago, that letters from my father were found among his private papers. These I discovered when I came home from the war, learning that my father was alive and here in Arizona. Only we were strangers ... I did not know whether he would like me for a son, or whether I wanted a stranger for a father. So, when I came here I took the name of my *compadre*, my friend from the war, Anse Kirby. I wanted to know my father before I made my claims.”

“And *Señor* Juanito—for this he will hate you!”

“Because I did not tell who I was at the start?” Drew asked.

“No—because you are truly *Don* Cazar’s son. Always *Don* Cazar, he treated *Señor* Juanito as a son, but I do not think that was enough. *Señor* Juanito, he is one who must have everything, all. Even when he was a boy, he was like that. Bartolomé Rivas, he braids beautiful ropes, and he made one for Juanito. Always I wanted a rope like that. I would watch Juanito use it and wish. Then once we spend Christmas at the Stronghold ... it was after my father was hurt and *Don* Cazar had us to stay there so he could tend my father’s wounds. Had *he* been with us when the wild ones stampeded, my father would not walk crooked, but we got him back to the ranch too late. But that is not what I would say. It was Christmas and *Don* Cazar gave to me a rope like that of Juanito, a fine rope which felt as if it was a part of a man’s own arm when he swung it. Two days later, that rope, it was gone, never did I find it. But I knew—I had seen Juanito watching me when I tried that fine rope. And I knew his thoughts: no one must have a rope as good as Juanito’s! Not long after that he ran away, to join the army. But really that was because *Don* Cazar caught him beating one of the Indios. Only that is not generally known. The Indio was being taught by *Don* Cazar to have charge of the grain



storage, and Juanito thought that Indios are as dirt—should have no place among Anglos. *Señor* Juanito would hate with a black hate anyone who had a right to be a son at the Stronghold, a better right than he could claim. He must always be on top, at the head. Sometimes it would seem that he would, if he could, push aside *Don* Cazar himself.... Now I think we should ride again.”

By dawn Drew had no idea where they were except that they pushed south. Whether they were now on the Range he did not know. And how in the immensity of this hostile country, they could fulfill Topham’s hopes and lead the troop patrol to Rennie’s posse, was something the Kentuckian did not even try to answer. The border lay south. If Kitchell had made such a sweeping raid, he would be certain to run the animals in that direction, for the outlaw was fully aware of Rennie’s reputation and temper, and knew that *Don* Cazar would trail him with set determination.

This meant the outlaw must have set up some plan for avoiding pursuit. Rouse the Apaches? Or prepare an ambush? Either could work. Then Bayliss’ men could be a saving factor. If the Kentuckian could locate Rennie, and ride in to his camp—or skulk close enough to it—that should bring the troops down.

But where was Anse? The Texan had not simply cleared out because of imminent trouble, Drew was sure of that. Had he followed Shannon to Mexico? This was one time when Drew could well understand the exasperation and frustration felt by an officer whose scouts did not report in as ordered and who had no idea of the disposition of reinforcements. Talk about going into something blind! But still he rode at a steady, mile-covering pace southward.

## 15

“Still south....” Teodoro pointed out the hoof prints deep in the soft earth beside the water hole. Drew steadied himself with one hand on the stirrup leathers as he stooped to see more clearly. He was groggy with lack of sleep and felt that if he once allowed himself to slip completely to ground level, he would not get up again.

“Rennie’s riders?”

Teodoro was on one knee, conning the mass of tracks as if they were a printed page. “*Si*—there is the mark of Bartolomé Rivas’ horse. It has a misshapen hoof; the shoe must always be well fitted.”

“How far are they ahead now?” Drew had come to depend upon the young mustanger’s judgment. Teodoro apparently was close to a Pima in his ability to read trace.

“Two hours—maybe three. But they will be at the pass and there they will stay.”

“Why?”

“I think they will lay a trap for the raiders. There has been no sign that they trail now behind driven horses. *Don* Cazar does not pursue; he rides to cut off the road to Mexico. Kitchell’s men, they would not take the open Sonora trail, that is folly for them. So they travel one ridden by men with a price on their heads. If Kitchell now moves south to stay, he will have with him all that he can carry, and he must come this way.”

“If he hasn’t gone already!”

“There is no sign,” Teodoro repeated stubbornly.

“So we keep on ahead.” Drew got down on both knees, splashed the muddy water-hole liquid into his face in an effort to clear his head.

They had changed mounts twice since leaving the camp, both times at the water forts on the Range. And the second time they had chanced three hours’ sleep and a hot meal. But the rest of the time it was ride, chew on jerky and cold tortillas, and depend on Teodoro’s sense of direction to take them eventually to their goal—the outlaws’ gate into Mexico. Drew had long since stopped looking over his shoulder for any thundering advance of cavalry. If Bayliss was hunting the fugitives, he was not pushing the pace too hard.

“Not ahead, no.” Teodoro drank from his cupped hand. “We go so....” He sketched a gesture east.

“Why?”

“It is never well to be shot by one’s friends.” The mustanger achieved a half smile, stretching the skin of his gaunt young face. “Always it is better to see before being seen.”

When they started he led the way to the left at a walk. Drew, aroused now, looked about him carefully. This was rough country cut by pinnacles of red and yellow rock, backed by the purple ridges of the greater heights. It was desert land, too. They had long since left the abundance of the valley behind them. Here was the stiff angularity of cactus, the twisted vegetation of an arid land.

The crack of a carbine shattered the empty silence. Drew pulled on reins as a second shot dug up a spurt of dust just beyond Teodoro’s mount.

“Hold it! Right there.”

That disembodied voice could have come from anywhere, but Drew thought it was from above and behind. Someone, holed up in the rocks, had them as perfect targets. The Kentuckian did not try to turn his head; there was no use giving the sharpshooter an excuse.

“All right, you....” The voice was hollow, its timbre distorted by echo. “Throw off your guns an’ git down ... one at a time ... th’ Mex first.”

Drew watched Teodoro slide out of the saddle.

“Stand away from that hoss ... easy now.”

The mustanger obeyed.

“Now you ... do jus’ like him.”

Drew followed instructions carefully.

“Hands up—high! Now turn around.”

They turned. A figure had detached itself from among the rocks they had passed moments earlier and came down toward them carbine ready.

“Anse!” Drew stumbled toward the Texan. The other’s hat was gone. A torn shirt sleeve flapped about his left arm, allowing sight of a neckerchief knotted about his forearm. His coat trailed from one shoulder. “What in the world happened to you?”

Anse sat down suddenly on one of the boulders, his gaze on Drew. He shook his head slowly.

“I ain’t sein’ things,” he said. “That’s you, ain’t it? Say—got any water?” His tongue curled over cracked lips.

Drew snatched the canteen from his saddle and hurried forward. More than a bloodstained bandage marked Anse, he could see now. He waited while the other seized the canteen avidly and drank. Then the Texan was smiling at him.

“Seems as how we’s always meetin’ up, don’t it now? Likewise it’s always to m’ benefit, too. Only this time I’ve got me somethin’ to trade. You keep on goin’ down this trail, *compadre*, an’ maybe you’ll wind up with a spade pattin’ you down nice an’ smooth.”

“What happened?”

Anse drank again with the discipline of a plains rider, a mouthful at a time.

“What didn’t would be more like it, *amigo*. Yesterday, well, they got m’ hoss—tried to git me. Only left their mark, though,” Anse said, regarding his arm ruefully. “I’ve been wearin’ off boot heels hoofin’ it ever since. Tryin’ to make it back to that there water hole.”

“Who shot your horse?”

“I didn’t see no name printed big ‘cross his jacket, but I’m thinkin’ it was Shannon.”

“You were in Mexico?”

Anse shook his head. “No, an’ Shannon ain’t there, neither. I trailed along—ridin’ th’ high lines careful—when he went with that there Mex *Coronel* an’ his men. Stayed with him ‘bout a day, Shannon did. Then another man, Anglo, rode into their camp—had him a chin fest with Shannon, an’ Johnny saddled up pronto, beat it with th’ stranger. Thought he might be headin’ home, but he weren’t. So I kept on ridin’ into their dust an’ waitin’ to find out what it was all ‘bout.

“Shannon an’ this hombre, they hit it up a pretty good lick till they got well away from th’ Sonora trail. Then they skimmed it down till you’d think they had all month an’ a handful of extra Sundays to git wherever they was goin’. Plumb wore me down amblin’ ‘long th’ way they did. I sure ‘nough ‘bout scraped off my hoss’s hoofs cuttin’ down his speed.

“Spent a whole day jus’ loungin’ ‘round in one camp. I’d say they was waitin’ for someone—only nobody ever showed. So they went on, me followin’. I’ll tell you one thing. This new hombre Shannon took up with, he was a real hard case. A short trigger man if I ever laid eye on one. Anyway we jus’ kept on, with me tryin’ to think iffen I should Injun up to git th’ drop on ‘em or not. Seemed to me, though, as how it might be brighter to kinda jus’ drift their way an’ see what’s makin’ ‘em rattle their hocks out in th’ middle of nowhere.

“Guess I weren’t as smart as I thought I was. As I said, yesterday suddenly they give th’ spurs an’ lit out. Me, guess I got kinda upset ‘bout losin’ ‘em an’ followed a bit too hasty. Hoss came down with a hole in him. Me, I took another. Gave ‘em a good sight of a man plugged where it means th’ most an’ that musta convinced ‘em I wasn’t no problem no more. So—that was what happened. I jus’ pulled as green a trick as a sod-buster tryin’ to crawl a wild one! An’ where Shannon is now I don’t know—only I don’t think it’s in Mexico.”

“Probably with Kitchell.” Hurriedly Drew filled in his own experiences and what he had learned from Topham.

Anse looked about him. “For territory what looks so bare,” he commented, “this stretch of country sure must have a sight of population wanderin’ ‘round in it. Th’ Old Man an’ his posse somewheres up ahead, an’ Shannon an’ that side-kick of his, an’ Kitchell maybe, as well as th’ Yankees hotfootin’ it behind you—or so you hope. Lordy, this’s gonna be th’ Battle of Nashville over again’ do they all meet up! All we need is a coupla bull pups up on one of them ridges an’ we could blow ‘em all to hell-an’-gone! Jus’ which bunch is goin’ to claim us first?”

“*Señores*, that is already decided,” Teodoro said quietly.

Drew looked up. Where had they come from, those four? Out of the rocks themselves? He only knew that now they were there, rifles over their forearms, ready to swing sights on the three below. His heart gave a lurch—Apaches? And then on the far right he recognized Greyfeather, Rennie’s chief scout. And it was Greyfeather who pointed to them and to the way ahead, who gave an emphatic wave of the hand which was an order. Leading their horses, they obeyed, the Pimas falling in behind.

The back-door route to the pass was a rough one. They had to leave the horses and climb, two of the Pimas always in sight behind, guns ready. Anse sighed.

“Seems like we have lots of luck—all of it plain bad. These Injuns run us in an’ as far as th’ Old Man’s concerned we’re jus’ what everybody claims we is. We’re a coupla saddle bums as is only on th’ loose ‘cause we got up earlier an’ owned faster hosses than th’ sheriff! How’d we ever git our saddles slipped ‘round so wrong, anyway?”

“I did it,” Drew said bitterly. “It’s not any of your doin’, Anse. Tied myself up in a string of lies and now they have me tight. So help me, Anse, if I ever get this unsnarled, I’m never goin’ to open my mouth again to say more’n ‘yes’ or ‘no’!”

The Texan laughed. “You ain’t never been one to color up a story redder’n a Navajo blanket! An’ don’t take on th’ whole pack of this when only ‘bout th’ salt bag is of your buyin’. You ain’t responsible for Kitchell, nor Johnny Shannon, nor Bayliss’ wantin’ to down th’ Old Man. Can’t see as how much of this is your doin’, after all.”

Rennie had set his ambush at the pass with care. At first sight there was no evidence of men lying in wait, but from the heights over which the Pimas brought their charges, Drew caught glimpses of men crouched behind sheltering rocks. The bulk of the Range posse was gathered in a hollow on the south side of the pass and it was there that Greyfeather delivered his catch.

*Don Cazar* surveyed them almost without interest. "Bayliss released you then," he said to Drew.

"No. Reese Topham and the Trinfans broke me out." Drew kept to his recent vow of truth-telling. And, he noticed with a spark of something approaching satisfaction, the truth seemed able to shake Rennie a little.

"Reese Topham broke you out! Why?" The demand was quick and to the point.

"He wanted me to play fox for the army's hounds ... bring the troopers south ... here," Drew replied. "Bayliss wouldn't march out and Topham thought that you needed some support—with Kitchell apparently on the move." Telling the truth did not mean you had to tell all of it. There was no reason to bring Shannon into this now and antagonize Rennie all over again.

"He what—?" His father was staring at him now with pure amazement. "But that doesn't make sense," he added as if to himself.

"No? I think it does, suh. Kitchell wouldn't have dared to raid the Range if he were goin' to stay in this country, would he? And after such a raid he'd head south. You believe that much or you wouldn't be here waitin' for him now. Nobody knows how many men ride with that gang—and maybe he can pull in the Apaches, too. They wouldn't pass up a good chance to get back at you. You have the reputation of being about the only white man in this territory to make them turn tail and give up a fight. Now—supposin' you do get Kitchell stopped here at the pass—and the army patrol comes in behind him. Then together you can finish him, and perhaps some bronco Apaches into the bargain. It could work."

Drew paused and then went on. "Of course, I have a good reason of my own for being here, apart from not wantin' to swallow Captain Bayliss' brand of justice. Kitchell's men took Shiloh. And nobody, nobody at all, suh, is goin' to run off that horse—not while I'm able to do something about it!"

"Seems to me, suh," Anse cut in now, "that three more guns is gonna be healthy for you to have 'round here, does th' fight work out th' way it can. Me, I don't make no big brag on my shootin'—but I never did wear no six-gun, nor tote no carbine, jus' for show."

"Of course, if you think we're Kitchell's plants," Drew added, "then keep us under guard. Only we're not and never were."

"Topham, Topham planned this?" Rennie still showed surprise. "I don't—"

A bird called flutingly. Rennie stiffened. Men moved, up slope, into cover, without direction.

"You two ... get up there, behind those pointed rocks," *Don Cazar* directed with a stab of his finger. "I'll be right behind you."

"We ain't about to give you no trouble," Anse said as he obeyed, and Drew agreed as he followed the Texan into hiding.

"I'd like a rifle jus' 'bout now," Anse remarked. "Only thing I've ever held 'gainst a six-gun is that it don't throw lead as far as a fella could sometimes want it to. But I think we've sorta been ruled outta this here fight—'less th' enemy gits close 'nough to spit at."

Now they could see down the cut of the pass. The narrow passage wound between rocks and Drew, though he could not spot them, did not doubt that Rennie's forces were snuggled in where a surprise volley could do the most good.

"Somethin' sure is comin'." Anse had one hand flat on the ground. "Feels like th' whole danged army hoofin' it an' fast!"

Drew was aware of it, too—the vibration carrying through stone and soil. The drumming of hoofs, horses coming at a run. Now it was more than vibration, a distinct roll of sound magnified and echoed. And he caught a shout or two, the cries of men hazing on lagers. It must be Kitchell on his way through to the border!

A dust haze, rising like smoke. Then the foremost runner of the band appeared in the cut, the whites of its eyes showing, patches of foam sticky on chest and shoulder. Five ... ten ... an even dozen—but not a gray coat among them. One light buckskin had almost startled Drew into rising until he caught a second and clearer look.

The leaders were through and a second wave was coming. Drew counted twenty more horses before the first rider appeared. His face was masked against the dust by a neckerchief drawn up to eye level. But, unlike the ordinary range rider, he wore an army forage cap in place of the wide-brimmed hat of the plains. As he spurred by below Drew's perch he glanced up but seemed to have no suspicion that he was under observation.

There came more horses, and Drew stopped counting. But the gray he sought was not among them. The shouts of the drivers were louder. And then, as three men appeared bunched, there was a crackle of shots. Two of the riders fell, one leaning slowly from the saddle, the other diving into the dust. The third tried to turn but did not get his horse around before a mule pushed into him, followed by another and another. The horse thieves were trapped. Drew could hear the sharp snap of shots along the pass. More than those three must have been caught in the ambush.

The mules, braying and running wild, thundered on south after the horses. Then a saddled horse, riderless, galloped by with a second at its heels. Confused shouting rang out, without any meaningful words. This was as much a muddle, Drew thought, as any battle. You never saw any action except that immediately about you—mostly you were too busy trying to keep alive to care about incidentals. Come to think of it, this was about the first time he had ever sat out a fight, watching it as a spectator.

The roll of firing was dying down. Anse grinned at him.

"Takes you right back, don't it now?" he asked when he could be heard. "Th' Old Man, he's got him some of th' Ginerals' idears—work good, too!"

"I didn't see Shiloh in that band." Drew stood up. "Couple of duns ... no grays."

"Come to think of it," Anse agreed, "that's right! But lookit that bay down there." He pointed to one of the saddled horses that had a dragging rein caught in a dead juniper stump and was trying to pull loose. "Got th' RR brand! Some of these must be from th' Range raid."

"Hey—down here—!" The hail broke down the pass from the north. Rennie climbed over his rock barricade, and other men came out of cover to move up the cut. Since no one tried to stop them, Drew and Anse went along.

"Got us two of 'em ready to talk!" Jared Nye strode to meet his employer. "They're Kitchell's gang, all right. Only he ain't with 'em."

“*Patrón*—” For the first time since he had known him Drew saw Bartolomé Rivas run. He was weaving in and out among the fallen men in the pass. “They ride.” He was half choked by the effort to force his message past heavy gulps for breath.

“Who rides?” Rennie demanded.

“Three—four men ... that way.” He waved a plump hand to the east. “They go like the wind, *Don Cazar*. And one—he rides the big gray!”

Drew whirled. The big gray—there was only one horse to be named so on the Range. Some of the outlaws had escaped the trap and one was riding Shiloh! Drew found the horse with the tangled rein, jerked and tore at the leather strap, and was in the saddle when a hand caught at the rein he had just freed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Hunt Rennie demanded.

Drew snapped the rein out from the other’s hold. There was only one thing he wanted now, and that was getting farther and farther away with every second he wasted here.

“After Shiloh!” He used spurs on the horse and it leaped ahead. For all he knew any one of the posse might take a shot at him, so he rode low in the saddle. He heard startled cries, saw Bartolomé Rivas stumble as he got out of the path of the wild horse. There were rocks, sand, a body which the horse avoided in a leap, then there was free ground and Drew settled down to ride.

A horse was coming up from behind—they need not think they were going to stop him now. Drew turned his head as the mount pulled level with his own. He was ready to fight if need be. Only the man in the saddle was Hunt Rennie.

“Better find out which way to go before you break your neck or that bay’s legs,” Rennie called. “Out beyond that pillar—then east.”

Drew nodded. But Rennie did not fall back. He was riding his heavy duty horse, a grulla famous for its staying power. And now the Kentuckian regained his proper share of common sense and began to pull in the bay. As his father had pointed out, a broken neck or a horse’s broken leg was not going to bring Shiloh any closer. He heard the sound of other horses and glanced back as they wheeled around the pillar to the east.

Four riders were bunched—Anse, Nye, Teodoro, and Donally. That made six of them in all, pursuing four fugitives over miles of countryside which might have been shaped with no other purpose in mind than to shelter men on the run. But perhaps they could come up with the quarry soon....

Shiloh! He had to get Shiloh! Drew began to call upon all the horseman’s knowledge and scout’s lore that he possessed. Those qualities, rather than fighting power, were what he believed he needed now. With luck—always with a large-sized helping of luck!

## 16

“Now that you have that bucked out, how about a little sound reasoning?” Hunt Rennie still held his position, riding stirrup to stirrup with Drew.

The worst of it was, *Don Cazar* was right. This was no time for raw emotion to replace thinking. Already it was almost dusk and their quarry could not be traced into the dark, even if they had the aid of a full moon. The Kentuckian reined in. Growing shadows masked the country ahead—rough territory—which he did not doubt the fugitives knew far better than he did.

“All right.” It was difficult, one of the most difficult things he had ever done, to admit even that much that he must follow Rennie’s lead. “What do I do now?”

“You still think you can go it alone—want to?” Rennie’s face was shadowed, and his voice again held that remote note.

“It’s my horse.” Drew was defensive.

“Stolen on my range,” Rennie retorted. “This is far more my fight than yours. If we didn’t get Kitchell back there at the pass, and I’m inclined to believe that we did not, then I want him! You don’t kill a rattler by cutting off his rattles—you go for the head. But this rattler’s on his home land and he knows where to hole up. We have only one card to play against him.”

“What’s that, suh?”

“Water. Oh, I know all the rumors that the Apaches have secret water holes back in the hills, and they may have introduced Kitchell to some of them. But the hills are behind him. He’ll want just one thing now, to get south, across the border. He’s lost a large number of his men, probably all of his loot, back there at the pass. He can’t hold out here any longer. Once he’s into Sonora we can’t touch him—I know he has friends down there.”

“Could he try to take the wagon road south?”

“As a last resort, perhaps. The pass was the only outlet through which he could run that band of stolen horses and his pack mules. But there are other places, at least two I know of, where a few men, riding light, can get through. I believe he’ll try to head for one of those.”

“Make it ahead of us now?”

Rennie laughed shortly. “If he does, he’ll have a warm reception. The Pimas are already scouting both passes. We planned to close the border when we set up that ambush. Meanwhile”—he glanced back—”Teodoro!”

“*Sí, Don Cazar?*”

“How far are we from your hunting-camp site?”

“Two, maybe three miles. Slow riding in the dark, *Don Cazar.*”

“We’ll head there. That—except for the hole behind us which Bartolomé will cover—is the only water for miles. And we’re between Kitchell and the border spring. One thing he will have to have is water. We stake out the pools and sooner or later they will come to us.”

It made sense, but still Drew was impatient. Out there one of Kitchell’s men, or perhaps the outlaw himself, was riding Shiloh. The fact that Rennie’s plan seemed a gamble did not make it any easier to follow. But the Kentuckian could think of nothing better to offer.



The moon was rising as they came to the water hole near the mustangers' camp. Men and animals drank together, and when Drew dismounted his weariness hit—hard. Fatigue was a gray cloud in his brain, a weight on arms, legs, body. Voices around him sounded faint and far away as he steadied himself with a grasp on the stirrup leathers and fought not only to keep on his feet but awake.

“What’s the matter with you, boy?”

Drew tried to lift his head, tried to summon words to answer that demand. A sullen kind of pride made him release his hold and stand away from the bay, only to reel back and bring up hard against a rock, grating his arm painfully. He clung there for a moment and got out:

“Nothing a little sleep won’t cure.” He spoke into the dark outline of Hunt Rennie. “I’m all right.”

Drew made a painful effort, pulled himself away from the rock to fumble at the cinches of the bay’s saddle, only to be pushed aside.

“Steer him over there, Perse ... bed him down.”

The Kentuckian’s last scrap of protest leaked away. He hardly knew when a blanket was pulled up over him as he lay in a rock niche, already drifting into deep sleep.

Voices awoke him into the gray of early morning. The light was hardly brighter than moonlight but he could make out Hunt Rennie, sitting cross-legged, rifle to hand, while Chino Herrera squatted on his heels before him. Chino had not been with them when they left the pass. And there was Greyfeather, too. Their party had had reinforcements. Drew pushed away the blanket and sat up, realizing he was stiff with cold. Fire ... hot coffee ... there was no sign of either. He yawned and jerked his coat straight about him. His attention suddenly focused on an object which lay on the ground at Chino’s left. It was a book, the same size as the three he had bought at Stein’s!

Without thinking, Drew moved forward, was about to reach for the volume when he heard the click of a cocked Colt. A hand swept down on the book.

“You, hombre—what do you want with this?” Herrera, with no friendliness in either voice or eyes, was holding a gun on him.

“That book—it looks like the ones I bought in town.” Drew was startled by the vaquero’s enmity.

“Give it to him,” Rennie ordered.

For a moment Herrera seemed on the point of open dispute, then he obeyed. But for some reason his weapon remained unholstered. Drew took up the volume.

“*History of the Conquest of Peru*,” he read out. The binding was a match for that of the other three. But—there *was* something different. He weighed the volume in his hand. That was it! This book was heavier....

“Well, hombre, you have seen such a one before?”

“Yes, this is bound to match those I bought from Stein. And one of those was *History of the Conquest of Mexico*. This is surely a part of the same library.”

“Those—what did they have in them?”

Rennie appeared content to let Chino ask the questions, but he continued to watch Drew and the book.

“Have in them?” Drew repeated. “Why pages. They were books to read—*The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *History of the Conquest of Mexico*. That’s all, just books.”

“Open this one,” Rennie told him.

The Kentuckian had trouble obeying. And for the first time he saw he did not hold a book composed of pages but a type of box. The cover resisted his tugging. Then, as if some catch had been mastered, it opened so suddenly he almost lost his grip on the book. The core of those once separate pages had been hollowed out to contain a nest of raw cotton on which lay ... The Kentuckian gasped.

Even in this subdued light those stones glittered, and their settings were gold and silver. Drew saw elaborate pieces, the like of which he had never seen before.

“There was a mule shot back in the pass,” Rennie explained. “His pack was opened. Three books were in it—one of them fell out and burst open.”

“This one?”

“No, it held gold coin. *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens—the contents hardly indicative of the subject, were they? Upon investigation a *Wonders of the World* produced more coin. And, as you see, *History of the Conquest of Peru* was even more fruitful. You are sure this binding matches that of the books you bought?”

“Certain. This was bound to order, as were the other three. They were part of someone’s personal library—had no bookplate, though.”

“And what was Stein’s story concerning them?”

“An old prospector named Lutterfield found them in a trunk in some cave he located out in the desert country. He brought them in to trade for supplies.”

“Lutterfield,” Rennie repeated thoughtfully. “Yes, that could be.”

“Trunk in a cave?” Herrera was skeptical. “But why leave books in a trunk in a cave?”

“One of Kitchell’s caches? Or else left by someone who cleared out in ‘61 and had to travel light. If anything remains, perhaps Lutterfield can locate it for us later. Anyway this”—Rennie took the book box from Drew, clapped the cover over, hiding the treasure—“won’t go to Mexico now. And if the owner is still alive, we may even find him—who knows? You had your sleep out, boy?”

Drew found Rennie’s expression one of indifference. Maybe *Don Cazar* no longer regarded him with the cold dislike Drew had met at the camp, but they were still strangers. What he had once said back in Kentucky at a remote and distant time was very true now. “Maybe Hunt Rennie doesn’t know I exist; maybe we won’t even like each other if and when we do meet ... I don’t know....”

Now Drew thought he did know. Was this insurmountable barrier all his fault? Because he had been so sure he wanted to go it on his own—come to his father as an equal and not a beggar? But could he ever have acted differently? Too independent, too defensive always—Alexander Mattock had made him like that. Now it seemed that his grandfather had won, after all. Because his grandson was the kind of man he was, there would be no meeting with Hunt Rennie to claim kinship, nothing more than what now existed.

“I’m all right.” After too long a pause, Drew replied to his father’s question. “Do we just keep on sittin’ here?”

“If necessary, Chino, pass those supplies you brought in. We eat cold, at least for now.”

“You look ready to up saddle ‘n ride.” Anse was waiting behind Drew’s rock. His arm rested in a sling with a neat and reasonably clean bandage about his wound.

“How’s that hole?” Drew asked with renewed concern.

“Nothin’ much more’n a nick. Say, th’ Old Man’s like a real doc, ain’t he? Carries doc’s things in his saddlebags an’ patched me up last night so I’m near as good as new. After I drunk th’ wrinkles smooth outta my belly an’ had me some shut-eye, why, I’m as right as four aces in any man’s hand! ‘Course I sure could do with some coffee—’bout strong ‘nough to float a hoss shoe gentle like. But we ain’t bendin’ lip over that this sunup. Lordy, this jerky sure gives a man’s chawers a workout!”

They chewed away at the dark sun-dried *carne* of the border country. There was about as much flavor in it as in a piece of wood, but it kept a man’s insides busy and about half satisfied. And they did have water.

Drew looked out over the land about them. Rennie had their small force stationed to cover every approach to the water hole, and with the Pimas here too, Drew was sure that they would not be surprised. Would Kitchell follow the pattern Rennie expected—try to water here? And then strike for the south? With his men scattered, many killed or taken at the pass, he had very little choice.

For some reason the quartet of fugitives must have been trailing quite a distance behind the main band, and so had been warned in time by the gunfire. Was one of that four Shannon? And what would it mean to Rennie if Shannon did turn up now with Kitchell?

Drew jerked back against the boulder, reacting to a screech from somewhere out in that wild country—a fierce, mad sound which tore at the nerves. He had heard its like before, but never rising so to the pitch of raw intensity. It was the challenge of a fighting stallion, one of the most terrifying sounds ever to break from the throat of an animal.

From the pocket meadow came the answering squeals of their own mounts, the pounding of hoofs as they fought their stake ropes.

“*Don Cazar!*” It was Teodoro. “The Pinto comes—and would fight!”

Again that shriek of rage and utter defiance. The rocks echoed it eerily, and Drew found it hard to judge either distance or direction. The wind was rising, too, scooping up dust to throw against men and boulders. But that wild stud could not be too far away, and what had stirred him to this point of vocal outburst?

“Teodoro,” Rennie called, “get back there and see if you can quiet those horses.”

Drew reached for the carbine he had taken from the boot on the saddle of the captured bay. Army issue ... Spencer. He appraised it with the sharp, quick scrutiny of a man who had had to depend on enemy weapons before. Just how had this fallen into outlaw hands? The arm was well kept, ready for action.

Horses turned mean, turned man-killer at times. And the Pinto was reputed to be a murderer of his own species. Not just content to protect his band from a raiding stallion, he actually went out of his way to seek and force a fight with other males. Could it be that now the wild killer had been drawn from hiding to meet a strange stallion?

And could that stranger be Shiloh? It would mean the men they sought were circling back to this water hole. Shiloh and the Pinto! Even when saddled and ridden, the Kentucky stallion

might respond to the challenge. And so handicapped he would have no chance! Drew bit hard on his underlip.

The yap-yap of a coyote sounded brazenly from the ridge behind which Drew was almost certain the Pinto had trumpeted.

“Pass the word,” said Rennie. “Riders coming.”

Anse hissed it on to Donally, who hid in the brush behind. Drew lay tense, as if his whole body was able to listen and assess sounds.

Waiting, as always, fretted the nerves. Imagination gave birth to sounds, made the quiver of a bush unnatural, planted in a man a growing sense of eyes boring down on his body, nakedly visible to the enemy. Drew’s muscles ached. He forced tight rein on his imagination and began the hard task of consciously schooling himself past the danger of a freeze when and if attack did come.

Wind moaning about the rocks, sand blown in eyes and face. Twice Drew half put out his hand to the canteen which lay between him and Anse. Both times he did not complete the reach. His tongue felt swollen, the saliva in his mouth sticky, sickly tasting.

No sun—this was going to be a cloudy, overcast day.

He half arose. That scream came again, this time closer, more rage-filled. Drew turned his head.

“Cover me!” He did not give Anse a chance to protest.

That slope ... he had been studying it carefully for long moments of the wait, gauging the distances between bits of cover, the tricky open spaces he would have to cross. But the riders they had been alerted to expect were not in sight, and if what he truly believed was about to happen did, the outlaws might never reach the water hole at all.

He was running, dodging, working his way up to the crown of the ridge. But he was still too low to see what was going on at the far side when that scream of challenge was answered. The answer was deeper in tone, but it carried with it the same rising note of anger and fighting promise. Although Drew had never seen Shiloh prepare to give battle, he was sure he had just heard him voice such readiness.

The Kentuckian flung himself flat before he reached the skyline, wriggling on in a desperate crawl. Then he lay panting in a small earth dip, only a ragged fringe of grass between him and the down slope.

Even in the swirl of wind-blown dust there was no mistaking Shiloh—rearing and fighting to dislodge his rider, wheeling about in a circle. Three other horses and their riders had edged well beyond the circumference of that circle, the horses neighing and snorting.

The squeal of the Pinto was ear-wrenching, though as yet the killer stud had not appeared in plain sight. The cry triggered Shiloh into a fantastic effort. He reared, striking out with front hoofs, perhaps in an effort to keep his balance. Drew fully expected to see him crash over and back.

Apparently his rider feared the same fall. In the dusty murk the man separated from the horse. Shiloh whirled and pounded back, away from his rider, and as he went he voiced once more his answer to the Pinto.

Drew sighted a dark spot moving in to intercept the gray. Then the spot turned broadside and he appreciated what had made the Pinto so elusive to hunters. The mottled red-and-white

patches of the wild stud's coat melted into the landscape in an uncanny fashion, making the horse seem to appear and disappear as he trotted back and forth.

The Kentuckian tried to bring the Spencer in line with that weaving, distorted barrel of spotted body. What was the range? Too far, he was afraid, for a shot to count. But he knew that he could not lie there and watch the Pinto cut down Shiloh in one of those vicious, deadly, equine duels. The Kentucky horse had no fighting experience, and his greater bulk and height would mean little against the wily cunning of the murderer who had already tasted blood too many times. To allow Shiloh to be ripped to pieces was utterly unthinkable.

The men down there no longer mattered. Drew rose to one knee, steadied the carbine, and fired.

Did the Pinto really flinch from a bullet striking home? Or had the dangerous sound of gunfire caused his old caution to win out for an instant over his blood lust? The red head with the dangling white forelock tossed, and then the wild horse whirled and ran. Shiloh, teeth bared, ready and willing to come to battle, followed....

Drew was on his feet. Then he was pulled backward by a jerk out of nowhere, and he fell under a brown, mostly bare body which pinned him firmly to the ground.

## 17

Drew struggled wildly but he could not break the grip which held him down. He was looking up into the face of Greyfeather, and none of his writhing made any impression on the Pima's hold. There was a sprinkle of shots; then a whirl of the wind brought sand up over them, blinding eyes, filling mouth and nose. Even the Indian flinched from that and Drew managed to tear loose. He rolled down the grade, bringing up against a small tree with a jolt which drove most of the air from his laboring lungs.

He pulled his arm up across his face, trying to shield his eyes from the blast which thickened steadily, gasping for air to breathe. And the wind voiced a howl which arose as alarmingly as the stallions' screaming.

Stallions! Drew clawed his way up to his knees. But there was no seeing through that murk to where Shiloh had been. Then he was on his feet, stumbling along ... the big gray must be hidden somewhere....

"Drew!" A figure blundered into him from behind, almost sending him to the ground again. "Get down, you fool!" Hands clutched at his body, trying to pull him earthward.

"Let me go! Shiloh—"

"Get down!" Anse's whole weight struck him, and he fell, the Texan sprawling with him. It was only then that he heard the spatter of rifle fire and understood that they were in the middle of an exchange of lead slugs.

"Keep down!" Anse, his voice ragged with anger, snapped the command in Drew's ear. "What in thunder you tryin' to do? You gone completely loco, *amigo*? Walkin' right out to git yourself shot like them bullets was nothin' but pecans or somethin' like!"

For the first time Drew realized what he had done—blown Rennie's carefully planned trap sky-high. His shot at the Pinto must have been warning enough for the fugitives. But why were they trying to make a fight of it now, when to cut and run would have been the smartest move? Unless, having seen only one man, they believed he was alone. He tried to rub the dust from his eyes and think coherently. But all that was in the forefront of his mind was that last sight of Shiloh following the Pinto to battle.

"All right." Drew shifted in Anse's hold. "It's all right."

Not that it was, but at least that was the best way he could express his return to reason. And the Texan appeared to understand, for his grip loosened.

The dust which had blown up an opaque curtain dropped as quickly. They lay together on the far side of the ridge, but the space below was empty. They saw no men, no battling horses—nothing.

"They've hightailed it," someone called from the crest of the ridge.

"I tell you ... I got one of 'em.... He's over between those two bushes. He'd pulled up to take up th' fella runnin' an' went out of th' saddle. Other man got his hoss an' lit out."

Drew stood up.

"Where you goin' now?" Anse demanded.

"Where d' you think?" the Kentuckian asked dully. "After Shiloh."

He went on foot, down the slope, across the open where the gray had unseated his rider and turned to take up the Pinto's challenge. Since the horses were no longer in sight, there was only one way they could have gone—to the east.

Drew was in the open when another of those wild sand and dust flurries caught him. Buffeted here and there, staggering, his arm up over his face, he was driven by its force until he brought up against a rock wall. With that as a guide he kept on stubbornly, because once more he had heard the scream of the Pinto. In triumph? Drew shivered under a thrust of fear which left him sick. He was sure that that murderous red-and-white devil had finished off Shiloh.

Along the wall ... keep going.... The dust was thinning again. Drew's hand was on the Colt Topham had supplied. The Spencer lay back on the ridge. But if any kind of fortune favored him now, he was going to shoot the Pinto—if it was the last thing he ever did.

There was a clear space ahead once more. The sullen gray sky gave only dulled light, but enough to see by.

Drew had heard many stories of the fury of the stallion battle, and he had seen fearsome scars ridging the hides of two of the Range studs. But actually witnessing such a battle shook him. Teeth ... hoofs ... blood on Shiloh's shoulders and flanks ... a strip of flesh dangling.... But Drew saw that the Pinto was marked, too.

The wild horse was trying for a final throat grip, and

Shiloh was on the defensive, running, wheeling to kick, once getting home on the Pinto's ribs so that the spotted horse squealed with pain. Shiloh had a torn ear and a gash open on his neck. The two battlers twisted and turned in a mad fury of movement.

Drew edged on, Colt ready. But to fire now was impossible.

The Pinto's hoofs crashed against the saddle and Shiloh gave ground. With a scream of triumph the wild one's head snaked out, teeth ready to set on the larger horse's throat. Hopelessly, Drew shot—it was all he could do.

The white-and-red head tossed. Shiloh had wrenched back. The Pinto drove against the gray and crashed down. It lay kicking as the larger horse hit out with forefeet, bringing them heavily down on the Pinto. The Pinto let out a cry of rage and pain that seemed to startle even Shiloh. The gray backed away from his writhing enemy and stood shivering, his head outstretched, nostrils distended. Drew fired for the second time and the helpless kicking was stilled.

Shiloh moved, limping. Blood matted with dust stained his coat, making him almost as red and white as the Range stud. Drew holstered the Colt and went to his horse, crooning softly as he caught one of the chewed and broken reins.

He was trying to examine what seemed to him terrible wounds, when Shiloh started neighing. The Kentuckian looked back. Anse and Rennie, with Teodoro and Chino bringing up the rear, were coming. The young mustanger went to look down at the Pinto.

“He is dead.” That was an observation rather than a question. Teodoro knelt in the dust, drew his knife and cut loose strands of the long mane hair.

“I shot him.” Drew was more intent on Shiloh's wounds. “He was killin' Shiloh.”

He pushed back the thought that although his horse was still on its feet, the Pinto might have killed him, after all. Except for horses ripped by shellfire in battle, Drew had never seen any

wounds such as these. He was deadly afraid that those two bullets had not really saved the stud.

“Let’s have a look, Chino, bring my saddlebags!” Hunt Rennie was beside Drew. “Can you lead him back to the water hole?” he asked. “See if he’ll walk.”

Somehow they did it—Drew and Anse, Rennie and Teodoro. They coaxed, led, supported Shiloh when they could, and brought him to the water hole. And then they worked to stop the weakening flow of blood. Drew kept the young horse quiet while Rennie stitched up the worst of the tears.

“He’ll do.” Rennie washed his hands. “Can’t move him for some time, though. He must have given a good account of himself meeting that murderer for the first time. Lucky ...”

“Suh—” Drew found it difficult to face Rennie. As his anxiety over the horse’s condition had faded, he had had time to think of something beyond his own affairs. “I want to say thanks.” He got that out in a rush before he added the admission he must make: “I spoiled your plan to take Kitchell.”

Rennie’s dark eyes held his as they had always been able to do. Then Drew had the odd sensation that the two of them were all alone in a place not bound by space or time.

“Don’t say you’re sorry. If you did, I wouldn’t believe you. You made the move you had to. If it had been Oro out there—I would have done the same.”

Drew responded to that impulsively. “You’re generous, suh.”

His father’s black brows drew together in a slight frown. “Generous? No, that’s the truth. As for losing Kitchell—we may not have. Those who got away have Greyfeather, Nye, and others on their trail. And I do not think they will find such hunters easy to fool. Also, we have a prisoner....”

*Don Cazar’s* acceptance of their failure was so placid that Drew was led to make a wild guess.

“Not Kitchell himself!”

Rennie smiled. “No, we weren’t that lucky—you must have had the lion’s share of that commodity here today. We have a Mexican, name unknown. He was shot down while trying to pick up the rider Shiloh got rid of—who just might have been Kitchell. But this prisoner may be moved to tell us about the three who got away. If these wind storms keep up, they could powder over the trail and the boys will need help.”

The Mexican, his shoulder bandaged, was propped up against the saddle they had taken from Shiloh. He stared at them sullenly, his gaze finally centering on *Don Cazar* when they took places opposite him.

“Some of that coffee for him, Chino,” Rennie called. Herrera brought over a tin cup from the fire now blazing. As the Mexican took it awkwardly with his left hand, still watching Rennie glassily over the brim, the latter used fluent Spanish, only a word or two of which Drew understood.

The man grunted and then was assailed by Chino in a hotter flow of his native tongue, until Rennie silenced the vaquero’s outburst with a wave of hand and spoke again.

Drew sniffed the aroma of the bacon Donally was frying, his stomach protesting plaintively.

“What are they sayin’?” he whispered to Anse.



“Old Man pointed out nice an’ plain what th’ Mex’s in for, lessen he speaks up. This hombre, Rennie thinks maybe he don’t run regular with Kitchell—more’n likely he came up from th’ south, could be to guide th’ gang back there some place. Iffen th’ Mex can prove that, th’ Old Man promises to talk for him with th’ law. So far he ain’t said nothin’ much in answer.”

They ate. The prisoner’s round face expressed surprise when Rennie had him provided with an equal share. He sucked his greasy fingers avidly after he had wolfed down his portion. A moment later he asked a question of his own. Rennie replied, nodding vigorously, as if to make assent more emphatic. Anse translated.

“Th’ Mex wanted to know if th’ Old Man meant what he said ‘bout talkin’ up to th’ law. If so, he may loosen his jaw some. I’d say, if he’s a guide from down there, he wouldn’t be too set on coverin’ for Kitchell—not when that might mean gettin’ his own neck stretched. Yeah ... now he’s beginnin’ to run right over at th’ lip.”

The prisoner did loose a flood of words, Rennie and Chino listening intently, Donally coming to stand behind the others. Drew guessed by his changing expressions that the Anglo rider was as much at home in Spanish as Anse. The Kentuckian regretted his own ignorance; the few words he had picked up along the trail from Texas certainly were no help now.

The Mexican wiped his good hand up and down the front of his worn jacket, and then smoothed a patch of soil. On it he drew lines and explained each of them, much as Hilario Trinfan had done for the horse hunters days earlier.

“What’s he sayin’ now?” Drew demanded of Anse.

“That it’s true he was sent to guide Kitchell south. That train of hosses an’ loot was th’ gang’s prime pickin’s. Some of it was to grease their way in with this hombre’s *patrón*—don’t know who *he* is—some Mex general or such. Kitchell, he rode behind because he had waited for a gringo to meet him. They was makin’ up time when they heard th’ fight goin’ on in th’ pass. Kitchell headed back here to fill canteens. Th’ Mex was goin’ to guide ‘em south by another trail—one he knows. He’s layin’ it out for th’ Old Man now. It’s a pretty rough one; they’d have to take it slow. Could be we could catch up before Kitchell makes it—’specially since he don’t have this Mex leadin’ him now.”

When it was necessary Rennie could move fast. He was on his feet giving orders almost before Anse had finished the translation. Their party was to be split in two. Drew and Anse were to stay with the wounded Mexican and Shiloh, and prepare to defend the water hole if the outlaws made a second attempt to come in. The rest of them would ride for an already designated rendezvous point where they would meet the party sent to trace the fugitives.

“Why do I stay, suh?” Anse protested when *Don Cazar* had finished.

“You can tend that arm better on the ground than in the saddle.”

“Ain’t no hurt there any more.” Anse hurriedly pulled it from the sling. “Anyways, that ain’t m’ shootin’ hand, neither!” But one look at Hunt Rennie’s face reduced him to muttering.

Drew watched their preparations quietly. Then he gathered up two canteens and filled them at the water hole, went back to loop their carry straps over Hunt Rennie’s saddle horn. Anse had a bad arm, so it was right that he should not go chasing hell-for-leather over rough country. But Drew Rennie—he was left because he was useless in another way. He was a man who could not be depended upon, who had sprung their trap because he cared more for a horse than he did for the success of Rennie’s mission.

And in a way Hunt Rennie was perfectly just in that judgment. If it were all to do over again, Drew knew he would make exactly the same choice. Shiloh was his—about the only good

thing he had ever possessed, or might ever have in the future. If, in order to keep Shiloh, he had to give up what he knew now was a very vague dream—he would surrender the dream every time.

Although he knew that was the truth, the Kentuckian was desperately unhappy as he made a lengthy business of adjusting the canteens. About the worst words one could ever speak, or think, were “too late.” This was all too late—twenty years too late. They might have had something good together, he and Hunt Rennie. Now it was too late.

As Drew heard the crunch of boots on gravel close behind him, he swung around. “Full canteens,” he blurted out. And then, ashamed of his own confusion, he forced himself to look straight at his father. “Good luck, suh.”

“We’ll need it. I’m leaving you José—he’ll do some prowling. Wouldn’t do for you to be jumped by Apaches. If we don’t come back in three or four days and Shiloh’s able to travel, you take the Mexican and head back to the Stronghold—understand? I mean that.”

“Yes, suh.” Drew had lost his right to protest, lost it the instant he had betrayed their ambush. Now he turned quickly and hurried to where Shiloh stood. The last thing he wanted to see was Hunt Rennie ride away.

Anse kicked earth over the fire when they were gone. “No use showin’ smoke,” he remarked, and Drew readily agreed. The horses, with the exception of Shiloh, were hobbled and allowed the restricted freedom of the pocket-sized meadow running back from the water hole. Anse and Drew divided the night into two-hour watches.

“Don’t see as how they’d be fool enough to try chewin’ back on their trail again, though,” Anse commented.

“They need water. Accordin’ to what this guide of theirs says, they’ll need it doubly bad before they finish that road of his. They might just be crazy enough to try here—men have gotten away with tricks such as that before.”

“Drew.” Anse was only a shadow among shadows, a voice out of the dark now. “You made up your mind about what you’re goin’ to do when this is all over?”

“Pull out—California maybe. I don’t know.”

“Sure you don’t want to stay?”

“No!” Drew put explosive emphasis into his reply.

“A man can be too stubborn an’ stiff-necked for his own good—”

“A man has to do what he has to,” Drew snapped. “I’m turnin’ in. Give me th’ nudge when it’s time.”

He rolled in a blanket, settled himself with his Colt close to hand, and lay gazing up into the cloudy sky. What was the matter with him, anyway? All he had to do was stick to his decision. And that *was* the best one for him. Resolutely he closed his eyes and tried to will his mind a blank, himself into slumber.

“Drew—!”

Before his eyes were fairly open his hand was reaching for the Colt, only to meet a numbing blow on the wrist. The Kentuckian rolled in instinctive reaction and a second, body-jarring stroke caught him in the ribs. He was left gasping, still not fully aware of what had happened.

“All right, you—on your feet!” A hand hooked in the collar of his coat to jerk him up. Somehow Drew did find his feet and stood bent over, his hands to his bruised side, breathing in small painful gasps. A rib had either been broken in that assault, or it was cracked.

There were two—three—four figures moving in the moonlight. Then the one fronting him turned and he saw the face clearly. Shannon!

“Only three of ‘em—Benito an’ these two,” one of the others reported.

“How’s Benito?” There was authority in that inquiry, but it came from the one man who kept well back in the shadows.

“Got him a holed shoulder.”

“Able to ride?”

“Dunno, suh.”

“He’d better be. We need him to find Graverro. These two we don’t need.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Colonel. This here’s about th’ best cover we could git us now.” Shannon laughed. “Mister Drew Rennie, come outta Kentucky to find his pa—touchin’ story, ain’t it? Real touchin’—like somethin’ outta a book. Well, does his pa find us, his sonny boy’d be real handy, now wouldn’t he?”

“You have a point, Shannon. We’ll take him.”

“An’ th’ other one, Colonel, suh?”

Kitchell—if Kitchell that shadow was—came out into the moonlight. He wore the gray shell jacket of a Confederate cavalryman, and the light glinted on the cords of a field officer’s hat.

“Who are you, boy?” He faced to the left and Drew looked in the same direction.

Anse stood there, the barrel of a Colt pushed against him just above the belt line.

“Anson Kirby.”

Shannon laughed again. “‘Nother big man—says he rode with General Forrest!”

“That true, Kirby, you were one of General Forrest’s command?”

“It’s true,” Anse drawled. “Mean’s nothin’ now, th’ war’s long gone, hombre.”

“Maybe it’s over back east—not here! You stayed to the end, boy?”

“Yankees took me prisoner before that.”

“Sergeant Wayne!”

“Yes, suh?” Anse’s captor responded.

“Put him to sleep!”

## 18

Drew lunged and then reeled back as Shannon laid the barrel of his Colt alongside the Kentuckian's head. He was half dazed from the blow but he managed to get out his protest.

"You murderin' butcher!"

"Kirby ain't dead, he'll just have a sore head tomorrow," Kitchell returned, as the man he called Sergeant Wayne straightened up from the Texan's crumpled form. "And you—you keep a civil tongue in your head when addressing a superior officer. Shannon, no more of that!" The order stayed a second blow.

"Oughta shot him for real, suh."

"No. Not a man who rode with General Forrest." Kitchell hesitated and then added, "We'll be long gone before he wakes. Tie this one in the saddle if he can't hang on by himself. You may be right, Shannon, about him having his uses in the future."

"Say, Colonel, this here gray hoss, he's got hisself all hurted bad. Can't nohow go 'long with us. Want I should shoot 'im?" That whine came from the meadow where they had left the horses.

"No, leave him. Won't do Kirby any good and that's a fine horse—might just see him again some day. Sergeant, you fill all the canteens; take any supplies you find here. Then we'll move out."

Drew, his wrists corded to the saddle horn, both ankles lashed to the stirrups, swayed in the saddle as Shannon took the reins of his horse and led it along. The pain in his head and the agony in his side resulting from even the most shallow breaths, brought on a kind of red mist which shut off most of the surrounding night. He had no idea how the outlaws had managed to jump the camp. And who was the extra man with them now? Only three had escaped during the horse fight, but four rode in the present party. He could not think straight; it was all he could do to will himself to hold on and ride.

Drew was thirsty, so thirsty his tongue was a cottony mass in his mouth. The day was light and sunny now, and they were single-filing through a region of bright, colored rock wind-worn into pinnacles, spires, and mesas. There was no water, no green of living things—just rock and sun and the terrible need for a drink.

Maybe he moaned; Drew could not be sure. He saw the man riding ahead turn in the saddle. Blue eyes, the man had, with no honest life in them. Once before the Kentuckian had seen eyes such as those. It had been in a cabin—a cabin back in Tennessee in the dead of winter. A young bushwhacker wearing Union blue, with a murderer's eyes in his boyish face, had watched Drew with the same incurious glance which held nothing of humankind. Shannon; the bushwhacker—two of the same killer breed. But to recognize that no longer mattered. Nothing mattered save water....

His mount stopped. Drew looked dully at the ground. Then his attention shifted to the man standing beside his horse.

"Down with you, fella."

Gray jacket, torn and threadbare—yet gray. Drew frowned.

“Sergeant Rennie, Buford’s Scouts....” He tried to identify himself to this strange Confederate, but the words that got out were a thick mumble. Then, somehow he was on the ground and the man was holding a canteen to his mouth, dribbling blessed liquid over that choking cotton. Drew drank.

“Sergeant Rennie ... must report ... General Buford....” He was able to talk better now.

“Wot’s that he’s sayin’?”

“Somethin’ ‘bout some General Buford. Don’t know who *he* is.”

“Buford? Buford rode with Forrest.” Those words were spoken by a different voice, sharper, better educated.

Drew opened his eyes, and for the first time actually saw the men he had been traveling with. The officer, who was maybe in his mid-thirties, had a beard trimmed to a point and eyes half sunk in his head. And Shannon—he had a half-grin on his lips as he stared down, enjoying what he saw when he surveyed Drew. The one Kitchell called Sergeant Wayne was a big fellow, even though he was thinned down. He had a square sort of face—jaw too heavy for the rest of it. Then, Drew’s eyes came to the last man and stopped.

To the first three there was a uniformity; the remnants of military training still clung to them. But this shrunken figure with a wild gray beard, watery, bloodshot eyes, a matted thatch of hair on which a broken-rimmed hat perched, ragged and filthy clothing ...

“Not gonna haul th’ Mex much farther, you ain’t!” observed this scarecrow with a touch of relish in the relaying of bad news. “He’s outta his head now, gonna be clean outta his skin come sundown.”

“All right!” said Kitchell. “We’ll camp here ... in that shade.” His gesture indicated some point beyond Drew’s range of vision.

“They’re gonna be sniffin’ ‘long right behind us,” the sergeant said dubiously.

“You’re forgettin’ we’ve got us sonny boy here!” Shannon loomed over Drew. “He’ll buy us out.”

“Maybe from Rennie—not from them Yankee troopers.”

“I told you”—Shannon lost his grin—“th’ Yanks ain’t gonna come all th’ way down here! There’s too much pointin’ in th’ other direction. That is, if you was as good as you said you was, Lutterfield!”

The old man grinned in turn, widely set yellow tooth stubs showing ragged. “Ain’t never failed you yet, boy. Old Amos Lutterfield, he’s got him those wot believe wot he says like it was Holy Writ—he sure has! Them troopers’ll go poundin’ down th’ Sonora road huntin’ wot never was, till they drop men an’ hosses all along. Then Nahata an’ his bucks’ll tickle ‘em up a bit—an’ they’ll forgit there was anyone else t’ hunt.”

Drew lay in the position where they had dumped him, his hands still tied, the ropes on his ankles now knotted together. Had the season been high summer they would have baked in this rock slit, but it was still uncomfortably warm. He heard a low moaning and saw Kitchell and Lutterfield bending over the Mexican. It was plain that the wounded man had suffered from his enforced ride.

Some time later the Kentuckian was pulled into a sitting position. His hands loosened, he was allowed to feed himself, but the *carne* tasted like wood splinters when he chewed it.

“Not much like th’ Range?” Shannon asked him. “Don’t worry none—it won’t last long, Rennie, no, it won’t!”

“You did take my papers.”

“I sure did! You thought I was clean outta m’ senses back there in th’ Jacks when that fool Texan called out your name—didn’t you now? Well, I wasn’t an’ what he said sure made me want to know a little more—seein’ as how Hunt Rennie might well be m’ pa. He owed me a Pa, you know. M’ real pa was killed gittin’ him outta prison. I didn’t want no drifters cuttin’ in on what was rightly mine, in a manner of speakin’. So I just waited m’ chance to get at that belt of yours. Found what I wanted—an’ that sorta made up m’ mind.

“Colonel Kitchell here, he wanted me to go south with him. They have them a war goin’ on down there; a man can always git ahead in wartime does he like soldierin’. But I weren’t sure ‘bout goin’, till I found out as how I might jus’ be pushed out, anyway.”

“Why did you think that? Hunt Rennie’s always treated you as a real son, hasn’t he?”

“Like a real son? Like *his* idea of a son, you mean. Work hard—an’ havin’ books pushed at me. Always jawin’ about education an’ bein’ a gentleman! Do this, don’t do that—this’s right, that’s wrong. Bein’ soft with Injuns—Lord, I was sick of bein’ his kind of son when I went off with Howard. Rennie wasn’t even ready to fight th’ war proper—big man here, ‘fraid to try it where he wasn’t! Rightly he was sick of me, too, only his precious duty wouldn’t let him say so.

“But as long as he didn’t know ‘bout you, he’d try, an’ keep on tryin’. I had me a good place to hole up on th’ Range. With you there he might’n’t hold on to his patience. First off I thought I might settle you permanent, then you got took up by Bayliss.” Shannon laughed. “That sure was a switch! Captain thought you was Kitchell’s man, when he shoulda looked a little closer in a coupla other places.”

“But you were shot—by Kitchell’s men.”

“I was creased by th’ shotgun rider on th’ stage we tried to stop. Boys brought me in close to town an’ dumped me on th’ road—gave us a chance to make up another tale to fool Bayliss. Me, I’ve been ridin’ with Colonel Kitchell since ‘64. We come west from Kansas ‘long th’ end of that year. Th’ Colonel, he saw what might be done out here where it’s a long ride between sheriffs an’ th’ army hadda think ‘bout Injuns most of th’ time—what army there still was in th’ territory. Me an’ old man Lutterfield, we could help th’ Colonel better not ridin’ with him, but for him, as you might say.”

“And now you’re goin’ to Mexico?”

“In time, Rennie, in time. Th’ Colonel’s thinkin’ out some plans. *Don Cazar*, he was too lucky at th’ pass.”

“You’re not goin’ to get back those horses or mules—or what they were packin’,” Drew said.

“We’ll see, we’ll see.” Certainly Shannon’s confidence was in nowise shaken. “Th’ Colonel, he didn’t want to call in Nahata an’ his bucks—now maybe he’ll have to. What we need is a lay-up till we can make some good plans. An’ Benito, he’ll arrange that.”

“If he lives.” Drew closed his eyes wearily. His face was one bruised ache where Shannon’s blow had landed, and his side was constant pain.

“You’ll see,” Shannon promised. “We’ve got us a big ace in th’ hole—th’ Range boys don’t know as how I’m with Kitchell, not yet. That’s how we took you so easy back to th’ water hole. I jus’ rode up to José—got that there Pima listenin’ to me till Lutterfield sneaked up an’

put him outta business. Lutterfield, he don't look much, but he was runnin' in this country with th' Injuns thirty years ago. He's got th' Apaches lissenin' to him good. An' I can talk us through th' posses—maybe even into th' Stronghold later.”

“You're a clever man, Shannon,” Drew commented dryly.

“An' you're too free with that lip!” Drew's head rocked under a stinging slap which made fiery wheels of pain roll in his head. He must have been sent very close to the edge of unconsciousness for a moment or two.

“That's 'nough, Johnny,” said Sergeant Wayne. “Th' Colonel says to keep him ready to move. You battin' him 'round like that don't do no good.”

So Topham had been right—Johnny Shannon was Kitchell's man. Not that it mattered now. Even if, by some miracle, Drew could get away from this pack of wolves, he had no idea of where he was or which way to go. One man alone and lost in this country faced death as certain as the bullet Johnny Shannon had already loaded for him. There was only one thing—he was still alive, and as long as a man lived he had hope.

Nye and Greyfeather had trailed this bunch from the water hole. Perhaps the wind and sand storms had muddled the tracks, but Drew still had faith in the Pima. And Rennie's party had followed with the knowledge of the Mexican's bolt hole to the south. Why, right now they could have circled ahead—could be waiting for Kitchell again as they had at the pass. An attack could give him a thin chance of escape. He had best keep his mouth shut and not provoke Shannon, maybe feign being more helpless than he was.

The outlaws had difficulty in getting the Mexican on his horse when they were ready to move on in the evening. Drew, seeing the man's swollen face, his half-closed, set eyes, thought he was in high fever, probably no longer conscious. Kitchell ought to have sense enough to know Benito might not last out the night. But it was plain they were now pushed for time.

They had been on the way for a while before Drew noticed that Lutterfield was not with them. His reappearance was far more dramatic than his going. A horse clattered up from behind at a pace not in keeping with the rough footing, and the rider drew level with Kitchell.

“Soldiers comin', Colonel. Got 'em a couple o' them Pima Scouts sniffin' th' trail an' some o' Rennie's men with 'em, too!”

“It ain't true!” Shannon's protest was loud.

“I seed em—bright an' clear—mos' up to where we stopped last. Iffen you wants to sit 'round waitin' for 'em, do it! I'm clearin' out—ain't nobody can say Amos Lutterfield was here.”

“Nobody but us,” Shannon said coldly.

“Lutterfield!”

Even Drew's head came around at that. The moonlight was silver bright on the barrel of the Colt in Kitchell's grasp. “Sergeant, suppose you take precautions to insure the continued company of this man. I don't intend, Lutterfield, to let you curry favor by pointing out our trail to the army. I'd answer your proposed desertion as it deserves—with a bullet—but a body on our trail would provide an excellent signpost for any pursuers.”

The rope which had been coiled on Wayne's saddle swung out in a perfect loop and tightened about Lutterfield, pinning his arms to his sides. His protests and roars of anger went unheeded and he rode on as much a prisoner as Drew.

“Move out.” Kitchell motioned with the Colt. “Those two peaks ahead—according to Benito, the cut we want is between them. Across that we’re free. The army can’t follow us into Mexico.”

But Kitchell still kept to a cautious pace. The risk of losing a mount was one he dared not run. Drew debated the idea of booting his own horse from their line of march and trying to ride for it. He need only hide out and wait for the troopers to pick him up. If he had had hands free and been able to move in the saddle to dodge bullets, he might have tried it.

The night wore on and Drew was driven to admiring the outlaws’ nerve. Kitchell did not hurry; in fact he followed the old cavalry custom of resting mounts at regular intervals, seeing that each of the weary horses had nostrils and mouth wiped out with a dampened cloth. At the third halt he allowed them a drink of water before a smaller portion was given the men. Whatever else the outlaw might be, he was an experienced field commander.

They had the peaks looming above them when Benito gave a gurgling gasp and stiffened, tall in the saddle, before he looped into a limp, dangling bundle of a man. Kitchell called a halt. He dismounted to examine the Mexican before he beckoned to Wayne.

“He’s dead. We’ll need his horse. Put him down behind those rocks over there, Sergeant.”

“You know where we’re goin’, suh?” Shannon asked.

“Enough to get us across the border. We can take cover there, make some other arrangements. Benito’s *patrón* would not welcome us with empty pockets. Hurry, Sergeant!”

“I only got two hands, suh.” Wayne had freed the body of the Mexican but was having trouble dragging it into the appointed hiding place.

“You help him, Shannon. We have no time to waste.”

“What about him?” Shannon’s thumb indicated Drew.

“I don’t see how he can get away. Hurry up!”

Johnny dismounted with visible reluctance, but not before he blasted Drew’s hopes by looping the reins of the captive’s horse around his own saddle horn. And in addition Kitchell stood there with drawn gun. They had disposed of the body and Johnny was back when a sudden command boomed out of the air.

“Freeze!”

Shannon leaped, putting his horse between him and the open. He had the reins of Drew’s mount in his hand. Kitchell went into a half crouch, and was startled into snapping a shot in the general direction of the voice.

Drew sat statue still. It was only too easy in this tricky light, bright though the moon was, to seem one of the men those ahead were hunting. He had no desire to stop a bullet now. But Johnny had ideas of his own. Under his direction Drew’s horse broke to the left. There were shots and Drew flattened himself as best he could on the saddle horn, but not before he saw Kitchell spin around in a crazy dance and fall.

“All right, all right!” Shannon’s voice was broken, ragged, almost as if he were sobbing. “You ain’t got me yet—not by a sight, you ain’t!” A knife flashed, cutting the ties which kept Drew’s left boot to the stirrup. The Kentuckian was dragged down and held while the knife sliced again. Two more shots—then silence. Drew lay face to earth. The fall from the saddle had brought him down on his injured side, and he was in too great pain to take much interest in his surroundings.



Then he was dragged, pulled over on his back.

“I got Drew Rennie here.” The call was one of desperation. “Yeah, hear that? Drew Rennie—th’ Old Man’s son.... I read them letters he had—it’s th’ truth! You come t’ take me an’ he gits a knife clean across his throat. I want me a hoss, water, an’ an open road south. Do I git ‘em—or does Mister High an’ Mighty Rennie git him a son who ain’t speakin’ no more?”

“Johnny? Is that you, Johnny?”

“It sure is! Me, Johnny Shannon! An’ I’m ridin’ outta here free’n clear or else I’ll do what I said. I mean that, Rennie! I surely do mean it. You lose me an’ you git your real son—good bargain, ain’t it?”

“You won’t ride free for long, Johnny. You know that.”

“I can have me a pretty good try, Rennie. This here’s my country an’ I know it well—better’n any but your men. Give me your word an’ I’ll go.”

Drew tried to fight back the darkness which was closing in, a dark stronger than mere night shadows.

“Give him what he wants.” The words echoed hollowly.

Shannon drew a deep breath. He laughed softly. And Drew made a great effort. He could see the bulk of the other’s body poised between him and an opening between the rocks which must give on the pocket in which the outlaws had been surprised. Johnny was set like a runner ready on the mark.

The Kentuckian could hear the scrape of horses’ hoofs on stone. They must be bringing out a mount, keeping Hunt’s part of the bargain. Only, Drew suddenly knew, Johnny was going to keep him. He saw the gun hand shift against the rock—Johnny was taking aim into the pocket. Why? By trusting to Rennie’s word he would have a slim chance, so why spoil it by some treachery?

“All right, Johnny, it’s ready for you.”

“Now you git them hands up, Rennie. Sorta guessed you’d come yourself. I’m gittin’ out, all right. Do I take you along there ain’t goin’ to be no trailin’, none ‘tall—do they want *Don Cazar* to keep on breathing regular. Git them hands up, high!”

With all the force he could summon Drew kicked at Johnny’s crouching body. Shannon cried out—there was a shot. Then Johnny cried again, this time with a choke cutting off the word as he arched convulsively against the boulder. In the half light the arrow projecting from between his shoulder blades stood out with unnatural clarity.

Arrow? Drew’s wits worked slowly. The arrow must have come from one of the Pimas—Rennie had been covered, after all. So he had not believed too much in Johnny’s promises....

“You there, kid?” Someone came through the rock gap. “Hey—he’s here all right, but he’s hurt!” Nye’s grasp on him brought the pain in Drew’s side to an agony he could no longer stand. He was crushed down into darkness.

“Ribs are cracked, not broken—that’s something to be thankful for. All right, you can let him down now. Give me that pad and some water; I want to see how much damage there is here.”

Drew tried to turn his head away from the touch on his swollen cheek and jaw, but he was held steady to endure it.

“Best we can do for the present. You can leave the rest to me, Nye.”

Drew opened his eyes. There was a fire near-by, but the flickering of the flames concealed more than they revealed of the face above him. He found the words to say rather than ask:

“You knew ... before Johnny told ... you knew....”

“Teodoro told me—yesterday.”

“I didn’t lie. Johnny took the papers.”

“He admitted it at the last. But why, why didn’t you come to me?”

Put muddled feelings into words, attempt to explain what he did not fully understand himself? It was hard even to try, but you always faced up to the hard things.

“Wanted to know ... if it was right ... for both of us ... had to know that.”

“If you’d be welcome—that it? Well, what did you decide?”

What had he decided hours, days ago?

“Too late....” But somehow that came out differently than he intended, as a question rather than a statement.

“No.” The answer was uttered flatly, in a voice you did not argue with. “Suppose we begin all over again. You willing to try?”

“Better say—are *you*, suh?” Drew had whirling memories of all that had gone wrong since he had tried things his way. Then he saw a smile on his father’s face, bringing him in—in where? To what? Suddenly he was eager to find out.

“Took the long way around to get home, didn’t you?” Hunt Rennie asked softly. “I think we can make it worth the effort. Now, suppose you try some sleep—you’ve a pair of cracked ribs which’ll have to be favored for a while. I think you’ve been too knocked about lately to make good sense. There’ll be plenty of time.”

Plenty of time.... Drew blinked. “Yes, suh.” Obediently he shut his eyes. A blanket was pulled up, tucked in about him. For a moment a warm hand rested protectingly on his shoulder. And that reassuring pressure carried over with him into sleep, as if what he had long sought without recognizing was his, never to be lost again.

## The Gifts of Asti

*She was the guardian of the worlds, but HER world was dead.*

Even here, on the black terrace before the forgotten mountain retreat of Asti, it was possible to smell the dank stench of burning Memphir, to imagine that the dawn wind bore upward from the pillaged city the faint tortured cries of those whom the barbarians of Klem hunted to their prolonged death. Indeed it was time to leave—

Varta, last of the virgin Maidens of Asti, shivered. The scaled and wattled creature who crouched beside her thigh turned his reptilian head so that golden eyes met the aquamarine ones set slantingly at a faintly provocative angle in her smooth ivory face.

“We go—?”

She nodded in answer to that unvoiced question Lur had sent into her brain, and turned toward the dark cavern which was the mouth of Asti’s last dwelling place. Once, more than a thousand years before when the walls of Memphir were young, Asti had lived among men below. But in the richness and softness which was trading Memphir, empire of empires, Asti found no place. So He and those who served Him had withdrawn to this mountain outcrop. And she, Varta, was the last, the very last to bow knee at Asti’s shrine and raise her voice in the dawn hymn—for Lur, as were all his race, was mute.

Even the loot of Memphir would not sate the shaggy headed warriors who had stormed her gates this day. The stairway to Asti’s Temple was plain enough to see and there would be those to essay the steep climb hoping to find a treasure which did not exist. For Asti was an austere God, delighting in plain walls and bare altars. His last priest had lain in the grave niches these three years, there would be none to hold that gate against intruders.

Varta passed between tall, uncarved pillars, Lur padding beside her, his spine mane erect, the talons on his forefeet clicking on the stone in steady rhythm. So they came into the innermost shrine of Asti and there Varta made graceful obeisance to the great cowed and robed figure which sat enthroned, its hidden eyes focused upon its own outstretched hand.

And above the flattened palm of that wide hand hung suspended in space the round orange-red sun ball which was twin to the sun that lighted Erb. Around the miniature sun swung in their orbits the four worlds of the system, each obeying the laws of space, even as did the planets they represented.

“Memphir has fallen,” Varta’s voice sounded rusty in her own ears. She had spoken so seldom during the last lonely months. “Evil has risen to overwhelm our world, even as it was prophesied in Your Revelations, O, Ruler of Worlds and Maker of Destiny. Therefore, obeying the order given of old, I would depart from this, Thy house. Suffer me now to fulfill the Law—”

Three times she prostrated her slim body on the stones at the foot of Asti’s judgment chair. Then she arose and, with the confidence of a child in its father, she laid her hand palm upward upon the outstretched hand of Asti. Beneath her flesh the stone was not cold and hard, but seemed to have an inner heat, even as might a human hand. For a long moment she stood so and then she raised her hand slowly, carefully, as if within its slight hollow she cupped something precious.

And, as she drew her hand away from the grasp of Asti, the tiny sun and its planets followed, spinning now above her palm as they had above the statue’s. But out of the cowed figure

some virtue had departed with the going of the miniature solar system; it was now but a carving of stone. And Varta did not look at it again as she passed behind its bulk to seek a certain place in the temple wall, known to her from much reading of the old records.

Having found the stone she sought, she moved her hand in a certain pattern before it so that the faint radiance streaming from the tiny sun, gleamed on the grayness of the wall. There was a grating, as from metal long unused, and a block fell back, opening a narrow door to them.

Before she stepped within, the priestess lifted her hand above her head and when she withdrew it, the sun and planets remained to form a diadem just above the intricate braiding of her dull red hair. As she moved into the secret way, the five orbs swung with her, and in the darkness there the sun glowed richly, sending out a light to guide their feet.

They were at the top of a stairway and the hollow clang of the stone as it moved back into place behind them echoed through a gulf which seemed endless. But that too was as the chronicles had said and Varta knew no fear.

How long they journeyed down into the maw of the mountain and, beyond that, into the womb of Erb itself, Varta never knew. But, when feet were weary and she knew the bite of real hunger, they came into a passageway which ended in a room hollowed of solid rock. And there, preserved in the chest in which men born in the youth of Memphir had laid them, Varta found that which would keep her safe on the path she must take. She put aside the fine silks, the jeweled cincture, which had been the badge of Asti's service and drew on over her naked body a suit of scaled skin, gemmed and glistening in the rays of the small sun. There was a hood to cover the entire head, taloned gloves for the hands, webbed, clawed coverings for the feet—as if the skin of a giant, man-like lizard had been tanned and fashioned into this suit. And Varta suspected that that might be so—the world of Erb had not always been held by the human-kind alone.

There were supplies here too, lying untouched in ageless containers within a lizard-skin pouch. Varta touched her tongue without fear to a powdered restorative, sharing it with Lur, whose own mailed skin would protect him through the dangers to come.

She folded the regalia she had stripped off and laid it in the chest, smoothing it regretfully before she dropped the lid upon its shimmering color. Never again would Asti's servant wear the soft stuff of His Livery. But she was resolute enough when she picked up the food pouch and strode forward, passing out of the robing chamber into a narrow way which was a natural fault in the rock unsmoothed by the tools of man.

But when this rocky road ended upon the lip of a gorge, Varta hesitated, plucking at the throat latch of her hood-like helmet. Through the unclouded crystal of its eye-holes she could see the sprouts of yellow vapor which puffed from crannies in the rock wall down which she must climb. If the records of the Temple spoke true, these curls of gas were death to all lunged creatures of the upper world. She could only trust that the cunning of the scaled hood would not fail her.

The long talons fitted to the finger tips of the gloves, the claws of the webbed foot coverings clamped fast to every hand and foot hold, but the way down was long and she caught a message of weariness from Lur before they reached the piled rocks at the foot of the cliff. The puffs of steamy gas had become a fog through which they groped their way slowly, following a trace of path along the base of the cliff.

Time did not exist in the underworld of Erb. Varta did not know whether it was still today, or whether she had passed into tomorrow when they came to a cross roads. She felt Lur press against her, forcing her back against a rock.

“There is a thing coming—” his message was clear.

And in a moment she too saw a dark hulk nosing through the vapor. It moved slowly, seeming to balance at each step as if travel was a painful act. But it bore steadily to the meeting of the two paths.

“It is no enemy—” But she did not need that reassurance from Lur. Unearthly as the thing looked it had no menace.

With a last twist of ungainly body the creature squatted on a rock and clawed the clumsy covering it wore about its bone-thin shoulders and domed-skull head. The visage it revealed was long and gray, with dark pits for eyes and a gaping, fang-studded, lipless mouth.

“Who are you who dare to tread the forgotten ways and rouse from slumber the Guardian of the Chasms?”

The question was a shrill whine in her brain, her hands half arose to cover her ears—

“I am Varta, Maiden of Asti. Memphir has fallen to the barbarians of the Outer Lands and now I go, as Asti once ordered—.”

The Guardian considered her answer gravely. In one skeleton claw it fumbled a rod and with this it now traced certain symbols in the dust before Varta’s webbed feet. When it had done, the girl stooped and altered two of the lines with a swift stroke from one of her talons. The creature of the Chasm nodded its misshapen head.

“Asti does not rule here. But long, and long, and long ago there was a pact made with us in His Name. Pass free from us, woman of the Light. There are two paths before you—.”

The Guardian paused for so long that Varta dared to prompt it.

“Where do they lead, Guardian of the Dark?”

“This will take you down into my country,” it jerked the rod to the right. “And that way is death for creatures from the surface world. The other—in our old legends it is said to bring a traveler out into the upper world. Of the truth of that I have no proof.”

“But that one I must take,” she made slight obeisance to the huddle of bones and dank cloak on the rock and it inclined its head in grave courtesy.

With Lur pushing a little ahead, she took the road which ran straight into the flume-veiled darkness. Nor did she turn to look again at the Thing from the Chasm world.

They began to climb again, across slimed rock where there were evil trails of other things which lived in this haunted darkness. But the sun of Asti lighted their way and perhaps some virtue in the rays from it kept away the makers of such trails.

When they pulled themselves up onto a wide ledge the talons on Varta’s gloves were worn to splintered stubs and there was a bright girdle of pain about her aching body. Lur lay panting beside her, his red-forked tongue protruding from his foam ringed mouth.

“We walk again the ways of men,” Lur was the first to note the tool marks on the stone where they lay. “By the Will of Asti, we may win out of this maze after all.”

Since there were no signs of the deadly steam Varta dared to push off her hood and share with her companion the sustaining power she carried in her pouch. There was a freshness to the air they breathed, damp and cold though it was, which hinted of the upper world.

The ledge sloped upwards, at a steep angle at first, and then more gently. Lur slipped past her and thrust head and shoulders through a break in the rock. Grasping his neck spines she allowed him to pull her through that narrow slit into the soft blackness of a surface night. They tumbled down together, Varta's head pillowed on Lur's smooth side, and so slept as the sun and worlds of Asti whirled protectingly above them.

A whirl of wings in the air above her head awakened Varta. One of the small, jewel bright flying lizard creatures of the deep jungle poised and dipped to investigate more closely the worlds of Asti. But at Varta's upflung arm it uttered a rasping cry and planed down into the mass of vegetation below. By the glint of sunlight on the stone around them the day was already well advanced. Varta tugged at Lur's mane until he roused.

There was a regularity to the rocks piled about their sleeping place which hinted that they had lain among the ruins left by man. But of this side of the mountains both were ignorant, for Memphir's rule had not run here.

"Many dead things in times past," Lur's scarlet nostril pits were extended to their widest. "But that was long ago. This land is no longer held by men."

Varta laughed cheerfully. "If here there are no men, then there will rise no barbarian hordes to dispute our rule. Asti has led us to safety. Let us see more of the land He gives us."

There was a road leading down from the ruins, a road still to be followed in spite of the lash of landslip and the crack of time. And it brought them into a cup of green fertility where the lavishness of Asti's sowing was unchecked by man. Varta seized eagerly upon globes of blood red fruit which she recognized as delicacies which had been cultivated in the Temple gardens, while Lur went hunting into the fringes of the jungle, there dining on prey so easily caught as to be judged devoid of fear.

The jungle choked highway curved and they were suddenly fronted by a desert of sere desolation, a desert floored by glassy slag which sent back the sun beams in a furnace glare. Varta shaded her eyes and tried to see the end of this, but, if there was a distant rim of green beyond, the heat distortions in the air concealed it.

Lur put out a front paw to test the slag but withdrew it instantly.

"It cooks the flesh, we can not walk here," was his verdict.

Varta pointed with her chin to the left where, some distance away, the mountain wall paralleled their course.

"Then let us keep to the jungle over there and see if it does not bring around to the far side. But what made this—?" She leaned out over the glassy stuff, not daring to touch the slick surface.

"War." Lur's tongue shot out to impale a questing beetle. "These forgotten people fought with fearsome weapons."

"But what weapon could do this? Memphir knew not such—."

"Memphir was old. But mayhap there were those who raised cities on Erb before the first hut of Memphir squatted on tidal mud. Men forget knowledge in time. Even in Memphir the lords of the last days forgot the wisdom of their earlier sages—they fell before the barbarians easily enough."

“If ever men had wisdom to produce this—it was not of Asti’s giving,” she edged away from the glare. “Let us go.”

But now they had to fight their way through jungle and it was hard—until they reached a ridge of rock running out from the mountain as a tongue thrust into the blasted valley. And along this they picked their slow way.

“There is water near—,” Lur’s thought answered the girl’s desire. She licked dry lips longingly. “This way—,” her companion’s sudden turn was to the left and Varta was quick to follow him down a slide of rock.

Lur’s instinct was right, as it ever was. There was water before them, a small lake of it. But even as he dipped his fanged muzzle toward that inviting surface, Lur’s spined head jerked erect again. Varta snatched back the hand she had put out, staring at Lur’s strange actions. His nostrils expanded to their widest, his long neck outstretched, he was swinging his head back and forth across the limpid shallows.

“What is it—?”

“This is no water such as we know,” the scaled one answered flatly. “It has life within it.”

Varta laughed. “Fish, water snakes, your own distant kin, Lur. It is the scent of them which you catch—”

“No. It is the water itself which lives—and yet does not live—” His thought trailed away from her as he struggled with some problem. No human brain could follow his unless he willed it so.

Varta squatted back on her heels and began to look at the water and then at the banks with more care. For the first time she noted the odd patches of brilliant color which floated just below the surface of the liquid. Blue, green, yellow, crimson, they drifted slowly with the tiny waves which lapped the shore. But they were not alive, she was almost sure of that, they appeared more a part of the water itself.

Watching the voyage of one patch of green she caught sight of the branch. It was a drooping shoot of the turbi, the same tree vine which produced the fruit she had relished less than an hour before. Above the water dangled a cluster of the fruit, dead ripe with the sweet pulp stretching its skin. But below the surface of the water—

Varta’s breath hissed between her teeth and Lur’s head snapped around as he caught her thought.

The branch below the water bore a perfect circle of green flowers close to its tip, the flowers which the turbi had borne naturally seven months before and which should long ago have turned into just such sweetness as hung above.

With Lur at her heels the girl edged around to pull cautiously at the branch. It yielded at once to her touch, swinging its tip out of the lake. She sniffed—there was a languid perfume in the air, the perfume of the blooming turbi. She examined the flowers closely, to all appearances they were perfect and natural.

“It preserves,” Lur settled back on his haunches and waved one front paw at the quiet water. “What goes into it remains as it was just at the moment of entrance.”

“But if this is seven months old—”

“It may be seven years old,” corrected Lur. “How can you tell when that branch first dipped into the lake? Yet the flowers do not fade even when withdrawn from the water. This is indeed a mystery!”

“Of which I would know more!” Varta dropped the turbi and started on around the edge of the lake.

Twice more they found similar evidence of preservation in flower or leaf, wherever it was covered by the opaline water.

The lake itself was a long and narrow slash with one end cutting into the desert of glass while the other wet the foot of the mountain. And it was there, on the slope of the mountain that they found the greatest wonder of all, Lur scenting it before they sighted the remains among the stones.

“Man made,” he cautioned, “but very, very old.”

And truly the wreckage they came upon must have been old, perhaps even older than Memphir. For the part which rested above the water was almost gone, rusty red stains on the rocks outlining where it had lain. But under water was a smooth silver hull, shining and untouched by the years. Varta laid her hand upon a ruddy scrap between two rocks and it became a drift of powdery dust. And yet—there a few feet below was strong metal!

Lur padded along the scrap of shore surveying the thing.

“It was a machine in which men traveled,” his thoughts arose to her. “But they were not as the men of Memphir. Perhaps not even as the sons of Erb—”

“Not as the sons of Erb!” her astonishment broke into open speech.

Lur’s neck twisted as he looked up at her. “Did the men of Erb, even in the old chronicles fight with weapons such as would make a desert of glass? There are other worlds than Erb, mayhap this strange thing was a sky ship from such a world. All things are possible by the Will of Asti.”

Varta nodded. “All things are possible by the Will of Asti,” she repeated. “But, Lur,” her eyes were round with wonder, “perhaps it is Asti’s Will which brought us here to find this marvel! Perhaps He has some use for us and it!”

“At least we may discover what lies within it,” Lur had his own share of curiosity.

“How? The two of us can not draw that out of the water!”

“No, but we can enter into it!”

Varta fingered the folds of the hood on her shoulders. She knew what Lur meant, the suit which had protected her in the underworld was impervious to everything outside its surface—or to every substance its makers knew—just as Lur’s own hide made his flesh impenetrable. But the fashioners of her suit had probably never known of the living lake and what if she had no defense against the strange properties of the water?

She leaned back against a rock. Overhead the worlds and sun of Asti still traveled their appointed paths. The worlds of Asti! If it was His Will which had brought them here, then Asti’s power would wrap her round with safety. By His Will she had come out of Memphir over ways no human of Erb had ever trod before. Could she doubt that His Protection was with her now?

It took only a moment to make secure the webbed shoes, to pull on and fasten the hood, to tighten the buckles of her gloves. Then she crept forward, shuddering as the water rose about her ankles. But Lur pushed on before her, his head disappearing fearlessly under the surface as he crawled through the jagged opening in the ship below.



Smashed engines which had no meaning in her eyes occupied most of the broken section of the wreck. None of the metal showed any deterioration beyond that which had occurred at the time of the crash. Under her exploring hands it was firm and whole.

Lur was pulling at a small door half hidden by a mass of twisted wires and plates and, just as Varta crawled around this obstacle to join him, the barrier gave way allowing them to squeeze through into what had once been the living quarters of the ship.

Varta recognized seats, a table, and other bits of strictly utilitarian furniture. But of those who had once been at home there, there remained no trace. Lur, having given one glance to the furnishings, was prowling about the far end of the cabin uncertainly, and now he voiced his uneasiness.

“There is something beyond, something which once had life—”

Varta crowded up to him. To her eyes the wall seemed without line of an opening, and yet Lur was running his broad front paws over it carefully, now and then throwing his weight against the smooth surface.

“There is no door—” she pointed out doubtfully.

“No door—ah—here—” Lur unsheathed formidable fighting claws to their full length for perhaps the first time in his temple-sheltered life, and endeavored to work them into a small crevice. The muscles of his forelegs and quarters stood out in sharp relief under his scales, his fangs were bare as his lips snapped back with effort.

Something gave, a thin black line appeared to mark the edges of a door. Then time, or Lur’s strength, broke the ancient locking mechanism. The door gave so suddenly that they were both sent hurtling backward and Lur’s breath burst from him in a huge bubble.

The sealed compartment was hardly more than a cupboard but it was full. Spread-eagled against the wall was a four-limbed creature whose form was so smothered in a bulky suit that Varta could only guess that it was akin in shape to her own. Hoops of metal locked it firmly to the wall, but the head had fallen forward so that the face plate in the helmet was hidden.

Slowly the girl breasted the water which filled the cabin and reached her hands toward the bowed helmet of the prisoner. Gingerly, her blunted talons scraping across metal, she pulled it up to her eye-level.

The eyes of that which stood within the suit were closed, as if in sleep, but there was a warm, healthy tint to the bronze skin, so different in shade to her own pallid coloring. For the rest, the prisoner had the two eyes, the centered nose, the properly shaped mouth which were common to the men of Erb. Hair grew on his head, black and thick and there was a faint shadow of beard on his jaw line.

“This is a man—” her thought reached Lur.

“Why not? Did you expect a serpent? It is a pity he is dead—”

Varta felt a rich warm tide rising in her throat to answer that teasing half question. There were times when Lur’s thought reading was annoying, He had risen to his hind legs so that he too could look into the shell which held their find.

“Yes, a pity,” he repeated. “But—”

A vision of the turbi flowers swept through her mind. Had Lur suggested it, or had that wild thought been hers alone? Only this ship was so old—so very old!

Lur's red tongue flicked. "It can do no harm to try—" he suggested slyly and set his claws into the hoop holding the captive's right wrist, testing its strength.

"But the metal on the shore, it crumpled into powder at my touch—" she protested. "What if we carry him out only to have—to have—" Her mind shuddered away from the picture which followed.

"Did the turbi blossom fade when pulled out?" countered Lur. "There is a secret to these fastenings—" He pulled and pried impatiently.

Varta tried to help but even their united strength was useless against the force which held the loops in place. Breathless the girl slumped back against the wall of the cabin while Lur settled down on his haunches. One of the odd patches of color drifted by, its vivid scarlet like a jewel spiraling lazily upward. Varta's eyes followed its drift and so were guided to what she had forgotten, the worlds of Asti.

"Asti!"

Lur was looking up too.

"The power of Asti!"

Varta's hand went up, rested for a long moment under the sun and then drew it down, carefully, slowly, as she had in Memphir's temple. Then she stepped towards the captive. Within her hood a beaded line of moisture outlined her lips, a pulse thundered on her temple. This was a fearsome thing to try.

She held the sun on a line with one of the wrist bonds, She must avoid the flesh it imprisoned, for Asti's power could kill.

From the sun there shot an orange-red beam to strike full upon the metal. A thin line of red crept across the smooth hoop, crept and widened. Varta raised her hand, sending the sun spinning up and Lur's claws pulled on the metal. It broke like rotten wood in his grasp.

The girl gave a little gasp of half-terrified delight. Then the old legends were true! As Asti's priestess she controlled powers too great to guess. Swiftly she loosed the other hoops and restored the sun and worlds to their place over her head as the captive slumped across the threshold of his cell.

Tugging and straining they brought him out of the broken ship into the sunlight of Erb. Varta threw back her hood and breathed deeply of the air which was not manufactured by the wizardry of the lizard skin and Lur sat panting, his nostril flaps open. It was he who spied the spring on the mountain side above, a spring of water uncontaminated by the strange life of the lake. They both dragged themselves there to drink deeply.

Varta returned to the lake shore reluctantly. Within her heart she believed that the man they had brought from the ship was truly dead. Lur might hold out the promise of the flowers, but this was a man and he had lain in the water for countless ages—

So she went with lagging steps, to find Lur busy. He had solved the mystery of the space suit and had stripped it from the unknown. Now his clawed paw rested lightly on the bared chest and he turned to Varta eagerly.

"There is life—"

Hardly daring to believe that, she dropped down beside Lur and touched their prize. Lur was right, the flesh was warm and she had caught the faint rhythm of shallow breath. Half remembering old tales, she put her hands on the arch of the lower ribs and began to aid that rhythm. The breaths were deeper—

Then the man half turned, his arm moved. Varta and Lur drew back. For the first time the girl probed gently the sleeping mind before her—even as she had read the minds of those few of Memphir who had ascended to the temple precincts in the last days.

Much of what she read now was confused or so alien to Erb that it had no meaning for her. But she saw a great city plunged into flaming death in an instant and felt the horror and remorse of the man at her feet because of his own part in that act, the horror and remorse which had led him to open rebellion and so to his imprisonment. There was a last dark and frightening memory of a door closing on light and hope—

The space man moaned softly and hunched his shoulders as if he struggled vainly to tear loose from bonds.

“He thinks that he is still prisoner,” observed Lur. “For him life begins at the very point it ended—even as it did for the turbi flowers. See—now he awakens.”

The eyelids rose slowly, as if the man hated to see what he must look upon. Then, as he sighted Varta and Lur, his eyes went wide. He pulled himself up and looked dazedly around, striking out wildly with his fists. Catching sight of the clumsy suit Lur had taken from him he pulled at it, looking at the two before him as if he feared some attack.

Varta turned to Lur for help. She might read minds and use the wordless speech of Lur. But his people knew the art of such communication long before the first priest of Asti had stumbled upon their secret. Let Lur now quiet this outlander.

Delicately Lur sought a way into the other’s mind, twisting down paths of thought strange to him. Even Varta could not follow the subtle waves sent forth in the quick examination and reconnoitering, nor could she understand all of the conversation which resulted. For the man from the ancient ship answered in speech aloud, sharp harsh sounds of no meaning. It was only after repeated instruction from Lur that he began to frame his messages in his mind, clumsily and disconnectedly.

Pictures of another world, another solar system, began to grow more clear as the space man became more at home in the new way of communication. He was one of a race who had come to Erb from beyond the stars and discovered it a world without human life: So they had established colonies and built great cities—far different from Memphir—and had lived in peace for centuries of their own time.

Then on the faraway planet of their birth there had begun a great war, a war which brought flaming death to all that world. The survivors of a last battle in outer space had fled to the colonies on Erb. But among this handful were men driven mad by the death of their world, and these had blasted the cities of Erb, saying that their kind must be wiped out.

The man they had rescued had turned against one such maddened leader and had been imprisoned just before an attack upon the largest of the colony’s cities. After that he remembered nothing.

Varta stopped trying to follow the conversation—Lur was only explaining now how they had found the space man and brought him out of the wrecked ship. No human on Erb, this one had said, and yet were there not her own people, the ones who had built Memphir? And what of the barbarians, who, ruthless and cruel as they seemed by the standards of Memphir, were indeed men? Whence had they come then, the men of Memphir and the ancestors of the barbarian hordes? Her hands touched the scaled skin of the suit she still wore and then rubbed across her own smooth flesh. Could one have come from the other, was she of the blood and heritage of Lur?

“Not so!” Lur’s mind, as quick as his flickering tongue, had caught that panic-born thought. “You are of the blood of this space wanderer. Men from the riven colonies must have escaped to safety. Look at this man, is he not like the men of Memphir—as they were in the olden days of the city’s greatness?”

The stranger was tall, taller than the men of Memphir and there was a certain hardness about him which those city dwellers in ease had never displayed. But Lur must be right, this was a man of her race. She smiled in sudden relief and he answered that smile. Lur’s soft laughter rang in both their heads.

“Asti in His Infinite Wisdom can see through Centuries. Memphir has fallen because of its softness and the evildoing of its people and the barbarians will now have their way with the lands of the north. But to me it appears that Asti is not yet done with the pattern He was weaving there. To each of you He granted a second life. Do not disdain the Gifts of Asti, Daughter of Erb!”

Again Varta felt the warm tide of blood rise in her cheeks. But she no longer smiled. Instead she regarded the outlander speculatively.

Not even a Maiden of the Temple could withstand the commands of the All Highest. Gifts from the Hand of Asti dared not be thrown away.

Above the puzzlement of the stranger she heard the chuckling of Lur.

# Ralestone Luck

# 1. The Ralestones Come Home

“Once upon a time two brave princes and a beautiful princess set out to make their fortunes—” began the dark-haired, dark-eyed boy by the roadster.

“Royalty is out of fashion,” corrected Ricky Ralestone somewhat indifferently. “Can’t you do better than that?” She gave her small, pert hat an exasperated tweak which brought the unoffending bowl-shaped bit of white felt into its proper position over her right eyebrow. “How long does it take Rupert to ask a single simple question?”

Her brother Val watched the gas gage on the instrument board of the roadster fluctuate wildly as the attendant of the station shook the hose to speed the flow of the last few drops. Five gallons—a dollar ten. Did he have that much? He began to assemble various small hoards of change from different pockets.

“Do you think we’re going to like this?” Ricky waved her hand vaguely in a gesture which included a dilapidated hot-dog stand and a stretch of road white-hot under the steady baking of the sun.

“Well, I think that Pirate’s Haven is slightly different from our present surroundings. Where’s your proper pride? Not everyone can be classed among the New Poor,” Val observed judiciously.

“Nobility in the bread line.” His sister sniffed with what she fondly believed was the air of a Van Astor dowager.

“Nobility?”

“We never relinquished the title, did we? Rupert’s still the Marquess of Lorne.”

“After some two hundred years in America I am afraid that we would find ourselves strangers in England. And Lorne crumbled to dust long ago.”

“But he’s still Marquess of Lorne,” she persisted.

“All right. And what does that make you?”

“Lady Richanda, of course, silly. Can’t you remember the wording of the old charter? And you’re Viscount—”

“Wrong there,” Val corrected her. “I’m only a lord, by courtesy, unless we can bash Rupert on the head some dark night and chuck him into the bayou.”

“Lord Valerius.” She rolled it upon her tongue. “Marquess, Lady, and Lord Val, out to seek their fortunes. Pity we can’t do it in the traditional family way.”

“But we can’t, you know,” he protested laughingly. “I believe that piracy is no longer looked upon with favor by the more solid members of any community. Though plank-walking is an idea to keep in mind when the bill collectors start to draw in upon us.”

“Here comes Rupert at last. Rupert,” she raised her voice as their elder brother opened the door by the driver’s seat, “shall we all go and be pirates? Val has some lovely gory ideas.”

“Not just yet anyway—we still have a roof over our heads,” he answered as he slid in behind the wheel. “We should have taken the right turn a mile back.”

“Bother!” Ricky surveyed as much of her face as she could see in the postage-stamp mirror of her compact. “I don’t think I’m going to like Louisiana.”

“Maybe Louisiana won’t care for you either,” Val offered slyly. “After all, we dyed-in-the-wool Yanks coming to live in the deep South—”

“Speak for yourself, Val Ralestone.” She applied a puff carefully to the tip of her upturned nose. “Since we’ve got this barn of a place on our hands, we might as well live in it. Too bad you couldn’t have persuaded our artist tenant to sign another lease, Rupert.”

“He’s gone to spend a year in Italy. The place is in fairly good condition though. LeFleur said that as long as we don’t use the left wing and close off the state bedrooms, we can manage nicely.”

“State bedrooms—” Val drew a deep breath which was meant to be one of reverence but which turned into a sneeze as the roadster’s wheels raised the dust. “How does it feel to own such magnificence, Rupert?”

“Not so good,” he replied honestly. “A house as big as Pirate’s Haven is a burden if you don’t have the cash to keep it up properly. Though this artist chap did make a lot of improvements on his own.”

“But think of the Long Hall—” began Ricky, rolling her eyes heavenward.

“And just what do you know about the Long Hall?” demanded Rupert.

“Why, that’s where dear Great-great-uncle Rick’s ghost is supposed to walk, isn’t it?” she asked innocently. “I hope that our late tenant didn’t scare him away. It gives one such a blue-blooded feeling to think of having an active ghost on the premises. A member of one’s own family, too!”

“Sure. Teach him—or it—some parlor tricks and we’ll show it—or him—off every afternoon between three and four. We might even be able to charge admission and recoup the family fortune,” Val suggested brightly.

“Have you no reverence?” demanded his sister. “And besides, ghosts only walk at night.”

“Now that’s something we’ll have to investigate,” Val interrupted her. “Do ghosts have union rules? I mean, I wouldn’t want Great-great-uncle Rick to march up and down the carriage drive with a sign reading, ‘The Ralestones are unfair to ghosts,’ or anything like that.”

“We’ll have to use the Long Hall, of course,” cut in Rupert, as usual ignoring their nonsense. “And the old summer drawing-room. But we can shut up the dining-room and the ball-room. We’ll eat in the kitchen, and that and a bedroom apiece—”

“I suppose there are bathrooms, or at least a bathroom,” his brother interrupted. “Because I don’t care to rush down to the bayou for a good brisk plunge every time I get my face dirty.”

“Harrison put in a bathroom at his own expense last fall.”

“For which blessed be the name of Harrison. If he hadn’t gone to Italy, he would have rebuilt the house. How soon do we get there? This touring is not what I thought it might be—”

The crease which had appeared so recently between Rupert’s eyes deepened.

“Leg hurt, Val?” he asked quietly, glancing at the slim figure sharing his seat.

“No. I’m expressing curiosity this time, old man, not just a whine. But if we’re going to be this far off the main highway—”

“Oh, it’s not far from the city road. We ought to be seeing the gate-posts any moment now.”

“Prophet!” Ricky leaned forward between them. “See there!”

Two gray stone posts, as firmly planted by time as the avenue of live-oaks they headed, showed clearly in the afternoon light. And from the nearest, deep carved in the stone, a jagged-toothed skull, crowned and grinning, stared blankly at the three in the shabby car. Beneath it ran the insolent motto of an ancient and disreputable clan, “What I want—I take!”

“This is the place all right—I recognize Joe there.” Val pointed to the crest. “Good old Joe, always laughing.”

Ricky made a face. “Horrid old thing. I don’t see why we couldn’t have had a swan or something nice to swank about.”

“But then the Lords of Lorne were hardly a nice lot in their prime,” Val reminded her. “Well, Rupert, let’s see the rest.”

The car followed a graveled drive between tall bushes which would have been the better for a pruning. Then the road made a sudden curve and they came out upon a crescent of lawn bordering upon a stone-paved terrace three steps above. And on the terrace stood the home a Ralestone had not set foot in for over fifty years—Pirate’s Haven.

“It looks—” Ricky stared up, “why, it looks just like the picture Mr. Harrison painted!”

“Which proves why he is now in Italy,” Val returned. “But he did capture it on canvas.”

“Gray stone—and those diamond-paned windows—and that squatty tower. But it isn’t like a Southern home at all! It’s some old, old place out of England.”

“Because it was built by an exile,” said Rupert softly. “An exile who loved his home so well that he labored five years in the wilderness to build its duplicate. Those little diamond-paned windows were once protected with shutters an inch thick, and the place was a fort in Indian times. But it is strange to this country. That’s why it’s one of the show places. LeFleur asked me if we would be willing to keep up the custom of throwing the state rooms open to the public one day a month.”

“And shall we?” asked Ricky.

“We’ll see. Well, don’t you want to see the inside as well as the out?”

“Of course! Val, you lazy thing, get out!”

“Certainly, m’lady.” He swung open the door and climbed out stiffly. Although he wouldn’t have confessed it for any reason, his leg had been aching dully for hours.

“Do you know,” Ricky hesitated on the first terrace step, bending down to put aside a trail of morning-glory vine which clutched at her ankle, “I’ve just remembered!”

“What?” Rupert looked up from the grid where he was unstrapping their luggage.

“That we are the very first Ralestones to—to come home since Grandfather Miles rode away in 1867.”

“And why the sudden dip into ancient history?” Val inquired as he limped around to help Rupert.

“I don’t know,” her eyes were fast upon moss-greened wall and ponderous door hewn of a single slab of oak, “except—well, we are coming home at last. I wonder if—if they know. All those others. Rick and Miles, the first Rupert and Richard and—”

“That spitfire, the Lady Richanda?” Rupert smiled. “Perhaps they do. No, leave the bags here, Val. Let’s see the house first.”



Together the Ralestones crossed the terrace and came to stand by the front door which still bore faint scars left by Indian hatchets. But Rupert stooped to insert a very modern key into a very modern lock. There was a click and the door swung inward before his push.

“The Long Hall!” They stood in something of a hesitant huddle at the end of a long stone-floored room. Half-way down its length a wooden staircase led up to the second floor, and directly opposite that a great fireplace yawned mightily, black and bare.

A leather-covered lounge was directly before this, flanked by two square chairs. And by the stairs was an oaken marriage chest. Save for two skin rugs, these were all the furnishings.

But Ricky had crossed hesitatingly to that cavernous fireplace and was standing there looking up as her brothers joined her.

“There’s where it was,” she said softly and pointed to a deep niche cut into the surface of the stone overmantel. That niche was empty and had been so for more than a hundred years—to their hurt. “That was where the Luck—”

“How hold ye Lorne?” Rupert’s softly spoken question brought the well-remembered answer to Val’s lips:

“By the oak leaf, by the sea wave, by the broadsword blade, thus hold we Lorne!”

“The oak leaf is dust,” murmured Ricky, “the sea wave is gone, the broadsword is rust, how now hold ye Lorne?”

Her brothers answered her together:

“By our Luck, thus hold we Lorne!”

“And we’ve got to get it back,” she said. “We’ve just got to! When the Luck hangs there again, we—”

“Won’t have anything left to worry about,” Val finished for her. “But that’s a very big order, m’lady. Short of catching Rick’s ghost and forcing him to disclose the place where he hid it, I don’t see how we’re going to do it.”

“But we are going to,” she answered confidently. “I know we are!”

“A good thing,” Rupert broke in, a hint of soberness beneath the lightness of his tone as he looked about the almost bare room and then at the strained pallor of Val’s thin face. “The Ralestones have been luckless too long. And now suppose we take possession of this commodious mansion. I suggest that we get settled as soon as possible. I don’t like the looks of the western sky. We’re probably going to have a storm.”

“What about the car?” Val asked as his brother turned to go.

“Harrison used the old carriage house as a garage. I’ll run it in there. You and Ricky better do a spot of exploring and see about beds and food. I don’t know how you feel,” he went on grimly, “but after last night I want something softer than a dozen rocks to sleep on.”

“I told you not to stop at that tourist place,” began Ricky smugly. “I said—”

“You said that a house painted that shade of green made you slightly ill. But you didn’t say anything about beds,” Val reminded her as he shed his coat and hung it on the newel-post.

“And since the Ralestone family have definitely gone off the gold or any other monetary standard, it’s tourist rests or the poorhouse for us.”

“Probably the poorhouse.” Rupert sounded resigned. “Now upstairs with you and get out some bedding. LeFleur said in his letter that the place was all ready for occupancy. And he stocked up with canned stuff.”

“I know—beans! Just too, too divine. Well, let’s know the worst.” Ricky started up the stairs. “I suppose there are electric lights?”

“Got to throw the main switch first, and I haven’t time to do that now. Here, Val.” Rupert tossed him his tiny pocket torch as he turned to go. The door closed behind him and Ricky looked over her shoulder.

“This—this is rather a darkish place, isn’t it?”

“Not so bad.” Val considered the hall below, which seemed suddenly peopled by an overabundance of oddly shaped shadows.

“No,” her voice grew stronger, “not so bad. We’re together anyway, Val. Last year I thought I’d die, shut up in that awful school, and then coming home to hear—”

“About me making my first and last flight. Yes, not exactly a rest cure for any of us, was it? But it’s all over now. The Ralestones may be down but they’re not out, yet, in spite of Mosile Oil and those coal-mines. D’you know, we might use some of that nice gilt-edged stock for wall-paper. There’s enough to cover a closet at least. Here we are, Rupert from beating about the globe trying to be a newspaper man, you straight from N’York’s finest finishing-school, and me—well, out of the plainest hospital bed I ever saw. We’ve got this house and what Rupert managed to clear from the wreck. Something will turn up. In the meantime—”

“Yes?” she prompted.

“In the meantime,” he went on, leaning against the banister for a moment’s rest, “we can be looking for the Luck. As Rupert says, we need it badly enough. Here’s the upper hall. Which way now?”

“Over to the left wing. These in front are what Rupert refers to as ‘state bedrooms.’”

“Yes?” He opened the nearest door and whistled softly. “Not so bad. About the size of a small union station and provided with all the comforts of a tomb. Decidedly not what we want.”

“Wait, here’s a plaque set in the wall. Look!” She ran her finger over a glass-covered square.

“Regulations for guests, or a floor plan to show how to reach the dining-room in the quickest way,” her brother suggested.

“No.” She read aloud slowly:

“‘This Room Was Occupied by General Andrew Jackson, the Victor of the Battle of New Orleans, upon the Tenth Day after the Battle.’”

“Whew! ‘Old Hickory’ here! But I thought that the Ralestones were more or less under a cloud at that time,” commented Val.

“History—”

“In the making. Quite so. Now may I suggest that we find some slumber rooms slightly more modern? Rupert is apt to become annoyed at undue delay in such matters.”

They went down the hall and turned into a short cross corridor. From a round window at the far end a ray of sun still swept in, but it was a sickly, faded ray. The storm Rupert had spoken of could not be far off.

“This is the right way. Mr. Harrison had these little numbers put on the doors for his guests,” Ricky pointed out. “I’ll take ‘three’; that was marked on the plan he sent us as a lady’s room. You take that one across the hall and let Rupert have the one next to you.”

The rooms they explored were not as imposing as the one which had sheltered Andrew Jackson for a night. Furnished with chintz-covered chairs, solid mahogany bedsteads and highboys, they were pleasant enough even if they weren’t chambers to make an antique dealer “Oh!” and “Ah!” Val discovered with approval some stiff prints of mathematically correct clippers hung in exact patterns on his walls, while Ricky’s room held one treasure, a dainty dressing-table.

A small door near the end of the hall gave upon a linen closet. And Ricky, throwing her short white jacket and hat upon the chair in her room, set about making beds, having given Val strict orders to return to the lower hall and sort out the luggage before bringing it up.

As he reached the wide landing he stopped a moment. Since that winter night, almost a year in the past, when a passenger plane had decided—in spite of its pilot—to make a landing on a mountainside, he had learned to hobble where he had once run. The accident having made his right leg a rather accurate barometer, that crooked bone was announcing the arrival of the coming storm with a sharp pain or two which shot unexpectedly from knee to ankle. One such caught him as he was about to take a step and threw him suddenly off balance.

He clutched at a dim tapestry which hung across the wall and tumbled through a slit in the fabric—which smelled of dust and moth balls—into a tiny alcove flanking a broad, well-cushioned window-seat under tall windows. Below him in a riot of bushes and hedges run wild, lay the garden. Somewhere beyond must lie Bayou Mercier leading directly to Lake Borgne and so to the sea, the thoroughfare used by their pirate ancestors when they brought home their spoil.

The green of the rank growth below, thought Val, seemed intensified by the strange yellowish light. A moss-grown path led straight into the heart of a jungle where sweet olive, banana trees, and palms grew in a matted mass. Harrison might have done wonders for the house but he had allowed the garden to lapse into a wilderness.

“Val!”

“Coming!” he shouted and pushed back through the curtain. He could hear Rupert moving about the lower hall.

“Just made it in time,” he said as the younger Ralestone limped down to join him. “Hear that?”

A steady pattering outside was growing into a wild dash of wind-driven rain. It was dark and Rupert himself was but a blur moving across the hall.

“Do you still have the flash? Might as well descend into the lower regions and put on the lights.”

They crossed the Long Hall, passing through another large chamber where furniture huddled under dust covers, and then into a small cupboard-lined passage. This gave upon a dark cavern where Val’s hand scraped a table top only too painfully as he went. Then Rupert found the door leading to the cellar, and they went down and down into inky blackness upon which their thread of torch-light made little impression.

The damp, unpleasant scent of mold and wet grew stronger as they descended, and their fingers brushed slime-touched walls.

“Phew! Not very comfy down here,” Val protested as Rupert threw the torch beam along the nearest wall. With a grunt of relief he stepped forward to pull open the door of a small black box. “That does it,” he said as he threw the switch. “Now for the topside again and some supper.”

They negotiated the steps and found the button which controlled the kitchen lights. The glare showed them a room on the mammoth scale suggested by the Long Hall. A giant fireplace still equipped with three-legged pots, toasting irons, and spits was at one side, its brick oven beside it. But a very modern range and sink faced it.

In the center of the room was a large table, while along the far wall were closed cupboards. Save for its size and the novelty of the fireplace, it was an ordinary kitchen, complete to red-checked curtains at the windows. Pleasant and homey, Val thought rather wistfully. But that was before the coming of that night when Ricky walked in the garden and he heard something stir in the Long Hall—which should have been empty—

“Val! Rupert!” A cry which started valiantly became a wail as it echoed through empty rooms. “Where are yo-o-ou!”

“Here, in the kitchen,” Val shouted back.

A moment later Ricky stood in the doorway, her face flushed and her usually correct curls all on end.

“Mean, selfish, utterly selfish pigs!” she burst out. “Leaving me all alone in the dark! And it’s so dark!”

“We just went down to turn on the lights,” Val began.

“So I see.” With a sniff she looked about her. “It took two of you to do that. But it only required one of me to make three beds. Well, this is a warning to me. Next time—” she did not finish her threat. “I suppose you want some supper?”

Rupert was already at the cupboards. “That,” he agreed, “is the general idea.”

“Beans or—” Ricky’s hand closed upon Val’s arm with a nipper-like grip. “What,” her voice was a thin thread of sound, “was that?”

Above the steady beat of the rain they heard a noise which was half scratch, half thud. Under Rupert’s hand the latch of the cupboard clicked.

“Back door,” he said laconically.

“Well, why don’t you open it?” Ricky’s fingers bit tighter so that Val longed to twist out of her grip.

The key grated in the lock and then Rupert shot back the accompanying bolt.

“Something’s there,” breathed Ricky.

“Probably nothing but a branch blown against the door by the wind,” Val assured her, remembering the tangled state of the garden.

The door came back, letting in a douche of cold rain and a black shadow which leaped for the security of the center of the room.

“Look!” Ricky laughed unsteadily and released Val’s arm.

In the center of the neat kitchen, spitting angrily at the wet, stood a ruffled and oversized black tom-cat.

## 2. The Luck Of The Lords Of Lorne

“Nice of you to drop in, old man,” commented Rupert dryly as he shut the door. “But didn’t anyone ever mention to you that gentlemen wipe their feet before entering strange houses?” He surveyed a line of wet paw prints across the brick floor.

“Did he get all wet, the poor little—” Ricky was on her knees, stretching out her hand and positively cooing. The cat put down the paw he had been licking and regarded her calmly out of round, yellow eyes. Then he returned to his washing. Val laughed.

“Evidently he is used to the strong, silent type of human, Ricky. I wonder where he belongs.”

“He belongs to us now. Yes him does, doesn’t him?” She attempted to touch the visitor’s head. His ears went back and he showed sharp teeth in no uncertain manner.

“Better let him alone,” advised Rupert. “He doesn’t seem to be the kind you can cuddle.”

“So I see.” Ricky arose to her feet with an offended air. “One would think that I resembled the more repulsive members of my race.”

“In the meantime,” Rupert again sought the cupboard, “let’s eat.”

Half an hour later, fed and well content (even Satan, as the Ralestones had named their visitor because of his temperament, having condescended to accept some of the better-done bits of bacon), they sat about the table staring at the dishes. Now it is a very well-known fact that dishes do *not* obligingly leap from a table into a pan of well-soaped water, slosh themselves around a few times, and jump out to do a spot of brisk rubbing down. But how nice it would be if they did, thought Val.

“The dishes—” began Ricky in a faint sort of way.

“Must be done. We gather that. How utterly nasty bacon grease looks when it’s congealed.” Her younger brother surveyed the platter before him with mournful interest.

“And the question before the house is, I presume, who’s going to wash them?” Rupert grinned. “This seems to be as good a time as any to put some sort of a working plan in force. There is a certain amount of so-called housework which has to be done. And there are three of us to do it. It’s up to us to apportion it fairly. Shall we say, let everyone care for his or her own room—”

“There are also the little matters of washing, and ironing, and cleaning,” Ricky broke in to remind him.

“And we’re down to fifty a month in hard cash. But the tenant farmer on the other side of the bayou is to supply us with fresh fruit and vegetables. And our wardrobes are fairly intact. So I think that we can afford to hire the washing done. We’ll take turns cooking—”

“Who’s elected to do the poisoning first?” Val inquired with interest. “I trust we possess a good cook-book?”

“Well, I’ll take breakfast tomorrow morning,” Rupert volunteered. “Anyone can boil coffee and toast bread. As for dishes, we’ll all pitch in together. And suppose we start right now.”

When the dishes were back again in their neat piles on the cupboard shelves, Ricky vanished upstairs, to come trailing down again in a house-coat which she fondly imagined made her look like one of the better-known screen sirens. The family gathered in an aimless way before the empty fireplace of the Long Hall. Rupert was filling a black pipe which allowed him to

resemble—in very slight degree, decided Val—an explorer in an English tobacco advertisement. Val himself was stretched full length on the couch with about ten pounds of cat attempting to rest on his center section in spite of his firm refusal to allow the same.

“Br-r-r!” Ricky shivered. “It’s cold in here.”

“Probably just Uncle Rick passing through—not the weather. No, cat, you may not sit on that stomach. It’s just as full of bacon as yours is and it wants a nice long rest.” Val swept Satan off to the floor and he resignedly went to roost by the boy’s feet in spite of the beguiling noises Ricky made to attract his attention.

“These stone houses are cold.” Rupert scratched a match on the sole of his shoe. “We ought to have flooring put down over this stone paving. I saw some wood stacked up in an outhouse when I put the car away. We’ll have it in tomorrow and see what we can do about a fire in the evening.”

“And I thought the South was always warm.” Ricky examined her hands. “Whoever,” she remarked pleasantly, “took my hand lotion better return it. The consequences might not be very attractive.”

“Are you sure you packed it this morning?” Val asked.

“But of—” Her fingers went to her mouth. “I wonder if I did? I’ve just got to have some. We’ll drive to town tomorrow and get a bottle.”

“Thirty miles or so for a ten-cent bottle of gooey stuff,” Val protested.

“Good idea.” Rupert stood with his back to the fireplace as if there really were a flame or two within its black emptiness. “I’ve some papers that LeFleur wants to see. Then there’re our boxes at the freight station to arrange transportation for, and we’ll have to see about getting a newspaper and—”

“Make a list,” murmured his brother.

Rupert dropped down upon the wide arm of Ricky’s chair and with her only too willing aid set to work. Val eyed them drowsily. Rupert and Ricky—or to give her her very formal name in full—Richanda Anne, were “Red” Ralestones, possessing the thin, three-cornered faces, the dark mahogany hair, the sharply defined cheek-bones which had been the mark of the family as far back in history as portraits or written descriptions existed. The “Red” Ralestones were marked also by height and a suppleness of body and movement. The men had been fine swordsmen, the ladies noted beauties. But they were also cursed, Val remembered vividly, with uncertain tempers.

Rupert had schooled himself to the point where his emotions were mastered by his will. But Val had seen Ricky enjoy full tantrums, and the last occasion was not so long ago that the scene had become misty in his memory. Generous to the point of self-beggary, loyal to a fault, and incurably romantic, that was a “Red” Ralestone.

Val himself was a “Black” Ralestone, which was a very different thing. They were a new growth on the family tree, a growth which appeared after the Ralestones had been exiled to colonial America. His black hair, his long, dark face of no particular beauty marked with straight, black brows set in a perpetual frown—that was the sign of a “Black” Ralestone. They were as strong-willed as the “Reds,” but their anger could be controlled to icy rage.

“Now that you have spent the monthly income,” Val suggested as Rupert added up a long column of minute figures scrawled across the first page of his pocket note-book, “let’s really get away from economics for one evening. The surroundings suggest something more

romantic than dollars and cents. After all, when did a pirate ever show a saving disposition? Would the first Roderick—”

“The Roderick who brought home the Luck?” Ricky laughed. “But he brought home a fortune, too, didn’t he, Rupert?”

Her brother relit his pipe. “Yes, but a great many lords came home from the Crusades with their pockets filled. Sir Roderick de la Stone thought the Luck worth his entire estate even after he was made Baron Ralestone.”

Ricky shivered delicately. “Not altogether nice people, those ancestors of ours,” she observed.

“No,” Val grinned. “By rights this room should be full of ghosts instead of the beat of just one. How many Ralestones died violently? Seven or eight, wasn’t it?”

“But the ones who died in England should haunt Lorne,” argued Ricky, half seriously.

“Well then, that sort of confines us to the crews of the ships our great-great-grandfather scuttled,” her brother replied.

“Rupert,” Ricky turned and asked impulsively, “do you really believe in the Luck?”

Rupert looked up at the empty niche. “I don’t know—No, I don’t. Not the way that Roderick and Richard and all the rest did. But something that has seven hundred years of history behind it—that means a lot.”

“Then did he take up ye sword fashioned by ye devilish art of ye East from two fine blades found in ye tomb,” Val quoted from the record of Brother Anselm, the friar who had accompanied Sir Roderick on his crusading. “Do you suppose that that part’s true? Could the Luck have been made from two other swords found in an old tomb?”

“Not impossible. The Saracens were master metal workers. Look at the Damascus blades.”

“It all sounds like a fairy-tale,” commented Ricky. “A sword with magic powers beaten out of two other swords found in a tomb. And the whole thing done under the direction of an Arab astrologer.”

“You’ve got to admit,” broke in Val, “that Sir Roderick had luck after it was given to him. He came home a wealthy man and he died a Baron. And his descendants even survived the Wars of the Roses when four-fifths of the great English families were wiped out.”

“And fortune continued to smile,” Rupert took up the story, “until a certain wild Miles Ralestone staked the Luck of his house on the turn of a card—and lost.”

“O-o-oh!” Ricky squirmed forward in her chair. “Now comes the pirate. Tell us that, Rupert.”

“You know the story by heart now,” he objected.

“We never heard it here, where some of it really happened. Tell it, please, Rupert!”

“In your second childhood?” he asked.

“Not out of my first yet,” she answered promptly. “Pretty please, Rupert.”

“Miles Ralestone, Marquess of Lorne,” he began, “rode with Prince Rupert of the Rhine. He was a notorious gambler, a loose liver, and a cynic. And he even threw the family Luck across the gaming table.”

“The Luck went from him who did it no honor,” Val repeated slowly. “I read that in that old letter among your papers, Rupert.”

“Yes, the Luck went from him. He survived Marston Moor; he survived the death of his royal master, Charles the First, on the scaffold. He lived long enough to witness the return of the Stuarts to England. But the Luck was gone, and with it the good fortune of his line. Rupert, his son, was but a penniless hanger-on at the royal court; the manor of Lorne a fire-gutted wreckage.

“Rupert followed James Stuart from England when that monarch became a fugitive to escape the wrath of his subjects. And the Marquess of Lorne sank to the role of pot-house bully in the back lanes of Paris.”

“And then?” prompted Val.

“And then a miracle occurred. Rupert was employed by his master on a secret mission to London, and there the Luck came again into his hands. Perhaps by murder. But he died miserably enough of a heavy cold got by lying in a ditch to escape Dutch William’s soldiers.”

“‘So is this perilous Luck come again into our hands. Then did I persevere to mend the fortunes of my house.’ That’s what Rupert’s son Richard wrote about the Luck,” Ricky recalled. “Richard, the first pirate.”

“He did a good job of fortune mending,” commented Val dryly. “Married one of the wealthiest of the French king’s wards and sailed for the French West Indies all in a fortnight. Turned pirate with the approval of the French and took to lifting the cargoes of other pirates.”

“I’ll bet that most of his success was due to the Lady Richanda,” observed Ricky. “She sailed with him dressed in man’s clothes. Remember that miniature of her that we saw in New York, the one in the museum? All the ‘Black’ Ralestones are supposed to look like her. Hear that, Val?”

“At least it was the Lady Richanda who persuaded her husband to settle ashore,” said Rupert. “She was personally acquainted with Bienville and Iberville who were proposing to rule the Mississippi valley for France by building a city near the mouth of the river. And ‘Black Dick,’ the pirate, obtained a grant of land lying along Lake Borgne and this bayou. Although the city was not begun until 1724, this house was started in 1710 by workmen imported from England.

“The house of an exile,” Rupert continued slowly. “Richard Ralestone was born in England, but he left there in his tenth year. In spite of the price on his head, he crept back to Devon in 1709 to see Lorne for the last time. And it was from the rude sketches he made of ruined Lorne that Pirate’s Haven was planned.”

“Why, we saw those sketches!” Ricky’s eyes shone with excitement. “Do you remember, Val?”

Her brother nodded. “Must have cost him plenty to do it,” he replied. “Richard had an immense personal fortune of his own gained from piracy, and he spared no expense in building. The larger part of the stone in these walls was brought straight from Europe, just as they later brought the paving blocks for the streets of New Orleans. When he had done—and the place was five years a-building because of Indian troubles and other disturbances—he settled down to live in feudal state. Some of his former seamen rallied around him as a guard, and he imported blacks from the islands to work his indigo fields.

“The family continued to prosper through both French and Spanish domination until the time of American rule.”

“Now for Uncle Rick.” Ricky settled herself with a wriggle. “This is even more exciting than Pirate Dick.”



“In the year 1788, the time of the great fire which destroyed over half of New Orleans, twin boys were born at Pirate’s Haven. They came into their heritage early, for their parents died of yellow fever when the twins were still small children.

“Those were restless times. New Orleans was full of refugees. From Haiti, where the revolting blacks were holding a reign of terror, and from France, where to be a noble was to be a dead one, came hundreds. Even members of the royal house, the Duc d’Orleans and his brother, the Duc de Montpensier, came for a space in 1798.

“The city had always been more or less lawless and intolerant of control. Like the New Englanders of the eighteenth century, many respected merchants were also smugglers.”

“And pirates,” suggested Val.

“The king of smugglers was Jean Lafitte. His forge—where his slaves shaped the wrought-iron which was one of the wonders of the city—was a fashionable meeting-place for the young bloods. He was the height of wit and fashion—daring openly to placard the walls of the town with his notices of smugglers’ sales.

“And Roderick Ralestone, the younger of the twins, became one of Lafitte’s men. In spite of the remonstrances of his brother Richard, young Rick withdrew to Baratavia with Dominique You and the rest of the outlawed captains.

“In the winter of 1814 matters came to a head. Richard wanted to marry an American girl, the daughter of one of Governor Claiborne’s friends. Her father told him very pointedly that since the owners of Pirate’s Haven seemed to be indulging in law breaking, such a marriage was out of the question. Aroused, Richard made a secret inspection of certain underground storehouses which had been built by his pirate great-grandfather and discovered that Rick had put them in use again for the very same purpose for which they had been first intended—the storing of loot.

“He waited there for his brother, determined to have it decided once and for all. They quarreled bitterly. Both were young, both had bad tempers, and each saw his side as the right of the matter—”

“Regular Ralestones, weren’t they?” commented Val slyly.

“Undoubtedly,” agreed Rupert. “Well, at last Richard started for the house, his brother in pursuit.

“Then they fought, here in this very hall. And not with words this time, but with the rapiers Richard had brought back from France. A slave named Falesse, who had been the twins’ childhood nurse, was the only witness to the end of that duel. Richard lay face down across the hearth-stone as she came screaming down the stairs.”

Ricky was studying the gray stone.

“By rights,” Val agreed with her unspoken thought, “there ought to be a stain there. Unfortunately for romance, there isn’t.”

“Rick was standing by the door,” Rupert continued. “When Falesse reached his brother, he laughed unsteadily and half raised his sword in a duelist’s salute. Then he was gone. But there were two swords on the floor. And that niche was empty.

“When he fled into the night storm with his brother’s blood staining his hands, Rick Ralestone took the Luck of his house with him.

“After almost a year of invalidism, Richard recovered. He never married his American beauty. But in 1819 he took a wife, a young Creole lady widowed by the Battle of New

Orleans. Of Rick nothing was heard again, although his brother searched diligently for more than thirty years.”

“How,” Val grinned at his brother, “did Richard explain the little matter of the ghost which is supposed to walk at night?”

“I don’t know. But when the Civil War broke out, Richard’s son Miles was the master of Pirate’s Haven. The once-great fortune of the family had shrunk. Business losses in the city, floods, a disaster at sea, had emptied the family purse—”

“The Luck getting in its dirty work by remote control,” supplied the irrepressible Val.

“Perhaps. Young Miles had married in his teens, and the call to the Confederate colors brought both his twin sons under arms as well as their father.

“Miles, the father, fell in the First Battle of Bull Run. But Miles, the son and elder of the twins, a lieutenant of cavalry, came out of the war the only surviving male of his family.

“His brother Richard had been wounded and was home on sick leave when the Northerners occupied New Orleans. Betrayed by one of his former slaves, a mulatto who bore a grudge against the family, he was murdered by a gang of bullies and cutthroats who had followed the invading army.

“Richard had been warned of their raid and had managed to hide the family valuables in a secret place—somewhere within this very hall, according to tradition.”

Val and Ricky sat up and looked about with wondering interest.

“But Richard was shot down in cold blood when he refused to reveal the hiding-place. His brother and some scouts, operating south without orders, arrived just in time to witness the last act. Miles Ralestone and his men summarily shot the murderers. But where Richard had so carefully concealed the last of the family treasure was never discovered.

“The war beggared the Ralestones. Miles went north in search of better luck, and this place was allowed to molder until it was leased in 1879 to a sugar baron. In 1895 it was turned over to a family distantly connected with ours. And since then it has been leased. We have had in all four tenants.”

“But,” Ricky broke in, “since the Luck went we have not prospered. And until it returns—”

Rupert tapped out his pipe against one of the fire irons. “It’s nothing but a folk-tale,” he told her.

“It isn’t!” Ricky contradicted him vehemently. “And we’ve made a good beginning anyway. We’ve come back.”

“If Rick took the Luck with him, I don’t see how we have an earthly chance of finding it again,” Val commented.

“It came back once before after it had gone from us,” reminded his sister. “And I think that it will again. At least I’ll hope so.”

“Outside of the superstition, it would be well worth having. The names of the heads and heirs of the house are all engraved along the blade, from Sir Roderick on down. Seven hundred years of history scratched on steel.” Rupert stretched and then glanced at his wrist-watch.

“Ten to ten, and we’ve had a long day. Who’s for bed?”

“I am, for one.” Val swung his feet down from the couch, disturbing Satan who opened one yellow eye lazily.

Ricky stood by the fireplace fingering the wreath of stiff flowers carved in the stone. Val took her by the arm.

“No use wondering which one you push to reveal the treasure,” he told her.

She looked up startled. “How did you know what I was thinking about?” she demanded.

“My lady, your thoughts, like little white birds—”

“Oh, go to bed, Val. When you get poetical I know you need sleep. Just the same,” she hesitated with one foot on the first tread of the stair, “I wonder.”

### 3. The Ralestones Entertain An Unobtrusive Visitor

Val lay trapped in an underground cavern, chained to the floor. An unseen monster was creeping up his prostrate body. He could feel its hot breath on his cheek. With a mighty effort he broke his bonds and threw out his arms in an attempt to fight off his tormentor.

The morning sun was warm across his pillow, making him blink. On his chest stood Satan, kneading the bedclothes with his front paws and purring gently. From the open window came a fresh, rain-washed breeze.

Having aroused the sleeper, Satan deserted his post to hang half-way out the window, intent upon the housekeeping arrangements of several birds who had built in the hedges below. A moment later Val elbowed him aside to look out upon the morning.

It was a fine one. Wisps of mist from the bayou still hung about the lower garden, but the sun had already dried the brick-paved paths. A bee blundered past Val's nose, and he realized that it might be well to close the screen hanging shutter-like outside.

From the direction of the hidden water came the faint *putt-putt* of a motor-boat, but inside Pirate's Haven there was utter silence. As yet the rest of the family were not abroad. Val dropped his pajamas in a huddle by the bed and dressed leisurely, feeling very much at peace with this new world. Perhaps that was the last time he was to feel so for many days to come. He stole cautiously out of his room and tiptoed down halls and dark stairs, wanting to be alone while he discovered Pirate's Haven for himself.

The Long Hall looked chilly and bleak, even though patches of sunlight were fighting the usual gloom. On the hearth-stone lay a scrap of white, doubtless Ricky's handkerchief. Val flung open the front door and stepped out on the terrace, drawing deep lungfuls of the morning air. The blossoms on the morning-glory vines which wreathed the edge of the terrace were open to the sun, and the birds sang in the bushes below. Satan streaked by and disappeared into the tangle. It was suddenly very good to be alive. The boy stretched luxuriously and started to explore, choosing the nearest of the crazy, wandering paths which began at the circle of the old carriage drive.

Here was evidence of last night's storm. Wisps of Spanish moss, torn from the great live-oaks of the avenue and looking like tufts of coarse gray horsehair, lay in water-logged mats here and there. And in the open places, the grass, beaten flat, was just beginning to rise again.

A rabbit scuttled across the path as it went down four steps of broken stone into a sort of glen. Here some early owner of the plantation had made an irregular pool of stone to be fed by the trickle of a tiny spring. Frogs the size of postage-stamps leaped panic-stricken for the water when Val's shadow fell across its rim. A leaden statue of the boy Pan danced joyously on a pedestal above. Ricky would love this, thought her brother as he dabbled his fingers in the chill water trying to catch the stem of the single lily bud.

Out of nowhere came a turtle to slide into the depths of the pool. The sun was very warm across Val's bowed shoulders. He liked the garden, liked the plantation, even liked the circumstances which had brought them there. Lazily he arose and turned.

By the steps down which he had come stood a slight figure in a faded flannel shirt and mud-streaked overalls. His bare brown feet gripped the stones as if to get purchase for instant flight.

"Hello," Val said questioningly.

The new-comer eyed young Ralestone warily and then his gaze shifted to the bushes beyond.

“I’m Val Ralestone.” Val held out his hand. To his astonishment the stranger’s mobile lips twisted in a snarl and he edged crabwise toward the bushes bordering the glen.

“Who are you?” Val demanded sharply.

“Ah has got as much right heah as yo’ all,” the boy answered angrily. And with that he turned and slipped into a path at the far end of the glen.

Aroused, Val hurried after him to reach the bayou levee. The quarry was already in midstream, wielding an efficient canoe paddle. On impulse Val shouted after him, but he never turned. A rifle lay across his knees and there were some rusty traps in the bottom of the flimsy canoe. Then Val remembered that Pirate’s Haven lay upon the fringe of the muskrat swamps where Cajun and American squatters still carried on the fur trade of their ancestors.

But as Val stood speeding the departure of the uninvited guest, another canoe put off from the opposite shore of the bayou and came swinging across toward the rough wooden landing which served the plantation. A round brown face grinned up at Val as a powerful negro clambered ashore.

“Is dey up at de big house now?” he asked cheerily as he came up.

“If you mean the Ralestones, why, we got here last night,” Val answered.

“Yo’ all is Mistuh Ralestone, suh?” He took off his wide-brimmed straw hat and twisted it in his oversized hands.

“I’m Valerius Ralestone. My brother Rupert is the owner.”

“Well, Mistuh Ralestone, suh, I’s yo’ all’s fahmah from ‘cross wata. Mistuh LeFleah, he says dat yo’ all is come to live heah agin. So mah woman, she says dat Ah should see if yo’ all is heah yet and does yo’ all want anythin’. Lucy, she’s bin a-livin’ heah, dat is, her mammy and pappy and her pappy’s mammy and pappy has bin heah since befo’ old Massa Ralestone done gone ‘way. So Lucy, she jest nachely am oneasy ‘bout yo’ all not gettin’ things comfo’ble.”

“That is kind of her,” Val answered heartily. “My brother said something last night about wanting to see you today, so if you’ll come up to the house—”

“I’s Sam, Mistuh Ralestone, suh. Ah done work heah quite a spell now.”

“By the way,” Val asked as they went up toward the house, “did you see that boy in the canoe going downstream as you crossed? I found him in the garden and the only answer he would give to my questions was that he had as much right there as I had. Who is he?”

The wide smile faded from Sam’s face. “Mistuh Ralestone, suh, effen dat no-’count trash comes ‘round heah agin, yo’ all bettah jest call de policemans. Dey’s nothin’ but poah white trash livin’ down in de swamp places an’ dey steals whatevah dey kin lay han’ on. Was dis boy big like yo’ all, wi’ black hair an’ a thin face?”

“Yes.”

“Dat’s de Jeems boy. He ain’t got no mammy nor pappy. He lives jest like de wil’ man wi’ a li’l huntin’ an’ a big lot stealin’. He talk big. Say he belongs in de big house, not wi’ swamp folks. But jest yo’ all pay no ‘tenshun to him nohow.”

“Val! Val Ralestone! Where are you?” Ricky’s voice sounded clear through the morning air.

“Coming!” he shouted back.

“Well, make it snappy!” she shrilled. “The toast has been burnt twice and—” But what further catastrophe had occurred her brother could not hear.

“Yo’all wants to git to de back do’, Mistuh Ralestone, suh? Dere’s a sho’t-cut ‘cross dis-away.” Sam turned into a side path and Val followed.

Ricky was at the stove gingerly shifting a coffee-pot as her brother stepped into the kitchen. “Well,” she snapped as he entered, “it’s about time you were showing up. I’ve simply cracked my voice trying to call you, and Rupert’s been talking about having the bayou dragged or something of the kind. Where have you been, anyway?”

“Getting acquainted with our neighbors. Ricky,” he called her attention to the smiling face just outside the door, “this is Sam. He runs the home farm for us. And his wife is a descendant of the Ralestone house folks.”

“Yassuh, dat’s right. We’s Ralestone folks, Miss ‘Chanda. Mah Lucy done sen’ me ovah to fin’ out what yo’all is a-needin’ done ‘bout de place. She was in yisteday afo’ yo’all come an’ seed to de dustin’ an’ sich—”

“So that’s why everything was so clean! That was nice of her—”

“Yo’all is Ralestones, Miss ‘Chanda. An’ Lucy say dat de Ralestones am a-goin’ to fin’ dis place jest ready for dem when dey come.” He beamed upon them proudly. “Lucy, she am a-goin’ be heah jest as soon as she gits de chillens set for de day. I’s come fust so’s Ah kin see wat Mistuh Ralestone done wan’ done wi dem rivah fiel’s—”

“Where is Rupert?” Val broke in.

“Went out to see about the car. The storm last night wrecked the door of the carriage house—”

“Zat so?” Sam’s eyes went round. “Den Ah bettah be a-gittin’ out an’ see ‘bout it. ‘Scuse me, suh. ‘Scuse me, Miss ‘Chanda.” With a jerk of his head he left them. Val turned to Ricky.

“We seem to have fallen into good hands.”

“It’s my guess that his Lucy is a manager. He just does what she tells him to. I wonder how he knew my name?”

“LeFleur probably told them all about us.”

“Isn’t it odd—” she turned off the gas, ““Ralestone folks.””

“Loyalty to the Big House,” her brother answered slowly. “I never thought that it really existed out of books.”

“It makes me feel positively feudal. Val, I was born about a hundred years too late. I’d like to have been the mistress here when I could have ridden out in a victoria behind two matched bays, with a coachman and a footman up in front and my maid on the little seat facing me.”

“And with a Dalmatian coach-hound running behind and at least three-fourths of the young bloods of the neighborhood as a mounted escort. I know. But those days are gone forever. Which leads me to another subject. What are we going to do today?”

“The dishes, for one thing,” Ricky began ticking the items off on her fingers, “and then the beds. This afternoon Rupert wants us—that is, you and me—to drive to town and do some errands.”

“Oh, yes, the list you two made out last night. Well, now that that’s all settled, suppose we have some breakfast. Has Rupert been fed or is he thinking of going on a diet?”

“He’ll be in—”

“Said she with perfect faith. All of which does not satisfy the pangs of hunger.”

“Where’s Lovey?”

“If you are using that sickening name to refer to Satan—he’s out—hunting, probably. The last I saw of him he was shooting head first for a sort of bird apartment house over to the left of the front door. Here’s Rupert. Now maybe we may eat.”

“I’ve got something to tell you,” hissed Ricky as the missing member of the clan banged the screen door behind him. Having so aroused Val’s curiosity, she demurely went around the table to pour the coffee.

“How’s the carriage house?” Val asked.

“Sam thinks he can fix it with some of that lumber piled out back of the old smoke-house.” Rupert reached for a piece of toast. “What do you think of our family retainer?”

“Seems a good chap.”

“LeFleur says one of the best. Possesses a spark of ambition and is really trying to make a go of the farm, which is more than most of them do around here. His wife, by all accounts, is a wonder. Used to be the cook-housekeeper here when the Rafaels had the place. LeFleur still talks about the two meals he ate here then. Sam tells me that she is planning to take us in hand.”

“But we can’t afford—” began Ricky.

“I gathered that money does not come into the question. The lady is rather strong-willed. So, Ricky,” he laughed, “we’ll leave you two to fight it out. But Lucy may be able to find us a laundress.”

“Which reminds me,” Ricky took a crumpled piece of white cloth from her pocket, “if this is yours, Rupert, you deserve to do your own washing. I don’t know what you’ve got on it; looks like oil.”

He took it from her and straightened out a handkerchief.

“Not guilty this time. Ask little brother here.” He passed over the dirty linen square. It was plain white—or it had been white before three large black splotches had colored it—without an initial or colored edge.

“I think he’s prevaricating, Ricky,” Val protested. “This isn’t mine. I’m down to one thin dozen and those are the ones you gave me last Christmas. They have my initials on.”

Ricky took back the disputed square. “That’s funny. It certainly isn’t mine. I’m sure one of you must be mistaken.”

“Why?” asked Rupert.

“Because I found it on the hearth-stone in the hall this morning. It wasn’t there last night or one of us would have seen it and picked it up, ‘cause it was right there in plain sight.”

“Sure it isn’t yours, Val?”

He shook his head. “Positive.”

“Queer,” murmured Rupert and reached for it again. “It’s a good quality of linen and it’s almost new.” He held it to his nose. “That’s oil on it. But how—?”

“I wonder—” Val mused.

“What do you know?” asked Ricky.

“Well—Oh, it isn’t possible. He wouldn’t carry a handkerchief,” her brother said half to himself.

“Who wouldn’t?” asked Rupert. Then Val told them of his meeting with the boy Jeems and what Sam had had to say of him.

“Don’t know whether I exactly like this.” Rupert folded the mysterious square of stained linen. “As you say, Val, a boy like that would hardly carry a handkerchief. Also, you met him in the garden, while—”

“The person who left that was in this house last night!” finished Ricky. “And I don’t like that!”

“The door was locked and bolted when I came down this morning,” Val observed.

Rupert nodded. “Yes, I distinctly remember doing that before I went up to bed last night. But when I was going around the house this morning I discovered that there are French doors opening from the old ball-room to the terrace, and I didn’t inspect their fastening last night.”

“But who would want to come in here? There are no valuables left except furniture. And it would take three or four men and a truck to collect that. I don’t see what he was after,” puzzled Ricky.

Rupert arose from the table. “We have, it seems, a mystery on our hands. If you want to amuse yourselves, my children, here’s the first clue. I’ve got to get back to the carriage house and my labors there.”

He dropped the handkerchief on the table and left. Ricky reached for the “clue.” “Awfully casual about it, isn’t he?” she said. “Just the same, I believe that this is a clue and I know what our visitor was after, too,” she finished triumphantly.

“What?”

“The treasure Richard Ralestone hid when the Yankee raiders came.”

“Well, if our unknown visitor has as little in the way of clues as we have, he’ll be a long time finding it.”

“And we’re going to beat him to it! It’s somewhere in the Hall, and the secret—”

“See here,” Val interrupted her, “what were you about to tell me when Rupert came in?”

She put the handkerchief in the breast pocket of her sport dress, buttoning the flap over it.

“Rupert’s got a secret.”

“What kind?”

“It has to do with those two brief-cases of his. You know, the ones he was so particular about all the way down here?”

Val nodded. Those bulging brief-cases had apparently contained the dearest of his roving brother’s possessions, judging from the way Rupert had fussed if they were a second out of his sight.

“This morning when I came downstairs,” Ricky continued, “he was sneaking them into that little side room off the dining-room corridor, the one which used to be the old plantation office. And when he came out and saw me standing there, he deliberately turned around and locked the door!”



“Whew!” Val commented.

“Yes, I felt that way too. So I simply asked him what he was doing and he made some silly remark about Bluebeard’s chamber. He means to keep his old secret, too, ‘cause he put the key on his key-ring when he didn’t know I was watching him.”

“This is not the place for a rest cure,” her brother observed as he started to scrape and stack the dishes. “First someone unknown leaves his handkerchief for a calling card and then Rupert goes Fu Manchu on us. To say nothing of the rugged and unfriendly son of the soil whom I found bumping around the garden where he had no business to be.”

“What was he like anyway?” asked his sister as she dipped soap flakes into the dish-water with a liberal hand.

“Oh, thin, and awfully brown. But not bad looking if it weren’t for his mouth and that scowl of his. And he very distinctly doesn’t like us. About my build, but quicker on his feet, tough looking. I wouldn’t care to try to stop him doing anything he wanted to do.”

“My dear, are you describing Clark Gable or someone you met in our garden this morning?” she demanded sweetly.

“Very well,” Val retorted huffily into the depths of the oatmeal pan he was wiping, “you catch him next time.”

“I will,” was her serene answer as she wrung out the dish-cloth.

They went on to the upstairs work and Val received his first lesson in the art of bed-making under his sister’s extremely critical tuition. It seemed that corners must be square and that dreadful things were likely to happen when wrinkles were not smoothed out. This exercise led them naturally to unpacking the remainder of the hand baggage and putting things away. It was after ten before Val came downstairs crab-fashion, wiping off each step behind him as he came with one of Ricky’s three dust-cloths.

He paused on the landing to pull back the tapestry curtain and open the windows above the alcove seat, letting in the freshness of the morning to rout some of the dank chill of the hall. Kneeling there, he watched Rupert come around the house. Rupert had shed his coat and his sleeves were rolled up almost to his shoulders. There was a streak of black across his cheek and a large rip almost separated the collar from his shirt. Although he looked hot, cross, and tired, more like a day-laborer than a gentleman plantation owner whose ancestors had always “planted from the saddle,” his stride had a certain buoyancy which it had lacked the day before.

With an idea of escaping Ricky by joining his brother, Val hurried downstairs and headed kitchenward. But his sister was there before him looking over a collection of knives of various lengths.

“Preparing for a little murder or two?” Val asked casually.

She jumped and dropped a paring knife.

“Val, don’t do that! I wish you’d whistle or something while you’re walking around in those tennis shoes. I can’t hear you move. I’m looking for something to cut flowers with. There don’t seem to be any scissors except mine and I’m not going to use those.”

“Take dat, Miss ‘Chanda.” A fat black hand motioned toward the paring knife.

Just within the kitchen door stood a wide, a very wide, Negro woman. Her neat print dress was stiff with starch from a recent washing, and round gold hoops swung proudly from her

ears. Her black hair, straightened by main force of arm, had been set again in stiff, corrugated waves of extreme fashion, but her broad placid face was both kind and serene.

“I’se Lucy,” she stated, thoroughly at her ease. “An’ dis,” she reached an arm behind her, pulling forth a girl at least ten shades lighter and thirty-five shades thinner, “is mah sistah’s onliest gal-chil’, Letty-Lou. Mak’ yo’ mannaahs, Letty. Does yo’ wan’ Miss ‘Chanda to think yo’ is a know-nothin’ outa de swamp?”

Thus sternly admonished, Letty-Lou ducked her head shyly and murmured something in a die-away voice.

“Letty-Lou,” announced her aunt, “is com’ to do fo’ yo’ all, Miss ‘Chanda. I’se larn’d her good how to do fo’ ladies. She is good at scrubbin’ an’ cleanin’ an sich. Ah done train’d her mahse’f.”

Letty-Lou looked at the floor and twisted her thin hands behind her back.

“But,” protested Ricky, “we’re not planning to have anyone do for us, Lucy.”

“Dat’s all right, Miss ‘Chanda. Yo’all’s not gittin’ a know-nothin’. Letty-Lou, she knows her work. She kin cook right good.”

“We can’t take her,” Val backed up Ricky. “You must understand, Lucy, that we don’t have much money and we can’t pay for—”

“Pay fo’!” Lucy’s indignant sniff reduced him to his extremely unimportant place. “We’s not talkin’ ‘bout pay workin’, Mistuh Ralestone. Letty-Lou don’ git no pay but her eatments. ‘Co’se, effen Miss ‘Chanda wanna give her some ole clo’s now an’ den, she kin tak’ dem. Letty-Lou, she don’ hav’ to git her a pay-work job, her pappy mak’s him a good livin’. But Miss ‘Chanda ain’ a-goin’ to tak’ keer dis big hous’ all by herself wit’ her lil’ han’s dere. We’s Ralestone folks. Letty-Lou, yo’ gits on youah ap’on an’ gits to work.”

“But we can’t let her,” Ricky raised her last protest.

“Miss ‘Chanda, we’s Ralestone folks. Mah gran’ pappy Bob was own man to Massa Miles Ralestone. He fit in de wah longside o’ Massa Miles. An’ wen de wah was done finish’d, dem two com’ home to-gethah. Den Massa Miles, he call mah gran’pappy in an’ say, ‘Bob, yo’all is free an’ I’se a ruinated man. Heah is fiv’ dollahs gol’ money an’ yo’ kin hav’ youah hoss.’ An’ Bob, he say, ‘Cap’n Miles, dese heah Yankees done said I’se free but dey ain’t done said dat I ain’t a Ralestone man. W’at time does yo’all wan’ breakfas’ in de mornin’?’ An’ wen Massa Miles wen’ no’th to mak’ his fo’tune, he told Bob, ‘Bob, I’se leavin’ dis heah hous’ in youah keer.’ An’, Miss ‘Chanda, we done look aftah Pirate’s Haven evah since, mah gran’pappy, mah pappy, Sam an’ me.”

Ricky held out her hand. “I’m sorry, Lucy. You see, we don’t understand very well, we’ve been away so long.”

Lucy touched Ricky’s hand and then, for all her weight, bobbed a curtsy. “Dat’s all right, Miss ‘Chanda, yo’ is ouah folks.”

Letty-Lou stayed.

## 4. Pistols For Two—Coffee For One

Val braced himself against the back of the roadster's seat and struggled to hold the car to a road which was hardly more than a cart track. Twice since Ricky and he had left Pirate's Haven they had narrowly escaped being bogged in the mud which had worked up through the thin crust of gravel on the surface.

To the south lay the old cypress swamps, dark glens of rotting wood and sprawling vines. A spur of this unsavory no-man's land ran close along the road, and looking into it one could almost believe, fancied Val, in the legends told by the early French explorers concerning the giant monsters who were supposed to haunt the swamps and wild lands at the mouth of the Mississippi. He would not have been surprised to see a brontosaurus peeking coyly down at him from twenty feet or so of neck. It was just the sort of place any self-respecting brontosaurus would have wallowed in.

But at last they won free from that place of cold and dank odors. Passing through Chalmette, they struck the main highway. From then on it was simple enough. St. Bernard Highway led into St. Claude Avenue and that melted into North Rampart street, one of the boundaries of the old French city.

"Can't we go slower?" complained Ricky. "I'd like to see some of the city without getting a crick in my neck from looking over my shoulder. Watch out for St. Anne Street. That's one corner of Beauregarde Square, the old Congo Square—"

"Where the slaves used to dance on Sundays before the war. I know; I've read just as many guide-books as you have. But there is such a thing as obstructing traffic. Also we have about a million and one things to do this afternoon. We can explore later. Here we are; Bienville Avenue. No, I will *not* stop so that you can see that antique store. Six blocks to the right," Val reminded himself.

"Val, that was the Absinthe House we just passed!"

"Yes? Well, it would have been better for a certain ancestor of ours if he had passed it, too. That was Jean Lafitte's headquarters at one time. Exchange Street—the next is ours."

They turned into Chartres Street and pulled up in the next block at the corner of Iberville. A four-story house coated with grayish plaster, its windows framed with faded green shutters and its door painted the same misty color, confronted them. There was a tiny shop on the first floor.

A weathered sign over the door announced that Bonfils et Cie. did business within, behind the streaked and bluish glass of the small curved window-panes. But what business Bonfils and Company conducted was left entirely to the imagination of the passer-by. Val locked the roadster and took from Ricky the long legal-looking envelope which Rupert had given them to deliver to Mr. LeFleur.

Ricky was staring in a puzzled manner at the shop when her brother took her by the arm. "Are you sure that you have the right place? This doesn't look like an office to me."

"We have to go around to the courtyard entrance. LeFleur occupies the second floor."

A small wooden door, reinforced with hinges of hand-wrought iron, opened before them, making them free of a courtyard paved with flagstones. In the center a tall tree shaded the flower bed at its foot and threw shadows upon the first of the steps leading to the upper

floors. The Ralestones frankly stared about them. This was the first house of the French Quarter they had seen, although their name might have admitted them to several closely guarded Creole strongholds. LeFleur's house followed a pattern common to the old city. The lower floor fronting on the street was in use only as a shop or store-room. In the early days each shopkeeper lived above his place of business and rented the third and fourth floors to aristocrats in from their plantations for the fashionable season.

A long, narrow ell ran back from the main part of the house to form one side of the courtyard. The ground floor of this contained the old slave quarters and kitchens, while the second was cut into bedrooms which had housed the young men of the family so that they could come and go at will without disturbing the more sedate members of the household. These small rooms were now in use as the offices of Mr. LeFleur. From the balcony, running along the ell, onto which each room opened, one could look down into the courtyard. It was on this balcony that the lawyer met them with outstretched hands after they had given their names to his dark, languid young clerk.

"But this is good of you!" René LeFleur beamed on them impartially. He was a small, plumpish, round-faced man in his early forties, who spoke in perpetual italics. His eyebrows, arched over-generously by Nature, gave him a look of never-ending astonishment at the world and all its works. But his genial smile was kindness itself. Unaccustomed as Val was to sudden enthusiasms, he found himself liking René LeFleur almost before his hand gripped Val's.

"Miss Ralestone, it is a pleasure, a very great pleasure, to see you here! And this," he turned to Val, "this must be that brother Valerius both you and Mr. Ralestone spoke so much of during our meeting in New York. You have safely recovered from that most unfortunate accident, Mr. Ralestone? But of course, your presence here is my answer. And how do you like Louisiana, Miss Ralestone?" His eyes behind his gold-rimmed eyeglasses sparkled as he tilted his head a fraction toward Ricky as if to hear the clearer.

"Well enough. Though we've seen very little of it yet, Mr. LeFleur."

"When you have seen Pirate's Haven," he replied, "you have seen much of Louisiana."

"But we're forgetting our manners!" exclaimed the girl. "We want to thank you for everything you've done for us. Rupert said to tell you that while he doesn't care for beans as a rule, the beans we found in our cupboard were very superior beans."

Mr. LeFleur hooted with laughter like a small boy. "He is droll, is that brother of yours. And has Sam been to see you?"

"Sam and—Lucy," answered Ricky with emphasis. "Lucy has decided to take us in hand. She has installed Letty-Lou over our protests."

The little lawyer nodded complacently. "Yes, Lucy will take care of you. She is a master housekeeper and cook—ah!" His eyes rolled upward. "And Mr. Ralestone, how is he?"

"All right. He's going over the farm with Sam this afternoon. We were sent in his place to give you the papers he spoke to you about."

At Ricky's answer, Val held out the envelope he had carried. To their joint surprise, LeFleur pounced upon it and withdrew to the window of the room into which he had conducted them. There he spread out the four sheets of yellowed paper which the envelope had contained.

"What were we carrying?" whispered Ricky. "Part of Rupert's deep, dark secret?"

“No,” her brother hissed back, “those are the plans of the Patagonian fort which were stolen from the Russian Embassy last Thursday by the beautiful woman spy disguised with a long green beard. You know, the proper first chapter of an international espionage thriller. You are the dumb but beautiful newspaper reporter on the scent, and I—”

“The even dumber G-man who spends most of his time running three steps ahead of Fu Chew Chow and his gang of oriental demons. In the second chapter—”

But a glance at Mr. LeFleur’s face as he turned away from the window put an end to their nonsense. Gone was his smile, his beaming good-will toward the world. He seemed a little tired, a trifle stooped. “Not here then,” he said slowly to himself as he slipped the papers back into the envelope.

“Mr. Valerius,” he looked up at the boy very seriously, “the LeFleurs have served the Ralestones, acting as their men of business, for over a hundred years. We owe your family a great debt. When young Denys LeFleur was shipped over here to New Orleans under false accusation of his enemies, the first Richard Ralestone became his patron. He helped the boy salvage something from the wreck of the LeFleur fortunes in France to start anew in a decent profession under tolerable surroundings, when others of his kind died miserably as beggars on the mud flats. Twice before have we been forced to be the bearers of ill news, but—” he shrugged, “that was in the past. This lies in the future.”

“What does?” asked Ricky.

“It is such a tangle,” he said, running his hand through his short, gray-streaked hair. “A tangle such as lawyers are supposed to delight in. But they don’t, I assure you that they don’t, Miss Ralestone. Not if they have their client’s interest at heart. You know, of course, of the missing Ralestone—Roderick?”

Ricky and Val both nodded. Mr. LeFleur spread out his plump hands in a queer little gesture as if he were pushing something away. “This whole unfortunate business begins with him. As far as we know today, he and his brother were co-owners of Pirate’s Haven. When young Roderick disappeared, he was still part owner. Although he was presumed dead, he was never lawfully declared so. Pirate’s Haven was simply assumed to be the property of your branch of the family.”

“Our branch of the family?” Val echoed him. “Do you mean that some descendant of Roderick has appeared to put in a claim?”

“That is the problem. Three days ago a man came to my office. He said that he is the direct descendant of Roderick Ralestone and that he can produce proof of that fact.”

“And he wants his share of the estate?” asked Ricky shrewdly.

“Yes.”

“He can keep on wanting,” Val said shortly. “We’ve nothing to give.”

“There’s Pirate’s Haven,” pointed out Mr. LeFleur.

“But he can’t—” Ricky’s hand closed about her brother’s wrist.

“Naturally he can’t take it,” Val assured her hotly. “Pirate’s Haven is ours. This looks to me like blackmail. He’ll threaten to stir up a lot of trouble unless we buy him off.”

Mr. LeFleur nodded. “That is perhaps the motive behind it all.”

“Well,” Val forced a laugh, “then he loses. We haven’t the money to buy him off.”

“Neither have you the money to fight a case through the courts, Mr. Valerius,” answered the lawyer soberly.

“But there is some chance, there must be!” urged Ricky.

“I submitted the full case to Mr. John Stanton yesterday—Mr. Stanton is our local authority on cases of this type. He has informed me that there is a single ray of hope. Frankly, I find this claimant a dubious person, but a shrewd one. He knows that he has the advantage now, but should we gain the upper hand, we could, I believe, rid ourselves of him. Our chance lies in the past. This was first a French and then a Spanish colony. Under both rules the law of primogeniture sometimes held force. That is, an estate passed to the eldest son of a family. Your estate was such a one. In fact, we possess in this very office old charters and papers which state that the property was entailed after the European custom. If that were so, the courts might declare that the elder of the twins born in 1788 was the sole owner of Pirate’s Haven.

“But which of the twin brothers was the elder? You will say at once, Richard. But your rival will say Roderick. And there is no proof. For in the spring, two months after the birth of the boys, most of the family papers were destroyed in the great fire which almost wiped out the city and burned the Ralestone town house. There is no birth record in existence. I appealed to your brother to return to me these papers which Miles Ralestone took north with him after the war. You returned them today but there was nothing in them of any value to this case.

“However, if you can find such proof, that Richard Ralestone was the elder and thus the legal heir under the laws of Spain, then we shall have a solid fact upon which to base our fight.”

“There is such a proof,” began Ricky slowly.

“What? Where?” demanded Mr. LeFleur.

“Don’t you remember, Val,” she turned to him, “what Rupert said about the Luck last night—that the names of the heirs were engraved upon its blade? We’ll have to find the Luck! We’ll just have to!”

“But Roderick took the Luck with him. And if it’s still in existence, this rival will have it now,” her brother reminded her.

“Yes, of course, I was forgetting—” her voice trailed off into silence and Val stared at her with a dropped jaw. Such a quick change of manner was totally unlike Ricky. “Yes,” she repeated slowly and distinctly, “I guess we’re the losers—”

“For Pete’s sake—” he began hotly and then he saw her hand making furious motions in his direction from behind the screen of her large purse. “Well, I suppose we are in a hole.” He managed to mend his tone a fraction. “Rupert will probably be in to see you tomorrow, Mr. LeFleur.”

“It would be well for him to become acquainted with the whole matter as quickly as possible,” agreed the unhappy Creole. “You may tell Mr. Ralestone that I am, of course, having this claimant thoroughly investigated. We shall have to wait and see. Time is a big factor,” he murmured as if to himself.

Ricky smiled brightly. There was a sort of eagerness about her, as if she were wild to be off. “Then we’ll say good-bye for the present, Mr. LeFleur. And may I mention again how much we have appreciated your thoughtfulness?”

René LeFleur aroused himself. “But it was a pleasure, a very great pleasure, Miss Ralestone. You are returning to Pirate’s Haven now?”

“Well—” she hesitated. Mystified at what lay behind her unexplainable actions, Val could only stand and listen. “We did have some errands. Of course, this news—”

LeFleur gestured widely. “But it will come all right. It must. There are papers somewhere.”

Firmly Ricky broke away from more protracted farewells. As the Ralestones turned out of the courtyard into which their host had conducted them, Val matched his step with hers.

“Well? What’s the matter?” he demanded.

“We had an eavesdropper.”

Val stopped short. “What do you mean?”

“I was facing the door to the balcony. There was the shadow of a head on the floor. When you spoke about Rick having the sword, it went away—the shadow, I mean. But someone had been listening and now he knows about the Luck and what it means to us.”

Aiming a kick at the nearest tire of the roadster, Val regarded the mud-stained rubber moodily. “Fine mess!”

“Yes, isn’t it? And there seems to be no loose end to the thing,” Ricky protested. “It’s like holding a big tangle of wool and being told to have it all straightened out before night—the plot of a fairy-tale. We have so many odd sections but no ends. There’s that boy in the garden this morning who said that he has as much right at Pirate’s Haven as we have, and then there’s that handkerchief, and now this man who claims half the estate—”

“And our mysterious listener,” finished her brother. “What shall we do now? Go home?”

“No. We might as well do the errands.” She seated herself in the car. “Val—”

“Yes?”

“I know one thing.” She leaned toward him and her eyes shone green as they did when she was excited or greatly troubled. “We aren’t going to let go of our tangle until we do find an end. We *are* the Ralestones of Pirate’s Haven and we are going to continue to be the Ralestones of Pirate’s Haven.”

“In spite of the enemy? I agree.” Val stepped on the starter. “You know, a hundred years ago there would have been a very simple remedy for this rival-claimant business.”

“What?”

“Pistols for two—coffee for one. Rupert or I would have met him out at the dueling oaks and that would have been the end of him.”

“Or you. But dueling—here!”

“Very common. The finest fencing masters on the North American continent plied their trade here. Why, one, Pepe Llula, the most famous duelist of his time, became the guardian of a cemetery just so, as gossip rumored, he could have some place to bury his opponents.

“Then on the other hand, if dueling were too risky, we might have had him voodooed, had we lived back in the good old days. Paid that voodoo queen—what was her name? Marie something or other—to put a curse on him so he’d just wither away.”

“And serve him right, too.” Ricky stared straight before her. “I don’t know how you feel about it, but I’m not going to give up Pirate’s Haven without a fight. It’s—it’s the first real home we’ve ever had. Rupert’s older; he’s spent his time traveling and seeing the world; it may not mean so much to him. But you and I, Val—You know what it’s been like! Schools,

and spending the holidays with aunts or in those frightful camps, never getting a chance to be together. We can't—we just can't have this only to lose it again. We can't!" her voice broke. "So we won't."

"Val, when you say things like that, I can almost believe them. If—if we do lose, let's stick together this time. Promise?" her voice lifted in an effort toward lightness.

"I promise. After this it will be the two of us together. Do you know, I've never really had a chance to get acquainted with my very good-looking sister."

She laughed. "I can't very well curtsy while sitting down in here, but 'thank yuh for them purty words, stranger.' And now for the express station. Then you are to stop at the Southeastern News Association headquarters for something of Rupert's and—"

The afternoon went quickly enough. They despatched the rest of their possessions from the express station to Pirate's Haven, went on a round of miscellaneous shopping, picked up a weighty box at the News Association, and ended up at five o'clock by visiting that institution of New Orleans, a coffee-house. Ricky was earnestly peeking into one of her ten or so small bags. They had parked the car and Val complained that he had become a sort of packhorse, and anything but patient one.

"What if your feet do hurt," his sister said wearily as she closed the bag and reached for another. "So do mine. These sidewalks feel like red-hot iron. I'll bet I could do one of those fakir tricks where you're supposed to walk over red-hot plowshares."

"Not only my feet but also my backbone is protesting. Whether you have reached the end of that *Anthony Adverse* of a shopping list or not, we're going home! And what *are* you looking for? You've opened all those bags at least twice and dropped no less than three on the floor each time," he snapped irritably.

"My pralines. I'm sure I gave them to you to carry. I've heard of New Orleans pralines all my life, so I got some today and now they've disappeared."

"They were probably included in that last arm-load of parcels I stowed in the car. Are you through?"

Ricky looked into her coffee-cup. "It's empty, so I guess I am. Where is the car? I'm so lost I don't know where we are now."

"We left it about three blocks away on the sunny side of the street," Val informed her with the relish of one who is thoroughly tired of his present existence. "If this is your usual behavior on a shopping trip, Rupert may bring you in the next time. Half an hour to choose a toothbrush-mug in the ten-cent store!"

"For a person who spends a good fifteen minutes matching a tie and a handkerchief," sniffed Ricky as she rose, "you're in a hurry to criticize others."

"Come *on!*" her brother almost howled as he scooped up the packages.

"Anyway, we won't have to get supper or wash the dishes or anything." She pulled off her hat as she settled herself in the car. "It's so beastly hot, but it'll be cooler at home. Do you suppose we could go swimming in the bayou?"

"I don't see why not." Val guided the roadster into a side street. "Where's that map of the city? We've got to see how to get back on to North Rampart from here."

"I'll look." Ricky bent her head and so she did not see the two figures walking close together and so rapt in conversation that the one on the curb side brushed against a lamp-post.



Now just what, considered Val, was the slim young clerk from Mr. LeFleur's office telling that red-faced man in the too-snug suit? He would have liked to have overheard a word or two. Perhaps he had become unduly suspicious but—he had his doubts.

“We turn left at the next corner,” said Ricky.

Val changed gears and drove on.

## 5. Their Tenant Discovers The Ralestones

Val stood on the small ornamental bridge pitching twigs down into the tiny garden brook. A moody frown creased his forehead. Under his feet lay a pair of pruning-shears he had borrowed from Sam with the intention of doing something about the jungle which surrounded Pirate's Haven on three sides. That is, he had intended doing something, but now—

“Penny for your thoughts.”

“Lady,” he answered dismally without turning around, “you can have a bushel of them for less than that.”

“There is a neat expression which describes you beautifully at this moment,” commented Ricky as she came up beside her brother. “Have you ever heard of a ‘sour puss?’”

“Several times. Oh, what's the use!” Val kicked at a long twig. A warm wind brought in its hold the heavy scent of flowering bushes and trees. His shirt clung to his shoulders damply. It was hot even in the shade of the oaks. Rupert had gone to town to see LeFleur and hear the worst, so that Pirate's Haven, save for themselves and Letty-Lou, was deserted.

“Come on,” Ricky's arm slid through his, “let's explore. Think of it—we've been here two whole days and we don't know yet what our back yard looks like. Rupert says that our land runs clear down into the swamp. Let's go see.”

“But I was going to—” He made a feeble beginning toward stooping for the pruning-shears.

“Val Ralestone, nobody can work outdoors in this heat, and you know it. Now come on. Bring those with you and we'll leave them in the carriage house as we pass it. You know,” she continued as they went along the path, “the trouble with us is that we haven't enough to do. What we need is a good old-fashioned job.”

“I thought we were going to be treasure hunters,” he protested laughingly.

“That's merely a side-line. I'm talking about the real thing, something which will pay us cash money on Saturday nights or thereabout.”

“Well, we can both use a typewriter fairly satisfactorily,” Val offered. “But as you are the world's worst speller and I am apt to become entangled in my commas, I can't see us the shining lights of any efficient office. And while we've had expensive educations, we haven't had practical ones. So what do we do now?”

“We sit down and think of one thing we're really good at doing and then—Val, what is that?” She pointed dramatically at a mound of brick overgrown with vines. To their right and left stretched a row of tumble-down cabins, some with the roofs totally gone and the doors fallen from the hinges.

“The old plantation bake oven, I should say. This must be what's left of the slave quarters. But where's the carriage house?”

“It must be around the other side of the big house. Let's try that direction anyway. But I think you'd better go first and do some chopping. This dress may be a poor thing but it's my own and likely to be for some time to come. And short of doing a sort of snake act, I don't see how we're going to get through there.”

Val applied the shears ruthlessly to vine and bush alike, glad to find something to attack. The weight of his depression was still upon him. It was all very well for Ricky to talk so lightly of getting a job, but talk would never put butter on their bread—if they could afford bread.

“You certainly have done a fine job of ruining that!”

Val surpassed Ricky’s jump by a good inch. By the old bake oven stood a woman. A disreputable straw hat with a raveled brim was pulled down over her untidy honey-colored hair and she was rolling up the sleeves of a stained smock to bare round brown arms.

“It’s very plain to the eye that you’re no gardener,” she continued pleasantly. “And may I ask who you are and what you are doing here? This place is not open to trespassers, you know.”

“We did think we would explore,” answered Ricky meekly. “You see, this all belongs to my brother.” She swept her hand about in a wide circle.

“And just who is he?”

“Rupert Ralestone of Pirate’s Haven.”

“Good—!” Their questioner’s hand flew to cover her mouth, and at the comic look of dismay which appeared on her face, Ricky’s laugh sounded. A moment later the stranger joined in her mirth.

“And here I thought that I was being oh so helpful to an absent landlord,” she chuckled. “And this brother of yours is *my* landlord!”

“How—? Why, we didn’t know that.”

“I’ve rented your old overseer’s house and am using it for my studio. By the way, introductions are in order, I believe. I am Charity Biglow, from Boston as you might guess. Only beans and the Bunker Hill Monument are more Boston than the Biglows.”

“I’m Richanda Ralestone and this is my brother Valerius.”

Miss Biglow grinned cheerfully at Val. “That won’t do, you know; too romantic by far. I once read a sword-and-cloak romance in which the hero answered to the name of Valerius.”

“I haven’t a cloak nor a sword and my friends generally call me Val, so I hope I’m acceptable,” he grinned back at her.

“Indeed you are—both of you. And what are you doing now?”

“Trying to find a building known as the carriage house. I’m beginning to believe that its existence is wholly mythical,” Val replied.

“It’s over there, simply yards from the direction in which you’re heading. But suppose you come and visit me instead. Really, as part landlords, you should be looking into the condition of your rentable property.”

She turned briskly to the left down the lane on which were located the slave cabins and guided the Ralestones along a brick-paved path into a clearing where stood a small house of typical plantation style. The lower story was of stone with steep steps leading to a balcony which ran completely around the second floor of the house.

As they reached the balcony she pulled off her hat and threw it in the general direction of a cane settee. Without that wreck of a hat, with the curls of her long bob flowing free, she looked years younger.

“Make yourselves thoroughly at home. After all, this is your house, you know.”

“But we didn’t,” protested Ricky. “Mr. LeFleur didn’t tell us a thing about you.”

“Perhaps he didn’t know.” Charity Biglow was pinning back her curls. “I rented from Harrison.”

“Like the bathroom,” Val murmured and looked up to find them staring at him. “Oh, I just meant that you were another improvement that he had installed,” he stammered. Miss Biglow nodded in a satisfied sort of way. “Spoken like a true southern gentleman, though I don’t think in the old days that bathrooms would have crept into a compliment paid to a lady. Now I did have some lemonade—if you will excuse me,” and she was gone into the house.

Ricky smiled. “I like our tenant,” she said softly.

“You don’t expect me to disagree with that, do you?” her brother had just time enough to ask before their hostess appeared again complete with tray, glasses, and a filled pitcher which gave forth the refreshing sound of clinking ice. And after her paraded an old friend of theirs, tail proudly erect. “There’s our cat!” cried Ricky.

Val snapped his fingers. “Here, Satan.”

After staring round-eyed at both of them, the cat crossed casually to the settee and proceeded to sharpen his claws.

“Well, I like that! After I shared my bed with the brute, even though I didn’t know it until the next morning,” Val exploded.

“Why, where did you meet Cinders?” asked Miss Biglow as she put down the tray.

“He came to us the first night we were at Pirate’s Haven,” explained Ricky. “I thought he was a ghost or something when he scratched at the back door.”

“So that’s where he was. He used to go over to the Harrisons’ for meals a lot. When I’m working I don’t keep very regular hours and he doesn’t like to be neglected. Come here, Cinders, and make your manners.”

Replying to her invitation with an insolent flirt of his tail, Cinders, whom Val continued obstinately to regard as “Satan,” disappeared around the corner of the balcony. Charity Biglow looked at them solemnly. “So obedient,” she observed; “just like a child.”

“Are you an artist, too?” Ricky asked as she put down her glass.

Miss Biglow’s face wrinkled into a grimace. “My critics say not. I manage to provide daily bread and sometimes a slice of cake by doing illustrations for action stories. And then once in a while I labor for the good of my soul and try to produce something my more charitable friends advise me to send to a show.”

“May—may we see some of them—the pictures, I mean?” inquired Ricky timidly.

“If you can bear it. I use the side balcony for a workshop in this kind of weather. I’m working on a picture now, something more ambitious than I usually attempt in heat of this sort. But my model didn’t show up this morning so I’m at a loose end.”

She led them around the corner where Satan had disappeared and pointed to a table with a sketching board at one end, several canvases leaning face against the house, and an easel covered with a clean strip of linen. “My workshop. A trifle untidy, but then I am an untidy person. I’m expecting an order so I’m just whiling away my time working on an idea of my own until it comes.”

Ricky touched the strip of covering across the canvas on the easel. “May I?” she asked.

“Yes. It might be a help, getting some other person’s reaction to the thing. I had a clear idea of what I wanted to do when I started but I don’t think it’s turning out to be what I planned.”

Ricky lifted off the cover. Val stared at the canvas.

“But that is he!” he exclaimed.

Charity Biglow turned to the boy. “And what do you mean—”

“That’s the boy I found in the garden, Ricky!”

“Is it?” She stared, fascinated, at the lean brown face, the untidy black hair, the bitter mouth, which their hostess had so skilfully caught in her unfinished drawing.

“So you’ve met Jeems.” Miss Biglow looked at Val thoughtfully. “And what did you think of him?”

“It’s rather—what did he think of me. He seemed to hate me. I don’t know why. All I ever said to him was ‘Hello.’”

“Jeems is a queer person—”

“Sam says that he is none too honest,” observed Ricky, her attention still held by the picture.

Miss Biglow shook her head. “There is a sort of feud between the swamp people and the farmers around here. And neither side is wholly to be believed in their estimation of the other. Jeems isn’t dishonest, and neither are a great many of the muskrat hunters. In the early days all kinds of outlaws and wanted men fled into the swamps and lived there with the hunters. One or two desperate men gave the whole of the swamp people a bad name and it has stuck. They are a strange folk back there in the fur country.

“Some are Cajuns, descendants of exiles from Evangeline’s country; some are Creoles who took to that way of life after the Civil War ruined them. There’s many a barefooted boy or girl of the swamps who bears a name that was once honored at the Court of France or Spain. And there are Americans of the old frontier stock who came down river with Andrew Jackson’s army from the wilds of Tennessee and the Indian country. It’s a strange mixture, and once in a while you find a person like Jeems. He speaks the uneducated jargon of his people but he reads and writes French and English perfectly. He has studied under Père Armand until he has a classical education such as was popular for Creole boys of good family some fifty years ago. Père Armand is an old man now, but he is as good an instructor as he is a priest.

“Jeems wants to make something of himself. He argues logically that the swamp has undeveloped resources which might save its inhabitants from the grinding poverty which is slowly destroying them. And it is Jeems’ hope that he can discover some of the swamp secrets when he is fitted by training to do so.”

“Who is he?” Val asked. “Is Jeems his first or last name?”

“His last. I have never heard his given name. He is very reticent about his past, though I do know that he is an orphan. But he is of Creole descent and he does have breeding as well as ambition. Unfortunately he had quite an unpleasant experience with a boy who was visiting the Harrisons last summer. The visitor accused Jeems of taking a fine rifle which was later discovered right where the boy had left it in his own canoe. Jeems has a certain pride and he was turned against all the plantation people. His attitude is unfortunate because he longs so for a different sort of life and yet has no contact with young people except those of the swamp. I think he is beginning to trust me, for he will come in the mornings to pose for my picture of the swamp hunter. Do you know,” she hesitated, “I think that you would find a real

friend in Jeems if you could overcome his hatred of plantation people. You would gain as much as he from such an association. He can tell you things about the swamp—stories which go back to the old pirate days. Perhaps—”

Ricky looked up from the uncompleted picture. “I think he’d be nice to know. But why does he look so—so sort of starved?”

“Probably because the bill of fare in a swamp cabin is not as varied as it might be,” answered Charity Biglow. “But you can’t offer him anything, of course. I don’t even know where he lives. And now, tell me about yourselves. Are you planning to live here?”

Her frank interest seemed perfectly natural. One simply couldn’t resent Charity Biglow.

“Well,” Ricky laughed ruefully, “we can’t very well live anywhere else. I think Rupert still has ten dollars—”

“After his expedition this morning, I would have my doubts of that,” Val cut in. “You see, Miss Biglow, we are back to the soil now.”

“Charity is the name,” she corrected him. “So you’re down—”

“But not out!” Ricky hastened to assure her. “But we might be that.” And then and there she told their tenant of the rival claimant.

Charity listened closely, absent-mindedly sucking the wooden shaft of one of her brushes. When Ricky had done, she nodded.

“Nice mess you’ve dropped into. But I think that your lawyer has the right idea. This is a neat piece of blackmail and your claimant will disappear into thin air if you have a few concrete facts to face him down with. Are you sure you’ve looked through all the family papers? No hiding-places or safes—”

“One,” said Ricky calmly, “but we don’t know where that is. In the Civil War days, after General Butler took over New Orleans, some family possessions were hidden somewhere in the Long Hall, but we don’t know where. The secret was lost when Richard Ralestone was shot by Yankee raiders.”

“Is he the ghost?” asked Charity.

“No. You ask that as if you know something,” Val observed.

“Nothing but talk. There have been lights seen, white ones. And a while back my maid Rose left because she saw something in the garden one night.”

“Jeems, probably,” the boy commented. “He seems to like the place.”

“No, not Jeems. He was sitting right on that railing when we both heard Rose scream.”

“Val, the handkerchief!” Ricky’s hand arose to her buttoned pocket. “Then there *was* someone inside the house that night. But why—unless they were after the treasure!”

“The quickest way to find out,” her brother got up from the edge of the table where he had perched, “is to go and do a little probing of our own. We have a good two hours until lunch. Will you join us?” he asked Charity.

“You tempt me, but I’ve got to get in as much work on this as I can,” she indicated her canvas. “And Jeems may show up even if it is late. So my conscience says ‘No.’ Unfortunately I do possess a regular rock-ribbed New England conscience.”

“Rupert will be back by four,” said Ricky. “Will your conscience let you come over for coffee with us then? You see how quickly we have adopted the native customs—coffee at four.”

“Ricky,” her brother explained, “desires to become that figure of Romance—the southern belle.”

“Then we must do what we can to help her create the proper atmosphere,” urged Charity solemnly.

“Even to the victoria and the coach-hound?” Val demanded in dismay.

“Well, perhaps not that far,” she laughed. “Anyway, I accept your kind invitation with pleasure. I shall be there at four—if I can find a presentable dress. Now clear out, you two, and see what secrets of the past you can uncover before lunch time.”

But their explorations resulted in nothing except slightly frayed tempers. Val had sounded what paneling there was, but as he had no idea what a hollow panel should sound like if rapped, he inwardly decided that he was not exactly fitted for such investigations.

Ricky broke two fingernails pressing the carving about the fireplace and sat down on the couch to state in no uncertain terms what she thought of the house, and of their ancestor who had been so misguided as to get himself shot after hiding the stuff. She ended with a brilliant but short description of Val’s present habits and vices—which she added because he happened to have said meekly enough that if she would only trim her nails to a reasonable length, such accidents could be avoided.

When she had done, her brother sat back on the lowest step of the stairs and wiped his hands on his handkerchief.

“Seeing that I have been crawling about on my hands and knees inspecting cracks in the floor, I think I have as much right to lose my temper as you have. Short of tearing the house down, I don’t see how we are going to find anything without directions. And I am *not* in favor of taking such a drastic step as yet.”

“It’s around here somewhere, I know it!” She kicked petulantly at the hearth-stone.

“That statement is certainly a big help,” Val commented. “Several yards across and I don’t know how many up and down—and you just know it’s there somewhere. Well, you can keep on pressing until you wear your fingers out, but I’m calling it a day right now.”

She did not answer, and he got stiffly to his feet. He was hot and more tired than he had been since he had left the hospital. Because he was just as sure as Ricky that the key to their riddle must be directly before them at that moment, he was thoroughly disgusted.

A strange sound from his sister brought him around. Ricky was not pretty when she cried. No pearly drops slipped down white cheeks. Her nose shone red and she sniffed. But Ricky did not cry often. Only when she was discouraged, or when she was really hurt.

“Why, Ricky—” Val began uncertainly.

“Go ‘way,” she hiccupped. “You don’t care—you don’t care ‘bout anything. If we have to lose this—”

“We won’t! We’ll find a way!” he assured her hurriedly. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. I’m just tired and hot, and so are you. Let’s go upstairs and freshen up. Lunch will be ready—”

“I kno-o-ow—” her sob deepened into a wail. “Then Rupert will laugh at us and—”

“Ricky! For goodness sake, pull yourself together!”

She looked up at him, round-mouthed in surprise at his sharpness. And then to his amazement she began to giggle, her giggles mixed with her sobs. “You do look so funny,” she gasped, “like the stern father of a family. Why don’t you fight back always when I get mean, Val?”

He grinned back at her. “I don’t know. Shall I, next time?”

She rubbed her face with a businesslike air and tucked her handkerchief away. “There isn’t going to be any next time,” she announced briskly. “If there is—well—”

“Yes?” Val prompted.

“Then you can just spank me or something drastic. Come on, I must look a sight. And goodness knows, you’re no beauty with that black mark across your chin and your slacks all grimy at the knees. We’ve got to clean up before lunch or Letty-Lou will think we’re some sort of heathen.”

With that she turned and led the way upstairs, totally recovered and herself again in spite of a red nose and suspiciously moist eyelashes.



## 6. Satan Goes A-Hunting And Finds Work For Idle Hands

“Val, did that cat go upstairs?” Ricky stood at the foot of the hall staircase frowning crossly. “If he did, you’ll just have to go up and get him. I will not have him walking on the beds with muddy feet. There’s enough to do here without cleaning up after a lazy cat. Where’s Rupert?”

Her brother put aside his note-book and got up from the couch with a lazy stretch. Ricky’s early-morning energy was apt to be a little irksome and Val had not had a good night. When one lies and stares up at a ceiling, one sometimes hears strange noises which cannot be accounted for by wind or creaking boards.

“He retired into Bluebeard’s den right after breakfast and he hasn’t appeared since.”

“I should think that after what he heard yesterday he’d be doing something,” she protested.

“And what is there for him to do? You know just how far we got with our investigations yesterday. Go rap on his door if you like and stir him up. But I don’t think his welcome will be a cordial one.”

Ricky sat down on the bottom step and pushed the hair back from her forehead. Suddenly she looked very small and faintly forlorn with all that expanse of age-blackened wood behind her.

“I can’t understand you two at all. One would think you would be just as well pleased if that Beezel the rival walked off with this place. You aren’t even trying to fight!”

“Listen, Ricky, how can we fight when we have nothing solid to fight with? LeFleur is doing all he can, we have explored every possibility here—”

“Val, don’t you *want* to stay here?” she interrupted him.

He looked around at stone and wood. Did he really want to? His instant hot anger at the thought of another owner there was his answer. Why, this house was a part of them, as much as if they had laid its foundation stones with their own hands. They had been brought up on its blood-stained legends, and on the one or two happier tales which had been lived within its walls. If they had to leave, they would regret it all their lives. And yet—Rupert seemed to take no interest in the claims of the rival, and only Ricky wanted to fight.

Ricky got up from the stairs.

“We might as well go up and catch that cat,” she said.

At the top of the stairs Satan sat, his eyes upon the landing windows. Val reached out his hands for him, but in that single instant Satan was gone. A black tail disappeared around the door of the Jackson room.

“Oh, dear, I hope he isn’t going to get on that bed.” Ricky opened the door wider. “No, there he goes under instead of on it. Can you see him, Val?”

Her brother crouched and lifted the edge of the brocaded cover which swept to the floor. To Val’s surprise a thin line of light showed along the wall at the head of the bed.

“Ricky, look behind the head of the bed! Is it fast against the wall?”

She started to the tall canopied head and pulled the faded fabrics away from the paneling. “No, there’s about two feet here at the bottom. It doesn’t show because the canopy covers it. And, Val, there’s an opening here! Satan’s trying to get through!”

“We need a flashlight.”

“I’ll get Rupert’s. Val, promise not to go in—if it *is* a door—until I come back!”

“Of course; but hurry.”

The flashlight revealed a wide panel which slid upward. Time and damp had warped the wood so that it no longer fitted snugly to the floor as the builder had intended. But the same warping made the door defy their efforts to raise it any higher. At last, by prying and pounding, they got it up perhaps a yard from the floor. Satan slipped through and they followed on hands and knees.

They crawled into a small room lighted by two round windows set like eyes in the side wall. More than three-quarters of the space was filled with furniture and boxes wrapped in tarred canvas. The choking dust and general mustiness of the long-closed apartment drove Val to investigate the window fastenings and throw them open to the morning air.

“There must be another door somewhere,” he said, calling Ricky away from a box where she was picking at the knotted rope which bound it. “All these things couldn’t have been brought through that hole behind the bed.”

“Here it is,” she said a moment later, pointing to an oblong set flush with the wall. “It’s bolted on this side.”

“Let me open it and see where we are.” Val fumbled at the rusty latch, but he had to use an iron poker from a discarded fire stand in the corner before he could hammer it back. Again the door resisted their efforts to push it open until Val flung his full weight against it. With a snapping report it swung open and he sprawled forward into the short hall which had once led into the garden wing, an ell of the house destroyed by roving British raiders during the days of 1815. The only wholly wooden portion of the house, it had been burnt and never rebuilt.

“Come on,” Ricky pulled at Val’s sleeve, “let’s explore.”

He looked at his black hands. “I would suggest some soap and water, several brooms, and some dusting cloths if we’re going to do it right. Better make a regular house-cleaning party of it.”

“Goodness, what have I strayed into?” Charity Biglow stood in the lower hall staring at the younger Ralestones as they came through from the kitchen. They had both changed into their oldest and least respectable clothes. Ricky, in fact, was wearing a pair of Val’s slacks and one of Rupert’s shirts, and they were burdened with a broom which was long past its youth, several smaller brushes, and a great bundle of floor-cloths.

“We’ve found a secret room—” began Ricky.

“As one door has been in plain sight since the building of this house, it could hardly be called a secret room,” Val objected.

“Well, we didn’t know it was there until Satan found the back entrance for us. And now we’re going to clean it out. It’s full of furniture and boxes and things.”

“Don’t!” Charity held up a paint-streaked hand. “You will have me drooling in a moment. I don’t suppose you could use another assistant? After all, it was my cat who found it for you. If you can provide me with a set of those weird coverings which seem to be your house-cleaning uniforms, I would just love to wield a broom in your company.”

“The more the merrier,” laughed Ricky. “I think Val has another pair of slacks—”

“That’s right, dispose of my wardrobe before my face,” he commented, balancing his load more carefully in preparation for climbing the stairs. “Only spare my white flannels, please. I’m saving those for the occasion when I can play the country gentleman in style.”

Upstairs he braced open the hall door of the storage-room. The open windows had cleared the air within but they were too high and too small to admit enough light to reach the far corners. It would be best, they decided, to carry each box and piece of furniture to the hall for examination. With the zeal of treasure hunters they set to work.

Some time later, when Val was coaxing the second box through the door, they were interrupted.

“And just what is going on here?” Rupert stood at the end of the hall.

“Oh,” Ricky smiled sweetly, “did we really disturb you?”

“Well, I did think that there was a troop of elephants doing tap dancing up here. But that isn’t the point—just *what* are you doing?”

“Cleaning house.” Ricky flicked a gray rag in his direction freeing a cloud of dust. “Don’t you think it needs it?”

Rupert sneezed. “It seems so. But why—? Miss Biglow!”

Charity, extremely dirty—she had apparently run dusty hands across her forehead several times—had come to the door of the storage-room. At the sight of Rupert she flushed and made a hurried attempt at smoothing her hair.

“I—” she began, when Ricky interrupted her.

“Charity is helping us, which is more than we can say of you. Go back to your old den and hibernate. And then you can’t look down that long nose of yours when we turn up the papers that’ll save us from the poorhouse.”

“That’s telling him,” Val murmured approvingly as he fanned himself with one of the cleaner cloths. “But perhaps we had better explain. You see, Satan went hunting and found work for idle hands,” and he told the tale of the sliding panel behind the bed.

When he had finished, Rupert laughed. “So you are still determined on treasure hunting, are you? Well, if it will keep you out of mischief, go to it.”

“Rupert,” Ricky faced him squarely, “don’t be utterly insufferable. If you had one drop of hot blood in you, you’d be just as thrilled as we are. Just because you’ve been around and around the world until you got dizzy or something, you needn’t stand there with that ‘See-the-little-children-play’ smirk on your face. You don’t really care whether we lose Pirate’s Haven or not, do you?”

Rupert straightened and the color crept up across his high cheek-bones. His mouth opened and then he closed it again without speaking the words he had intended, closed with a firmness which tightened his lips into a straight line.

“Don’t stand there and glower at me,” Ricky went on. “Why don’t you say what you were going to? I’m just about tired of this world-weary attitude—”

“Ricky!” Val clapped his black hand over her mouth and turned to Charity. “Please excuse the fireworks. They are not usual, I assure you.”

“Let me go!” Ricky twisted out of his grip. “I don’t care if Charity does hear. She ought to know what we’re really like!”

“Speak for yourself, my pet.” The red had faded from Rupert’s face. “You do have a nice little habit of speaking your mind, don’t you? But on this occasion I believe you’re at least eight-tenths right. I have been neglecting my opportunities. Suppose you let me get at that box, Val. And look here, if you are going to unpack these, why not move them down to the end of the hall and turn them out on a sheet?”

Charity and Ricky suddenly disappeared back into the room and were very busy whenever Rupert crossed their line of vision, but Val was heartily glad of his brother’s help in lifting and pulling.

“Better not try to take this bedstead and stuff out,” Rupert advised when they had the three boxes out in the hall. “We have no need for it now, anyway.”

“I believe—yes, it is! A real Sergnoret piece!” Charity was industriously rubbing away at the head of the bed. Rupert knelt down beside her.

“And just what is a Sergnoret piece?”

“A collector’s item nowadays. François Sergnoret was one of the greatest cabinet-makers of New Orleans. See that ‘S’—that’s the way he always signed his work.”

“Treasure trove!” cried Ricky. “I wonder how much it’s worth?”

“Exactly nothing to us.” Rupert was running his hands across the mahogany. “We couldn’t sell anything from this house until the title is cleared.”

As Val moved around to the opposite side to see better, his foot struck against something on the floor. He stooped and picked up a box with a slanting cover, the whole black and smooth with age and the rubbing of countless hands.

“What’s this?” He had crossed to the door and was examining his find in the light.

Rupert’s hand fell upon his shoulder. “Val, be careful of that. Charity, he’s got something here!” He pulled her up beside him, not noting in his excitement that he had broken out of the formal shell which seemed to wall him in whenever she was around.

“A Bible box! And an authentic one, too!” She drew her fingers down the slope of the lid.

“And just what is it?” Val asked for the second time.

“These boxes were used in the seventeenth century for writing-desks and later to keep the large family Bibles in. But this is the first one I’ve ever seen outside of a museum. What’s this on the lid?” She traced a worn outline. Val studied the design.

“Why, it’s Joe! You know, that grinning skull we have stuck up all over the place to bolster up our superiority complex. That proves that this is ours, all right.”

“Perhaps—” Ricky’s eyes were round with excitement, “perhaps it belonged to Pirate Dick himself!”

“Perhaps it did,” her younger brother agreed.

“Lift the lid.” She was almost hopping on one foot in her impatience. “Let’s see what’s inside.”

“No gold or jewels, I’ll wager. How do you get the thing undone?”

“Here, let me try.” Rupert took it from Val’s hands and put it down on one of the chests, squatting on the floor before it. With the smallest blade of his penknife he delicately probed the fastening sunken in the wood.

“I could do a faster job,” he remarked, “if you didn’t all breathe down the back of my neck.” They retreated two inches or so and waited impatiently. With a satisfied grunt he dropped his knife and pulled the lid up.

“Why, there’s nothing in it!” Ricky’s cry of disappointment was almost a wail.

“Nothing but that old torn lining.” Val was as disgusted as she.

Rupert closed it again. “I’ll rub this up some and put in another lining. This is too good a piece to hide away up here,” and he put it carefully aside at the end of the hall.

Their investigations yielded nothing more except great quantities of dust, a mummified rat which even Satan refused to sniff at, and a large collection of spider webs. Having swept out the room, they went to wash their hands before unpacking the well-wrapped boxes.

When their swathing canvas and sacking was thrown aside, the boxes stood revealed as stout chests banded with iron. Charity paused before one. “This is a marriage chest, late seventeenth century, I would judge. Look there, under that carved leaf—isn’t that a date?”

“Sixteen hundred ninety-three,” Rupert deciphered. “That crest above it looks familiar. I know, it belonged to that French lady who married our pirate ancestor.”

“The first Lady Richanda!” Ricky touched the chest lovingly. “Then this is mine, Rupert. Can’t it be mine?” she coaxed.

“Of course. But it’s locked, and as we don’t have any keys which would fit the lock, you’ll have to wait until we can get a locksmith out to work on it before you will know what’s inside.”

“I don’t care. No,” she corrected herself, “that’s wrong; I do care. But anyway it’s mine!” She caressed the stiff carving with her fingers.

“What’s this one?” Val turned to the second box. It, too, was fashioned of wood, but it was plain where the other was carved, and the iron bands across it were pitted with rust.

“A sea chest, I would say.” Rupert touched the top gingerly. “By the feel, it’s locked too. And I don’t care to play around with it. The men who made things like these were too fond of having little poisoned fangs run into your hand when you tried to force the chest without knowing the trick. We’ll have to leave this for an expert, too.”

“What about the third?”

Charity laughed. “After your two treasures I’m afraid that this will be a disappointment.” She indicated a small humpbacked trunk covered with moth-eaten horsehair. “No romance here. But the key is tied to the clasp beside the lock.”

“Then open it before I expire of pure unsatisfied curiosity,” Ricky begged. “Go on, Rupert. Hurry.”

“Oh,” she said a moment later, “it’s full of nothing but a lot of books.”

“What did you expect,” Val asked her, “a skeleton? Do you know, I think that Rick’s ghost, or whatever influence presides over this house, has a sense of humor. You find a room, or a trunk, or something which makes you feel that you are on the verge of getting what you want, and then it all fades into just nothing again. Now, by rights, that writing-desk should have contained the secret message which would have told us where to find a hidden passage or

something. But what is in it? A couple of pieces of lining almost completely torn from the bottom. I'll wager that when you open those chests you'll find nothing but a brick or 'April Fool' scrawled across the inside. This isn't true to any fiction I ever read," he ended plaintively.

"Good Heavens!" Charity was staring down at what lay within a portfolio she had opened.

"Don't tell me you have really found something!" Val exclaimed.

"It can't be true!" She still stared at what she held.

Ricky looked over her shoulder. "Why, it's nothing but a picture of a bird," she observed.

"It's a genuine Audubon," Charity corrected her.

"What!" With little regard for manners, Rupert snatched the portfolio from her hands. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. But you must take it in to the museum and get an expert opinion. It's wonderful!"

"Here's another." Reverently Rupert raised the first sketch and then the second. "Three, four, five, six," he counted.

"Was Audubon ever here?" Charity looked about the hall, a sort of awe coloring her voice.

"He might easily have been when he lived in New Orleans. Though we have no record of it," answered Rupert. "But these," he closed the portfolio carefully and knotted its strings, "speak for themselves. I'll take them to LeFleur tomorrow. We can't allow them to lie about here."

"I should hope not!" Charity eyed the portfolio wistfully. "Imagine actually owning six of those—"

"They won't pay our bills," said Ricky, practical for once in her life. Treasure to Ricky was not half a dozen sketches on yellowed paper but good old-fashioned gold with a few jewels thrown in for her own private satisfaction. The portfolio and its contents left her unmoved. Val admitted to himself that he, too, was disappointed. After all—well, treasure should be treasure.

Rupert carried the portfolio into his bedroom and locked it in one of his mysterious brief-cases which had somehow found its way upstairs.

The two chests they moved out farther into the hall and the trunk was placed back against the wall, ready for further investigation.

"Mistuh Ralestone, suh," Letty-Lou, standing half-way up the back stairs, addressed Rupert, "lunch am on de table. Effen yo'all doan come now, de eatments will be spiled."

"All right," he answered.

"Letty-Lou," called Ricky, "put on another plate. Miss Charity is staying to lunch."

"Dat's all ri', Miss 'Chanda. I'se done done dat. Yo'all comin' now?"

"You see how we are bullied," Ricky appealed to Charity. "Of course you're going to stay," she swept aside the other's protests. "What's food for, if not to feed your friends? Val, go wash up; your hands are frightful. I don't care if you did wash once; go and—"

"This is her little-mother-of-the-family mood," her younger brother explained to Charity. "It wears off after a while if you just don't notice it. But I will wash though," he looked at his hands, "I seem to need it."

“And don’t use the guest towels,” Ricky called after him. “You know that they’re only to look at.”

When Val emerged from the bathroom he found the hall deserted. Sounds from below suggested that his family had basely left him for food. He started along the passage. Not far from the stairs was the writing-desk where Rupert had left it. Val picked it up, thinking that he might as well take it along down with him.

## 7. By Our Luck!

Depositing the desk on the seat of one of the hall chairs, Val started toward the dining-room, a grim hole which Lucy had calmly forced the family to use but which they all cordially disliked. Its paneled walls, crystal-hung chandelier, marble-fronted fireplace, and inlaid floor gave it the appearance of one of the less cozy rooms in a small palace. There were also two tasteful portraits of dead ducks which had been added as a finishing touch by some tenant during the eighties and which still remained upon the walls to Ricky's unholy joy.

But the long table, the high-backed chairs, the side serving-table, and the two tall cabinets of china were fine enough pieces if one cared for the massive. Ricky's table-cloth of violent-hued peasant linen was not in keeping with the china and glassware Letty-Lou had set out upon it. Charity was commenting upon this ensemble as Val entered.

"Doesn't this red and green plaid seem a bit—well, bright?" The corners of her mouth twitched betrayingly.

"No," Ricky returned firmly. "This cloth matches the ducks."

"Oh, yes, the ducks," Charity eyed them. "So you consider that the ducks are the note you wish to emphasize?"

"Certainly." Ricky surveyed the picture hanging opposite her. "I consider them unique. Not everyone can have ducks in the dining-room nowadays."

"For which they should be eternally thankful," observed Rupert. "They are rather gaudy, aren't they?"

"Oh, but I like the expression in this one's glassy eye," Ricky pointed out. "You might call this study 'Gone But Not Forgotten.'"

"Corn-bread, please," Val asked, thus attempting to put an end to the art-appreciation class.

"I think," continued Ricky, undisturbed as she passed him the plate heaped with golden squares, "that they are slightly surrealist. They distinctly resemble the sort of things one is often pursued by in one's brighter nightmares."

"Do you have any really good pictures?" asked Charity, resolutely averting her gaze from the ducks.

"Three, but they've been loaned to the museum," answered Rupert. "Not by well-known painters, but they're historically interesting. There's one of the first Lady Richanda, and one of the missing Rick. That's the best of the lot, according to LeFleur. I saw a photograph of it once. Come to think about it, Val looks a lot like the boy in the picture. He might have sat for it."

They all turned to eye Val. He arose and bowed. "I find these compliments too overwhelming," he murmured.

Rupert grinned. "And how do you know that that remark was intended as a compliment?"

"Naturally I assumed so," his brother retorted with a dignity which disappeared as the piece of corn-bread in his hand broke in two, the larger and more liberally buttered portion falling butter side down on the table. Ricky smiled in a pained sort of way as she attempted to judge from her side of the table just how much damage Val's awkwardness had done.



“If you were the graceful hostess,” he informed her severely, “you would now throw your piece in the middle to show that anyone could suffer a like mishap.”

Ricky changed the subject hurriedly by passing beans to Charity.

“So Val looks like the ghost,” Charity said a moment later. “Now I will have to go to town and see that portrait. Just where is it?”

Rupert shook his head. “I don’t know. But it’s listed in the catalogue as ‘Portrait of Roderick Ralestone, Aged Eighteen.’”

“Just Val’s age, then.” Ricky spooned some watermelon pickles onto her plate. “But he was older than that when he left here.”

“Let’s see. He was born in February, 1788, which would make him fourteen when his parents died in 1802. Then he disappeared in 1814, twelve years later. Just twenty-six when he went,” computed Rupert.

“A year younger than you are now,” observed Ricky.

“And nine years older than yourself at this present date,” Val added pleasantly. “Why this sudden interest in mathematics?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Only somehow I always thought Rick was younger when he went away. I’ve always felt sorry for him. Wonder what happened to him afterwards?”

“According to our rival,” Rupert pulled his coffee-cup before him as Letty-Lou took away their plates, “he just went quietly away, married, lived soberly, and brought up a son, who in turn fathered a son, and so on to the present day. A tame enough ending for our wild privateersman.”

“I’ll bet it isn’t true. Rick wouldn’t end like that. He probably went off down south and got mixed up in some of the revolutions they were having at the time,” suggested Ricky. “He couldn’t just settle down and die in bed. I could imagine him scuttling a ship but not being a quiet business man.”

“He was one of Lafitte’s men, wasn’t he?” asked Charity. At their answering nods, she went on: “Lafitte was a business man, you know. Oh, I don’t mean that forge he ran in town, but his establishment at Grande Terre. He was more smuggler than pirate, that’s why he lasted so long. Even the most respected tradesmen had dealings with him. Why, he used to post notices right in town when he held auctions at Baratavia, listing what he had to sell, mostly smuggled Negroes and a few cargoes of luxuries from Europe. He was a privateer under the rules of war, but he was never a real pirate. At least, that’s the belief held nowadays.”

“We can’t turn up our noses at pirates,” laughed Ricky. “This house was built by pirate gold. We only wish—”

From the hall came a dull thump. Ricky’s napkin dropped from her hand into her coffee-cup. Rupert laid down his spoon deliberately enough, but there was a certain tension in his movements. Val felt a sudden chill. For Letty-Lou was in the kitchen, the family were in the dining-room. There should be no one in the hall.

Rupert pushed back his chair. But Val was already half-way to the door when his brother joined him. And Ricky, suddenly sober, was at their heels.

*Zzzzzrupp!* The slitting sound was clear as they burst into the hall. On the fur rug by the couch lay the writing-desk. Its lid was thrown back and by it crouched Satan industriously ripping the remnants of lining from its interior. As Rupert came up, the cat drew back, his ears flattened and his lips a-snarl.

“Cinders! What has he done?” demanded Charity, swooping down upon her pet. At her coming, he fled under the couch out of reach.

Rupert picked up the desk. “Nothing much,” he laughed. “Just torn all that lining loose, as I had planned to do.”

“What is this?” Ricky disentangled a small slip of white from the torn and musty velvet. “Why, it’s a piece of paper,” she answered her own question. “It must have been under the lining and Satan pulled it out with the cloth.”

“Here,” Rupert took it from her, “let me see it.”

He scanned the faded lines of writing. “Val! Ricky!” He looked up, his face flushed with excitement. “Listen!”

“Gatty has returned from the city. The raiders calling themselves the ‘Buck Boys’ are headed this way. Gatty tells me that Alexander is with them, having deserted the plantation a week ago. Since his malice towards us is well known, it is easy to believe that he means us open harm. I am making my preparations accordingly. The valuables now under this roof, together with the proceeds from the last voyage of the blockade runner, *Red Bird*, I am putting in that safe place discovered by me in childhood, of which I have sometimes spoken. Remember the hint I once gave you—By Our Luck. Having written this in haste, I shall intrust it to Gatty—”

“That’s the end; the rest is gone.” Rupert stared down at the scrap of paper in his hand as if he simply could not believe in its reality.

“Richard wrote that.” Ricky touched the note in awe. “But why didn’t Gatty give it to Miles when he came?”

“Gatty was probably a slave who ran when the raiders appeared,” suggested Rupert. “He or she must have hidden this in here before leaving. We’ll never know.”

“But we’ve got our clue!” cried Ricky. “We knew that the hiding-place was in this hall, and now we have the clue.”

“By our Luck.” Rupert looked about him thoughtfully. “That’s not the most helpful—”

“Rupert!” Ricky seized him by the arm. “There’s only one thing in this room that will answer that. Can’t you see? The niche of the Luck!”

Their gaze followed her pointing finger to the mantel above their heads.

“I believe she’s right! Wait until I get the step-ladder from the kitchen.” Rupert was gone almost before he had finished speaking.

“Oh, if it’s only true!” Ricky stared up like one hypnotized. “Then we’ll be rich and—”

“Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched,” Val reminded her, but he didn’t think that she heard him.

Then Rupert was back with the ladder. He climbed up, leaving the three of them clustered about its foot.

“Nothing here but two stone studs to hold the Luck in place,” he said a moment later.

“Why not try pressing those?” suggested Charity.

“All right, here goes.” He placed his thumbs in the corners of the niche and threw his weight upon them.

“Nothing happened.” Ricky’s voice was deep with disappointment.

“Look!” Val pointed over her shoulder.

To the left of the fireplace were five panels of oak, to balance those on the other side about the door of the unused drawing-room. The center one of these now gaped open, showing a dark cavity.

“It worked!” Ricky was already heading for the opening.

There behind the paneling was a shallow closet which ran the full length of the five panels. It was filled with a collection of bags and small chests, a collection which appeared much larger when it lay in the gloom within than when they dragged it out. Then, when they had time to examine it carefully, they discovered that their booty consisted of two small wooden boxes or chests, one fancifully carved and evidently intended for jewels, the other plain but locked; a felt bag and another of canvas, and a package hurriedly done up in cloth. Rupert spread it all out on the floor.

“Well,” he hesitated, “where shall we begin?”

“Charity thought about how to open it, and it was her cat that found us the clue—let her choose,” Val suggested.

“Good,” agreed Rupert. “And what’s your choice, m’lady?”

“What woman could resist this?” She laid her hand upon the jewel box.

“Then that it is.” He reached for it.

It opened readily enough to show a shallow tray divided into compartments, all of them empty.

“Sold again,” Val commented dryly.

Carefully Rupert lifted out the top tray to disclose another on which rested three small leather bags. He loosened the draw-string of the nearest and shook out into his palm a pair of earrings of a quaint pattern in twisted gold set with dull red stones. Charity pronounced them garnets. Though they were not of great value, they were precious in Ricky’s eyes, and even Charity exclaimed over them.

The second bag yielded a carnelian seal on a wide chain of gold mesh, the sort of ornament a dandy wore dangling from his watch pocket in the days of the Regency. And the third bag contained a cross of silver, blackened by time, set with amethysts. This was accompanied by a chain of the same dull metal.

Putting these into the girls’ hands, Rupert lifted the second tray to lay bare the bottom of the chest. Here again were several small bags. There was another cross, this time of jet inlaid with gold and attached to a short necklace of jet beads; a wide bracelet of coral and turquoise which was crudely made and might have been native work of some sort. Then there was a tiny jewel-set bottle, about which, Ricky declared, there still lingered some faint trace of the fragrance it had once held. And most interesting to Charity was a fan, the sticks carved of ivory so intricately that they resembled lacework stiffened into slender ribs. The covering between them was fashioned of layers of silk painted with a scene of the bayou country, with the moss-grown oaks and encroaching swamp all carefully depicted.

Charity declared that she had never seen its equal and that some great artist must have decorated the dainty trifle. She closed it carefully and slipped it back into its covering, and Rupert took out the last of the bags. From its depths rolled a ring.

It was plain enough, a simple band of gold so deep in shade as to be almost red. Nearly an inch in width, there was no ornamentation of any sort on its broad, smooth surface.

“Do you know what this is?” Rupert turned the circlet around in his fingers.

“No.” Ricky was still dangling the earrings before her eyes.

“It is the wedding-ring of the Bride of the Luck.”

“What!” Val leaned forward to look down at the plain circle of gold.

Even Ricky gave her brother her full attention now. Rupert turned to Charity.

“You probably know the story of our Luck?” he asked.

She nodded.

“When the Luck was brought from Palestine, it was decided that it must be given into the hands of a guardian who would be responsible for it with his or her life. Because the men of the house were always at war during those troublesome times, the guardianship went to the eldest daughter if she were a maiden. By high and solemn ceremony she was married to the Luck in the chapel of Lorne. And she was the Bride of the Luck until death or a unanimous consent from the family released her. Nor could she marry a mortal husband during the time she wore this.” He touched the ring he held.

“This must be very old. It’s the red gold which came into Ireland and England before the Romans conquered the land. Perhaps this was found in some old barrow on Lorne lands. But it no longer means anything without the Luck.”

He held it out to Ricky. “By tradition this is yours.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think I want that, Rupert. It’s too old—too strange. Now these,” she held up the earrings, “you can understand. The girls who wore them were like me, and they wore them because they were pretty. But that—” she looked at the Bride’s ring with distaste—“that must have been a burden to its wearer. Didn’t you tell us once of the Lady Iseult, who killed herself when they would not release her from her vows to the Luck? I don’t want to wear that, ever.”

“Very well.” He dropped it back into its bag. “We’ll send it to LeFleur for safe-keeping. Any scruples about the rest of this stuff?”

“Of course not! And none of it is worth much. May I keep it?”

“If you wish. Now let’s see what is in here.” He drew the second box toward him and forced it open.

“Money!” Charity was staring at it with wide eyes.

Within, in neat bundles, lay packages of paper notes. Even Rupert was shaken from his calm as he reached for one. Outside of a bank none of them had ever seen such a display of wealth. But after he studied the top note, the master of Pirate’s Haven laughed thinly.

“This may be worth ten cents to some collector if we’re lucky—”

“Rupert! That’s real money,” began Ricky.

But Val, too, had seen the print. “Confederate money, child. As useless now as our pretty oil stock. I told you that things always turn out wrong in this house. If we do find treasure, it’s worthless. How much is there, anyway?”

Rupert picked up a slip of paper tucked under the tape fastening the first bundle. “This says thirty-five thousand—profit from a blockade runner’s trip.”

“Thirty-five thousand! Well, I think that that is just too much,” Ricky said defiantly. “Why didn’t they get paid in real money?”

“Being loyal to the South, the Ralestones probably would not take what you call ‘real money,’” replied Charity.

“It’s nice to know how wealthy we once were,” Val observed. “What are you going to do with that wall-paper, Rupert?”

“Oh, chuck it in my desk. I’ll get someone to look it over; there might be a collector’s item among these bills. Now let’s have the joker out of *this* bundle.” He plucked at the fastenings of the felt bag.

When he had pulled off its wrappings, a silver tray with coffee- and chocolate-pot, cream pitcher and sugar bowl stood, tarnished and dingy, on the floor.

“That’s more like it.” Ricky picked up the chocolate-pot. “Do you suppose it will ever be possible to get these clean again?”

“With a lot of will power and some good hard rubbing it can be done,” Val assured her.

“Well, I’ll supply the will power and you may do the rubbing,” she announced pleasantly.

Rupert had opened the remaining packages to display a set of twelve silver goblets, one with a dented edge, and a queerly shaped vessel not unlike an old-fashioned gravy-boat. Charity picked this up and examined it gravely.

“I’m afraid that this is pirate loot.” She tapped the lip of the piece she held. The metal gave off a clear ringing sound. “If I’m not mistaken, this was stolen from a church. Yes, I’m right; see this cross under the leaves?” She pointed out the bit of engraving.

“Black Dick’s work,” agreed Ricky complacently. “But after almost three hundred years I’m afraid we can’t return it. Especially since we don’t know where it came from in the first place.”

Val looked about at what they had uncovered. “If you are going to take all of this in to LeFleur, you’ll have to get a truck. D’you know, I think this place might turn out to be a gold-mine if one knew just where to dig.”

“We haven’t found the Luck yet,” reminded Ricky.

Val got clumsily to his feet and then gave Charity a hand up, beating Rupert to it by about three seconds. “As we don’t even know whether it is still in existence, there’s no use in hunting for it,” Val retorted.

Ricky smiled, that set little smile which usually meant that she neither agreed with nor approved of the speaker. She got up from the floor and shook out her skirt purposefully.

“I’ll remind you of that some day,” she promised.

“I suppose,” Rupert glanced at the silver, “this ought to be taken to town as soon as possible. This house is too isolated to harbor both us and the silverware at the same time. What do you think?” Ignoring both Ricky and Val, he turned to Charity.

“You are right. But it seems a pity to send it all away before we have a chance to rub it up and see what it really looks like!”

“By all means, take it at once!” Val urged promptly. “We can always clean it later.”

Rupert grinned. “Now that might be a protest against the suggestion Ricky made a few minutes ago. But I’ll save you some honest labor this time, Val; I’ll take it to town this afternoon.”

Ricky laughed softly.

“And why the merriment?” her younger brother inquired suspiciously.

“I was just thinking what a surprise the visitor who dropped his handkerchief here is going to get when he finds the cupboard bare,” she explained.

Rupert rubbed his palm across his chin. “Of course. I had almost forgotten that.”

“Well, I haven’t! And I wonder if we have found what he—or they—were hunting,” Val mused as he helped Rupert wrap up the spoil again.

## 8. Great-Uncle Rick Walks The Hall

Sam had produced a horse complete with saddle and a reputed skittishness. That horse was the pride of Sam's big heart. It had once won a small purse at some country fair or something of the sort, and since then it had been kept only to wear the saddle at rare intervals. Not that Sam ever rode. He drove a spring-board behind a thin, sorrowful mule called "Suggah." But the saddle horse was rented at times to white folk of whom Sam approved.

Soon after the arrival of the Ralestones at Pirate's Haven, Sam had brought this four-footed prodigy to their attention. But claiming that the family were his "folks," he indignantly refused to accept hire and was hurt if one of them did not ride at least once a day. Ricky had developed an interest in the garden and had accepted the loan of Sam's eldest son, an earth-brown child about as tall as the spade, to help her mess about. Rupert spent the largest part of his days shut up in Bluebeard's chamber. Which of course left the horse to Val.

And Val was becoming slightly bored with Louisiana, at least with that portion of it which immediately surrounded them. Charity was hard at work on her picture of the swamp hunter, for Jeems had come back without warning from his mysterious concerns in the swamp. There was no one to talk to and nowhere to go.

LeFleur had notified them that he believed he was on the track of some discreditable incident in the past of their rival which would banish him from their path. And no more handkerchiefs had been found, ownerless, in their hall. It was a serene morning.

But, Val thought long afterwards, he should have been warned by that very serenity and remembered the old saying, that it was always calmest before a storm. On the contrary, he was riding Sam's horse along the edge of that swamp, wondering what lay hidden back in that dark jungle. Some day, he determined, he would do a little exploring in that direction.

A heron arose from the bayou and streaked across the metallic blue of the sky. Another was wading along, intent upon its fishing. Sam's yellow dog, which had followed horse and rider, set up a barking, annoyed at the haughty carriage of the bird. He scrambled down the steep bank, drove it into flight after its fellow.

Val pulled his shirt away from his sticky skin and wondered if he would ever feel really cool again. There was something about this damp heat which seemed to remove all ambition. He marveled how Ricky could even think of trimming roses that morning.

Sam's dog began to bark deafeningly again, and Val looked around for the heron which must have aroused his displeasure. There was none. But across the swamp crawled an ungainly monster.

Four great rubber-tired wheels, ten feet high, as he later learned, supported a metal framework upon which squatted two men and the driver of the monstrosity. With the ponderous solemnity of a tank it came on to the bayou.

Val's mount snorted and his ears pricked back. He began to have very definite ideas about what he saw. The thing slipped down the marshy bank and took to the water with ease, turning its square nose downstream and sending waves shoreward.

"Ride 'em, cowboy!" yelled one of the men derisively as Sam's horse decided to stand on his hind legs and wave at the strange apparition as it went by. Val brought him down upon four feet again, and he stood sweating, his ears still back.

“What do you call that?” the boy shouted back.

“Prospecting engine for swamp use,” answered the driver. “Don’t you swampers ever get the news?”

The car, or whatever it was, moved on downstream and so out of sight.

“Now I wonder what that was,” Val said aloud as his mount sidled toward the center of the road. The hound-dog came up and sat down to kick a patch of flea-invaded territory which lay behind his left ear. Again the morning was quiet.

But not for long. A mud-spattered car came around the bend in the road and headed at Val, going a good pace for the dirt surfacing. Before it quite reached him it stopped and the driver stuck his head out of the window.

“Hey, you, move over! Whatya tryin’ to do—break somebody’s neck?”

Val surveyed him with interest. The man was, perhaps, Rupert’s age, a small, thin fellow with thick black hair and the white seam of an old scar beneath his left eye.

“This is,” the boy replied, “a private road.”

“Yeah,” he snarled, “I know. And I’m the owner. So get your hobby-horse going and beat it, kid.”

Val shifted in the saddle and stared down at him.

“And what might your name be?” he asked softly.

“What d’yuh think it is? Hitler? I’m Ralestone, the owner of this place. On your way, kid, on your way.”

“So? Well, good morning, cousin.” Val tightened rein.

The invader eyed him cautiously. “What d’yuh mean—cousin?”

“I happen to be a Ralestone also,” the boy answered grimly.

“Huh? You the guy who thinks he owns this?” he asked aggressively.

“My brother is the present master of Pirate’s Haven—”

“That’s what *he* thinks,” replied the rival with a relish. “Well, he isn’t. That is, not until he pays me for my half. And if he wants to get tough, I’ll take it all,” he ended, and withdrew into the car like a lizard into its rock den.

Val sat by the side of the road and watched the car slide along toward the plantation. As it passed him he caught a glimpse of a second passenger in the back seat. It was the red-faced man he had seen with LeFleur’s clerk on the street in New Orleans. Resolutely Val turned back and started for the house in the wake of the rival.

By making use of a short-cut, he reached the front of the house almost as soon as the car. Ricky had been working with the morning-glory vines about the terrace steps, young Sam standing attendance with a rusty trowel and one of the kitchen forks.

At the sound of the car she stood up and tried to brush a smear of sticky earth from the front of her checked-gingham dress. When the rival got out she smiled at him.

“Hello, sister,” he smirked.

She stood still for a moment and her smile faded. When she answered, her voice was chill. “You wished to see Mr. Ralestone?” she asked distantly.



“Sure. But not just yet, sister. You better be pleasant, you know. I’m the new owner here—”

Val rode out of the bushes and swung out of the saddle, coming up behind him. Although the boy was one of the smaller “Black” Ralestones, he topped the invader by a good two inches, and he noted this with delight as he came up to him.

“Ricky,” he said briefly, “go in. And send Sam for Rupert.”

She nodded and was gone. The man turned to face Val. “You again, huh?” he demanded.

“Yes. And Ralestone or no Ralestone, I would advise you to keep a civil tongue in your head,” he began hotly, when Rupert appeared at the door.

“Well, Val,” he asked, a frown creasing his forehead, “what is it?”

The rival advanced a short step and looked up. “So this is the guy who’s trying to do me out of my rights?”

Rupert reached behind him and closed the screen before coming to the head of the terrace steps. “I presume that you are Mr. Ralestone?” he asked quietly.

“Course I’m Ralestone,” asserted the other. “And I’m part owner of this place.”

“That has not yet been decided,” answered Rupert calmly. “But suppose you tell me to what we owe the honor of this visit?”

Now, however, the passenger took a hand in the game. He crawled out of the car, taking off his soiled panama to wipe his bald head with a gaudy silk handkerchief.

“Here, here, Mr. Ralestone,” he addressed his companion, “let us have no unpleasantness. We have merely come here today, sir,” he explained to Rupert, “to see if matters could not be settled amicably without having to take recourse to a court of law. Your Mr. LeFleur will give us very little satisfaction, you see. I am a plain and honest man, sir, and I believe an affair of this kind may be best agreed upon between principals. My client, Mr. Ralestone, is a reasonable man; he will be moderate in his demands. It will be to your advantage to listen to our proposal. After all, you cannot contest his rights—”

“But that is just what I am going to do.” Rupert smiled down at them, if a slight twist of the lips may be called a smile. “Have you ever heard that old saying that ‘possession is nine points of the law’? I am the Ralestone in residence, and I shall continue to be the Ralestone in residence until after this case is heard. Now, as I am a busy man and this is the middle of the morning, I shall have to say good-bye—”

“So that’s the way you’re going to take it?” The visiting Ralestone glared at Rupert. “All right. Play it that way and you won’t be here a month from now. Nor,” he turned on Val, “this kid brother of yours, either. You can’t pull this lord-of-the-land stuff on me and get away with it. I’ll—” But he did not finish his threat. Instead, his jaws clamped shut on mid-word. In silence he turned and got into the car to which his counselor had already withdrawn.

The car leaped forward into a rose bush. With a savage twist of the wheel the driver brought it back to the drive, leaving deep prints in the front lawn. Then it was gone, down the drive, as they stood staring after it.

“So that’s that,” Val commented. “Well, all I’ve got to say is that Rick’s branch of the family has sadly gone to seed—”

“Being a southern gentleman has made you slightly snobbish.” Ricky came out from her lurking place behind the door.

“Snobbish!” her brother choked at the injustice. “I suppose that that is your idea of a perfect gentleman, a diamond in the rough—”

He pointed down the drive.

Ricky laughed. “It’s so easy to tease you, Val. Of course he is a—a wart of the first class. But Rupert will fix him—won’t you?”

Her older brother grinned. “After that example of your trust in me, I’ll have to. I agree, he is not the sort you would care to introduce to your more particular friends. But this visit seems to suggest something—”

“That he has the wind up?” Val asked.

“There are indications of that, I think. Something LeFleur has done has stirred our friends into direct action. We shall probably have more of it within the immediate future. So I want you, Ricky, to go to town. Madame LeFleur has very kindly offered to put you up—”

Each tiny curl on Ricky’s head seemed to bristle with indignation. “Oh, no you don’t, Rupert Ralestone! You don’t get me away from here when there are exciting things going on. I hardly think that our friend with the slimy manner will use machine-guns to blast us out. And if he does—well, it wouldn’t be the first time that this house was used as a fortress. I’m not going one step out of here unless you two come with me.”

Rupert shrugged. “As I can’t very well hog-tie you to get you to town, I suppose you will have to stay. But I *am* going to send for Lucy.” With that parting shot he turned and went in.

Lucy arrived shortly before noon. She was accompanied by a portion of her large family—four, Val counted, including that Sam who had become Ricky’s faithful shadow.

“What’s all dis Ah heah ‘bout some mans sayin’ he am de Ralestone?” she demanded of Ricky. “De policemans oughta lock him up. Effen he comes botherin’ ‘roun’ heah agin I’ll ten’ to him!”

With that she marched majestically into the kitchen, elbowed Letty-Lou out of her way, and proceeded to stir up a batch of brown molasses cookies. “‘Cause dey is fillin’ fo’ boys. An’ Mistuh Val, heah, he needs some moah fat ‘crost dose skinny ribs. Letty-Lou, yo’ all ain’t feedin’ dese men-folks ri’. Now yo’ chillens,” she swooped down upon her own family, “yo’ all gits outa heah an’ don’t fuss me.”

“They can come with me,” offered Ricky. “I’m trying to find that maze which is marked on the garden plans.”

“Miss ‘Chanda, yo’ all ain’t a’ goin’ ‘way ‘afo’ yoah brothah gits through his wo’k. He done tol’ me to keep an eye on yo’ all. Why don’t yo’ all go visit wi’ Miss Charity?”

Ricky looked at her watch. “All right. She’ll be through her morning work by now. I’ll take the children, Lucy.”

To Val’s open surprise, she obeyed Lucy, meekly moving off without a single protest. One of the boys remained behind and offered shyly to take the horse back to Sam’s place. When Lucy agreed that it would be all right, Val boosted him into the saddle where he clung like a jockey.

“An’ wheah is yo’ all goin’, Mistuh Val?” asked Lucy, cutting out round cookies with a downward stroke of the drinking glass she had pressed into service. The regular cutter was, in her opinion, too small.

“Down toward the bayou. I’ll be back before lunch,” he said, and hurried out before she could as definitely dispose of him as she had of Ricky.

Val struck off into the bushes until he came to one of the paths that crossed the wilderness. As it ran in the direction of the bayou, he turned into it. Then for the second time he came into the glen of the pool and passed along the path Jeems had known. So somehow Val was not surprised, when he came out upon the edge of the bayou levee, to see Jeems sitting there.

“Hello!”

The swamper looked up at Val’s hail but this time he did not leave.

“Hullo,” he answered sullenly.

Val stood there, ill at ease, while the swamper eyed him composedly. What could he say now? Val’s embarrassment must have been very apparent, for after a long moment Jeems smiled derisively.

“Yo’ goin’ ridin’ in them funny pants?” he asked, pointing to the other’s breeches.

“Well, that’s what they are intended for,” Val replied.

“Wheah’s youah hoss?”

“I sent him back to Sam’s.” Val was beginning to feel slightly warm. He decided that Jeems’ manners were not all that they might be.

“Sam!” the swamp boy spat into the water. “He’s a—”

But what Sam was, in the opinion of the swamper, Val never learned, for at that moment Ricky burst from between two bushes.

“Well, at last,” she panted, “I’ve gotten rid of my army. Val, do you think that Lucy is going to be like this all the time—order us about, I mean?”

“Who’s that?” Jeems was on his feet looking at Ricky.

“Ricky,” her brother said, “this is Jeems. My sister Richanda.”

“Yo’ one of the folks up at the big house?” he asked her directly.

“Why, yes,” she answered simply.

“Yo’ don’ act like yo’ was.” He stabbed his finger at both of them. “Yo’ don’t walk with youah noses in the air looking down at us—”

“Of course we don’t!” interrupted Ricky. “Why should we, when you know more about this place than we do?”

“What do yo’ mean by that?” he flashed out at her, his sullen face suddenly dark.

“Why—why—” Ricky faltered, “Charity Biglow said that you knew all about the swamp—”

His tense position relaxed a fraction. “Oh, yo’ know Miss Charity?”

“Yes. She showed us the picture she is painting, the one you are posing for,” Ricky went on.

“Miss Charity is a fine lady,” he returned with conviction. He shifted from one bare foot to the other. “Ah’ll be goin’ now.” With no other farewell he slipped over the side of the levee into his canoe and headed out into midstream. Nor did he look back.

Lucy departed after dinner that evening to bed down her family before returning with Letty-Lou to occupy one of the servant’s rooms over the side wing. Rupert had gone with her to interview Sam. Val gathered that Sam had some notion of trying to reintroduce the growing

of indigo, a crop which had been forsaken for sugar-cane at the beginning of the nineteenth century when a pest had destroyed the entire indigo crop of that year all over Louisiana.

“Let’s go out in the garden,” suggested Ricky.

“What for?” asked her brother. “To provide a free banquet for mosquitoes? No, thank you, let’s stay here.”

“You’re lazy,” she countered.

“You may call it laziness; I call it prudence,” he answered.

“Well, I’m going anyway,” she made a decision which brought Val reluctantly to his feet. For mosquitoes or no mosquitoes, he was not going to allow Ricky to be outside alone.

They followed the path which led around the side of the house until it neared the kitchen door. When they reached that point Ricky halted.

“Listen!”

A plaintive miaow sounded from the kitchen.

“Oh, bother! Satan’s been left inside. Go and let him out.”

“Will you stay right here?” Val asked.

“Of course. Though I don’t see why you and Rupert have taken to acting as if Fu Manchu were loose in our yard. Now hurry up before he claws the screen to pieces. Satan, I mean, not the worthy Chinese gentleman.”

But Satan did not meet Val at the door. Apparently, having received no immediate answer to his plea, he had withdrawn into the bulk of the house. Speaking unkind things about him under his breath, Val started across the dark kitchen.

Suddenly he stopped. He felt the solid edge of the table against his thigh. When he put out his hand he touched the reassuring everyday form of Lucy’s stone cooky jar. He was in their own pleasant everyday kitchen.

But—

He was not alone in that house!

There had been the faintest of sounds from the forepart of the main section, a sound such as Satan might have caused. But Val knew—knew positively—that Satan was guiltless. Someone or something was in the Long Hall.

He crept by the table, hoping that he could find his way without running into anything. His hand closed upon the knob of the door opening upon the back stairs used by Letty-Lou. If he could get up them and across the upper hall, he could come down the front stairs and catch the intruder.

It took Val perhaps two minutes to reach the head of the front stairs, and each minute seemed a half-hour in length. From below he could hear a regular *pad, pad*, as if from stocking feet on the stone floor. He drew a deep breath and started down.

When he reached the landing he looked over the rail. Upright before the fireplace was a dim white blur. As he watched, it moved forward. There was something uncanny about that almost noiseless movement.

The blur became a thin figure clad in baggy white breeches and loose shirt. Below the knees the legs seemed to fade into the darkness of the hall and there was something strange about the outlines of the head.

Again the thing resumed its padding and Val saw now that it was pacing the hall in a regular pattern. Which suggested that it was human and was there with a very definite purpose.

He edged farther down the stairs.

“And just what are you doing?”

If his voice quavered upon the last word, it was hardly his fault. For when the thing turned, Val saw—

It had no face!

With a startled cry he lunged forward, clutching at the banister to steady his blundering descent. The thing backed away; already it was fading into the darkness beside the stairs. As Val's feet touched the floor of the hall he caught his last glimpse of it, a thin white patch against the solid paneling of the stairway's broad side. Then it was gone. When Rupert and Ricky came in a few minutes later and turned on the lights, Val was still staring at that blank wall, with Satan rubbing against his ankles.

## 9. Portrait Of A Lady And A Gentleman

Rupert had dismissed Val's story of what he had seen in the hall in a very lofty manner. When his brother had persisted in it, Rupert suggested that Val had better keep out of the sun in the morning. For no trace of the thing which had troubled the house remained.

Ricky hesitated between believing wholly in Val's tale or just in his powers of imagination. And between them his family drove him sulky to bed. He was still frowning, or maybe it was a new frown, when he looked into the bathroom mirror the next morning as he dressed. For Val knew that he *had* seen something in the hall, something monstrous which had no right to be there.

What had their rival said before he left? "Play it that way and you won't be here a month from now." It was just possible—Val paused, half in, half out of, his shirt. Could last night's adventure have had anything to do with that threat? Two or three episodes of that sort might unsettle the strongest nerves and drive the occupants from a house where such a shadow walked.

Something else nagged at the boy's memory. Slowly he traced back over the events of the day before, from the moment when he had watched that queer swamp car crawl downstream. After the visit of the rival, Lucy had come to stay. And then Ricky had started for Charity's while he had gone down to the bayou where he met Jeems. That was it. Jeems!

When Ricky had hinted that he knew more of the swamp than the Ralestones did, why had he been so quick to resent that remark? Could it be because he understood her to mean that he knew more of Pirate's Haven than they did?

And the thing in the Long Hall last night had known of some exit in the wall that the Ralestones did not know of. It had faded into the base of the staircase. And yet, when Val had gone over the paneling there inch by inch, he had gained nothing but sore finger tips.

He tucked his shirt under his belt and looked down to see if Sam Junior had polished his boots as Lucy had ordered her son to do. Save for a trace of mud by the right heel, they had the proper mirror-like surface.

"Mistuh Val," Lucy's penetrating voice made him start guiltily, "is yo' or is yo' not comin' to brekfas'?"

"I am," he answered and started downstairs at his swiftest pace.

The new ruler of their household was standing at the foot of the stairs, her knuckles resting on her broad hips. She eyed the boy sternly. Lucy eyed one, Val thought, much as a Scotch nurse Ricky and he had once had. They had never dared question any of Annie's decrees, and one look from her had been enough to reduce them to instant order. Lucy's eye had the same power. And now as she herded Val into the dining-room he felt like a six-year-old with an uneasy conscience.

Rupert and Ricky were already seated and eating. That is, Ricky was eating, but Rupert was reading his morning mail.

"Yo'all sits down," said Lucy firmly, "an' yo'all eats what's on youah plate. Yo'all ain' much fattah nor a jay-bird."

"I don't see why she keeps comparing me to a living skeleton all the time," Val complained as she departed kitchenward.

“She told Letty-Lou yesterday,” supplied Ricky through a mouthful of popover, “that you are ‘peaked lookin’.”

“Why doesn’t she start in on Rupert? He needs another ten pounds or so.” Val reached for the butter. “And he hasn’t got a very good color, either.” Val surveyed his brother professionally. “Doesn’t get outdoors enough.”

“No,” Ricky’s voice sounded aggrieved, “he’s too busy having secrets—”

“Hmm,” Rupert murmured, more interested in his letter than in the conversation.

“The trouble is that we are not Chinese bandits, Malay pirates, or Arab freebooters. We don’t possess color, life, enough—enough—”

“Sugar,” Rupert interrupted Val, pushing his coffee-cup in the general direction of Ricky without raising his eyes from the page in his hand. She giggled.

“So that’s what we lack. Well, now we know. How much sugar should we have, Rupert? Rupert—Mr. Rupert Ralestone—Mr. Rupert Ralestone of Pirate’s Haven!” Her voice grew louder and shriller until he did lay down his reading matter and really looked at them for the first time.

“What do you want?”

“A little attention,” answered Ricky sweetly. “We aren’t Chinese, Arabs, or Malays, but we are kind of nice to know, aren’t we, Val? If you’d only come out of your subconscious, or wherever you are most of the time, you’d find that out without being told.”

Rupert laughed and pushed away his letters. “Sorry. I picked up the bad habit of reading at breakfast when I didn’t have my table brightened by your presence. I know,” he became serious, “that I haven’t been much of a family man. But there are reasons—”

“Which, of course, you can not tell *us*,” flashed Ricky.

His face lengthened ruefully. He pulled at his tie with an embarrassed frown. “Not yet, anyway. I—” He fumbled with his napkin. “Oh, well, let me see how it comes out first.”

Ricky opened her eyes to their widest extent and leaned forward, every inch of her expressing awe. “Rupert, don’t tell me that you are an *inventor*!” she cried.

“Now I know that we’ll end in the poorhouse,” Val observed.

Rupert had recovered his composure. “I yam what I yam,” he quoted.

“Very well. Keep it to yourself then,” pouted Ricky. “We can have secrets too.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He glanced at Val. “Unfortunately you always tell them. See any more bogies last night, Val? Did a big, black, formless something reach out from under the bed and clutch at you?”

But his brother refused to be drawn. “No, but when it does I’ll sic it onto you. A big, black, formless something is just what you need. And I’ll—”

“Am I interrupting?” Charity stood in the door. “Goodness! Haven’t you finished breakfast yet? Do you people know that it is almost ten?”

“Madam, we have banished time.” Rupert drew out the chair at his left. “Will you favor us with your company?”

“I thought you were going to be busy today,” said Ricky as she rang for Letty-Lou and a fresh cup of coffee for their guest.

“So did I,” sighed Charity. “And I should be. I’ve got this order, you know, and now I can’t get any models. Why there should be a sudden dearth of them right now, I can’t imagine. I thought I could use Jeems again, but somehow he isn’t the type.” She raised her cup to her lips.

“Are you doing story illustrations?” asked Rupert, more alive now than he had been all morning.

“Yes. A historical thriller for a magazine. They want a full-page cut for the first chapter and a half-page to illustrate the most exciting scene. Then there’re innumerable smaller ones. But the two large ones are what I’m worrying about. I like to get the important stuff finished first, and now I simply can’t get models who are the right types.”

“What’s the story about?” demanded Ricky.

“It’s laid in Haiti during the French invasion led by Napoleon’s brother-in-law, the one who married Pauline. All voodoo and aristocratic young hero and beautiful maiden pursued by an officer of the black rebels. And,” she almost wailed, “here I am with the clothes spread all over my bed—the right costumes, you know—with no one to wear them. I went over to the Corners this morning and called Johnson—he runs a registration office for models—but he couldn’t promise me anyone.” She bit absent-mindedly into a round spiced roll Ricky had placed before her.

“Wait!” She laid down the roll in a preoccupied fashion and stared across the table. “Val, stand up.”

Wondering, he pushed back his chair and arose obediently.

“Turn your head a little more to the right,” Charity ordered. “There, that’s it! Now try to look as if there were something all ready to spring at you from that corner over there.”

For one angry moment he thought that she had been told of what had happened the night before and was baiting him, as the others had done. But a sidewise glance showed him that her interest lay elsewhere. So he screwed up his features into what he fondly hoped was a grim and deadly smile.

“For goodness sake, don’t look as if you had eaten green apples,” Ricky shot at him. “Just put on that face you wear when I show you a new hat. No, not that sneering one; the other.”

Rupert threw back his head and laughed heartily. “Better let him alone, Ricky. After all, it’s *his* face.”

“I’m glad that someone has pointed out that fact,” Val said stiffly, “because—”

“Oh, be quiet!” Charity leaned forward across the table. “Yes,” she nodded, “you’ll do.”

“For what?” Val asked, slightly apprehensive.

“For my hero. Of course your hair is too short and you are rather too youthful, but I can disguise those points. And,” she turned upon Ricky, “you can be the lady in distress. Which gives me another idea. Do you suppose that I might use your terrace for a background and have that big chair, the one with the high back?” she asked Rupert.

“You may have anything you want within these walls,” he answered lightly enough, but it was clear that he really meant it.

“What am I supposed to do?” Val asked.



Charity considered. "I think I'll try the action one first," she said half to herself. "That's going to be the most difficult. Ricky, will you send one of Lucy's children over with me to help carry back the costumes and my material—" She was already at the door.

"Val and I will go instead," Ricky replied.

Some twenty minutes later Val was handed a suitcase and told to use the contents to cover his back. Having doubts of the wisdom of the whole affair, he went reluctantly upstairs to obey. But the result was not so bad. The broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted coat did not fit him ill, though the shiny boots were at least a size too large. Timidly he went down. Ricky was the first to see him.

"Val! You look like something out of *Lloyds of London*. Rupert, look at Val. Doesn't he look wonderful?"

Having thus made public his embarrassment, she ran to the mirror to finish her own prinking. The high-waisted Empire gown of soft green voile made her appear taller than usual. But she walked with a little shuffle which suggested that her ribbon-strapped slippers fitted her no better than Val's boots did him. Charity was coaxing Ricky's tight fashionable curls into a looser arrangement and tying a green ribbon about them. This done, she turned to survey Val.

"I thought so," she said with satisfaction. "You are just what I want. But," the tiny lines about her eyes crinkled in amusement, "at present you are just a little too perfect. Do you realize that you have just fought off an attack, led by a witch doctor, in which you were wounded; that you have struggled through a jungle for seven hours in order to reach your betrothed; and that you are now facing death by torture? I hardly think that you should look as if you had just stepped out of the tailor's—"

"I've done all that?" Val demanded, somewhat staggered.

"Well, the author says you have, so you've got to look it. We'd better muss you up a bit. Let's see." She tapped her fingernail against her teeth as she looked him up and down. "Off with that coat first."

He wriggled out of the coat and stood with the glories of his ruffled shirt fully displayed.

"Now what?" he asked.

"This," she reached forward and ripped his left sleeve to the shoulder. "Untie that cravat and take it off. Roll up your other sleeve above the elbow. That's right. Ricky, you muss up his hair. Let a lock of it fall across his forehead. No, not there—there. Good. Now he's ready for the final touches." She went to the table where her paints had been left. "Let's see—carmine, that ought to be right. This is water-color, Val, it'll all wash off in a minute."

Across his smooth tanned cheek she dribbled a jagged line of scarlet. Then instructing Ricky to bind the torn edge of his sleeve above his elbow, she also stained the bandage. "Well?" she turned to Rupert.

"He looks as though he had been through the wars all right," he agreed. "But what about the costume?"

"Oh, we needn't worry about that. They knew I'd have to do this, so they duplicated everything. Now for you, Ricky. Pull your sleeve down off your shoulder and see if you can tear the skirt up from the hem on that side—about as far as your knee. Yes, that's fine. You're ready now."

Rupert picked up from the table a sword and a long-barrelled dueling pistol and led the way out onto the terrace. Charity pointed to the big chair in the sunlight.

“This will probably be hard for you two,” she warned them frankly. “If you get tired, don’t hesitate to tell me. I’ll give you a rest every ten minutes. Val, you sit down in the chair. Slump over toward that arm as if you were about finished. No, more limp than that. Now look straight ahead. You are on the terrace of Beauvallet. Beside you is the girl you love. You are all that stands between her and the black rebels. Now take this sword in your right hand and the pistol in your left. Lean forward a little. There! Now don’t move; you’ve got just the pose I want. Ricky, crouch down by the side of his chair with your arm up so that you can touch his hand. You’re terrified. There’s death, horrible death, before you!”

Val could feel Ricky’s hand quiver against his. Charity had made them both see and feel what she wanted them to. They weren’t in the peaceful sunlight on the terrace of Pirate’s Haven; they were miles farther south in the dark land of Haiti, the Haiti of more than a hundred years ago. Before them was a semitropical forest from which at any moment might crawl—death. Val’s hand tightened on the sword hilt; the pistol butt was clammy in his grip.

Rupert had put up the easel and laid out the paints. And now, taking up her charcoal, Charity began to sketch with clear, clean strokes.

Her models’ unaccustomed muscles cramped so that when they shifted during their rest periods they grimaced with pain. Ricky whispered that she did not wonder models were hard to get. After a while Rupert went away without Charity noticing his leaving. The sun burned Val’s cheek where the paint had dried and he felt a trickle of moisture edge down his spine. But Charity worked on, thoroughly intent upon what was growing under her brushes.

It must have been close to noon when she was at last interrupted.

“Hello there, Miss Biglow!”

Two men stood below the terrace on a garden path. One of them waved his hat as Charity looked around. And behind them stood Jeems.

“Go away,” said the worker, “go away, Judson Holmes. I haven’t any time for you today.”

“Not after I’ve come all the way from New York to see you?” he asked reproachfully. “Why, Charity!” He had the reddest hair Val had ever seen—and the homeliest face—but his small-boy grin was friendliness itself.

“Go away,” she repeated stubbornly.

“Nope!” He shook his head firmly. “I’m staying right here until you forget that for at least a minute.” He motioned toward the picture.

With a sigh she put down her brush. “I suppose I’ll have to humor you.”

“Miss Charity,” Jeems had not taken his eyes from the two models since he had arrived and he did not move them now, “what’re they all fixed up like that fur?”

“It’s a picture for a story,” she explained. “A story about Haiti in the old days—”

“Ah reckon Ah know,” he nodded eagerly, his face suddenly alight. “That’s wheah th’ blacks kilt th’ French back in history times. Ah got me a book ‘bout it. A book in handwritin’, not printin’. Père Armand larned me to read it.”

Judson Holmes’ companion moved forward. “A book in handwriting,” he said slowly. “Could that possibly mean a diary?”

Charity was wiping her hands on a paint rag. “It might. New Orleans was a port of refuge for a great many of the French who fled the island during the slave uprising. It is not impossible.”

“I’ve got to see it! Here, boy, what’s your name?” He pounced upon Jeems. “Can you get that book here this afternoon?”

Jeems drew back. “Ah ain’t gonna bring no book heah. That’s mine an’ you ain’t gonna set eye on it!” With that parting shot he was gone.

“But—but—” protested the other, “I’ve got to see it. Why, such a find might be priceless.”

Mr. Holmes laughed. “Curb your hunting instincts for once, Creighton. You can’t handle a swamper that way. Let’s go and see Charity’s masterpiece instead.”

“I don’t remember having asked you to,” she observed.

“Oh, see here now, wasn’t I the one who got you this commission? And Creighton here is that strange animal known as a publisher’s scout. And publishers sometimes desire the services of illustrators, so you had better impress Creighton as soon as possible. Well,” he looked at the picture, “you have done it!”

Even Creighton, who had been inclined to stare back over his shoulder at the point where Jeems disappeared, now gave it more than half his attention.

“Is that for *Drums of Doom*?” he asked becoming suddenly crisp and professional.

“Yes.”

“Might do for the jacket of the book. Have Mr. Richards see this. Marvelous types, where did you get them?” he continued, looking from the canvas to Ricky and Val.

“Oh, I am sorry. Miss Ralestone, may I present Mr. Creighton, and Mr. Holmes, both of New York. And this,” she smiled at Val, “is Mr. Valerius Ralestone, the brother of the owner of this plantation. The family, I believe, has lived here for about two hundred and fifty years.”

Creighton’s manner became a shade less brusque as he took the hand Ricky held out to him. “I might have known that no professional could get that look,” he said.

“Then this isn’t your place?” Mr. Holmes said to Charity after he had greeted the Ralestones.

“Mine? Goodness no! I rent the old overseer’s house. Pirate’s Haven is Ralestone property.”

“Pirate’s Haven.” Judson Holmes’ infectious grin reappeared. “A rather suggestive name.”

“The builder intended to name it ‘King’s Acres’ because it was a royal grant,” Val informed him. “But he was a pirate, so the other name was given it by the country folk and he adopted it. And he was right in doing so because there were other freebooters in the family after his time.”

“Yes, we are even equipped with a pirate ghost,” contributed Ricky with a mischievous glance in her brother’s direction.

Holmes fanned himself with his hat. “So romance isn’t dead after all. Well, Charity, shall we stay—in town I mean?”

“Why?” a thin line appeared between her eyes as if she had little liking for such a plan.

“Well, Creighton is here on the track of a mysterious new writer who is threatening to produce a second *Gone with the Wind*. And I—well, I like the climate.”

“We’ll see,” muttered Charity.

## 10. Into The Swamp

In spite of the fact that they received but lukewarm encouragement from Charity, both Holmes and Creighton lingered on in New Orleans. Mr. Creighton made several attempts to get in touch with Jeems, whom he seemed to suspect of concealing vast literary treasures. And he spent one hot morning going through the trunk of papers which the Ralestones had found in the storage-room. Ricky commented upon the fact that being a publisher's scout was almost like being an antique buyer.

Holmes was a perfect foil for his laboring friend. He lounged away his days draped across the settee on Charity's gallery or sitting down on the bayou levee—after she had chased him away—pitching pebbles into the water. He told all of them that it was his vacation, the first one he had had in five years, and that he was going to make the most of it. Companioned by Creighton, he usually enlarged the family circle in the evenings. And the tales he could tell about the far corners of the earth were as wildly romantic as Rupert's—though he did assure his listeners that even Tibet was very tame and well behaved nowadays.

Charity had finished the first illustration and had started another. This time Ricky and Val appeared polished and combed as if they had just stepped out of a ball-room of a governor's palace—which they had, according to the story. It was during her second morning's work upon this that she threw down her brush with a snort of disgust.

"It's no use," she told her models, "I simply can't work on this now. All I can see is that scene where the hero's mulatto half-brother watches the ball from the underbrush. I've got to do that one first."

"Why don't you then?" Ricky stretched to relieve cramped muscles.

"I would if I could get Jeems. He's my model for the brother. He's enough like you, Val, for the resemblance, and his darker tan is just right for color. But he won't come back while Creighton's here. I could wring that man's neck!"

"But Creighton left for Milneburg this morning," Val reminded her. "Rupert told him about the old voodoo rites which used to be celebrated there on June 24th, St. John's Eve, and he wanted to see if there were any records—"

"Yes. But Jeems doesn't know he's gone. If we could only get in touch with him—Jeems, I mean."

"Miss 'Chanda!"

Sam Two, as they had come to call Sam's eldest son and heir, was standing on the lowest step of the terrace, holding a small covered basket in his hands.

"Yes?"

"Letty-Lou done say dis am fo' yo'all, Miss 'Chanda."

"For me?" Ricky looked at the offering in surprise. "But what in the world—Bring it here, Sam."

"Yas'm."

He laid the basket in Ricky's outstretched hands.

"I've never seen anything like this before." She turned it around. "It seems to be woven of some awfully fine grass—"

“That’s swamp work.” Charity was peering over Ricky’s shoulder. “Open it.”

Inside on a nest of raw wild cotton lay a bracelet of polished wood carved with an odd design of curling lines which reminded Val of Spanish moss. And with the circlet was a small purse of scaled hide.

“Swamp oak and baby alligator,” burst out Charity. “Aren’t they beauties?”

“But who—” began Ricky.

Val picked up a scrap of paper which had fluttered to the floor. It was cheap stuff, ruled with faint blue lines, but the writing was bold and clear: “Miss Richanda Ralestone.”

“It’s yours all right.” He handed her the paper.

“I know.” She tucked the note away with the gifts. “It was Jeems.”

“Jeems? But why?” her brother protested.

“Well, yesterday when I was down by the levee he was coming in and I knew that Mr. Creighton was here and I told him. So,” she colored faintly, “then he took me across the bayou and I got some of those big swamp lilies that I’ve always wanted. And we had a long talk. Val, Jeems knows the most wonderful things about the swamps. Do you know that they still have voodoo meetings sometimes—way back in there,” she swept her hand southward. “And the fur trappers live on house-boats, renting their hunting rights. But Jeems owns his own land. Now some northerners are prospecting for oil. They have a queer sort of car which can travel either on land or water. And Père Armand has church records that date back to the middle of the eighteenth century. And—”

“So that’s where you were from four until almost six,” Val laughed. “I don’t know that I approve of this riotous living. Will Jeems take me to pick the lilies too?”

“Maybe. He wanted to know why you always moved so carefully. And I told him about the accident. Then he said the oddest thing—” She was staring past Val at the oaks. “He said that to fly was worth being smashed up for and that he envied you.”

“Then he’s a fool!” her brother said promptly. “Nothing is worth—” Val stopped abruptly. Five months before he had made a bargain with himself; he was not going to break it now.

“Do you know,” Ricky said to Charity, “if you really need Jeems this morning, I think I can get him for you. He told me yesterday how to find his cabin.”

“But why—” The objection came almost at once from Charity. Val thought she was more than a little surprised that Jeems, who had steadfastly refused to give her the same information, had supplied it so readily to Ricky whom he hardly knew at all.

“I don’t know,” answered Ricky frankly. “He was rather queer about it. Kept saying that the time might come when I would need help, and things like that.”

“Charity,” Val was putting her brushes straight, “I learned long ago that nothing can be kept from Ricky. Sooner or later one spills out his secrets.”

“Except Rupert!” Ricky aired her old grievance.

“Perhaps Rupert,” her brother agreed.

“Anyway, I do know where Jeems lives. Do you want me to get him for you, Charity?”

“Certainly not, child! Do you think that I’d let you go into the swamp? Why, even men who know something of woodcraft think twice before attempting such a trip without a guide. Of

course you're not going! I think," she put her paint-stained hand to her head, "that I'm going to have one of my sick headaches. I'll have to go home and lie down for an hour or two."

"I'm sorry." Ricky's sympathy was quick and warm. "Is there anything I can do?"

Charity shook her head with a rueful smile. "Time is the only medicine for one of these. I'll see you later."

"Just the same," Ricky stood looking after her, "I'd like to know just what is going on in the swamp right now."

"Why?" Val asked lightly.

"Because—well, just because," was her provoking answer. "Jeems was so odd yesterday. He talked as if—as if there were some threat to us or him. I wonder if there is something wrong." She frowned.

"Of course not!" her brother made prompt answer. "He's merely gone off on one of those mysterious trips of his."

"Just the same, what if there were something wrong? We might go and see."

"Nonsense!" Val snapped. "You heard what Charity said about going into the swamp alone. And there is nothing to worry about anyway. Come on, let's change. And then I have something to show you."

"What?" she demanded.

"Wait and see." His ruse had succeeded. She was no longer looking swampward with that gleam of purpose in her eye.

"Come on then," she said, prodding him into action.

Val changed slowly. If one didn't care about mucking around in the garden, as Ricky seemed to delight in doing, there was so little in the way of occupation. He thought of the days as they spread before him. A little riding, a great amount of casual reading and—what else? Was the South "getting" him as the tropics are supposed to "get" the Northerners?

That unlucky meeting with a mountaintop had effectively despoiled him of his one ambition. Soldiers with game legs are not wanted. He couldn't paint like Charity, he couldn't spin yarns like Rupert, he possessed a mind too inaccurate to cope with the intricacies of any science. And as a business man he would probably be a good street cleaner.

What was left? Well, the surprise he had promised Ricky might cover the problem. As he reached for a certain black note-book, someone knocked on his door.

"Mistuh Val, wheah's Miss 'Chanda? She ain't up heah an' Ah wan's to—"

Lucy stood in the hall. The light from the round window was reflected from every corrugated wave of her painfully marcelled hair. Her vast flowered dress had been thriftily covered with a dull-green bib-apron and she had changed her smart slippers for the shapeless gray relics she wore indoors. Just now she looked warm and tired. After all, running two households was something of a task even for Lucy.

"Why, she should be in her room. We came up to change. Miss Charity's gone home with a headache. What was it you wanted her for?"

"Dese heah cu'ta'ns, Mistuh Val"—she thrust a mound of snowy and beruffled white stuff at him—"dey has got to be hung. An' does Miss 'Chanda wan' dem in her room or does she not?"

“Better put them up. I’ll tell her about it. Here wait, let me open that door.”

Val looked into Ricky’s room. As usual, it appeared as though a whirlwind, a small whirlwind but a thorough one, had passed through it. Her discarded costume lay tumbled across the bed and her slippers lay on the floor, one upside down. He stooped to set them straight.

“It do beat all,” Lucy said frankly as she put her burden down on a chair, “how dat chile do mak’ a mess. Now yo’, Mistuh Val, jest put eberythin’ jest so. But Miss ‘Chanda leave eberythin’ which way afore Sunday! Looka dat now.” She pointed to the half-open door of the closet. A slip lay on the floor. Ricky must have been in a hurry; that was a little too untidy even for her.

A sudden suspicion sent Val into the closet to investigate. Ricky’s wardrobe was not so extensive that he did not know every dress and article in it very well. It did not take him more than a moment to see what was missing.

“Did Ricky go riding?” Val asked. “Her habit is gone.”

“She ain’ gone ‘cross de bayo’ fo’ de hoss,” answered Lucy, reaching for the curtain rod. “An’ anyway, Sam done took dat critter down de road fo’ to be shoed.”

“Then where—” But Val knew his Ricky only too well.

She had a certain stubborn will of her own. Sometimes opposition merely drove her into doing the forbidden thing. And the swamp had been forbidden. But could even Ricky be such a fool? Certain memories of the past testified that she could. But how? Unless she had taken Sam’s boat—

Without a word of explanation to Lucy, he dashed out of the room and downstairs at his best pace. As he left the house Val broke into a stumbling run. There was just a chance that she had not yet left the plantation.

But the bayou levee was deserted. And the post where Sam’s boat was usually moored was bare of rope; the boat was gone. Of course Sam Two might have taken it across the stream to the farm.

That hope was extinguished as the small brown boy came out of the bushes along the stream side.

“Sam, have you seen Miss ‘Chanda?” Val demanded.

“Yessuh.”

“Where?” Carrying on a conversation with Sam Two was like prying diamonds out of a rock. He possessed a rooted distaste for talking.

“Heah, suh.”

“When?”

“Jest a li’l bitty ‘go.”

“Where did she go?”

Sam pointed downstream.

“Did she take the boat?”

“Yessuh.” And then for the first time since Val had known him Sam volunteered a piece of information. “She done say she a-goin’ in de swamp.”

Val leaned back against the hole of one of the willows. Then she had done it! And what could he do? If he had any idea of her path, he could follow her while Sam aroused Rupert and the house.

“If I only knew where—” he mused aloud.

“She a-goin’ to see dat swamper Jeems,” Sam continued. “Heh, heh,” a sudden cackle of laughter rippled across his lips. “Dat ole swamper think he so sma’t. Think no one fin’ he house—”

“Sam!” Val rounded upon him. “Do you know where Jeems lives?”

“Yessuh.” He twisted the one shoulder-strap of his overalls and Val guessed that his knowledge was something he was either ashamed of or afraid to tell.

“Can you take me there?”

He shook his head. “Ah ain’ a-goin’ in dere, Ah ain’!”

“But, Sam, you’ve got to! Miss ‘Chanda is in there. She may be lost. We’ve got to find her!” Val insisted.

Sam’s thin shoulders shook and he slid backward as if to avoid the white boy’s reach. “Ah ain’ a-goin’ in dere,” he repeated stubbornly. “Effen yo’all wants to go in dere—Looky, Mistuh Val, Ah tells yo’all de way an’ yo’all goes.” He brightened at this solution. “Yo’all kin take pappy’s othah boat; it am downstream dere, behin’ dem willows. Den yo’all goes down to de secon’ big pile o’ willows. Behin’ dem is a li’l bitty bayo’ goin’ back. Yo’all goes up dat ‘til yo’all comes to a fur rack. Den dat Jeems got de way marked on de trees.”

With that he turned and ran as if all the terrors of the night were on his trail. There was nothing for Val to do but to follow his directions. And the longer he lingered before setting out the bigger lead Ricky was getting.

He found the canoe behind the willows as Sam had said. Awkwardly he pushed off, hoping that Lucy would pry the whole story out of her son and put Rupert on their track as soon as possible.

The second clump of willows was something of a landmark, a huge matted mass of sucker and branch, the lower tips of the long, frond-like twigs sweeping the murky water. A snake swimming with its head just above the surface wriggled to the bank as Val cut into the small hidden stream Sam had told him of.

Vines and water plants had almost choked this, but there was a passage through the center. And one tough spike of vegetation which snapped back into his face bore a deep cut from which the sap was still oozing. The small stinging flies and mosquitoes followed and hung over him like a fog of discomfort. His skin was swollen and rough, irritated and itching. And in this green-covered way the heat seemed almost solid. Drops of moisture dripped from forehead and chin, and his hair was plastered tight to his skull.

Frogs leaped from the bank into the water at the sound of his coming. In the shallows near the bank, crawfish scuttled under water-logged leaves and stones at this disturbance of their world. Twice the bayou widened out into a sort of pool where the trees grew out of the muddy water and all sorts of lilies and bulb plants blossomed in riotous confusion.

Once a muskrat waddled into the protection of the bushes. And Val saw something like a small cat drinking at a pool. But that faint shadow disappeared noiselessly almost before the water trickled from his upraised paddle.



Clumps of wild rice were the meeting grounds for flocks of screaming birds. A snow-white egret waded solemnly across a mud-rimmed pocket. And once a snake, more dangerous than the swimmer Val had first encountered, betrayed its presence by the flicker of its tongue.

The smell of the steaming mud, the decaying vegetation, and the nameless evils hidden deeper in this water-rotted land was an added torment. The boy shook a large red ant from its grip in the flesh of his hand and wiped the streaming perspiration from his face.

It was then that the canoe floated almost of its own volition into a dead and distorted strip of country. Black water which gave off an evil odor covered almost half an acre of ground. From this arose the twisted, gaunt gray skeletons of dead oaks. To complete the drear picture a row of rusty-black vultures sat along the broad naked limb of the nearest of these hulks, their red-raw heads upraised as they croaked and sidled up and down.

But the bayou Val was following merely skirted this region, and in a few moments he was again within the shelter of flower-grown banks. Then he came upon a structure which must have been the fur rack Sam Two had alluded to, for here was their other boat moored to a convenient willow.

Val fastened the canoe beside it. The turf seemed springy, though here and there it gave way to patches of dark mud. It was on one of these that Ricky had left her mark in the clean-cut outline of the sole of her riding-boot.

With a last desperate slap at a mosquito Val headed inland, following with ease that trail of footprints. Ricky was suffering, too, for her rashness he noted with satisfaction when he discovered a long curly hair fast in the grip of a thorny branch he scraped under.

But the path was not a bad one. And the farther he went the more solid and the dryer it became. Once he passed through a small clearing, man-made, where three or four cotton bushes huddled together forlornly in company with a luxuriant melon patch.

And the melon patch was separated by only a few feet of underbrush from Jeems' domain. In the middle of a clearing was a sturdy platform, reinforced with upright posts and standing about four feet from the surface of the ground. On this was a small cabin constructed of slabs of bark-covered wood. As a dwelling it might be crude, but it had an air of scrupulous neatness. A short distance to one side of the platform was a well-built chicken-run, now inhabited by five hens and a ragged-tailed cock.

The door of the cabin was shut and there were no signs of life save the chickens. But as Val lowered himself painfully onto the second step of the ladder-like stairs leading up to the cabin, he thought he heard someone moving around. Glancing up, he saw Ricky staring down at him, open-mouthed.

"Hello," she called, for one of the few times in her life really astounded.

"Hello," Val answered shortly and shifted his weight to try to relieve the ache in his knee.

"Nice day, isn't it?"

## 11. Ralestones To The Rescue!

“Val! What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Following you. Good grief, girl,” he exploded, “haven’t you any better sense than to come into the swamp this way?”

Ricky’s mouth lost its laughing curve and her eyes seemed to narrow. She was, by all the signs, distinctly annoyed.

“It’s perfectly safe. I knew what I was doing.”

“Yes? Well, I will enjoy hearing Rupert’s remarks on that subject when he catches up with us,” snapped her brother.

“Val!” She lost something of her defiant attitude. He guessed that for all her boasted independence his sister was slightly afraid of Mr. Rupert Ralestone. “Val, he isn’t coming, too, is he?”

“He is if he got my message.” Val stretched his leg cautiously. The cramp was slowly leaving the muscles and he felt as if he could stand the remaining ache without wincing. “I sent Sam Two back to tell Rupert where his family had eloped to. Frankly, Ricky, this wasn’t such a smart trick. You know what Charity said about the swamps. Even the little I’ve seen of them has given me ideas.”

“But there was nothing to it at all,” she protested. “Jeems told me just how to get here and I only followed directions.”

Val chose to ignore this, being hot, tired, and in no mood for one of those long arguments such as Ricky enjoyed. “By the way, where is Jeems?” He looked about him as if he expected the swamper to materialize out of thin air.

Ricky sat down on the edge of the platform and dangled her booted feet. “Don’t know. But he’ll be here sooner or later. And I don’t feel like going back through the swamp just yet. The flies are awful. And did you see those dreadful vultures on that dead tree? What a place! But the flowers are wonderful and I saw a real live alligator, even if it was a small one.” She rubbed her scarf across her forehead. “Whew! It seems hotter here than it does at home.”

“This outing was all your idea,” Val reminded her. “And we’d better be getting back before Rupert calls out the Marines or the State Troopers or something to track us down.”

Ricky pouted. “Not going until I’m ready. And you can’t drag me if I dig my heels in.”

“I have no desire to be embroiled in such an undignified struggle as you suggest,” he told her loftily. “But neither do I yearn to spend the day here. I’m hungry. I wonder if our absent host possesses a larder?”

“If he does, you can’t raid it,” Ricky answered. “The door’s locked, and that lock,” she pointed to the bright disk of brass on the solid cabin door, “is a good one. I’ve already tried a hairpin on it,” she added shamelessly.

They sat awhile in silence. A wandering breeze had found its way into the clearing, and with it came the fragrance of flowers blossoming under the sun. The chicken family were pursuing a worm with more energy than Val decided he would have cared to expend in that heat, and a heavily laden bee rested on the lip of a sunflower to brush its legs. Val’s eyelids drooped and he found himself thinking dreamily of a hammock under the trees, a pillow, and long hours of

lazy dozing. At the same time a corner of his brain was sending forth nagging messages that they should be up and off, back to their own proper world. But he simply did not have the will power to get up and go.

“Nice place,” he murmured, looking about with more approbation than he would have granted the clearing some ten minutes earlier.

“Yes,” answered Ricky. “It would be nice to live here.”

Val was beginning to say something about “no bathtubs” when a sound aroused them from their lethargy. Someone was coming down the path. Ricky’s hand fell upon her brother’s shoulder.

“Quick! Up here and behind the house,” she urged him.

Not knowing just why he obeyed, Val scrambled up on the tiny platform and scuttled around behind the cabin. Why they should hide thus from Jeems who had given Ricky directions for reaching the place and had asked her to come, was more than he could understand. But he had a faint, uneasy feeling of mistrust, as if they had been caught off guard at a critical moment.

“This the place, Red?” The clipped words sounded clear above the murmurs of life from swamp and woods.

“Yeah. Bum-lookin’ joint, ain’t it? These guys ain’t got no brains; they like to live like this.” The contempt of the second speaker was only surpassed by the stridency of his voice.

“What about this boy?” asked the first.

“Dumb kid. Don’t know yet who his friends is.” There was a satisfied grunt as the speaker sat down on the step Val had so lately vacated. Ricky pressed closer to her brother.

“What about the cabin?”

“He ain’t here. And it’s locked, see? Yuh’d think he kept the crown jewels there.” The tickling scent of a cigarette drifted back to the two in hiding. “Beats me how he slipped away this morning without Pitts catching on. For two cents I’d spring that lock of his—”

“Isn’t worth the trouble,” replied the other decisively. “These trappers have no money except at the end of the fur season, and then most of them are in debt to the storekeepers.”

“Then why—”

“I sometimes wonder,” the voice was coldly cutting, “why I continue to employ you, Red. What profit would I find in a cabin like this? I want what he knows, not what he has.”

Having thus reduced his henchman to silence, the speaker went on smoothly, as if he were thinking aloud. “With Simpson doing so well in town, we’re close to the finish. This swamper must tell us—” His voice trailed away. Except for the creaking of wood when the sitter shifted his position, there was no other sound.

Then Red must have grown restless, for someone stamped up to the platform and rattled the chain on the cabin door aggressively. Val flattened back against the wall. What if the fellow took it into his head to walk around?

“Gonna wait here all day?” demanded Red.

“As it is necessary for me to have a word with him, we will. This waste of time is the product of Pitts’ stupidity. I shall remember that. It is entirely needless to use force except as a last resource. Now that this swamper’s suspicions are aroused, we may have trouble.”

“Yeah? Well, we can handle that. But how do yuh know that this guy has the stuff?”

“I can at least believe the evidence of my own eyes,” the other replied with bored contempt. “I came down river alone the night of the storm and saw him on the levee. He has a way of getting into the house all right. I saw him in there. And he doesn’t go through any of the doors, either. I must know how he does it.”

“All right, Boss. And what if you do get in? What are we supposed to be lookin’ for?”

“What those bright boys up there found a few days ago. That clerk told us that they’d discovered whatever the girl was talking about in the office that day. And we’ve got to get that before Simpson comes into court with his suit. I’m not going to lose fifty grand.” The last sentence ended abruptly as if the speaker had snapped his teeth shut upon a word like a dog upon its quarry.

“What does this guy Jeems go to the house for?” asked Red.

“Who knows? He seems to be hunting something too. But that’s not our worry. If it’s necessary, we can play ghost also. I’ve got to get into that house. If I can do it the way this Jeems does, without having to break in—so much the better. We don’t want the police ambling around here just now.”

Val stiffened. It didn’t require a Sherlock Holmes to get the kernel of truth out of the conversation he had overheard. “Night of the storm,” “play ghost,” were enough. So Jeems had been the ghost. And the swamper knew a secret way into the house!

“Wait,” Ricky’s lips formed the words by his ear as Val stirred restlessly. “Someone else is coming.”

“I don’t like the set-up in town,” Red was saying peevishly. “That smooth mouthpiece is asking too darn many questions. He’s always asking Simpson about things in the past. If you hadn’t got Sim that family history to study, he’d been behind bars a dozen times by now.”

“And he had better study it,” commented the other dryly, “because he is going to be word perfect before the case comes to court, if it ever does. There are not going to be any slip-ups in this deal.”

“Nother thing I don’t like,” broke in the other, “is this Waverly guy. I don’t like his face.”

“No? Well, doubtless he would change it if you asked him to. And I do not think it is wise of you to be too critical of plans which were made by deeper thinkers than yourself. Sometimes, Red, you weary me.”

There was no reply to that harsh judgment. And now Val could hear what Ricky had heard earlier—a faint swish as of a paddle through water. Again Ricky’s lips shaped words he could barely hear.

“Spur of bayou runs along here in back. Someone coming up from there.”

“Jeems?”

“Maybe.”

“We’d better—” Val motioned toward the front of the cabin. Ricky shook her head. Jeems was to be allowed to meet the intruders unwarned.

“This swamper may be tough,” ventured Red.

“We’ve met hard cases before,” answered the other significantly.

Red moved again, as if flexing his muscles.

“One boy, and a small one at that, shouldn’t force you to undergo all that preparation,” goaded the Boss.

Ricky must get away at once, her brother decided. Stubbornness or no stubbornness, she must go this time. Why he didn’t think of going himself Val never afterwards knew. Perhaps he possessed a spark of the family love of danger, after all, but mostly he clung to his perch because of that last threat. Whoever Jeems was or whatever he had done, he was one and alone. And he might relish another player on his side. But Ricky must go.

He said as much in a fierce whisper, only to have her grin recklessly back at him. In pantomime she gestured that he might try to make her. Val decided that he should have known the result of his efforts. Ricky was a Ralestone, too. And short of throwing her off the platform and so unmasking themselves completely, he could not move her against her will.

“No,” she whispered. “They’re planning trouble for Jeems. He’ll probably need us.”

“Well,” Val cautioned her, “if it gets too rough, you’ve got to promise to cut downstream for help. We’ll be able to use it.”

She nodded. “It’s a promise. But we’ve got to stand by Jeems if he needs us.”

“If he does—” Val was still suspicious. “He may fall in with their suggestions.”

Ricky shook her head. “He isn’t that kind. I don’t care if he *has* been playing ghost.”

Someone was walking along the path among the bushes bordering the back of the clearing. Although they could hear no sound, they could mark the passing of a body by the swish of the foliage. Val lay, face down, on the platform and reached for a stick of wood lying on the ground below. Somehow he did not like to think of being caught empty-handed when the excitement began.

“Hello.” It was Red, suddenly genial. The Ralestones could almost feel the radiance of the smile which must have split his face.

“Whatta yo’ doin’ heah?” That was Jeems, and his demand was sharply hostile.

“Now, bub, don’t get us wrong.” That was Red, still genial. “I know my pal sorta flew off his base this mornin’. But it was all in fun, see? So we kinda wanted yuh to stick around till he came and not do the run-out on us. And now the Boss has come down here so we can talk business all friendly like.”

“Shut up, Red!” Having so bottled his companion’s flow of words, the other spoke directly to Jeems. “My men made a mistake. All right. That’s over and done with; they’ll get theirs. Now let’s get down to business. What do you know about that big plantation up river, the one called ‘Pirate’s Haven’?”

“Nothin’.” Jeems’ answer was clear. The hostility was gone from his voice; nothing remained but an even tonelessness.

“Come now, I know you have reason to be hot. But this is business. I’ll make it worth your while—”

“Nothin’,” answered Jeems as concisely as before.

“You can’t expect us to believe that. I followed you one night.”

“Yo’ did?” The challenge was unmistakable.

“I did. So you see I know something of you. Something which even the present owner does not. Say the ghost in the hall, for example.”

There was the sound of a deeply drawn breath.

“So you see it is to your advantage to listen to us,” continued the Boss smoothly.

“What do you want?”

Val knew disappointment at that question. Would Jeems surrender as easily as that?

“Just an explanation of how you get into the house unseen.”

“Yo’ll nevah know!” The swamper’s reply came swift and clear.

“No? Well, I’d think twice before I held to that answer if I were you,” purred the other softly.

“A word to the Ralestones about those nightly walks of yours—”

“Won’t give yo’ what yo’ want,” replied Jeems shrewdly.

“I see. Perhaps I have been using the wrong approach,” observed the Boss composedly. “You work for a living, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know the value of money. What is your price? Come on, we won’t haggle.”

The Boss’ impatience colored his tone. “How much do you want for this information?”

“Nothin’!”

“Nothing?”

“Ah ain’t said nothin’ an’ Ah ain’t a-goin’ to say nothin’. An’ yo’ bettah be a-gittin’ offen this heah land of mine afo’—”

“Before what, swamper?” Red was taking a hand in the game.

“Yo’ can’t fright’n me with that gun,” came calmly enough from Jeems. “Yo’ ain’t a-goin’ to risk shootin’—”

“There ain’t no witnesses here, kid. And there ain’t no law back in these swamps. Yuh’re gonna tell the Boss what he wants to know an’ yuh’re gonna spill it quick, see? I know some ways of making guys squeal—”

At that suggestion Val’s fingers tightened on his club and Ricky choked back a cry as her brother crept toward the corner of the cabin. Their melodrama was fast taking on the color of tragedy.

“So yuh better speak up.” Red was still encouraging Jeems.

There was no immediate answer from the swamper, but Ricky touched Val’s arm and nodded toward the bushes. She had decided that it was time for her to leave. He agreed eagerly. She dropped lightly to the ground and he watched her crawl away unnoticed by those in front who were so intent upon the baiting of their quarry.

“Three minutes, swamper!”

Ricky was gone, free from whatever might develop. Val edged forward and for the first time peered around the corner of the cabin. The two assailants were still only voices, but he could see Jeems. The swamper’s face was bruised and there was a smear of dried blood across one cheek as if he had already been roughly handled. But he stood at ease, facing the cabin. His hands were hanging loosely at his sides and he was seemingly unconcerned by what confronted him. Suddenly his eyes flickered to the bushes at one side. Had Ricky betrayed herself, Val wondered breathlessly.

Clear now of the cabin, Val wriggled his way around the platform. In a minute he would be able to see the Boss and Red. He gripped the club.

Then Jeems stared straight into his face. But the swamper gave no sign of seeing Val. And that, to the boy's mind, was the greatest feat of all that afternoon. For Val knew that if he had been in Jeems' place he would have betrayed them both in his surprise.

The others were at last visible, their backs to Val. Nervously he sized them up. The Boss was tall and thin, but his movements suggested possession of wiry strength. Red, his brick-colored hair making him easy to identify, was shorter and thick across the shoulders, but his waistline was also thick and the boy thought that his wind was bad. Of the two, the Boss was the more dangerous. Red might lose his head in a sudden attack, but not the Boss. Val decided to tackle the latter.

Slowly he got from his knees to his feet. After the first quick glance, Jeems hadn't looked at him, but Val knew that the swamper was ready and waiting to take advantage of any diversion he might make.

"Three minutes are up, swamper. So yuh've decided to be tough, eh?"

"Whatta yo' wanna know?" Jeems' question was silly but it held their attention.

"We have told you several times," answered the Boss, his temper beginning to fray visibly.

"What is the trick of getting into that house?"

"Well," Jeems raised his hand to rub his ear, "yo' turn to the left—"

So he agreed with the listener. Val was to take the Boss on his left. He gathered his feet under him for the leap which he hoped would land him full upon the invader.

"Yes?" prompted the man impatiently as Jeems hesitated. At that moment Val sprang.

But his game leg betrayed him again. Instead of landing cleanly upon the other, he came down draggingly across the Boss' shoulders. The gun roared and then the attacked man lashed back a vicious blow which split the skin over Val's cheek-bone.

For the next three minutes Val was more than occupied. His opponent was a dirty fighter, and when he had recovered from his surprise he was more than the boy could handle. Val's club was twisted out of his hands, and he found himself fighting wildly to keep the man's clawing fingers from his eyes. They were both rolling on the ground, flailing out at each other. Twice Val tasted his own blood when one of the enemy's vicious jabs glanced along his face. Either blow would have finished Val had it landed clean.

Then in a sudden turn the Boss caught him in a deadly body-lock which left him half-stunned and panting, at his mercy. And there was no mercy in the man. When Val looked up into that flushed, snarling face, he knew that he was as hopeless as a trapped animal. The man could—and would—finish him at his leisure.

"This way, Rupert! Sam!" the cry reached even Val's dulled ears.

The man above him stirred. The boy saw the blood-lust fade from his eyes and apprehension take its place. He got to his feet, launching a last bruising kick at Val's ribs before he limped across the clearing. On his way he hauled Red to his feet. They were going, not toward the path from the bayou, but around the house on the trail that Jeems had followed. Val struggled up and looked around. The turf was torn and gouged. In the dust lay his club and Red's revolver.

And by the steps lay something else, a slight brown figure. Painfully the boy got to his feet and lurched across to Jeems.

## 12. The Ralestones Bring Home A Reluctant Guest

The swamper was lying on his back, his eyes closed. From a great purple welt across his forehead the blood oozed sluggishly. When Val touched him he moaned faintly.

“Val! Are you hurt? What’s the matter?” Ricky was upon them like a whirlwind out of the bush.

“Jeems stopped a nasty one,” her brother panted.

“Is he—” She dropped down in the dust beside them.

“He’s knocked out, and he’ll have a bad headache for some time, but I don’t think it’s any worse than that.”

Ricky had pulled out a microscopic bit of handkerchief and was dabbing at the blood in an amateurish way. Jeems moaned and turned his head as if to get away from her ministrations.

“Where’s Rupert—and Sam?” Val looked toward the path. “They were with you, weren’t they?”

Ricky shook her head. “No. That was just what you call creating a diversion. For all I know, they’re busy at home.”

Her brother straightened. “Then we’ve got to get out of here—fast. Those two left because they were rattled, but when they have had a chance to cool off they’ll be back.”

“What about Jeems?”

“Take him with us, of course. We won’t be able to manage the canoe. But you brought the outboard, so we’ll go in that and tow the canoe. We ought to have something to cover his head.” Val regarded the bleeding wound doubtfully.

Without answering, Ricky leaned forward and began systematically going through Jeems’ pockets. In the second she found a key. Val took it from her and hobbled up the cabin steps. For a wonder, he thought thankfully, the key was the right one. The lock clicked and he went in.

Like the clearing, the interior of the one-room shack was neat, a place for everything and everything in its place. Under the window in the far wall was a small chest of some dark polished wood. Save for its size, it was not unlike the chests the Ralestones had found in their store-room. Opposite it was a wooden cot, the covers smoothly spread. A stool, a blackened cook stove, and a solid table with an oil lamp were the extent of the furnishings. Lines of traps hung on the walls, along with the wooden boards for the stretching of drying skins, and there was a half-finished grass basket lying on top of the chest.

Val hefted a stoneware jug. They had no time to hunt for a spring. And if this contained water, they would need it. At the resulting gurgle from within, he set it by the door and returned to rob the cot of pillow and the single coarse but clean sheet.

Ricky tore the sheet and made a creditable job of washing and bandaging the ugly bruise. Jeems drank greedily when they offered him water but he did not seem to recognize them. In answer to Ricky’s question of how he felt, he muttered something in the swamp French of the Cajuns. But he was uneasy until Val locked the cabin door and put the key in his hand.

“How are we going to get him to the boat?” asked Ricky suddenly.



“Carry him.”

“But, Val—” for the first time she looked at her brother as if she really saw him—“Val, you’re hurt!”

“Just a little stiff,” he hastened to assure her. “Our late visitors play rather rough. We’ll manage all right. I’ll take his shoulders and you his feet.”

They wavered drunkenly along the path. Twice Val stumbled and regained his balance just in time. Ricky had laid the pillow across their burden’s feet, declaring that she would need it when they got to the boat. Val passed the point of aching misery—when he thought that he could not shuffle forward another step—and now he came into what he had heard called “second wind.” By fixing his eyes on a tree or a bush a step or two ahead and concentrating only upon passing that one, and then that, and that, he got through without disgracing himself.

At the bayou at last, they wriggled Jeems awkwardly into the boat. Val had no doubt that a woodsman might have done the whole job better in much less time and without a tenth of the effort they had expended. But all he ever wondered afterward was how they ever did it at all.

It was when Ricky had made their passenger as comfortable as she could in the bottom of the boat, steadying his head across her knees, that her brother partially relaxed.

“Val, you run the engine,” she said without looking up.

He dragged himself toward the stern of the boat, remembering too late, when he had cast off, that he had not taken the canoe in tow. The engine coughed, sputtered, and then settled down to a steady *putt-putt*. They were off.

“Val, do you—do you think he is badly hurt?”

He dared not look down; it required all his powers of concentration on what lay before them to keep his hand steady.

“No. We’ll get a doctor when we get back. He’ll come around again in no time—Jeems, I mean.”

But would he? Head injuries were sometimes more serious than they seemed, Val remembered dismally.

It was not until they came out into the main bayou that Jeems roused again. He looked up at Ricky in a sort of dull surprise, and then his gaze shifted to Val.

“What—”

“We won the war,” Val tried to grin, an operation which tore his mask of dried blood, “thanks to Ricky. And now we’re going home.”

At that, Jeems made a violent effort to sit up.

“*Non!*” his English deserted him and he broke into impassioned French.

“Yes,” Val replied firmly as Ricky pushed the swamper down. “Of course you’re coming with us. You’ve had a nasty knock on the head that needs attention.”

“Ah’m not a-goin’ to no hospital!” His eyes burned into Val’s.

“Certainly not!” cried Ricky. “You’re bound for our guest-room. Now keep quiet. We’ll be there soon.”

“Ah ain’t a-goin’,” he declared mutinously.

“Don’t be silly,” Ricky scolded him; “we’re taking you. Does Val have to come and hold you down?”

“Ah can’t!” His eyes flickered from Val’s face to hers. There was something more than independence behind that firm refusal. “Ah ain’t a-goin’ theah.”

“Why not?”

He seemed to shrink from her. “It ain’t fitten,” he murmured.

“How perfectly silly,” laughed Ricky. But Val thought that he understood.

“Because of the secret you know?” he asked quietly.

The pallor beneath Jeems’ heavy tan vanished in a flush of slow-burning red. “Ah reckon so,” he muttered, but he met Val’s eyes squarely.

“Let’s leave all explanations until later,” Val suggested.

“Ah played haunt!” the confession came out of the swamper in a rush.

“Then you *were* my faceless ghost?”

Jeems tried to nod and the action printed a frown of pain between his eyes.

“Why? Didn’t you want us to live there?” asked Ricky gently.

“Ah was huntin’—”

“What for?”

The frown became one of puzzlement. “Ah don’t know—” His voice trailed off into a thin whisper as his eyes closed wearily. Val signaled Ricky to keep quiet.

“Ahoy there!” Along the bank toward them came Rupert and after him Sam. Beyond them lay the Ralestone landing. Val headed inshore.

“Just what does this mean—Val! Has there been an accident?” The irritation in Rupert’s voice became hot concern.

“An intended one,” his brother replied. “We’ve got the real victim here with us.”

They tied up to the landing and Sam came down to hand out Jeems who apparently had lapsed into unconsciousness again.

“You’d better call a doctor,” Val told Rupert. “Jeems has a head wound.”

But Rupert had already taken charge of affairs with an efficiency which left Val humbly grateful. The boy didn’t even move to leave the boat. It was better just to sit and watch other people scurry about. Sam had started for the house, carrying Jeems as if the long-legged swamper was the same age and size as his own small son. Ricky dashed on ahead to warn Lucy. Rupert had Sam Two by the collar and was giving him instructions for catching Dr. LeFrode, who was probably making his morning rounds and might be found at the sugar-mill where one of the feeders had injured his hand. Sam Two’s sister had seen the doctor on his way there a scant ten minutes earlier.

Val watched all this activity dreamily. Everything would be all right now that Rupert was in charge. He could relax—

“Now,” his brother turned upon Val, “just what did—What’s the matter with you?”

“Tired, I guess,” Val said ruefully. But Rupert was already in the boat, getting the younger boy to his unsteady feet.

“Can you make it to the house?” he asked anxiously.

“Sure. Just give me an arm till I get on the landing.”

But when Val had crawled up on the levee he did not feel at all like walking to the house. Then Rupert’s arm was about his thin shoulders and he thought that he could make it if he really tried.

The garden path seemed miles long, and it was not until Val had the soft cushions of the hall couch under him that he felt able to tell his story. But at that moment the short, stout doctor came through the door in a rush. Sam Two had led him to believe that half the household had been murdered. At first Dr. LeFrode started toward Val, until in alarm the boy swung his feet to the floor and sat up, waving the man to the stairway where Ricky hovered to act as guide.

Then Val was alone, even Sam Two having edged upstairs to share in the excitement. The boy sank back on his pillows and wondered where their late assailants were now, and why they had been so determined to learn Jeems’ secret. As Ricky had said once before, the Ralestones seemed to have been handed a gigantic tangle without ends, only middle sections, and had been told to unravel it.

Boot heels clicked on the stone flooring. Val turned his head cautiously and tried not to wince. Rupert was coming in with a bowl of water, from which steam still arose. Across his arm lay a towel and in his other hand was their small first-aid kit.

“Suppose we do a little patching,” he suggested. “Your face at present is not all it might be. What did you and your swamp friend do—run into a mowing machine?” He swabbed delicately at the cut the Boss had opened across Val’s cheek-bone, and at another by his mouth.

“I thought it might be that for a moment—a mowing machine, I mean. No, we just met a couple of gentlemen—enterprising fellows who wanted to see more of this commodious mansion of ours—” Val’s words faded into a sharp hiss as Rupert applied iodine with a liberal hand. “They seemed to think that Jeems knew a lot about Pirate’s Haven and they were going to persuade him to tell all. Only it didn’t turn out the way they had planned.”

“Due to you?” Rupert eyed his brother intently. The boy’s face was swollen almost out of recognition and he didn’t like this sudden talkativeness.

“Due partly to me, but mostly to Ricky. She—ah—created the necessary diversion. I had sort of lost interest at the time. I know so little about gouging and biting in clinches.”

“Dirty fighters?”

“Well, soiled anyway. But if the Boss isn’t nursing a cracked wrist, it isn’t my fault. I don’t know what Jeems did to Red, but he, too, departed in a damaged condition. Do you have to do that?” Val demanded testily, squirming as Rupert ran his hands lightly over the boy’s shoulders and down his ribs, touching every bruise to tingling life.

“Just seeing the extent of the damage,” he explained.

“You don’t have to see, I can feel!” Val snapped pettishly.

Rupert got to his feet. “Come on.”

“Where?”

“Oh, a hot bath and then bed. You’ll be taking an interest in life again about this time tomorrow. I think LeFrode had better see you too.”

“No,” Val objected. “I’m not a child.”

Rupert grinned. “If you’d rather I carried you—”

There was no opposing Rupert when he was in that mood, as his brother well knew. Val got up slowly.

The program that Rupert had outlined was faithfully carried out. Half an hour later Val found himself between sheets, blinking at the ceiling drowsily. When two cracks overhead wavered together of their own accord, his eyes closed.

“—still sleeping?” whispered someone at his side much later.

“Yes, best thing for him.”

“Was he badly hurt?”

“No, just banged around more than was good for him.”

Val opened his eyes. It must have been close to dusk, for the sunlight was red across the bedclothes. Rupert stood by the window and Ricky was in the doorway, a tray of covered dishes in her hands.

“Hello!” Val sat up, grimacing at the twinge of pain across his back. “What day is this?”

Rupert laughed. “Still Tuesday.”

“How’s Jeems?”

“Doing very well. I’ve had to have Rupert in to frighten him into staying in bed,” Ricky said. “The doctor thinks he ought to be there a couple of days at least. But Jeems doesn’t agree with him. Between keeping Jeems in bed and keeping Rupert out of the swamp I’ve had a full day.”

Rupert sat down on the foot of the bed. “You’d know this Boss and Red again, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Then you’ll probably have a chance to identify them.” There was a grim look about Rupert’s jaw. “Ricky’s told me all that you overheard. I don’t know what it means but I’ve heard enough for me to get in touch with LeFleur. He’ll be out tomorrow morning. And once we get something to work on—”

“I’m beginning to feel sorry for our swamp visitors,” Val interrupted.

“They’ll be sorry,” hinted Rupert darkly. “How about you, Val, beginning to feel hungry?”

“Now that you mention it, I *am* discovering a rather hollow ache in my center section. Supper ready?”

“Half an hour. I’ll bring you up a tray—” began Ricky.

But Val had thrown back the sheet and was sitting on the side of the bed. “Oh, no, you don’t! I’m not an invalid yet.”

Ricky glanced at Rupert and then left. Val reached for his shirt defiantly. But his brother raised no objection. The painful stiffness Val had felt at first wore off and he was able to move without feeling as if each muscle were tied in cramping knots.

“May I pay Jeems a visit?” he asked as they went out into the hall. Rupert nodded toward a door across the corridor.

“In there. He’s a stubborn piece of goods. Reminds me of you at times. If he’d ever get rid of that scowl of his, he’d be even more like you. He warms to Ricky, but you’d think I was a

Chinese torturer the way he acts when I go in.” There was a shade of irritation in Rupert’s voice.

“Maybe he’s afraid of you.”

“But what for?” Rupert stared at the boy in open surprise.

“Well, you do have rather a commanding air at times,” Val countered. If Ricky had told Rupert nothing of Jeems’ confession, he wasn’t going to.

“So that’s what you really think of me!” observed Rupert. “Go reason with that wildcat of yours if you want to. I’m beginning to believe that you are two of a kind.” He turned abruptly down the hall.

Val opened the door of the bedroom. The sunlight was fading fast and already the corners of the large room were filled with the gray of dusk. But light from the windows swept full across the bed and its occupant. Val hobbled stiffly toward it.

“Hello.” The brown face on the pillow did not change expression as Val greeted the swamper. “How do you feel now?”

“Bettah,” Jeems answered shortly. “Ah’m good but they won’t le’ me up.”

“The Doc says you’re in for a couple of days,” Val told him.

Somehow Jeems looked smaller, shrunken, as he lay in that oversized bed. And he had lost that air of indolent arrogance which had made him seem so independent in their swamp and garden meetings. It was as if Val were looking down upon a younger and less confident edition of the swamper he had known.

“What does he think?” There was urgency in that question.

“Who’s he?”

“Yo’ brothah.”

“Rupert? Why, he’s glad to have you here,” Val answered.

“Does he know ‘bout—”

Val shook his head.

“Tell him!” ordered the swamper. “Ah ain’t a-goin’ to stay undah his ruff lessen he knows. ‘Tain’t fitten.”

At this clean-cut statement of the laws of hospitality, Val nodded. “All right. I’ll tell him. But what were you after here, Jeems? I’ll have to tell him that, too, you know. Was it the Civil War treasure?”

Jeems turned his head slowly. “No.” Again the puzzled frown twisted his straight, finely marked brows. “What do Ah want wi’ treasure? Ah don’t know what Ah was lookin’ fo’. Mah grandpappy—”

“Val, supper’s ready,” came Rupert’s voice from the hall.

Val half turned to go. “I’ve got to go now. But I’ll be back later,” he promised.

“Yo’ll tell him?” Jeems stabbed a finger at the door.

“Yes; after supper. I promise.”

With a little sigh Jeems relaxed and burrowed down into the softness of the pillow. “Ah’ll be awaitin’,” he said.

### 13. On Such A Night As This—

It had been on of those dull, weepy days when a sullen drizzle clouded sky and earth. In consequence, the walls and floors of Pirate's Haven seemed to exude chill. Rupert built a fire in the hall fireplace, but none of the family could say that it was a successful one. It made a nice show of leaping flame accompanied by fancy lighting effects but gave forth absolutely no heat.

“Val?”

The boy started guiltily and thrust his note-book under the couch cushion as Charity came in. Tiny drops of rain were strung along the hairs which had blown free of her rain-cape hood like steel beads along a golden wire.

“Yes? Don't come here expecting to get warm,” he warned her bitterly. “We are very willing but the fire is weak. Looks pretty, doesn't it?” He kicked at a charred end on the hearth.

“Well, that's all it's good for!”

“Val, what sort of a mess have you and Jeems jumped into?” she asked as she handed him her dripping cape.

“Oh, just a general sort of mess,” he answered lightly. “Jeems had callers who forgot their manners. So Ricky and I breezed in and brought the party to a sudden end—”

“As I can see by your black eye,” she commented. “But what has Jeems been up to?”

Val was suddenly very busy holding her cape before that mockery of a blaze.

“Why don't you ask him that?”

“Because I'm asking you. Rupert came over last night and sat on my gallery making very roundabout inquiries concerning Jeems. I pried out of him the details of your swamp battle. But I want to know now just what Jeems has been doing. Your brother is so vague—”

“Rupert has the gift of being exasperatingly uncommunicative,” his brother told her. “The story, so far as I know, is short and simple. Jeems knows a secret way into this house. In addition, his grandfather told him that the fortune of the house of Jeems is concealed here—having been very hazy in his description of the nature of said fortune. Consequently, grandson has been playing haunt up and down our halls trying to find it.

“His story is as full of holes as a sieve but somehow one can't help believing it. He has explained that he has the secret of the outside entrance only, and not the one opening from the inside. In the meantime he is in bed—guarded from intrusion by Ricky and Lucy with the same care as if he were the crown jewels. So matters rest at present.”

“Neatly put.” She dropped down on the couch. “By the way, do you realize that you have ruined your face for my uses?”

Val fingered the crisscrossing tape on his cheek. “This is only temporary.”

“I certainly hope so. That must have been some battle.”

“One of our better efforts.” He coughed in mock modesty. “Ricky saved the day with alarms and excursions without. Rupert probably told you that.”

“Yes, he can be persuaded to talk at times. Is he always so silent?”

“Nowadays, yes,” he answered slowly. “But when we were younger—You know,” Val turned toward her suddenly, his brown face serious to a degree, “it isn’t fair to separate the members of a family. To put one here and one there and the third somewhere else. I was twelve when Father died, and Ricky was eleven. They sent her off to Great-aunt Rogers because Uncle Fleming, who took me, didn’t care for a girl—”

“And Rupert?”

“Rupert—well, he was grown, he could arrange his own life; so he just went away. We got a letter now and then, or a post-card. There was money enough to send us to expensive schools and dress us well. It was two years before I really saw Ricky again. You can’t call short visits on Sunday afternoons seeing anyone.

“Then Uncle Fleming died and I was simply parked at Great-aunt Rogers’. She”—Val was remembering things, a bitter look about his mouth—“didn’t care for boys. In September I was sent to a military academy. I needed discipline, it seemed. And Ricky was sent to Miss Somebody’s-on-the-Hudson. Rupert was in China then. I got a letter from him that fall. He was about to join some expedition heading into the Gobi.

“Ricky came down to the Christmas hop at the academy, then Aunt Rogers took her abroad. She went to school in Switzerland a year. I passed from school to summer camp and then back to school. Ricky sent me some carvings for Christmas—they arrived three days late.”

He stared up at the stone mantel. “Kids feel things a lot more than they’re given credit for. Ricky sent me a letter with some tear stains between the lines when Aunt Rogers decided to stay another year. And that was the year I earned the reputation of being a ‘hard case.’

“Then Ricky cabled me that she was coming home. I walked out of school the same morning. I didn’t even tell anyone where I was going. Because I had money enough, I thought I would fly. And that, dear lady, is the end of this very sad tale.” He grinned one-sidedly down at her.

“It was then that—that—”

“I was smashed up? Yes. And Rupert came home without warning to find things very messy. I was in the hospital when I should have been in some corrective institution, as Aunt Rogers so often told me during those days. Ricky was also in disgrace for speaking her mind, as she does now and then. To make it even more interesting, our guardian had been amusing himself by buying oil stock with our capital. Unfortunately, oil did not exist in the wells we owned. Yes, Rupert had every right to be anything but pleased with the affairs of the Ralestones.

“He swept us off here where we are still under observation, I believe.”

“Then you don’t like it here?”

“Like it? Madam, ‘like’ is a very pallid word. What if you were offered everything you ever wished for, all tied up in pink ribbons and laid on your door-step? What would your reaction be?”

“So,” she was staring into the fire, “that’s the way of it?”

“Yes. Or it would be if—” He stooped to reach for another piece of wood. The fire was threatening to die again.

“What is the flaw in the masterpiece?” she asked quietly.

“Rupert. He’s changed. In the old days he was one of us; now he’s a stranger. We’re amusing to have around, someone to look after, but I have a feeling that to him we don’t really exist. We aren’t real—” Val floundered trying to express that strange, walled-off emotion which so

often held him in this grown-up brother's presence. "Things like this 'Bluebeard's Chamber' of his—that isn't like the Rupert we knew."

"Did you ever think that he might be shy, too?" she asked. "He left two children and came home to find two distrustful adults. Give him his chance—"

"Charity!" Ricky ran lightly downstairs. "Why didn't Val tell me you had come?"

"I just dropped in to inquire concerning your patient."

"He's better-tempered than Val," declared Ricky shamelessly. "You'll stay to dinner of course. We're having some sort of crab dish that Lucy seems to think her best effort. Rupert will be back by then, I'm sure; he's out somewhere with Sam. There's been some trouble about trespassers on the swamp lands. Goodness, won't this rain ever stop?"

As if in answer to her question, there came a great gust of wind and rain against the door, a blast which shook the oak, thick and solid as it was. And then came the thunder of the knocker which Letty-Lou had polished into shining life only the day before.

Val opened the door to find Mr. Creighton and Mr. Holmes huddled on the mat. They came in with an eagerness which was only surpassed by Satan, wet and displaying cold anger towards his mistress, whom he passed with a disdainful flirt of his tail as he headed for that deceptive fire.

"You, again," observed Charity resignedly as Sam Two was summoned and sent away again draped with wet coats and drenched hats.

"Man"—Holmes argued with Satan for the possession of the hearth-stone—"when it rains in this country, it rains. A branch of your creek down there is almost over the road—"

"Bayou, not creek," corrected Charity acidly. Lately she had shown a marked preference for Holmes' absence rather than his company.

"I stand corrected," he laughed; "a branch of your bayou."

"If you found it so unpleasant, why did you—" began Charity, and then she flushed as if she had suddenly realized that that speech was too rude even for her recent attitude.

"Why did we come?" Holmes' crooked eyebrow slid upward as his face registered mock reproof. "My, my, what a warm welcome, my dear." He shook his head and Charity laughed in spite of herself.

"Don't mind my bearishness," she made half apology. "You know what pleasant moods I fall into while working. And this rain is depressing."

"But Miss Biglow is right." Creighton smiled his rare, shy smile. Brusque and impatient as he was when on business bent, he was awkwardly uncomfortable in ordinary company. The man, Val sometimes thought privately, lived, ate, slept books. Save when they were the subject of conversation, he was as out of his element as a coal-miner at the ballet. "We should explain the reason for this—this rather abrupt call." He fingered his brief-case, which he still clutched, nervously.

"Down to business already." Holmes seated himself on the arm of Ricky's chair. "Very well, out with it."

Creighton smiled again, laid the case across his knees, and looked straight at Ricky. For some reason he talked to her, as if she above all others must be firmly convinced of the importance of his mission.

"It is a very queer story, Miss Ralestone, a very queer—"



“Said the mariner to the wedding guest.” Holmes snapped his fingers at Satan, who contemptuously ignored him. “Or am I thinking of the Whiting who talked to the Snail?”

“Perhaps I had better begin at the beginning,” continued Creighton, frowning at Holmes who refused to be so suppressed.

“Why be so dramatic about it, old man? It’s very simple, Miss Ricky. Creighton has lost an author and he wants you to help find him.”

When Ricky’s eyes involuntarily swept about the room, Val joined in the laughter. “No, it isn’t as easy as all that, I’m afraid.” Creighton had lost his nervous shyness. “But what Holmes says is true. I have lost an author and do hope that you can help me locate the missing gentleman—or lady. Two months ago an agent sent a manuscript to our office for reading. It wasn’t complete, but he thought it was well worth our attention. It was.

“Although there were only five chapters finished, the rest being but synopsis and elaborated scenes, we knew that we had something—something big. We delayed reporting upon it until Mr. Brewster—our senior partner—returned from Europe. Mr. Brewster has the final decision on all manuscripts; he was as well pleased with this offering as we were. Frankly, we saw possibilities of another great success such as those two long historical novels which have been so popular during the past few years.

“Queerly enough, the author’s name was not upon the papers sent us by the agent—that is, his proper name; there was a pen-name. And when we applied to Mr. Lever, the agent, we received a most unpleasant shock. The author’s real name, which had been given in the covering letter mailed with the manuscript to Mr. Lever, had most strangely disappeared, due to some carelessness in his office.

“Now we have an extremely promising book and no author—”

“What I can’t understand,” cut in Holmes, “is the modesty of the author. Why hasn’t he written to Lever?”

“That is the most unfortunate part of the whole affair.” Mr. Creighton shook his head. “Lever recalled that the chap had said in the letter that if Lever found the manuscript unsalable he should destroy it, as the writer was moving about and had no permanent address. The fellow added that if he didn’t hear from Lever he would assume that it was not acceptable. Lever wrote to the address given in the letter to acknowledge receipt, but that was all.”

“Mysterious,” Val commented, interested in spite of himself.

“Just so. Lever deduced from the tone of the letter that the writer was very uncertain of his own powers and hesitated to submit his manuscript. And yet, what we have is a very fine piece of work, far beyond the ability of the average beginner. The author must have written other things.

“The novel is historical, with a New Orleans setting. Its treatment is so detailed that only one who had lived here or had close connections with this country could have produced it. Mr. Brewster, knowing that I was about to travel south, asked me to see if I could discover our missing author through his material. So far I have failed; our man is unknown to any of the writers of the city or to any of those interested in literary matters.

“Yet he knows New Orleans and its history as few do today except those of old family who have been born and bred here. Dr. Hanly Richardson of Tulane University has assured me that much of the material used is authentic—historically correct to the last detail. And it was Dr. Richardson who suggested that several of the scenes must have actually occurred, becoming with the passing of time part of the tradition of some aristocratic family.

“The period of the story is that time of transition when Louisiana passed from Spain to France and then under the control of the United States. It covers the years immediately preceding the Battle of New Orleans. Unfortunately, those were years of disturbance and change. Events which might have been the talk of the town, and so have found description in gossipy memoirs, were swallowed by happenings of national importance. It is, I believe, in intimate family records only that I can find the clue I seek.”

“Which scenes”—Ricky’s eyes shone in the firelight—“are those Dr. Richardson believes real?”

“Well, he was very certain that the duel of the twin brothers must have occurred—Why, Mr. Ralestone,” he interrupted himself as the stick Val was about to place on the fire fell from his hands and rolled across the floor. “Mr. Ralestone, what is the matter?”

Across his shoulder Ricky signaled her brother. And above her head Val saw Holmes’ eyes narrow shrewdly.

“Nothing. I’m sorry I was so clumsy.” Val stooped hurriedly to hide his confusion.

“A duel between twin brothers.” Ricky twisted one of the buttons which marched down the front of her sport dress. “That sounds exciting.”

“They fought at midnight”—Creighton was enthralled by the story he was telling—“and one was left for dead. The scene is handled with restraint and yet you’d think that the writer had been an eye-witness. Now if such a thing ever did happen, there would have been a certain amount of talk afterwards—”

Charity nodded. “The slaves would have spread the news,” she agreed, “and the person who found the wounded twin.”

Val kept his eyes upon the hearth-stone. There was no stain there, but his vivid imagination painted the gray as red as it had been that cold night when the slave woman had come to find her master lying there, his brother’s sword across his body. Someone had used the story of the missing Ralestone. But who today knew that story except themselves, Charity, LeFleur, and some of the negroes?

“And you think that some mention of such an event might be found in the papers of the family concerned?” asked Ricky. She was leaning forward in her chair, her lips parted eagerly.

“Or in those of some other family covering the same period,” Creighton added. “I realize that this is an impertinence on my part, but I wonder if such mention might not be found among the records of your own house. From what I have seen and heard, your family was very prominent in the city affairs of that time—”

Ricky stood up. “There is no need to ask, Mr. Creighton. My brother and I will be most willing to help you. Unfortunately, Rupert is very much immersed in a business matter just now, but Val and I will go through the papers we have.”

Val choked down the protest that was on his lips just in time to nod agreement. For some reason Ricky wanted to keep the secret. Very well, he would play her game. At least he would until he knew what lay behind her desire for silence.

“That is most kind.” Creighton was beaming upon both of them. “I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your coöperation in this matter—”

“Not at all,” answered Ricky with that deceptive softness in her voice which masked her rising temper. “We are only too grateful to be allowed to share a secret.”

And then her brother guessed that she did not mean Creighton's secret but some other. She crossed the room and rang the bell for Letty-Lou to bring coffee. Something triumphant in her step added to Val's suspicion. Like the Englishman of Kipling's poem, Ricky was most to be feared when she grew polite. He turned in time to see her wink at Charity.

Rupert came in just then, wet and thoroughly out of sorts, full of the evidences he had discovered on Ralestone lands bordering the swamp that strangers had been camping there. Their guests all stayed to supper, lingering long about the table to discuss Rupert's find, so that Val did not get a chance to be alone with Ricky to demand an explanation. And for some reason she seemed to be adroitly avoiding him. He did have her almost cornered in the upper hall when Letty-Lou came up behind him and plucked at his sleeve.

"Mistuh Val," she said, "dat Jeems boy done wan' to see yo'all."

"Bother Jeems!" Val exploded, his eyes on Ricky's back. But he stepped into the bedroom where the swamper was still imprisoned by Lucy's orders.

The boy was propped up on his pillows, looking out of the window. His body was tense. At the sound of Val's step he turned his bandaged head.

"Can't yo' git me outa heah?" he demanded.

"Why?"

"The watah's up!" His eyes were upon the water-filled darkness of the garden.

"But that's all right," the other assured him. "Sam says that it won't reach the top of the levee. At the worst, only the lower part of the garden will be flooded."

Jeems glanced at Val over his shoulder and then without a word he edged toward the side of the bed and tried to stand. But with a muffled gasp he sank back again, pale and weak. Awkwardly Val forced him back against his pillows.

"It's all right," he assured him again.

But in answer the swamper shook his head violently, "It ain't all right in the swamp."

In a flash Val caught his meaning. Swampers lived on house-boats for the most part, and the boats will outride all but unusual floods. But Jeems' cabin was built on land, land none too stable even in dry weather. The swamp boy touched Val's hand.

"It ain't safe. Two of them piles is rotted. If the watah gits that far, they'll go."

"You mean the piles holding up your cabin platform?" Val asked.

He nodded. For a second Val caught a glimpse of forlorn loneliness beneath the sullen mask Jeems habitually wore.

"But there's nothing you can do now—"

"It ain't the cabin. Ah gotta git the chest—"

"The one in the cabin?"

His black eyes were fixed upon Val's, and then they swerved and rested upon the wall behind the young Ralestone.

"Ah gotta git the chest," he repeated simply.

And Val knew that he would. He would get out of bed and go into the swamp after that treasure of his. Which left only one thing for Val to do.

“I’ll get the chest, Jeems. Let me have your key to the cabin. I’ll take the outboard motor and be back before I’m missed.”

“Yo’ don’t know the swamp—”

“I know how to find the cabin. Where’s the key?”

“In theah,” he pointed to the highboy.

Val’s fingers closed about the bit of metal.

“Mistuh,” Jeems straightened, “Ah won’t forgit this.”

Val glanced toward the downpour without.

“Neither will I, in all probability,” he said dryly as he went out.

It had been on just such a night as this that the missing Ralestone had gone out into the gloom. But he was coming back again, Val reminded himself hurriedly. Of course he was. With a shake he pulled on his trench-coat and slipped out the front door unseen.

## 14. Pirate Ways Are Hidden Ways

The rain, fine and needle-like, stung Val's face. There were ominous pools of water gathering in the garden depressions. Even the small stream which bisected their land had grown from a shallow trickle into a thick, mud-streaked roll crowned with foam.

But the bayou was the worst. It had put off its everyday sleepiness with a roar. A chicken coop wallowed by as the boy struggled with the knot of the painter which held the outboard. And after the coop traveled a dead tree, its topmost branches bringing up against the plantation landing with a crack. Val waited for it to whirl on before he got on board his craft.

The adventure was more serious than he had thought. It might not be a case of merely going downstream and into the swamp to the cabin; it might be a case of fighting the rising water in grim battle. Why he did not turn back to the house then and there he never knew. What would have happened if he had? he sometimes speculated afterward. If Ricky had not come into the garden to hunt him? If together they had not—

While Val went with the current, his voyage was ease itself. But when he strove to cut across and so reach the mouth of the hidden swamp-stream, he narrowly escaped upsetting. As it was, he fended off some dark blot bobbing through the water, his palm meeting it with a force that jarred his bones.

But he did make the mouth of the swamp-stream. Switching on the strong search-light in the bow, he headed on. And because he was moving now against the current, it seemed that he lost two feet for every one that he advanced.

The muddy water was whipped into foam where it tore around shrub and willow. There were no longer any confining banks, only a waste of water glittering through the dark foliage. The drear habitat of the vultures was being swept bare by the scouring of the incoming streams, but its moldy stench still arose stronger than ever, as if some foulness were being stirred up from its ancient bed.

It was only by chance that Val found the drying rack which marked the boundary of Jeems' property. Here the land was higher than the flood, which had not yet spread inland. He tied the boat to a willow and splashed ashore. In the lower portions of the path his feet sank into patches of wet. Something which might have been—and probably was—a snake oozed away from the beam of his pocket torch.

The clearing was much as it had been, save that the door of the chicken-run stood ajar and its feathered population was gone. But under the cabin Val saw the betraying sparkle of water. The bayou in the rear must have topped flood level.

Someone had been there before him. The lock was battered and there had been an attempt to pry loose its staples, an attempt which had left betraying gouges on the door frame. But misused as it had been, the lock yielded to the key and Val went in. Warned by a lapping sound from beneath, it did not take him long to get the chest, relock the door, and head back to the boat.

He was none too soon. Already, in the few moments of his absence, there were rills cutting across the mud, rills which were growing in strength and size. And the flood around the drying rack was up a good three inches. Val dumped the chest into the bow with little ceremony and climbed in after it, his wet trousers clinging damply to his legs. Something

plate-armored and possessing wicked yellow eyes swam effortlessly through the light beam—a ‘gator bound for the Gulf, whether he would or no.

The return as far as the bayou was easy enough, for again the boat was borne on the current. But when Val faced the torn waters of the river he experienced a certain tightness of throat and chill of blood. What might have been the roof of a small shed was passing lumpily as he hesitated. Then came a tree burdened with a small ‘coon which stared at the boy piteously, its eyes green in the light. An eddy sent its ship close to the boat; the top branches clung a moment to the bow. And to Val’s surprise, the ‘coon roused itself to a mighty effort and crossed into the egg-shell safety the boat offered. Once in the outboard, it retreated to the bow where it crouched beside the chest and kept a wary eye on Val’s every movement.

But he could not rescue the wildcat which swept by spitting at the water from a log, nor the shivering doe which awaited the coming of death, marooned on an islet which was fast being cut away by the hungry waters. And all the time the stinging rain fed the flood.

Val gripped the rudder until the bar was printed deep across his palm. Soon it would be too late. He must cross now, heading diagonally downstream to escape the full fury of the current. With a deep breath he turned out into the bayou.

It was like fighting some vast animated feather-bed. His greatest efforts were as nothing against the overpowering sweep seaward. And there was constant danger from the floating booty of the storm. The muddy spray lashed his body, filling the bottom of his craft as if it were a tea-cup. And once the boat was whirled almost around.

Val was beginning to wonder just how long a swimmer might last in that black fog of rain, wind, and water when his bow eased into comparatively quiet water. He had crossed the main current; now was the time to head upstream. Grimly he did, to begin a struggle which was to take on all the more horrible properties of a nightmare. For this was many times worse than his fight against the swamp-stream.

Twice the engine sputtered protestingly and Val thought of trying to leap ashore. But stubbornly the outboard fought on. If there ever were a sturdy ship, fit to be named with Columbus’ gallant craft or Hudson’s vessel, it was that frail outboard which buffeted the rising waters of a Louisiana bayou gone flood mad.

It achieved the impossible; it crept upstream inch by inch, escaping disaster after disaster by the thinness of a dime. Since he had apparently not been born to drown, Val thought as he saw his headlight touch the tip of the landing, he would doubtless depart this life by hanging.

Then his light picked out something else which lay between him and the landing. The sleek, knife-bowed cruiser certainly did not belong to Pirate’s Haven. And what neighbor would come calling by water on such a night? It was moored by two thick ropes to a sunken post, and already the mooring was dragging the bow down. Val headed in toward it, running the outboard between the stranger and the landing.

Out of the blackness ashore a shadow arose and waved at him frenziedly. Then he saw Ricky’s white face above her long oil-silk cape. Her hair was plastered tight to her skull and she was protecting her eyes from the fury of the rain with her hands.

Val sent the boat inshore until it bit into the crumbling surface of the levee with a shock which threatened his balance. Ricky snatched at the painter and held steady while he jumped. They made the boat fast and Val landed the chest. The passenger did his own disembarking, making his way into the garden without a backward look. Then Val demanded an explanation.

“What are you doing here?” he tried to out-scream the wind.

In answer she clapped her wet, muddy hand across his mouth and pulled him back from the levee.

They reached the semi-shelter of a rotting summer-house where he put down the chest. Ricky pushed her wet hair out of her eyes. It was impossible for them to hear each other without screaming madly.

“Jeems told me—after you left—Val! How could you be so mad!”

“I made it.” He touched the chest with his toe. “After we had practically kidnapped him, we couldn’t let his belongings just float away. But why are you out here? And where did that boat come from?”

“I came out here after Jeems told me. I’m all right.” She laughed shakily. “I’ve got my oldest clothes on—and this,” she touched her cape. “I couldn’t stay in there—waiting—after I knew. And I didn’t want Rupert to ask questions. So I said that I was going to bed with a headache. Then I slipped out here to the levee. And I hadn’t been here two minutes before that boat came downstream. There were four men in it and they got out and went into the bushes over there. And, Val, Rupert is down at the other end of the garden where they are having trouble with the levee. Holmes and Creighton went down to see if they could help, too, just after you left. There’s nobody but Charity up at the house with Lucy and Letty-Lou. Val, what are we going to do?” she appealed to him.

“First I’ll investigate these visitors,” he said easily, though he felt far from easy within.

“Me too,” she said firmly if ungrammatically, and since Val could not wait to argue, she went along.

They took the route she had watched the invaders follow, wriggling through wet bushes and around trees.

“Val, look out!” She grabbed his arm and so saved him from tumbling headlong into a black hole in the ground. Vines and a small shrub or two had been ruthlessly torn out to bare the opening. It was here that the visitors must have gone to earth. And then Val had a glimmering of the truth; the “Boss” and his friends had at last found Jeems’ private door.

Prudence urged that they return to the house and send Sam Two or some other messenger down to the cross-roads store to summon the police by phone. Prudence however had never successfully advised any Ralestone. They had a decided taste for fighting their own battles. So, torch in hand, Val dropped into the hole. And a moment later Ricky slid down to join him.

They stood in a rough passage. Stout timbers banked its sides and guarded the roof. There was a damp underground smell such as Val had noted in the cellar of the house, but the air was fresh enough. After the first hasty survey, the boy held his fingers over the bulb of the flashlight so that only the faintest glimmer escaped to light their path.

The passage was short, ending abruptly in a low bricked room. Save for themselves, a tangle of rotting rope in a far corner, and two lively black beetles, it was empty.

“Val,” Ricky’s throaty whisper reached him, “can’t you guess what this is? The first pirate Ralestone’s storage-house!”

It was a likely enough explanation—though nothing could have been stored there very long; the place was too damp. Beads of slimy moisture from the walls dripped slowly down, shining like silver in the light.

At the other side of the room was a corridor branching away. But this they barely glanced into, little knowing how that neglect was to prove disastrous in the end. It was the main door to their right which interested them most, for that led, so far as Val could determine, toward the house. And that must have been the one the mysterious visitors had followed.

Thus they came into the second of their pirate ancestor's store-rooms. This one was long and narrow. Three wooden casks eaten with decay and spotted with fungus stood against the wall, testifying to the use to which this chamber had been put, though the all-pervading damp could not have been good for the wine.

Again a dark archway tempted them on, and the third room into which they came had a more grim reminder of the scarlet past of the house. For Ricky stumbled over something which clinked dully. And when Val used the flash they looked down upon a telltale length of chain ending in an iron ring, its other end soldered into the wall.

"Val," Ricky's voice quavered, "did—did they keep people here?"

"Slaves, perhaps," her brother answered soberly and shoved the rusting metal aside with his foot. But there were two other chains hanging from the wall, speaking of past horrors of which he did not care to think.

And then as their light picked out these damning testimonials, Val thought that the Ralestones, for all their pride and fine, brave airs, had been only pirates after all, akin to those whom they were now hunting through the dark.

There was a low arched doorway of brick on the right side of the room, and this they passed through. Beyond were three broad stone steps, worn a little on the treads, one cracked clear across. These led to a wide landing paved with brick. Here the walls were brick as well. Ricky touched one involuntarily and drew back her hand with a little exclamation of disgust. She wiped her palm vigorously on the wet surface of her cape.

Everywhere was the smell of rot and slow, vile decay. In spite of its historical associations, decided Val, this vault should be sealed forever from the daylight and left to the sole occupancy of those nameless things which creep in its dark. The very air, in spite of its freshness, seemed tainted.

Another flight of stairs was before them, the treads fashioned of stone but equipped with a rotted wooden hand-rail. And above was the faint reflection of light and the sound of voices. Val hesitated and realized for the first time how foolhardy their expedition was.

Those above would be prepared to handle interruptions. Val was determined to keep Ricky out of trouble, and to go on alone was the rankest folly. But, as he hesitated, the decision was taken out of his hands, for the light above suddenly became brighter. Grabbing at Ricky's arm, he stumbled back into the shelter of the archway, pulling her after him.

A round circle of light shone plainly at the top of the stairs. Someone was coming down. Ricky's breath was warm on Val's cheek and she moved with a faint crackling of her cape which sounded as loud as a thunderclap in his ears.

"How're we gonna do it without bustin' the wall down?" demanded an aggrieved voice from the top of the stairs. "There ain't no knob, no handle, no nothin' to work it from this side. And these guys what stored their stuff here in the boot-leggin' days never got into the house."

"The boy got through, didn't he?" Val knew that voice, the Boss of the swamp meeting. "Well, if he did, we can."



“Lissen, Boss, it’s a secret, ain’t it? An’ we gotta know how it works before we can work it. An’ lissen here, you swamp bum, you keep outta my way—see? I don’t care if you were one of Mike Flanigan’s boys; that don’t cut no ice with me.” This truculent warning must have been addressed to an unseen companion on the same stair level. The listeners below heard a faint sound which might have marked a collision and then the hiss of swamp French spoken hurriedly and angrily.

“What’re you gonna do now, Boss?”

The light half-way down the stairs paused. “There is some way of opening that panel—”

“An’ we gotta find it. All right, all right. But tell me how.”

“I don’t know whether it will be necessary to open it—from this side.”

“What d’ya mean?”

“Use that thick skull of yours, Red. Doors swing two ways, don’t they? They can be used either to go in or to go out.”

“Got it!” The thick voice was oily with flattering approval. “We can get out this way—”

“Smart work, Red. Did you think that out all by yourself?” asked the other contemptuously.

“Yes, we can come out this way when”—his voice was sharp with purpose—“we are finished. Send one of these swampers down to the levee where the men are working. As long as this flood keeps rising we’re safe. Then the other three of us will go for the house. We may be seen that way, but there’s no use spending any more time here playing tick-tack-toe on that wood up there. We locate what we want, and if we’re cornered we can come out through here to the bayou. Slick enough.”

“Great stuff, Boss—” Red began. But the rest was muffled, for Ricky and Val drew back into the room of the chains. There was only one thing to do now—reach Rupert and the others and prepare to meet these skulkers in the open. But before they had quite crossed the room Ricky came to grief. She caught her foot in one of those gruesome chains and stumbled forward, falling on her hands and knee. The noise of her fall echoed around the low chamber with betraying clamor.

A white light beat upon them as Val stooped to aid Ricky.

“Stop!” came the shout, but Val had only one thought, to dim that light. He swung back his arm and flung his own flash straight at the other. There was a grunt of pain and the light fell to the floor. With the tinkle of breaking glass it went out. Val pulled Ricky to her feet and threw her toward the door, forgetting everything but the wild panic which urged him out of that place of foul darkness. They bruised their hands against the brick as they felt for the opening, and then they were out in the other chamber.

“Val,” Ricky clung to him, “I’ve got that little flash I keep under my pillow at night. Wait a minute until I get it out of my pocket. We can’t find our way out of here without a light.”

Muffled sounds from behind them suggested that their pursuers were on the trail even without light. After all, given time enough, it would be easy for them to feel their way out of the vaults. Val hustled Ricky on, taking his direction from one of the wine-casks he had bumped into. And before he allowed her to hunt for her torch they stood in the first of the chambers.

The light she produced was poor and it flickered warningly. But it was good enough for them to see the dark opening which led to the outer world. They ducked into this just as the first of the other party came cursing into the open. At Val’s orders, Ricky switched off the light and they crept along by the wall, one hand on its guiding surface.

But the way seemed longer than it had upon their entering. Surely they should have reached the garden entrance by now. And the surface underfoot remained level instead of slanting upward. Suddenly Ricky gave a little cry.

“We’ve taken the wrong passage! There’s only a blank wall in front of us!”

She was right. The torch showed a brick surface across their path, and Val remembered too late the second passage out of the first chamber. They must go back and hope to elude the others in the dark.

“They may have all gone out, thinking we were still ahead of them,” he mused aloud.

“Well, it’s got to be done,” Ricky observed, “so we might as well do it.”

Back they went along the unknown passage. This appeared to run straight out from the first chamber. But why it had been fashioned and then walled up they had no way of knowing. Ricky’s torch picked out the entrance at last.

“Wait,” Val cautioned her, “we had better see how the land lies before we go out in the open.”

They stood listening. Save for the constant drip, drip of water, there was no sound.

“I guess it’s clear,” he said.

“Wonder where all the water is coming from?” Ricky shivered.

“Down from the garden. Come on, I think it’s safe to have a light now.”

Ricky must have been holding the torch upward when she pressed the button, for the round circle of light appeared on the supporting timbers above the door. They both looked up, fascinated for a moment. The old oak had been laid in a crisscross pattern, the best support possible in the days when the vaults had been made.

“How wet—” began Ricky.

Val cried out suddenly and struck at her. The blow sent her sprawling some three or four feet back in the passage. There might be time yet to cover her body with his own, he planned desperately, before—

The sound of slipping earth was all about them as Val flung himself toward Ricky. As he thrust blindly at her body, rolling her back farther into the tunnel, he felt the first clod strike full upon his shoulder. Ricky’s complaining whimper was the last thing he heard clearly. For in the dark was the crash of breaking timber.

He was felled by a stroke across the upper arm, and then came a chill darkness in which he was utterly swallowed up.

## 15. Pieces Of Eight—Ralestones' Fate!

Through the dull roaring which filled his ears Val heard a sharp call:

“Val! Val, where are you? Val!”

He stared up into utter blackness.

“Val!”

“Here, Ricky!” But that thin thread of a whisper surely didn't belong to him. He tried again and achieved a sort of croak. Something moved behind him and there was an answering rattle of falling clods.

“Val, I'm afraid to move,” her voice wavered unsteadily. “It seems to be falling yet. Where are you?”

The boy tried to investigate, only to find himself more securely fastened than if he had been scientifically bound. And now that the mists had cleared from him, his spine and back felt a sharp pain to which he was no stranger. From his breast-bone down he was held as if in a vise.

“Are you hurt, Ricky?” He formed the words slowly. Every breath he drew thrust a red-hot knife between his ribs. He turned his head toward her, pillowing his cheek on the gritty clay.

“No. But where are you, Val? Can't you come to me?”

“Sorry. Un—unavoidably detained,” he gasped. “Don't try any crawling or the rest may come down on us.”

“Val! What's the matter? Are you hurt?” Her questions cut sharply through the darkness.

“Banged up a little. No”—he heard the rustle which betrayed her movements—“don't try to come to me—Please, Ricky!”

But with infinite caution she came, until her brother felt the edge of her cape against his face. Then her questing hand touched his throat and slid downward to his shoulders.

“Val!” He knew what horror colored that cry as she came upon what imprisoned him.

“It's all right, Ricky. I'm just pinned in. If I don't try to move I'm safe.” Quickly he tried to reassure her.

“Val, don't lie to me now—you're hurt!”

“It's not bad, really, Ricky—”

“Oh!” There was a single small cry and a moment of utter silence and then a hurried rustling.

“Here.” Her hand groped for his head. “I've wadded up my cape. Can I slip it under your head?”

“Better not try just yet. Anything might send off the landslide again. Just—just give me a minute or two to—to sort of catch my breath.” Catch his breath, when every sobbing gasp he drew was a stab!

“Can't we—can't I lift some of the stuff off?” she asked.

“No. Too risky.”

“But—but we can’t stay here—” Her voice trailed off and it was then that she must have realized for the first time just what had happened to them.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to, Ricky,” said her brother quietly.

“But, Val—Val, what if—if—”

“If we aren’t found?” he put her fear into words. “But we will be. Rupert is doubtless moving a large amount of earth right now to accomplish that.”

“Rupert doesn’t know where we are.” She had regained control of both voice and spirit.

“We—we may never be found, Val.”

“I was a fool,” he stated plainly a fact which he now knew to be only too true.

“I would have come even if you hadn’t, Val,” she answered generously and untruthfully. It was perhaps the kindest thing she had ever said.

Now that the noise of the catastrophe had died away they could hear again the drip of water. And that sound tortured Val’s dry throat. A glass of cool water—He turned his head restlessly.

“If we only had a light,” came Ricky’s wish.

“The flash is probably buried.”

“Val, will—will it be fun?”

“What?” he demanded, suddenly alert at her tone. Had the dark and their trouble made her light-headed?

“Being a ghost. We—we could walk the hall with Great-uncle Rick; he wouldn’t begrudge us that.”

“Ricky! Stop it!”

Her answering laugh, though shaky, was sane enough.

“I do pick the wrong times to display my sense of humor, don’t I? Val, is it so very bad?”

Something within him crumbled at that question.

“Not so good, Lady,” he replied in spite of the resolutions he had made.

She brushed back the hair glued by perspiration to his forehead. Ricky was not gold, he thought, for gold is a rather dirty thing. But she was all steel, as clean and shining as a blade fresh from the hands of a master armorer. He made a great effort and found that he could move his right arm an inch or two. Concentrating all his strength there, he wriggled it back and forth until he could draw it free from the wreckage. But his left shoulder and side were numb save for the pain which came and went.

“Got my arm free,” Val told her exultantly and reached up to feel for her in the dark. His fingers closed upon coarse cloth. He pulled feebly and something rolled toward him.

“What’s this?”

Ricky’s hands slid along his arm to the thing he had found. He could hear her exploring movements.

“It’s some sort of a bundle. I wonder where it came from.”

“Some more remains of the jolly pirate days, I suppose.”

“Here’s something else. A bag, I think. Ugh! It smells nasty! There’s a hole in it—Oh, here’s a piece of money. At least it feels like money. There’s more in the bag.” She pressed a disk about as large as a half-dollar into Val’s palm.

“Pirate loot—” he began. Anything that would keep them from thinking of where they were and what had happened was to be welcomed.

“Val”—he could hear her move uneasily—“remember that old saying: ‘Pieces of eight—Ralestones’ fate?’”

“All good families have curses,” he reminded her.

“And good families can have—can have accidents, too.”

There could be no answer to that. Nor did Val feel like answering. The savage pain in his legs and back had given way to a kind of numbness. A chill not caused by the dank air crawled up his body. What—what if his injuries were worse than he had thought? What if—if—

The dripping of the water seemed louder, and it no longer fell with the same rhythm. Ricky must be counting money from the bag. He could hear the clink of metal against stone as she dropped a piece.

“Don’t lose it,” he muttered foggily.

“Lose what?”

“Your pieces of eight.”

“What do you mean?”

“You just dropped a piece.”

“I haven’t touched—Val, do—do you feel worse?”

But he had no thought now for his body. If Ricky had not dropped the money, then what had caused the clink? He ground his cheek against the clay. *Thud, thud, clink, thud*. That was not water dripping nor coin rattling. That was the sound of digging. And digging meant—

“Ricky! They’re digging! I can hear them!”

Her fingers closed about his free hand until the nails dug into the flesh. “Where?”

“I don’t know. Listen!”

The sound had grown in strength until now, though muffled, it sounded through that part of the passage still remaining open.

“It comes from this end. From behind that wall. But why should it come from there?”

“Does it matter? Val, do you suppose they could hear me if I pounded on the wall at this side?”

“You haven’t anything heavy enough to pound with.”

“Yes, I have. This package thing that you found. It’s quite heavy. Val, we’ve got to let them know we’re here!”

She crawled away, moving with caution lest she bring on another slide. That reassuring *thud, thud* still sounded. Then, after long minutes, Val heard the answering blow from their side. Three times Ricky struck before the rhythm of the digging was broken. Then there was silence followed by three sharp blows. They had heard!

Ricky beat a perfect tattoo in joy and was quickly answered. Then the *thud, thud* began again, but this time the pace was quickened.

“They’ve heard! They’re coming!” Ricky’s voice shrilled until it became a scream. “Val, we’re found!”

A clod was loosened somewhere above them and crashed upon the wreckage. Would the efforts of their rescuers bring on another slide?

“Be quiet, Ricky,” Val croaked a warning, “it’s still moving.”

Then there came the sharp clink of metal against stone. “Val,” called Ricky, “they’re right against the wall now!”

“Come back here, away from it. We—we don’t want you caught, too,” he answered her.

Obediently she crawled back to him and again he felt her hand close about his. The sound of metal grating against stubborn brick filled their pocket of safety. But as an ominous accompaniment came the soft hiss of earth sliding onto the wreckage. Which would win to them first, the rescuers or the second slide?

There was a vicious grinding noise from the walled end of the passage. A moment later a blinding ray of light swung in, to focus upon them.

“Ricky! Val!”

Val was blinking stupidly at the light, but Ricky had presence of mind enough to answer.

“Here we are!”

“Look out,” Val roused enough to warn, “the walls are unsafe!”

“We’re coming through,” rang the answer out of the dark. “Stand away!”

Now that they could see, Val realized for the first time the danger of their position. A jagged, water-rotted beam half covered with clay and sand lay across him, and beyond that was a mass of splintered wood and wet earth. A little sick, he looked up at Ricky. She was staring at the wreckage. Her eyes were black in a white, mud-smearred face.

“Val—Val!” His name came as the thinnest of whispers.

“It isn’t as bad as it looks,” he said hurriedly. “Something underneath must be supporting most of the weight or—or I wouldn’t be here at all.”

“Val,” she repeated, and then, paying no heed to his frantic injunctions to keep away, she dug at earth and rotten wood with her hands. Using the long bundle clumsily wrapped in stained canvas, she levered a piece of beam out of the way so that she might get down on her knees and scoop up the sand and clay.

“Ricky! Val!” The light swung ahead as someone scrambled through the hole in the barrier wall. Then, when the ray held firm upon them, the headlong rush was checked for a long instant. “Val!”

“Get her—away,” he begged. “Another—slip—”

But before he had done, a long arm gathered Ricky up as if she had been a child. “Right,” came the firm answer. “Sam, take Miss ‘Chanda back. Then—”

Val was watching the reflection of the flash on the broken roof above him. Sand slid in tiny streams down the wall, mingling with the greenish trickles of water. There were queer blue

and green arcs painted on the brick which had something to do with the hot pain behind his eyes. The blue turned to orange—to scarlet—

“Careful! Right here in the hall, Holmes—”

The broken earth above him had somehow been changed to a high ceiling, the chill darkness to blazing light and warmth.

“Ricky?” he asked.

“Here, Val.” Her face was very close to his.

“You—are—all—right?”

“Course!” But she was crying. “Don’t try to talk, Val. You must be quiet.”

He heard someone moving toward them but he kept his eyes on Ricky’s face. “We did it!”

“Yes,” she answered slowly, “we did it.”

“Val, don’t try to talk.” Rupert’s face showed above Ricky’s hunched shoulder. There was an odd, strained look about his mouth, a smear of mud across his cheek. But the harsh tone of his voice struck his brother as dumb as if he had slapped him.

“Sorry,” Val shaped the words stiffly, “all my fault.”

“Nothing’s your fault,” Ricky’s indignant answer cut in. “But—but just be quiet, Val, until the doctor comes.”

He turned his head slowly. On the hearth-stone stood Charity talking quietly to Holmes. Just within the circle of the firelight lay a bundle which he had seen before. But of course, that was the thing they had found in the passage, which Ricky had used to pound out their answer to Rupert.

“Ricky—” Val always believed that it was some instinct out of the past which forced that whisper out of him—”Ricky, open that package.”

“Why—” she began, but then she got to her feet and went to the bundle, twisting the tarred rope that fastened it in a vain attempt to undo the intricate knots. It was Holmes who produced a knife and sawed through the tough cord. And it was Holmes who unrolled the strips of canvas, oil-silk, and greasy skins. But it was Ricky who took up what lay within and held it out so that it reflected both red firelight and golden room light.

Her brother’s sigh was one of satisfaction.

For Ricky held aloft by its ponderous hilt a great war sword. There could be no doubt in any of them—the Luck of Lorne had returned.

“We found it!” breathed Ricky.

“Put it in its place,” Val ordered.

Without a word, Rupert drew out a chair and scrambled up. Taking from Ricky’s hands the ancient weapon, he slipped it into the niche their pirate ancestor had made for it. In spite of the years underground, the metal of hilt and blade was clear. Seven hundred years of history—their Luck!

“Everything will come right again,” Val repeated as Ricky came back to him. “You’ll see. Everything—will—be—all—right.”

His eyes closed in spite of his efforts. He was back in the darkness where he could only feel the warmth of Ricky’s hands clasped about his.

## 16. Ralestones Stand Together

“I like Louisiana,” drawled Holmes lazily from his perch on the window-seat. “The most improbable things happen here. One finds secret passages under houses and medieval war swords stuck in drains. Then there are ‘things that go boomp in the night,’ too. It might be worth settling down here—”

“Not for you,” cut in Charity briskly. “Too far from the bright lights for you, my man.”

“Just for that,” he triumphed, “I shall not return this lost property found under a cushion of the couch in the hall.”

At the sight of that familiar black note-book, Val shifted uneasily on his pillows. Rupert got up.

“Tired, old man?” he asked and reached to straighten one of his brother’s feather-stuffed supports.

Val shook his head. Being bandaged like a mummy was wearying, but one had to humor two broken ribs and a fractured collar-bone.

“Sometimes,” replied Charity, “you are just too clever, Mr. Judson Holmes. That does not happen to be my property.”

“No?” He flipped it open and held it up so that she might see what lay within. “I’ll admit that it isn’t your usual sort of stuff, but—”

She was staring at the drawings. “No, that isn’t mine. But who—”

Ricky got up from the end of Val’s cot and went to look. Then she turned, her eyes shining with excitement. “You’re trying them again! But, Val, you said you never would.”

“Give me that book!” he ordered grimly. But Rupert had calmly collected the trophy and was turning over the pages one by one. Val made a horrible face at Ricky and resigned himself to the inevitable.

“How long have you been doing this sort of thing?” his brother asked as he turned the last page.

“Ever so long,” Ricky answered for Val brightly. “He used to draw whole letters of them when we were at school. There were two sets, one for good days and the other for bad.”

“And now,” Val cut in, “suppose we just forget the whole matter. Will you please let me have that!”

“Rupert, don’t let him go all modest on us now,” urged the demon sister. “One retiring violet in the family is enough.”

“And who is the violet? Your charming self?” inquired Holmes.

“No.” Ricky smiled pleasantly. “Only Mr. Creighton might be interested in the contents of Bluebeard’s Chamber. What do you think, Rupert?”

At that audacious hint, Val remembered the night of the storm and Ricky’s strange attitude then.

“So Rupert’s the missing author,” he commented lightly. “Well, well, well.”



Charity's indulgent smile faded, and Holmes, suddenly alert, leaned forward. Rupert stared at Val for a long moment, his face blank. Was he going to retire behind his wall of reserve from which their venture underground had routed him? Or was he going to remain the very human person who had spent eight hours of every day at his brother's beck and call for the past few weeks?

"Regular Charlie Chan, aren't you?" he asked mildly.

Val's sigh of relief was echoed by Ricky. "Thanks—so much," Val replied humbly in the well-known manner of the famous detective Rupert had likened him to.

"Then we are right?" asked Ricky.

Rupert's eyebrows slid upward. "You seemed too sure to be in doubt," he commented.

"Well, I was sure at times. But then no one can ever be really sure of anything about you," she admitted frankly.

"But why—" protested Charity.

"Why didn't I spread the glad tidings that I was turning out the great American novel?" he asked. "I don't know. Perhaps I am a violet—no?" He looked pained at Ricky's snort of dissent. "Or perhaps I just don't like to talk about things which may never come true. When I didn't hear from Lever, I thought that my worst forebodings were realized and that my scribbling was worthless. But you know," he paused to fill his pipe, "writing is more or less like the drug habit. I've told stories all my life, and I found myself tied to my typewriter in spite of my disappointment. As for talking about it—well, how much has Val ever said about these?" He ruffled the pages of the note-book provokingly.

"Nothing. And you would never have seen those if I could have prevented it," his brother replied. "Those are for my private satisfaction only."

"Two geniuses in one family." Ricky rolled her eyes heavenward. "This is almost too, too much!"

"Jeems," Val ordered, "you're the nearest. Can't you make her shut up?"

"Just let him try," said his sister sweetly. The swamper grinned but made no move to stir from his chair.

Jeems had become as much a part of Pirate's Haven as the Luck, which Val could see from his cot glimmering dully in its niche in the Long Hall. The swamper's confinement in the sick-room had paled his heavy tan and he had lost the sullen frown which had made him appear so old and bitter. Now, dressed in a pair of Val's white slacks and a shirt from his wardrobe, Jeems was as much at ease in his surroundings as Rupert or Holmes.

It had been Jeems who had saved Ricky and Val on that night of terror when they had been trapped in the secret ways of their pirate ancestors. Sam Two had trailed Ricky to the garden and had witnessed their entering the tunnel. But his racial fear of the dark unknown had kept him from venturing in after them. So he had lingered there long enough to see the invaders come out and take to the river. Catching some words of theirs about a cave-in, he had gone pelting off to Rupert with the story.

The investigating party from the levee had discovered, to their horror, the passage choked for half its length. They were making a futile and dangerous attempt to clear it when Jeems appeared on the scene. Letty-Lou having given him a garbled account of events, he had staggered from his bed in an effort to reach Rupert. He alone knew the underground ways as

well as he knew the garden. And so once getting Rupert's attention, he had set them to work in the cellar cutting through to the one passage which paralleled the foundation walls.

In the weeks which followed their emergence from the threatened tomb, the swamper had unobtrusively slipped into a place in the household. While Val was frightening his family by indulging in a bout of fever to complicate his injuries, Jeems was proving himself a tower of strength and a person to be relied upon. Even Lucy had once asked his opinion on the importance of a fire in the hall, and with that his position was assured.

Of the invaders they had heard or seen no more, although the police had visited Pirate's Haven on two separate occasions, interviewing each and every member of the household. They had also made a half-hearted attempt to search the swamp. But for all the evidence they found, Ricky and Val might have been merely indulging in an over-vivid dream. Save that the Luck hung again in the Long Hall.

"Seriously, though," Holmes drew Val's thoughts out of the past, "these are worth-while. Would you mind if I showed them to a friend of mine who might be interested?"

Since Rupert had already nodded and Charity had handed him the note-book, Val decided that he could hardly raise a protest.

"Rupert," Charity glanced at him, "are you going to see Creighton?"

"Since all has been discovered," he misquoted, "I suppose that that is all there is left for me to do."

"Then you had better do it today; he's planning to leave for the North tonight," she informed him.

Rupert came to life. For all his pose of unconcern, he was excited. In the long days Val had been tied to the cot hurriedly set up in a corner of the drawing-room on the night of the rescue—it had been thought wiser to move him no farther than necessary—he had found again the real Rupert they had known of old. There was little he could conceal from his younger brother now—or so Val thought.

"Sam has the roadster," Rupert said. "There's something wrong with the brakes and I told him to take it to town and have it looked over. Goodness only knows what time he'll be back."

"See here, Ralestone," Holmes looked at his wrist-watch, "I've the car I hired here with me. Let me drive you in. Charity has to go, anyway, and see about sending off those sketches of hers."

"Oh, but we were going together," protested Ricky. "I have some shopping to do."

"Very simple," Val suggested. "Why don't you all go?"

"But that would leave you alone." Rupert shook his head.

"No. There's Jeems."

"I don't know," Rupert hesitated doubtfully.

"It doesn't require more than one person to wait on me at present," Val said firmly. "Now all of you go. But remember, I shall expect the Greeks to return bearing gifts."

Holmes saluted. "Right you are, my hearty. Well, ladies, the chariot awaits without."

In spite of their protests, Val at last got rid of them. Since he had a project of his own, he was only too glad to see the last of his oversolicitous family for awhile.

Val had never been able to understand why broken ribs or a fractured collar-bone should chain one to the bed. And since he had recovered from his wrenched back he was eager to be up and around. In private, with the protesting assistance of Sam Two, he had made a pilgrimage across the room and back. And now it was his full intention to be seated on the terrace when the family came home.

It was Lucy of all people who aided fortune to give him his opportunity.

“Mistuh Val,” she announced from the doorway as the sound of the car pulling out of the drive signaled the departure of the city-bound party, “dem lights is out agin.”

“Another fuse gone? That’s the second this week. Who’s been playing games?” he asked.

“Dis heah no-’count!” She dragged out of hiding from behind her voluminous skirts her second son, a chocolate-brown infant who rejoiced in the name of Gustavus Adolphus and was generally called “Doff.” At that moment he was sobbing noisily and eyeing Val as if the boy were the Grand High Executioner of Tartary. “Yo’ all tell Mistuh Val whats yo’ bin a-doin’!” commanded his mother, emphasizing her order with a shake.

“Ain’t done nothin’,” wailed Doff. “Sam, he give me de penny an’ say, ‘Le’s hab fun.’ Den Ah puts de penny in de lil’ hole an’ den Mammy cotch me.”

“Doff seems to be the victim, Lucy,” Val observed. “Where’s Sam?”

“Ah don’ know. But I’s a-goin’ to fin’ out!” she stated with ominous determination. “How’s Ah a-goin’ to git mah ironin’ done when dere ain’t no heat fo’ de iron? Ah asks yo’ dat!”

“There are some fuses in the pantry and Jeems will put one in for you,” Val promised.

With a sniff Lucy withdrew, her fingers still hooked in the collar of her tearful son. Jeems glanced at Val as he went by the boy’s cot. And Val didn’t care for what he read into that glance. Had the swamper by any foul chance come to suspect Val’s little plan?

But it all turned out just as he had hoped. Val made that most momentous trip in four easy stages, resting on the big chair where Rupert had spent so many hours, on the bench by the window, in the first of the deck-chairs by the side of the French doors leading to the terrace, and then he reached the haven of the last deck-chair and settled down just where he had intended. And when Jeems returned there was nothing he could do but accept the fact that Val had fled the cot.

“Miss Ricky won’t like this,” he prophesied darkly. “Nor Mr. Rupert neither. Yo’ wouldn’t’ve tried it if they’d been heah.”

“Oh, stop worrying. If you’d been tied to that cot the way I’ve been, you’d be glad to get out here, too. It’s great!”

The sun was warm but the afternoon shadow of an oak overhung his seat so that Val escaped the direct force of the rays. A few feet away Satan sprawled full length, giving a fine imitation of a cat that had rid himself of all nine lives, or at least of eight and a half.

Never had the garden shown so rich a green. Ricky’s care had sharpened the lines of the flower-beds and had set shrubs in their proper places. And the plants had repaid her with a riot of blossoms. A breeze set the gray moss to swaying from the branches of the oak. And a green grasshopper crossed the terrace in four great leaps, almost scraping Satan’s ear in a fashion which might easily have been fatal to the insect. Val sighed and slipped down lower in his chair. “It’s great,” he murmured again.

“Sure is,” Jeems echoed. He dropped down cross-legged beside Val, disdaining the other chair.

Satan stretched without opening his eyes and yawned, gaping to the fullest extent of his jaws and curling his tongue upward so that it seemed pointed like a snake's. Then he rolled over on his other side and curled up with his paws under his chin. A bumblebee blundered by Val's head on its way to visit the morning-glories. He suddenly discovered it difficult to keep his eyes open.

"Someone's comin'," observed Jeems. "Ah just heard a car turn in from the road."

"But the folks have been gone such a short time," Val protested.

However, the car which came almost noiselessly down the drive was not the one in which the family had departed. It had the shape of a sleek gray beetle, rounded so that it was difficult to tell at first glance the hood from the rear. It glided to a stop before the steps and after a moment four passengers disembarked.

Val simply stared, but Jeems got to his feet in one swift movement.

For, coming purposefully up the terrace steps, were four men they had seen before and had very good cause to remember for the rest of their lives.

In the lead strutted the rival, a tight smile rendering his unlovely features yet more disagreeable. Behind him trotted the red-faced counselor who had accompanied him on his first visit. But matching the rival step for step was the "Boss," while "Red" brought up the rear in a tidy fashion.

"Swell place, ain't it?" demanded the rival, taking no notice of Val or Jeems. "Make yourselves to home, boys; the place is yours."

Val gripped the arm of his chair. Sam, Rupert, Holmes—they were all beyond call. It was left to him to meet this unbelievable invasion alone. There was a stir beside him. Val glanced up to meet the slightest of reassuring nods from the swamper. Jeems was with him.

"Whatcha gonna do with the joint, Brick?" asked Red, tossing his cigarette down on the flagstones and grinding it to powder with his heel.

"I dunno yet." The rival strode importantly toward the front door.

"You might tell us when you find out," Val suggested quietly.

With an exaggerated start of surprise the rival turned toward the boy.

"Oh, so it's you, kid?"

"Perhaps," Val said softly, "you had better introduce your friends. After all, I like to know the names of my guests."

The Boss smiled sardonically and Red grinned. Only the red-faced lawyer shuffled his feet uneasily and looked from one to another of his companions with an expression of pleading. But the rival came directly to the point.

"Where's that high and mighty brother of yours?" he demanded.

"Mr. Ralestone will doubtless be very glad to see you," Val evaded, having no desire for the visitors to discover just how slender his resources were. "Jeems, you might go and tell him that we have visitors. Go through the Long Hall, it's nearer that way." He dug the fingernails of his sound hand into the soft wood of the chair arm. Could Jeems interpret that hint? Someone must remove and hide the Luck before these men saw it.

"Right." The swamper turned on his heel and padded toward the French windows.

“No, you don’t!” the rival snarled as he moved into line between Jeems and his objective.

“When we want that guy, we’ll hunt him out ourselves. When we’re good and ready!”

“If you don’t wish to see my brother, just why did you come?” Val asked feverishly. He must keep them talking there until he had time to think of some way of getting that slender blade of steel into hiding.

“We’re movin’ in,” Red answered casually for them all.

“How interesting. I think that the police will enjoy hearing that,” Val commented.

“It’s perfectly legal,” bleated the lawyer. “We possess a court order to view the place with the purpose of appraising it for sale.” He drew a stiff paper from the inside pocket of his coat and waved it toward the boy.

“Bunk! I don’t know much about the law but I do know that you could have obtained nothing of the kind without our being notified. And just which one of you has been selected to do the appraising?”

“Him,” answered Red laconically and jerked his thumb at the Boss.

“So,” Jeems stared at him, “since yo’ couldn’t git what yo’ want by thievin’ at night, yo’re goin’ to try and git it by day.”

“But what are you really after? I’m curious to know. You certainly don’t want a sugar plantation which hasn’t been paying its way since the Civil War. That just isn’t reasonable. And you ought to know that we can’t afford to buy you off. We must be living over a gold-mine that we haven’t discovered. Come on, tell us where it is,” Val prodded.

“Cut the cackle,” advised Red, “an’ le’s git down to it.”

“I would advise you to get back in your car and drive out.” Val wondered if his face looked as stiff as it felt. “This visit isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

“We ain’t goin’ any place, kid,” remarked the rival. “You don’t seem to understand. We’re stayin’ right here. I got rights and the judge has recognized them. I’m top guy here now.”

“Yeah. Yuh ain’t so smart as yuh think yuh are,” contributed Red, scowling at Val. “We ain’t gonna leave.”

It wasn’t Red’s speech, however, that straightened the boy’s back and made Jeems shift his position an inch or two. There was another car coming up the drive. And since their enemies were all gathered before them, they could only be receiving friends, or at the worst neutrals.

But the car which came from between the live-oaks to park behind the first contained only two passengers. LeFleur and Creighton got out, stopped in surprise to view the party on the terrace, and then came up, shoving by Red.

“Quite a party,” Val observed. “But how did you manage to arrive so opportunely?”

“We have made a discovery,” panted the Creole lawyer; “a very important discovery. What are these men doing here?”

“We got a court order to view this house for sale.” The rival was truculent. “An’ it’s all legal. The mouthpiece says so,” he indicated his counselor.

“Perhaps,” Creighton’s cool tones cut through, “you had better introduce us.” There was a decided change in his manner. Gone was his shy nervousness, his slightly hesitant reserve. It was a keen business man who stood there now.

Val grinned. “You see before you the family skeleton. May I introduce Mr. Ralestone, who firmly believes that he is the Ralestone of Pirate’s Haven? And three other—shall we say gentlemen—whom I myself have never met formally. Though I did have the pleasure, I believe,” he addressed the Boss directly, “of blackening your eye.”

“Yeah, I’m Ralestone, and I’m gonna have my rights,” stated the rival briskly.

“You are a descendant of Roderick Ralestone?” asked LeFleur.

“Yuh know I am. I got proofs!”

“The man is a liar,” Creighton said calmly.

As they stared at him, LeFleur nodded. Val saw an ugly grin begin to curve Red’s thick lips.

“Yeah? An how do yuh know that, wise guy?” he asked.

“Because there is only one Roderick Ralestone in this generation and he is standing right there. Permit me to introduce Roderick St. Jean Ralestone!”

The person he turned to was Jeems!

## 17. The Return Of Rick Ralestone

Val ventured to break the sudden silence which resulted from Creighton's astonishing statement.

"But how—why—"

"Yeah," the rival had collected a measure of his scattered wits, "whatta yuh mean, wise guy?"

"Just this—" LeFleur drew himself up and faced the invaders sternly—"I have only this very morning deposited with the probate court certain documents making very plain the identity of this young man. Without the shadow of a doubt he is the only living descendant of Roderick Ralestone and his wife, Valerie St. Jean de Roche. I have also sworn out a complaint—"

Then the Boss took a hand in the game. "The boy's a minor," he observed.

"Through me," LeFleur returned, "Mr. Rupert Ralestone as nearest of kin has applied for guardianship and there will be no difficulty in the settlement of that matter."

"Yeah!" The rival threw his gloves on the terrace and glared not at LeFleur but at his own backing. Having stared at the lawyer of his party until that unfortunate man lost all assurance, he attacked the Boss. "So, wise guy, what now? We ain't got such a snap as yuh said we were gonna have. We were gonna move right in and take over the joint, were we? We didn't have anything to worry about. For once we was playin' with the law. Yeah, we were. We are nothin' but a gang of mugs. Whatta we gonna do now, huh? You oughta know. Ain't yuh been doin' our thinkin' for us all along? We can't grab the land and run. We gotta camp right here if we're gonna git anything. And how are we gonna—"

"Simpson!" the Boss's voice was sharp. "Be quiet! You are becoming wearisome. Gentlemen," he bowed slightly toward LeFleur and Creighton, "one cannot fight bad luck, and this time Fate smiles upon you. It was a good idea if it had worked," he added musingly. "Young Ralestone seems to have gathered all the aces into his hand. Even," the drawl became a sneer, "even the guardianship of the missing heir, which will mean a nice sum in the bank for the happy guardian, if all reports are true."

"What *did* you want here?" Val asked for the last time.

The Boss smiled. "I shall leave that mystery for you to unravel, my wounded hero. It should occupy an idle moment or two. Doubtless all will be made clear in the fullness of time. As for you," he turned upon LeFleur, "there is no use in your entertaining any foolish idea of calling the police. For our invasion today we have a court order; unhappily it is no longer of use. But we did come here in good faith, as we are prepared to prove. And all other evidence of any lawbreaking upon our part rests, I believe, upon the word of two boys, evidence which might be twisted by a clever lawyer. You may prosecute Simpson for perjury, of course. But I think that Simpson will not be in this part of the country long. Yes," he looked about him once more at garden and house, "it was a very good idea. A pity it did not work. Well, I must be going before I begin to curse my luck. When a man does that, he sometimes loses it. You must have found yours, I think."

"We did," Val answered, but the Boss did not hear him, for he had turned on his heel and was striding down the terrace. For a moment his followers hesitated uncertainly and then they were after him. Back into their sinister beetle-car went the invaders and then they were gone down the drive, leaving the Ralestones in possession of the victorious field.

“Now,” Val said plaintively, “will somebody please tell me just what this is all about? Who is Jeems, really?”

“Just who I said,” answered Creighton promptly. “Roderick St. Jean Ralestone, the only descendant of your pirate ancestor.”

“Bettah tell us the story,” suggested the swamper quietly. “Yo’ ain’t foolin’, are yo’, Mistuh Creighton?”

The New Yorker shook his head. “No, I’m not fooling. But you are not the first one to question my story.” He smiled reminiscently. “Judge Henry Lane had to see every line of written proof this morning before he would admit that the tale might be true.”

“But where did you find this ‘proof’?” Val demanded as Jeems pulled up chairs for the lawyer and Creighton.

“In that chest of Jeems’ which you brought out of the swamp on the night of the storm,” he replied promptly. “And, young man,” he said to Jeems indignantly, “if you had let me see those papers of yours a month ago, instead of waiting until last week, we would have had this matter cleared up then—”

“But then we might never have found the Luck!” Val protested.

“Humph, that piece of steel is historically interesting, no doubt,” conceded Creighton, “but hardly worth risking your life for.”

“No? Well, you heard what that man said just now—that we had found our luck. It’s so; we have had good luck since. But I’m sorry; do get on with the story of Jeems’ box.”

“Ah gave it to him Monday,” said the swamper slowly. “But, Mistuh Creighton, there weren’t nothin’ in that chest but some books full of handwritin’—most in some funny foreign stuff—an’ a French prayer-book.”

“Plenty to establish your right to the name and a quarter interest in the estate,” snapped LeFleur. Val thought the lawyer rather resented the fact that it was Creighton and not he who had found the way out of their difficulties.

“Two of those books were ships’ logs, kept in the fashion of diaries, partly in Latin,” explained the New Yorker. “The log of the ship *Annette Marie* for the years 1814 and 1815 gave us what we wanted. The master was Captain Roderick Ralestone, although he concealed his name in a sort of an anagram. After his quarrel with his brother he apparently went to Lafitte and purchased the ship which he had once commanded for the smuggler. Then he sailed off into the Gulf to become a free-trader, with his headquarters first in Georgetown, British Guiana, then in Dutch Curaçao, and finally at Port-au-Prince, Haiti. It was there that he met and fell in love with Valerie St. Jean de Roche, the only living child and heir of the Comte de Roche, who had survived the Terror of the French Revolution only to fall victim to the rebel slaves on his Haitian estates.

“Horribly injured, the Comte de Roche had been saved from death by the devotion of his daughter and her nurse, a free woman of color. These two women not only saved his life, but managed to keep him and themselves alive through the dark years which followed the horrors of the black uprising and the overthrow of the French rule. The courage of that lady of France must have been very great. But she was near to the end of her strength when she met Roderick Ralestone.

“Against the direct orders of the black despots in the land, young Ralestone got de Roche and his daughter away on his ship. Her maid chose to remain among her people. Ralestone hints



that she was a sort of priestess of Voodoo and that it had been her dark powers which had protected the lives of those she loved.

“Ralestone took the refugees to Curaçao, but de Roche did not survive. He lived only long enough to see his daughter married to her rescuer and to persuade his son-in-law to legally adopt the name of St. Jean de Roche, that an old and honored family might not be forgotten. The Comte’s only son had been killed by the blacks.

“So it was as Roderick St. Jean—he dropped the ‘de Roche’ in time—that he returned here in 1830. His wife was dead, worn out while yet in her youth by the horrors of her girlhood. But Roderick brought with him a ten-year-old boy who had the right to both the name of Ralestone and that of de Roche.

“Roderick himself was greatly changed. Years of free-trading, both in the Gulf and in the South Seas, had made him wholly sailor. A cutlass cut disfigured his face and altered the line of his mouth. Anyone who had known Roderick Ralestone would have little interest in Captain St. Jean, the merchant adventurer. He discusses this point at some length in his log, always concealing his real name.

“For the space of a year or two he was content to live quietly. He even opened a small shop and dealt in luxuries from the south. Then the desire to wander, which must have been the key-note of his life, drove him out into the world again. He placed his son in the care of a certain priest, whom he trusted, and went south to become one of the visionary revolutionists who were fighting their way back and across South and Central America. In one bloody engagement he fell, as his son notes in the old logs which he was now using to record his own daily experiences.”

“Ricky said,” Val mused, “that Roderick Ralestone never died in his bed. What became of the son?”

“Father Justinian wanted him to enter the Church, but in spite of his strict training he had no vocation. The money his father had left with the priest was enough to establish him in a small coastwise trading venture, and later he developed a flatboat freight service running upriver to Nashville.”

“But didn’t he ever try to get in touch with the Ralestones?” Val asked.

“No. When Roderick Ralestone sailed from New Orleans he seems to have determined to cut himself off from the past entirely. As I said, he used an anagram to hide his name all the way through the log, and doubtless his son never knew that there was anything strange about his father’s past. Laurent St. Jean, the son, prospered. Just before the outbreak of the Civil War he was reckoned one of the ten wealthiest men of his native city.

“But that wealth vanished in the war when shipping no longer went forth from the port. I did come across one interesting fact in Laurent’s notes covering those years. In 1861 Laurent St. Jean built a blockade-runner called the *Red Bird*. His backer in the venture was a Mr. Ralestone of Pirate’s Haven. So once Ralestone did meet Ralestone without being aware of the fact.

“Laurent St. Jean was imprisoned by ‘Beast’ Butler, along with other prominent men of the city, when the Yankees captured New Orleans. And he died in 1867 from a lingering illness contracted during his imprisonment. His son, René St. Jean, came home from war to find himself ruined. His father’s shipping business existed on paper only. Having the grit and determination of his grandfather, he struggled along for almost ten years trying to get back on his feet. But those were dark years for the whole country.

“In 1876 St. Jean gave up the struggle. With his Creole wife and their two sons he moved into the swamps. Working first as a guide and trapper and then as a hunter of birds, he managed to make a sparse living. His eldest son followed in his footsteps, but the younger took to the sea. Roderick St. Jean, the eldest son, died of yellow fever in 1890. He left one son to the guardianship of his brother who had come home from the sea. That son came to look upon his uncle as his father and the real relationship between them was half forgotten.

“But René St. Jean the second was curious. He knew something of the world and he was interested in the past. It was his custom to do a great amount of reading, especially reading which concerned the history of his own state and city. And once he was inclined to get out the old sea chest which had been moved with the family for so many years. Then he must have discovered his relationship to the Ralestones; perhaps he solved the anagram or found the pasted pages in the prayer-book—

“He was not ambitious for himself, but he wanted a better chance for his foster-son and nephew than the one he had had. So he endeavored to prove his claim to this property. Unfortunately, the lawyer he trusted was a shyster of the worst sort. He himself had no belief in his client’s story and merely bled him for small sums each month without ever really looking into the matter.”

“Gran’pappy said he was tryin’ to git his rights,” broke in Jeems. “He nevah tol’ mah pappy what he knowed. An’ he wouldn’t let anyone see into that chest—he kep’ it undah his bed. Then aftah Pappy died of the fever—’long with mah mothah—Gran’pappy cotched it too. An’ the doctah said that was what made him so fo’getful aftahwards. He stopped goin’ in town; but he came heah—’huntin’ his rights,’ he said. An’ he tol’ me that our fortune was hidden heah. ‘Course,” Jeems looked at them apologetically, “it soun’s sorta silly, but when Gran’pappy tol’ yo’ things yo’ kinda believed ‘em. So aftah he died Ah usta come huntin’ heah too. An’ then when Ah opened the chest and foun’ these—” From his breast pocket he drew a wash-leather bag and opened it.

He held out to Val a chain of gold mesh ending in a carnelian carved into a seal. “This is youah crest,” he pointed to the seal. “Ah took it in town an’ a man at the museum tol’ me about it. An’ this heah is Ralestone, too,” he indicated a small miniature painted on a slip of yellowed ivory. Val was looking at the face of the Ralestone rebel, as near like the water-color copy Charity had made of the museum portrait as one pea is to its pod-mate. Creighton took up the small painting.

“Hm-m,” he looked from the ivory to Jeems and then to Val, “this is the final proof. Either one of you might have sat for this. You have the same coloring and features. If it were not for a slight difference of expression you might pass for twins. At any rate, there is no denying that you are both Ralestones.”

“I don’t think that we’ll ever attempt to deny it,” Val laughed. “But you were right, Jeems—I mean Roderick,” he said to his newly discovered cousin, “you do have as much right here as we do.”

Jeems colored. “Ah’m sorry for sayin’ that,” he confessed. “Ah thought yo’ were right smart and too good for us. An’ Ah’m sorry Ah played ha’nt. But Ah didn’t expec’ yo’ would evah see me, only the niggahs, an’ I didn’t care ‘bout them. Ah always came when yo’ were ‘way or in bed.”

“Well, you’ve explained your interest in the place,” Val assented, “but what about the rival? Why did he appear?”

“It started in a blackmail plot. Your family have been wealthy, you know,” explained LeFleur. “But then the scheme became more serious when the oil prospectors aroused interest in the swamp. Already several men whose property bounds yours have been approached by the Central American Oil Company with an offer for their land. It would not at all surprise me if you were asked to dispose of your swamp wasteland for a good price. And the rumor of oil is what made the rival, as you call him, try to press his false claim instead of merely holding it over you as a threat.”

“The Luck is certainly doing its stuff,” Val observed. “Here’s the lost heir found, oil-wells bubbling at our back door—”

“I would hardly say that, Mr. Valerius,” remonstrated LeFleur.

“They may bubble yet,” the boy assured him airily. “I wouldn’t put it beyond the power of that length of Damascus steel to make wells bubble. Oil-wells bubbling,” Val continued from the point where the lawyer had interrupted him, “Rupert turning out to be the missing author—”

“What was that?” demanded Creighton sharply. He was on the point of handing a small book to Jeems.

“We just discovered that Rupert is your missing author,” Val explained. “Didn’t you guess when you heard the story of the missing Ralestone? The family went into town to tell you all about it; that’s why we were alone when the invaders arrived.”

“Mr. Ralestone my missing author! No, I didn’t guess. I was too interested in the story—but I should have! How stupid!” He looked down at the book he still held and then put it into the swamper’s hand. “Between the pages of the prayer-book, covering the offices for St. Louis’ Day, you’ll find the birth certificate for Laurent St. Jean with his right name,” he said. “That’s a very important paper to keep, young man. Mr. Ralestone my author.” He wiped his forehead with the handkerchief from his breast-pocket. “How stupid of me not to have seen at once. But why—”

“He had some idea that his stuff was no good when he didn’t hear from that agent,” Val explained, “so he just tried to forget the whole matter.”

“But I have to see him, I have to see him at once.” The New Yorker looked about him as if by will-power alone he could summon Rupert to stand before him on the terrace.

“Stay to supper and you will,” Val invited. “Ricky and I discovered him for you just as we promised we would. But then you’ve given us Rod in return. I am not,” Val told his cousin, “going to call you Rick even though there is a tradition for it. There are too many ‘Ricks’ complicating the family history now. I think you had better be ‘Rod’.”

“Anythin’ yo’ say,” he grinned.

For the third time that afternoon Val heard a car coming up the drive.

“If this should turn out to be the Grand Chan of Tartary or the Lama of Peru I shall not be one iota surprised,” he announced. “After what I’ve been through this afternoon, nothing, absolutely nothing, would surprise me. Oh, it’s only the family.”

With the impatience of one who has a good earth-shaking shock ready to administer, he watched his wandering relatives disembark. Charity and Holmes were still with them and a sort of aura of disappointment hung over the group. Then Ricky looked up and with a cry of joy came up the terrace steps in what seemed like a single leap.

“Oh, Mr. Creighton,” she began when Val lifted his hand. “Let me tell it,” he begged, “I’ve been waiting for a chance like this for years.” Ricky was obediently silent, thinking that he wished to break the mystery of the author. But Jeems and LeFleur understood that it was to them Val appealed.

“Val, what are you doing out of bed?” was Rupert’s first question.

“Saving the old homestead while you went joy-riding. We had visitors this afternoon.”

“Visitors? Who?” he began when his brother silenced him with a frown.

“Oh, let’s not go into that now,” Val said hurriedly. “There is something more important to be discussed. Since you left this afternoon we have had an addition to the family.”

“An addition to the family,” puzzled Ricky. “What do you mean?”

“Rick Ralestone has come back,” Val announced.

“Val, hadn’t you better go back to bed?” suggested his sister.

“Not now,” he grinned at her. “I haven’t lost my mind yet, nor am I raving. Ladies and gentlemen,” Val prepared to echo Creighton’s speech of an hour before, “permit me to introduce Roderick St. Jean de Roche Ralestone, the missing heir!”

With an impish grin Val had never seen on his face before, Jeems clicked his heels in a creditable imitation of a court bow.

## 18. Rupert Brings Home His Marchioness

“Such a nice domestic scene,” Val observed.

Ricky looked up from the bowl into which she was shelling peas. “Now just what do you mean by that?” she asked suspiciously.

“Nothing, nothing at all. It’s getting so I can’t say a word around here without you suspecting some sort of a catch in it,” her brother complained. He shifted the drawing-board Rod had fixed up for him an inch or two. Although Val’s arm was at last out of the sling, he was not supposed to use it unless absolutely necessary.

“Well, after that afternoon when you made the missing heir appear like a rabbit out of a hat—” began his sister.

“Rod,” Val called down to where their cousin was busied over the stretching of the new badminton net, “did you hear that? She referred to you as a rabbit—deliberately.”

“Hm-m,” Rod answered in absent-minded fashion. “That cat of Miss Charity’s just walked away with one of those feathered things yo’ bat ‘round.”

“Let us hope that he returns it in time,” Val said; “otherwise I can prophesy that you are going to spend the rest of the morning crawling around under hedges and things hunting for him and it. Ricky will not be balked. If she says that we are going to play badminton—well, we are going to play badminton.”

“I think that you might help too.” Ricky attacked a fresh pod viciously as their cousin came up on the terrace. He stopped for a moment by Ricky’s chair, long enough to gather the pods together on the paper she had put down for them, piling them up in a more orderly fashion than she was capable of.

“Doing what?” Val inquired. “You know that Lucy has chased everyone out of the house. And now that Rod has finished setting out the lawn sports, what is there left to do? By the way, did Sam mend that croquet mallet, the one with the loose head?”

“The one that you broke hitting the stone with when you aimed at your ball yesterday?” she asked sweetly. “Yes, I saw to that this morning.”

“Then what more is there to worry about? Let the party begin.” Val reached for his box of pencils.

That afternoon promptly at three-thirty the Ralestones of Pirate’s Haven were going to give their first party. They had lived, eaten, and slept with the idea of a party for the past week until Rupert rebelled and disappeared for the morning, taking Charity with him. He declared before he left that the house was no longer habitable for anyone above the mental level of a party-mad monomaniac, a statement with which Val privately agreed. But Ricky did trap him before he got the roadster out and made him promise to bring home two pounds of salted nuts and some more ice, because she simply knew that they wouldn’t have enough.

Ricky dropped the last of the peas into the bowl and leaned back in her canvas deck-chair. “I’m going to wear green,” she murmured dreamily, “with that leaf thing in my hair. And Charity’s going to wear her rose, the one that swishes when she walks.”

“I think I’ll appear in saffron,” Val announced firmly. “Somehow I feel like saffron. How about you, Rod?”

The thin, efficient, brown-faced person who was Roderick St. Jean de Roche Ralestone, to grant him his full name, stretched lazily and transferred a fistful of Ricky's peas to his mouth, a mouth which was no longer sullen. At Val's question he raised his shoulders in one of his French shrugs and considered.

"Yellow, with lilies behind mah ears," he grinned at Ricky. "Bettah give them somethin' to stare at; they'll all be powerful interested, anyway."

"Yes, the lost viscount," Val agreed. "Of course, you're really only a Lord like me, but it sounds better to say 'the lost viscount.' You'll share the limelight with Rupert and the Luck, so you'd better take that pair of my flannels which haven't turned quite yellow yet."

Rod shook his head. "This time Ah have mah own. Ah went in town shoppin' yesterday. It's mah turn to share clothes. Youah brothah told me to get yo' some shirts. So Ah did. Lucy put them in the top drawer."

"Don't tell me," Val begged, aroused by this news, "that we are actually able to afford some new clothes again?"

Rod nodded and Ricky sat up. "Don't be silly," she said, "we're comfortably well off. With Rupert writing books, and a lot of oil or something in the swamp, why, what have we got to worry about? And next fall Rod's going to college and I'm taking that course in dress designing and Rupert's going to write another book and—and—" Her inventive powers failed as Holmes came out on the terrace.

"Hello there." Val glanced at his watch. "I don't want to seem inhospitable, but you're about four hours too early. We haven't even crawled into our party duds."

"So I see. But this isn't a social call. By the way, where's Charity?"

"Oh, she went off with Rupert this morning," answered Ricky. "And I think it was mean of them, running out on us that way, when there was so much to do."

It seemed to Val that there was a faint shadow of irritation across the open good nature of Holmes' smile when he heard her answer. "That damsel is becoming very elusive nowadays," he observed as he sat down. "But now for business."

"More business? Not another oil-well!" Ricky expressed her surprise vividly with upflung hands.

"Not an oil-well, no. Just this—" He pulled Val's black note-book from his pocket. "Now I am not going to tell you that I have shown them to a publisher and that he wants fifty thousand or so at five dollars apiece. But I did show them to that friend I spoke of. He isn't very well known at present but he will be some day. His name is Fenly Moss and he is interested in animated cartoons. He has some ideas that sound rather big to me.

"Fen says that these animal drawings of yours show promise and he wants to know whether you ever thought of trying something along his line?"

Val shook his head, impatient to hear the rest.

"Well, he's in town right now on his vacation and he's coming out to see you tomorrow. I advise you, Ralestone, that if Fen makes you the proposition I think he's going to, to grab it. It'll mean hard work for you and plenty of it, but there is a future to it."

"I don't know how to thank you," the boy began when Holmes frowned at him half-seriously. "None of that. I was really doing Fen a favor, but you needn't tell him that. Do you know how long Charity and your brother are going to be gone?"

“No. But they’ll be back for lunch,” Ricky said. “If they remember lunch—they’re getting so vague lately. Val went out to call them to dinner last night and it took him a good five minutes to get them out of the garden.”

“Five? Nearer ten,” scoffed her brother.

Holmes got up abruptly. “Well, I’ll be drifting. When is this binge of yours?”

“Three-thirty, which really means four,” answered Ricky. “Aren’t you going to stay to lunch?”

The New Yorker shook his head. “Sorry, I’ve another engagement. Thanks just the same.”

“Thank *you!*” Val waved the note-book as he vanished. “Wonder why he hurried off that way?”

“Mad to think that Miss Charity was gone,” answered Rod shrewdly. “Yo’ve had that board long enough.” He calmly possessed himself of Val’s drawing equipment. “Time to rest.”

“Yes, grandfather,” his cousin assented meekly.

Ricky slapped at a fly. “It seems to get hotter and hotter,” she said. From the breast pocket of her sport dress she produced a handkerchief and mopped her face. Then she looked at the handkerchief in surprise.

“What’s the matter? Some face come off along with the paint?” asked Val.

“No. But I just remembered what this is—our clue!”

“You mean the handkerchief we found in the hall? I wonder who—”

Rod reached up and took it out of her hand.

“Mine. Miss Charity gave me a dozen last Christmas.”

“Then you left it there,” Ricky laughed. “Well, that solves the last of our mysteries.”

“All present or accounted for,” Val agreed as around the house came Rupert and their tenant.

“So there you are,” began Ricky. “And I’d like to know what you’ve been doing all morning—”

“Would you really?” asked Rupert.

Ricky stared at him for a long moment and then she arose before transferring her gaze to Charity. It might have been sunburn or the heat Ricky had complained of which colored the cheeks of the Boston Biglow.

“Rod! Val!” cried Ricky. “Where are your manners?” As she sank forward in a deep and graceful curtsy she added, “Can’t you see that Rupert has brought home his Marchioness?”

“Now that,” said Val, as he held out his hand to the new mistress of Pirate’s Haven, “is what I call ‘Ralestone Luck.’”

# **Ride Proud, Rebel!**



# 1. Ride with Morgan

The stocky roan switched tail angrily against a persistent fly and lipped water, dripping big drops back to the surface of the brook. His rider moved swiftly, with an economy of action, to unsaddle, wipe the besweated back with a wisp of last year's dried grass, and wash down each mud-spattered leg with stream water. Always care for the mount first—when a man's life, as well as the safety of his mission, depended on four subordinate legs more than on his own two.

Though he had little claim to a thoroughbred's points, the roan was as much a veteran of the forces as his groom, with all a veteran's ability to accept and enjoy small favors of the immediate present without speculating too much concerning the future. He blew gustily in pleasure under the attention and began to sample a convenient stand of spring green.

His mount cared for, Drew Rennie swung up saddle, blanket, and the meager possessions which he had brought out of Virginia two weeks ago, to the platform in a crooked tree overhanging the brook. He settled beside them on the well-seasoned timbers of the old tree house to rummage through his saddlebags.

The platform had been there a long time—before Chickamauga and the Ohio Raid, before the first roll of drums in '61. Drew pulled a creased shirt out of the bags and sat with it draped over one knee, remembering....

Sheldon Barrett and he—they had built it together one hot week in summer—had named it Boone's Fort. And it was the only thing at Red Springs Drew had really ever owned. His dark eyes were fixed now on something more than the branches about him, and his mouth tightened until his face was not quite sullen, only shuttered.

Five years ago—only five years? Yes, five years next month! But the past two years of his own personal freedom—and war—those seemed to equal ten. Now there was no one left to remember the fort's existence, which made it perfect for his present purpose.

The warmth of the sun, beating down through yet young leaves, made Drew brush his battered slouch hat to the flooring and luxuriate in the heat. Sometimes he didn't think he'd ever get the bite of last winter's cold out of his bones. The light pointed up every angle of jaw and cheekbone, making it clear that experience—hard experience—and not years had melted away boyish roundness of chin line, narrowed the watchful eyes ever alert to his surroundings. A cavalry scout was wary, or he ceased to be a scout, or maybe even alive.

Shirt in hand, Drew dropped lightly to the ground and with the same dispatch as he had cared for his horse, made his own toilet, scrubbing his too-thin body with a sigh of content as heartfelt as that the roan had earlier voiced.

The fresh shirt was a dark brown-gray, but the patched breeches were Yankee blue, and the boots he pulled on when he had bathed were also the enemy's gift, good stout leather he'd been lucky enough to find in a supply wagon they had captured a month ago. Butternut shirt, Union pants and boots—the unofficial standard uniform of most any trooper of the Army of the Tennessee in this month of May, 1864. And he had garments which were practically intact. What was one patch on the seat nowadays?

For the first time Drew grinned at his reflection in the small mirror he had been using, when he scraped a half week's accumulation of soft beard from his face. Sure, he was all spruced up now, ready to make a polite courtesy call at the big house. The grin did not fade, but was

gone in a flash, leaving no hint of softness now about his gaunt features, no light in the intent, measuring depths of his dark gray eyes.

A call at Red Springs was certainly the last thing in the world for him to consider seriously. His last interview within its walls could still make him wince when he recalled it, word by scalding word. No, there was no place for a Rennie—and a Rebel Rennie to make matters blacker—under the righteous roof of Alexander Mattock!

Hatred could be a red-hot burning to choke a man's throat, leaving him speechless and hurting inside. Since he had ridden out of Red Springs he had often been cold, very often hungry—and under orders willingly, which would have surprised his grandfather—but in another way he had been free as never before in all his life. In the army, the past did not matter at all if one did one's job well. And in the army, the civilian world was as far away as if it were conducted in the cold chasms of the moon.

Drew leaned back against the tree trunk, wanting to yield to the soft wind and the swinging privacy of the embowered tree house, wanting to forget everything and just lie there for a while in the only part of the past he remembered happily.

But he had his orders—horses for General Morgan, horses and information to feed back to that long column of men riding or trudging westward on booted, footsore feet up the trail through the Virginia mountains on the way home to Kentucky. These were men who carried memories of the Ohio defeat last year which they were determined to wipe out this season, just as a lot of them had to flush with gunsmoke the stench of a Northern prison barracks from their nostrils.

And there were horses at Red Springs. To mount Morgan's men on Alexander Mattock's best stock was a prospect which had its appeal. Drew tossed his haversack back to the platform and added his carbine to it. The army Colts in his belt holsters would not be much hindrance while crawling through cover, but the larger weapon might be.

He thumped a measure of dust from his hat, settled it over hair as black as that felt had once been, and crossed the brook with a running leap. The roan lifted his head to watch Drew go and then settled back to grazing. This, too, followed a pattern both man and horse had practiced for a long time.

Drew could almost imagine that he was again hunting Sheldon as a "Shawnee" on the warpath while he dodged from one bush to the next. Only Chickamauga stood between the past and now—and Sheldon Barrett would never again range ahead, in play or earnest.

The scout came out on a small rise where the rails of the fence were cloaked on his side by brush. Drew lay flat, his chin propped upon his crooked arm to look down the gradual incline of the pasture to the training paddock. Beyond that stood the big house, its native brick settling back slowly into the same earth from which it had been molded in 1795.

In the pasture were the brood mares, five of them, each with an attendant foal, all long legs and broom tail, still young enough to be bewildered by so large and new a world. In the paddock.... Drew's head raised an inch or so, and he pressed forward until his hat was pushed back by the rail. The two-year-old being schooled in the paddock was enough to excite any horseman.

Red Springs' stock right enough, of the Gray Eagle-Ariel breed, which was Alexander Mattock's pride. Born almost black, this colt had shed his baby fur two seasons ago for a dark iron-gray hide which would grow lighter with the years. He had Eclipse's heritage, but he was more than a racing machine. He was—Drew's forehead rasped against the weathered wood of the rail—he was the kind of horse a man could dream about all his days and perhaps

find once in a lifetime, if he were lucky! Give that colt three or four more years and there wouldn't be any horse that could touch him. Not in Kentucky, or anywhere else!

He was circling on a leading strap now, throwing his feet in a steady, rhythmic pattern around the hub of a Negro groom who was holding the strap and admiring the action. Mounted on another gray—a mare with a dainty, high-held head—was a woman, her figure trim in a habit almost the same shade of green as the fields.

Drew pulled back. Then he smiled wryly at his instinctive retreat. His aunt, Marianna Forbes, had abilities to be respected, but he very much doubted if she could either sense his presence or see through the leafy wall of his present spy hole. Yet caution dictated that he get about his real business and inspect the fields where the horses he sought should be grazing.

He halted several times during his perimeter march to survey the countryside. And the bits of activity he spied upon began to puzzle him. Aunt Marianna's supervision of the colt's schooling had been the beginning. And he had seen her later, riding out with Rafe, the overseer, to make the daily rounds, a duty which had never been undertaken at Red Springs by any one other than his grandfather.

Aunt Marianna had every right to be at Red Springs. She had been born under its roof, having left it only as a bride to live in Lexington. The war had brought her back when her husband became an officer in the Second Kentucky Cavalry—Union. But now—riding with Rafe, watching in the paddock—where was Alexander Mattock?

Red Springs was his grandfather. Drew found it impossible to think of the house and the estate without the man, though in the past two years he had discovered very few things could be dismissed as impossible. Curiosity made him want to investigate the present mystery. But the memory of his last exit from that house curbed such a desire.

Drew had never been welcome there from the day of his birth within those walls. And the motive for his final flight from there had only provided an added aggravation for his grandfather. A staunch Union supporter wanted no part of a stubborn-willed and defiant grandson who rode with John Hunt Morgan. Drew clung to his somewhat black thoughts as he made his way to the pasture. The escape he had found in the army was no longer so complete when he skulked through these familiar fields.

But there were only two horses grazing peacefully in the field dedicated by custom to the four- and five-year-olds, and neither was of the best stock. One could imagine that Red Springs had already contributed to the service.

Of course, Morgan's men were not the only riders aiming to sweep good horseflesh out of Kentucky blue grass this season, and here the Union cavalry would be favored.

There was a slim chance that a few horses might be in the stables. He debated the chance of that against the risk of discovery and continued debating it as he started back to the tree house.

Drew had known short rations and slim foraging for a long time, but the present pinch in his middle sharpened when he sighted the big house, with its attendant summer kitchen showing a trail of chimney smoke.

Alexander Mattock might have considered his grandson an interloper at Red Springs; certainly the old man never concealed the state of his feelings on that subject. But neither had he, in any way, slighted what he deemed to be his duty toward Drew.

There had been plenty of good clothing—the right sort for a Mattock grandson—and the usual bounteous table set by hospitable Kentucky standards. Just as there had been education,

sometimes enforced by the use of a switch when the tutor—imported from Lexington—thought it necessary to impress learning on a rebellious young mind by a painful application in another portion of the body. Education, as well as a blooded horse in the stables, and all the other prerequisites of a young blue-grass grandee. But never any understanding, affection, or sympathy.

That cold behavior—the cutting, weighing, and judgment of every act of childish mischief and boyish recklessness—might have crushed some into a colorless obedience. But it had made of Drew a rebel long before he tugged on the short gray shell jacket of a Confederate cavalryman.

Drew had forgotten the feel of linen next to his now seldom clean skin, the set of broadcloth across the shoulders. And he depended upon the roan's services with appreciation which had nothing to do with boasted bloodlines, having discovered in the army that a cold-blooded horse could keep going on rough forage when a finer bred hunter broke down. But today the famed dinner table at Red Springs was a painful memory to one facing only cold hoecake and stone-hard dried beef.

He had circled back to the brush screening the brook and the tree house. Now he stood very still, his hand sliding one of the heavy Colts out of its holster. The roan was still grazing, paying no attention to a figure who was kneeling on the limb-supported platform and turning over the gear Drew had left piled there.

The scout flitted about a bush, choosing a path which would bring him out at the stranger's back. That same warm sun, now striking from a different angle into the tree house, was bright on a thick tangle of yellow hair, curly enough to provide its owner with a combing problem.

Drew straightened to his full height. The sense of the past which had dogged him all day now struck like a blow. He couldn't help calling aloud that name, even though the soberer part of his brain knew there could be no answer.

“Shelly!”

The blond head turned, and blue eyes looked at him, startled, across a bowed shoulder. Drew's puzzlement was complete. Not Sheldon, of course, but who? The other's open surprise changed to wide-eyed recognition first.

“Drew!” The hail came in the cracked voice of an adolescent as the other jumped down to face the scout. They stood at almost eye-to-eye level, but the stranger was still all boy, awkwardly unsure of strength or muscle control.

“You must be Boyd—” Drew blinked, something in him still clinging to the memory of Sheldon, Sheldon who had helped to build the tree house. Why, Boyd was only a small boy, usually tagging his impatient elders, not this tall, almost exact copy of his dead brother.

“Sure, I'm Boyd. And it's true then, ain't it, Drew? General Morgan's coming back here? Where?” He glanced over his shoulder once more as if expecting to see a troop prance up through the bushes along the stream.

Drew holstered the revolver. “Rumors of that around?” he asked casually.

“Some,” Boyd answered. “The Yankee-lovers called out the Home Guard yesterday. What sort of a chance do they think they'll have against *General Morgan*?”

Drew moved toward the roan's picket rope. As his fingers closed on that he thought fast. Just as the Mattocks and the Forbeses were Union, the Barretts were, or had been, Southern in

sympathy. Most of Kentucky was divided that way now. But what might have been true two years ago was not necessarily a fact today. One took no chances.

“You come back to see your grandfather, Drew?”

“Any reason why I should?” The whole countryside must know very well the state of affairs between Alexander Mattock and Drew Rennie.

“Well, he’s been sick for so long.... Didn’t you know about that?” Boyd must have read Drew’s answer in his face, for he spilled out the news quickly. “He had some kind of a fit when he heard Murray was killed——”

Drew dropped the picket rope. “Uncle Murray ... dead?”

Boyd nodded. “Killed at Murfreesboro in sixty-two, but the news didn’t come till about a week after the battle. Mr. Mattock was in town when Judge Hagerstorm told him ... just turned red in the face and fell down in the middle of the street. They brought him home, and sometimes he sits outdoors. But he can’t walk too good and he talks thick; you can hardly understand him.”

“So that’s why Aunt Marianna’s in charge.” Drew thought of Uncle Murray swept away by time and the chances of war as so many others—and no emotion stirred within him. Murray Mattock had firmly agreed with his father concerning the child who was the result of a runaway match between his sister Melanie and a despised Texan. But Uncle Murray’s death must indeed have been a paralyzing blow for the old man at Red Springs, with all his pride and his plans for his only son.

“Yes, Cousin Marianna runs Red Springs,” Boyd assented, “she and Rafe. They sell horses to the army—the blue bellies.” He used the term with the concentration of one determined to say the right thing at the right time.

Drew laughed. And with that spontaneous outburst, years fell away from his somber face. “I take it that you do not approve of blue bellies, Boyd?”

“Course not! Me, I’m goin’ to join General Morgan now. Ain’t nobody goin’ to keep me from doin’ that!” Again his voice scaled up out of control, and he flushed.

“You’re rather young——” Drew began, when the other interrupted him with something close to desperation in his voice.

“No, I ain’t too young! That’s all I ever hear—too young to do this, too young to be thinkin’ about things like that! Well, I ain’t much younger than you were, Drew Rennie, when you joined up with Captain Castleman and rode south to join General Morgan—you and Shelly. And you know that, too! I’ll be sixteen on the fifteenth of this July. And this time I’m goin’! Where’s the General now, Drew?”

The scout shrugged. “Movin’ fast. Your rumors probably know as much as I do. They plant him half a dozen places at once. He might be in any one of them or fifty miles away; that’s how Morgan rides.”

“But you’re goin’ to join him, and you’ll take me with you, won’t you, Drew?”

The lightness was gone from the older boy’s eyes, his mouth set in controlled anger. “I am not goin’ to do anything of the kind, Boyd Barrett.” He spoke the words slowly, in an even tone, with a fraction of pause between each. Men of the command had once or twice heard young Rennie speak that way. Although difficult to know well, he had the general reputation of being easy to get along with. But a few times he had erupted into action as might a spring

uncoiling from tight pressure, and that action was usually preceded by just such quiet statements as the one he had just made to Boyd.

Boyd, however, was never one to be defeated in a first skirmish of wills. “Why not?” he demanded now.

“Because,” Drew offered the first argument he could think of which might be acceptable to the other, “I’m on scout in enemy-held territory. If I’m taken, it’s not good. I have to ride light and fast, and this is duty I’ve been trained to do. So I can’t afford to be hampered by a green kid——”

“I can ride just as fast and hard as you can, Drew Rennie, and I have Whirlaway for my own now. He’s certainly better than that nag!” With an arrogant lift of the chin, Boyd indicated the roan, who had raised his head and was chewing rather noisily, regarding the two by the tree house with mild interest.

“Don’t underrate Shawnee.” For an instant Drew rose to the roan’s defense and then found himself irritated at being so drawn from the main argument. “And I wouldn’t care if you had Gray Eagle, himself, under you, boy—I’m not taking you with me. Let us be snapped up by the Yankees, and you’d be in bigger trouble than I would.” He gestured to his shirt and breeches. “I’m in uniform; you ain’t.”

“No blue bellies could drop on us,” Boyd pushed. “I know where all the garrisons are round here—all about their patrols. I could get us through quicker’n you can, yourself. I ain’t no green kid!”

Drew slapped the blanket down on Shawnee’s back, smoothed it flat with a palm stroke, and jerked his saddle from the platform. He could not stay right here now that Boyd had smoked him out—maybe nowhere in the neighborhood with this excitable boy dogging him.

The scout was driven to his second line of defense. “What about Cousin Merry?” he asked as he tightened the cinch. “Have you talked this over with her—enlistin’, I mean?”

Boyd’s lower lip protruded in a child’s pout. His eyes shifted away from Drew’s direct gaze.

“She never said No——”

“Did you ask her?” Drew challenged.

“Did you ask your grandfather when you left?” Boyd tried a counterattack.

This time Drew’s laughter was harsh, without humor. “You know I didn’t, and you also know why. But I didn’t leave a mother!”

He was being purposefully brutal now, for a good reason. Sheldon had ridden away before; Boyd must not go now. In Drew’s childhood, his father’s cousin, Meredith Barrett, had been the only one who had really cared about him. His only escape from the cold bleakness of Red Springs had been Barrett’s Oak Hill. There was a big debt he owed Cousin Merry; he could not add to it the burden of taking away her second son.

Sure, he had been only a few months older than this boy when he had run away to war, but he had not left anyone behind who would worry about him. And Alexander Mattock’s cold discipline had tempered his grandson into someone far more able to take hard knocks than Boyd Barrett might be for years to come. Drew had met those knocks, thick and fast, enduring them as the price of his freedom.

“You were mad at your grandfather, and you ran away. Well, I ain’t mad at Mother, but I ain’t goin’ to sit at home with General Morgan comin’! He needs men. They’ve been

recruitin' for him on the quiet; you know they have. And I've got to make up for Sheldon—  
—”

Drew swung around and caught Boyd's wrist in a grip tight enough to bring a reflex backward jerk from the boy. “That's no way to make up for Sheldon's death—runnin' away from home to fight. Don't give me any nonsense about goin' to kill Yankees because they killed him! When a man goes to war ... well, he takes his chances. Shelly did at Chickamauga. War ain't a private fight, just one man up against another—”

But he was making no impression; he couldn't. At Boyd's age you could not imagine death as coming to you; nor were you able to visualize the horrors of an ill-equipped field hospital. Any more than you could picture all the rest of it—the filth, hunger, cold, and boredom with now and then a flash of whirling horses and men clashing on some road or field, or the crazy stampede of other men, yelling their throats raw as they charged into a hell of Minié balls and canister shot.

“I'm goin' to ride with General Morgan, like Shelly did,” Boyd repeated doggedly, with that stubbornness which seasons ago had kept him eternally tagging his impatient elders.

“That's up to you.” Suddenly Drew was tired, tired of trying to find words to pierce to Boyd's thinking brain—if one had a thinking brain at his age. Slinging his carbine, Drew mounted Shawnee. “But I do know one thing—you're not goin' with me.”

“Drew-Drew, just listen once....”

Shawnee answered to the pressure of his rider's knees and leaped the brook. Drew bowed his head to escape the lash of a low branch. There was no going back ever, he thought bitterly, shutting his ears to Boyd's cry. He'd been a fool to ride this way at all.

## 2. Guns in the Night

There were sounds enough in the middle of the night to tell the initiated that a troop was on the march—creak of saddle leather, click of shod hoof, now and then the smothered exclamation of a man shaken out of a cavalryman's mounted doze. To Drew's trained ears all this was loud enough to send any Union picket calling out the guard. Yet there was no indication that the enemy ahead was alert.

Near two o'clock he made it, and the advance were walking their horses into the fringe of Lexington—this was home-coming for a good many of the men sagging in the saddles. Morgan's old magic was working again. Escaping from the Ohio prison, he had managed to gather up the remnants of a badly shattered command, weld them together, and lead them up from Georgia to their old fighting fields—the country which they considered rightfully theirs and in which during other years they had piled one humiliating defeat for the blue coats on another. General Morgan could *not* lose in Kentucky!

And they already had one minor victory to taste sweet: Mount Sterling had fallen into their hold as easily as it had before. Now Lexington—with the horses they needed—friends and families waiting to greet them.

Captain Tom Quirk's Irish brogue, unmistakable even in a half whisper, came out of the dark: "Pull up, boys!"

Drew came to a halt with his flanking scout. There was a faint drum of hoofs from behind as three horsemen caught up with the first wave of Quirk's Scouts.

"Taking the flag in ..." Drew caught a snatch of sentence passed between the leader of the newcomers and his own officer. He recognized the voice of John Castleman, his former company commander.

"... worth a try ..." that was Quirk.

But when the three had cantered on into the mouth of the street the scout captain turned his head to the waiting shadows. "Rennie, Bruce, Croxton ... give them cover!"

Drew sent Shawnee on, his carbine resting ready across his saddle. The streets were quiet enough, too quiet. These dark houses showed no signs of life, but surely the Yankees were not so confident that they would not have any pickets posted. And Fort Clay had its garrison....

Then that ominous silence was broken by Castleman's call: "Bearer of flag of truce!"

"... Morgan's men?" A woman called from a window up ahead, her voice so low pitched Drew heard only a word or two. Castleman answered her before he gave the warning:

"Battery down the street, boys. Take to the sidewalks!"

A lantern bobbed along in their direction. Drew had a glimpse of a blue-uniformed arm above it. A moment later Castleman rode back. One of his companions swerved close-by, and Drew recognized Key Morgan, the General's brother.

"They say, 'No surrender.'"

Perhaps that was what they said. But the skirmishers were now drifting into town. Orders snapped from man to man through the dark. The crackle of small-arms fire came sporadically, to be followed by the heavier *boom-boom* as cannon balls from Fort Clay



ricocheted through the streets, the Yankees being forced back into the protection of that stronghold. Riders threaded through alleys and cross streets; lamps flared up in house windows. There was a pounding on doors, and shouted greetings. Fire made a splash of angry color at the depot, to be answered with similar blazes at the warehouses.

“Spur up those crowbaits of yours, boys!” Quirk rounded up the scouts. “We’re out for horses—only the best, remember that!”

Out of the now aroused Lexington just as daylight was gray overhead, they were on the road to Ashland. If Red Springs might have proved poor picking, John Clay’s stables did not. One sleek thoroughbred after another was led from the stalls while Quirk fairly purred.

“Skedaddle! Would you believe it? Here’s Skedaddle, himself, just aching to show heels to the blue bellies, ain’t you?” He greeted the great racer. “Now that’s the sort of stuff we need! Give us another chase across the Ohio clean up to Canada with a few like him under us. Sweep ‘em clean and get going! The General wants to see the catch before noon.”

Drew watched the mounts being led down the lane. Beautiful, yes, but to his mind not one of them was the equal of the gray colt he had seen at Red Springs. Now that was a horse! And he was not tempted now to strip his saddle off Shawnee and transfer to any one of the princes of equine blood passing him by. He knew the roan, and Shawnee knew his job. Knows more about the work than I do sometimes, Drew thought.

“You, Rennie!”

Drew swung Shawnee to the left as Quirk hailed him.

“Take point out on the road. Just like some stubborn Yankee to try and cut away a nice little catch like this.”

“Yes, sir.” Drew merely sketched a salute; discipline was always free and easy in the Scouts.

The day was warm. He was glad he had managed to find a lightweight shirt back at the warehouse in town. If they didn’t win Lexington to keep, at least all of the raiders were going to ride out well-mounted, with boots on their feet and whole clothing on their backs. The Union quartermasters did just fine by Morgan’s boys, as always.

Shawnee’s ears went forward alertly, but Drew did not need that signal of someone’s approaching. He backed into the shadow-shade of a tree and sat tense, with Colt in hand.

A horse nickered. There was the whirr of wheels. Drew edged Shawnee out of cover and then quickly holstered his weapon, riding out to bring to a halt the carriage horse between the shafts of an English dogcart.

He pulled off his dust-grayed hat. “Good mornin’, Aunt Marianna.”

Such a polite greeting—the same words he would have used three years ago had they met in the hall of Red Springs on their way to breakfast. He wanted to laugh, or was it really laughter which lumped in his throat?

Her momentary expression of outrage faded as she leaned forward to study his face, and she relaxed her first half-threatening grip on her whip. Though Aunt Marianna had never been a beauty, her present air of assurance and authority became her, just as the smart riding habit was better suited to her somewhat angular frame than the ruffles and bows of the drawing room.

“Drew!” Her recognition of his identity had come more slowly than Boyd’s, and it sounded almost wary.

“At your service, ma’am.” He found himself again using the graces of another way of life, far removed from his sweat-stained shirt and patched breeches. He shot a glance over his shoulder, making sure they were safely alone on that stretch of highway. After all, one horse among so many would be no great loss to his commander. “You’d better turn around. The boys’ll have Lady Jane out of the shaft before you get into Lexington if you keep on. And the Yankees are still pepperin’ the place with round shot.” He wondered why she was driving without a groom, but did not quite dare to ask.

“Drew, is Boyd here with you?”

“Boyd?”

“Don’t be evasive with me, boy!” She rapped that out with an officer’s snap. “He left a note for Merry—two words misspelled and a big blot—all foolishness about joining Morgan. Said you had been to Red Springs, and he was going along. Why did you do it, Drew? Cousin Merry ... after Sheldon, she can’t lose Boyd, too! To put such a wild idea into that child’s head!”

Drew’s lips thinned into a half grimace. He was still cast in the role of culprit, it seemed. “I didn’t influence Boyd to do anything, Aunt Marianna. I told him I wouldn’t take him with me, and I meant it. If he ran away, it was his own doin’.”

She was still measuring him with that intent look as if he were a slightly unsatisfactory colt being put through his paces in the training paddock.

“Then you’ll help me get him back home?” That was more a statement than a question, delivered in a voice which was all Mattock, enough to awaken by the mere sound all the old resistance in him.

He nodded at the Lexington road. “There are several thousand men ahead there, ma’am. Hunting Boyd out if he wants to hide from me—and he will—is impossible. He’s big enough to pass a recruiter; they ain’t too particular about age these days. And he’ll stay just as far from me as he can until he is sworn in. He already knows how I feel about his enlistin’.”

Her gloved hands tightened on the reins. “If I could see John Morgan himself—”

“If you could get to Lexington and find him—”

“But Boyd’s just a child. He hasn’t the slightest idea of war except the stories he hears ... no idea of what could happen to him, or what this means to Merry. All this criminal nonsense about being a soldier—sabers and spurs, and dashing around behind a flag, the wrong flag, too—” She caught her breath in an unusual betrayal of emotion. And now she studied Drew with some deliberation, noting his thinness, itemizing his shabbiness.

He smiled tiredly. “No, I ain’t Boyd’s idea of a returnin’ hero, am I?” he agreed with her unspoken comment. “Also, we Rebs don’t use sabers; they ain’t worth much in a real skirmish.”

She flushed. “Drew, why did you go? Was it all because of Father? I know he made it hard for you.”

“You know—” Drew regarded a circling bird in the section of sky above her head—“some day I hope I’ll discover just what kind of a no-account Hunt Rennie was, to make his son so unacceptable. Most of the Texans I’ve ridden with in the army haven’t been so bad; some of them are downright respectable.”

“I don’t know.” Again she flushed. “It was a long time ago when it all happened. I was just a little girl. And Father, well, he has very strong prejudices. But, Drew, for you to go against

everything you'd been taught, to turn Rebel—that added to his bitterness. And now Boyd is trying to go the same way. Isn't there something you can do? I can't stand to see that look in Merry's eyes. If we can just get Boyd home again——”

“Don't hope too much.” Drew was certain that nothing Marianna Forbes could do was going to lead Boyd Barrett back home again. On the other hand, if the boy had not formally enlisted, perhaps the rigors of one of the General's usual cross-country scrambles might be disillusioning. But, having tasted the quality of Boyd's stubbornness in the past, Drew doubted that. For long months he had been able to cut right out of his life Red Springs and all it stood for; now it was trying to put reins on him again. He shifted his weight in the saddle.

“He's been restless all spring,” his aunt continued. “We might have known that, given an opportunity like this, the boy would do something wild. Only the waste, the sinful waste! I can't go back and face Merry without trying something—anything! Can't you ... Drew?”

“I don't know.” He couldn't harden himself to tell her the truth. “I'll try,” he promised vaguely.

“Drew——” A change in tone brought his attention back to her. She looked disturbed, almost embarrassed. “Have you had a hard time? You look so ... so thin and tired. Is there anything you need?”

He flinched from any such attack on the shell he had built against the intrusion of Red Springs, for a second or two feeling once more the rasp across raw nerves. “We don't get much time for sleep when the General's on the prod. Horse stealin' and such keeps us a mite busy, accordin' to your Yankee friends. And we have to pay our respects to them, just to keep them reminded that this is Morgan country. I'll warn you again, Aunt Marianna, keep Lady Jane out of Lexington today—if you want to keep *her*.” He gathered up his reins. “Boyd told me about Grandfather,” he added in a rush. “I'm sorry.” And he was, he told himself, sorry for Aunt Marianna, who had to stay at Red Springs now, and even a little in an impersonal way for the old man, who must find inactivity a worse prison than any stone-walled room. But it was being polite about a stranger. “Major Forbes ... he's all right?”

“Yes. Only, Drew——” Again the urgency in her voice held him against his will, “Boyd...”

He was saved further evasion by a carrying whistle from down the road, the signal to pull in pickets. Pursing his own lips, he answered.

“I have to go. I'll do what I can.” He set Shawnee pounding along the pike, and he did not look back.

If he were ever to fulfill his promise to locate Boyd, that would have to come later. Quirk's horse catch delivered, the scouts were on the move again, on the Georgetown road, riding at a pace which suggested they must keep ahead of a boiling wasp's nest of Yankees. There was an embarrassment of blue-coat prisoners on the march between two lines of gray uniforms, and pockets of the enemy such as that at Fort Clay were left behind. The strike northward took on a feverish drive.

Georgetown with its streets full of women and cheering males, too old or too young to be riding with the columns. Mid-afternoon, Friday, and the heat rising from the pavement as only June heat could. Then they reached the Frankfort road, and the main command halted. The scouts ate in the saddle as they fanned out along the Frankfort pike, pushing toward Cynthia. Sam Croxton strode back from filling his canteen at a farmyard well and scowled at Drew, who had dismounted and loosened cinch to cool Shawnee's back.

“Cynthiana, now. I’m beginnin’ to wonder, Rennie, if we know just which way we are goin’.”

Drew shrugged. “Might be a warm reception waitin’ us there. Drake figures about five hundred Yankees on the spot, and trains comin’ in with more all the time.”

Sighing, Croxton rubbed his hand across his freckled face, smearing road dust and sweat into a gritty mask. “Me—I could do with four or five hours’ sleep, right down here in the road. Always providin’ no blue belly’d trot along to stir me up. Seems like I ain’t had a ten minutes’ straight nap since we joined up with the main column. Scoutin’ ahead a couple weeks ago you could at least fill your belly and rest up at some farm. Them boys pushin’ the prisoners back there sure has it tough. Bet some of ‘em been eatin’ dust most all day—”

“Be glad you’re not ridin’ in one of the wagons nursin’ a hole in your middle.” Drew wet his handkerchief, or the sad gray rag which served that purpose, and carefully washed out Shawnee’s nostrils, rubbing the horse gently down the nose and around his pricked ears.

Croxton spat and a splotch of brown tobacco juice pocked the roadside gravel. “Now ain’t you cheerful!” he observed. “No, I’ve no hole in my middle, or my top, or my bottom—and I don’t want none, neither. All I want is about an hour’s sleep without Quirk or Drake breathin’ down my back wantin’ to know why I’m playin’ wagon dog. The which I ain’t gonna have very soon by the looks of it. So...” He mounted, spat again with accuracy enough to stun a grasshopper off a nodding weed top, which feat seemed to restore a measure of his usual good nature. “Got him! You comin’, Rennie?”

The hours of Friday afternoon, evening, night, crawled by—leadenly, as far as the men in the straggling column were concerned. That dash which had carried them through from the Virginia border, through the old-time whirling attack on Mount Sterling only days earlier, and which had brought them into and beyond Lexington, was seeping from tired men who slept in the saddle or fell out, too drugged with fatigue to know that they slumped down along country fences, unconscious gifts for the enemy doggedly drawing in from three sides. There was the core of veterans who had seen this before, been a part of such punishing riding in Illinois, Ohio, and Kentucky. The signs could be read, and as Drew spurred along that faltering line of march late that night, carrying a message, he felt a creeping chill which was not born of the night wind nor a warning of swamp fever.

Before daylight there was another halt. He had to let Shawnee pick his own careful path around and through groups of dismounted men sleeping with their weapons still belted on, their mounts, heads drooping, standing sentinel.

Saturday’s dawn, and the advance had plowed ahead to the forks of the road some three miles out of Cynthiana. One brigade moved directly toward the town; the second—with a detachment of scouts—headed down the right-hand road to cross the Licking River and move in upon the enemies’ rear. From the hill they could sight a stone-fence barricade glistening with the metal of waiting musket barrels. Then, suddenly, the old miracle came. Men who had clung through the hours to their saddles by sheer will power alone, tightened their lines and were alertly alive.

The ear-stinging, throat-scratching Yell screeched high over the pound of the artillery, the vicious spat of Minié balls. A whip length of dusty gray-brown lashed forward, flanking the stone barrier. Blue-coated men wavered, broke, ran for the bridge, heading into the streets of the town. The gray lash curled around a handful of laggards and swept them into captivity.

Then the brigade thundered on, driving the enemy back before they could reform, until the Yankees holed up in the courthouse, the depot, a handful of houses. Before eight o'clock it was all over, and the confidence of the weary raiders was back. They had showed 'em!

Drew had the usual mixture of sharp scenes to remember as his small portion of the engagement while he spurred Shawnee on past the blaze which was spreading through the center of the town, licking out for more buildings no one seemed to have the organization nor the will to save. He was riding with the advance of Giltner's brigade, double-quicking it downriver to Keller's Bridge. In town the Yankees were prisoners, but here a long line, with heavy reserves in wedges of blue behind, strung out across open fields.

Once more the Yell arose in sharp ululating wails, and the ragged line swept from the road, tightening into a semblance of the saber blades Morgan's men disdained to use ... clashed.... Then, after what seemed like only a moment's jarring pause, it was on the move once more while before it crumpled motes of blue were carried down the slope to the riverbank, there to steady and stand fast.

Drew's throat was aching and dry, but he was still croaking hoarsely, hardly feeling the slam of his Colts' recoils. They were up to that blue line, firing at deadly point-blank range. And part of him wondered how any men could still keep their feet and face back to such an assault with ready muskets. By his side a man skipped as might a marcher trying to catch step, then folded up, sliding limply to the trampled grass.

Men were flinging up hands holding empty cartridge boxes along the attacking line—too many of them. Others reversed the empty carbines, to use them in clubbing duels back and forth. The Union troops fell back, firing still, making their way into the railroad cut. Now the river was a part defense for them. Bayonets caught the sunlight in angry flashing, and they bristled.

“You ... Rennie....”

Drew lurched back under the clutch of a frantic hand belonging to an officer he knew.

“Get back to the horse lines! Bring up the holders' ammunition, on the double!”

Drew ran, panting, his boots slipping and scraping on the grass as he dodged around prone men who still moved, or others who lay only too still. A horse reared, snorted, and was pulled down to four feet again.

“Ammunition!” Drew got the word out as a squawk, grabbing at the boxes the waiting men were already tossing to him. Then, through the haze which had been riding his mind since the battle began, he caught a clear sight of the fifth man there.... And there was no disguising the blond hair of the boy so eagerly watching the struggle below. Drew had found Boyd—at a time he could do nothing about it. With his arms full, the scout turned to race down the slope again, only to sight the white flag waving from the railroad cut.

More prisoners to be marched along, joining the other dispirited ranks. Drew heard one worried comment from an officer: they would soon have more prisoners than guards.

He went back, trying to locate Boyd, but to no purpose. And the rest of the day was more confusion, heat, never-ending weariness, and always the sense of there being so little time. Rumors raced along the lines, five thousand, ten thousand blue bellies on the march, drawing in from every garrison in the blue grass. And those who had been hunted along the Ohio roads a year before were haunted by that old memory of disaster.

Once more they made their way through the streets of Cynthiana, where the acrid smoke of burning caught at throats, adding to the torturous thirst which dried a man's mouth when he

tore cartridge paper with his teeth. Drew and Croxton took sketchy orders from Captain Quirk, their eyes red-rimmed with fatigue above their powder-blackened lips and chins. Fan out, be eyes and ears for the column moving into the Paris pike.

Croxton's grin had no humor in it as they turned aside into a field to make better time away from the cluttered highway.

"Looks like the butter's spread a mite thin on the bread this time," he commented. "But the General's sure playin' it like he has all the aces in hand. Which way to sniff out a Yankee?"

"I'd say any point of the compass now——"

"Listen!" Sam's hand went up. "Those ain't any guns of ours."

The rumble was distant, but Drew believed Croxton was right. Through the dark, guns were moving up. The wasps were closing in on the disturbers of their nest, and every one of them carried a healthy stinger. He thought of what he had seen today: too many empty cartridge boxes, Enfield rifles still carried by men who would not, in spite of orders, discard them for the Yankee guns with ammunition to spare. Empty guns, worn-out men, weary horses ... and Yankee guns moving confidently up through the night.

### 3. On the Run——

“They’re comin’! Looks like the whole country’s sproutin’ Yankees outta the ground.”

They were, a dull dark mass at first and then an arc of one ominous color advancing in a fast, purposeful drive, already overrunning the pickets with only a lone shot here and there in defiance. They rode up confidently, dismounted, and charged—to be thrown back once. But there were too many of them, and they moved with the precision of men who knew what was to be done and that they could do it. Confederates were trapped before they could reach their horses; there was a wild whirling scramble of a fight flowing backward toward the river.

Men with empty guns turned those guns into clubs, fighting to hold the center. But the enemy had already cut them off from the Augusta road and the bridge, and the river was at their backs. Water boiled under a lead rain. Drew saw an opening between two Union troopers. Flattening himself as best he could on Shawnee’s back, he gave the roan the spur. What good could be accomplished by the message he carried now—to bring up half the horse holders as reinforcements—was a question.

However, he was never to deliver that message, for the horse lines had been stampeded by the first wave of flying men. Here and there a holder or two still tried to control at least one wild horse of the four he was responsible for, but there were no reserves for the fighting line. And—Drew glanced back—no battle to lead them into if there were.

Men and horses were struggling, dying in the river. The bridge ... he gaped at the horror of that bridge ... horses down, kicking and dying, barring an escape route to their riders. And the blue coats everywhere. Like a stallion about to attack, Shawnee screamed suddenly and reared, his front hoofs beating the air. A spurting red stream fountained from his neck; an artery had been hit.

Drew set teeth in lip, and plugged that bubbling hole with his thumb. Shawnee was dying, but he was still on his feet, and he could be headed away from the carnage in that water. Drew, his face sick and white, turned the horse toward the railroad tracks.

“Drew!”

Croxton? No, but somehow Drew was not surprised to see Boyd trying to keep his feet, being dragged along by two plunging horses, their eyes white-rimmed with terror. The only wonder was that the scout had heard that call through the din of screaming and shouting, the wild neighs of the horses, and the continual crackle of small arms’ fire.

“Mount! Mount and ride!” He mouthed the order, not daring to pull up Shawnee, already past Boyd and his horses. The roan’s hoofs spurned gravel from the track line now. And Boyd drew level with him and mounted one of the horses, continuing to lead the other. There was a cattle guard ahead to afford some protection from the storm churning along the river.

“Where?” Boyd called.

Drew, his thumb still planted in the hole which was becoming Shawnee’s death, nodded to the guard. They made it, and Drew kned the roan closer to the extra horse Boyd led, slinging his saddlebags across to the other mount. Then he dismounted, releasing his hold on the roan’s wound. For the second time Shawnee cried, but this time it was no warrior’s protest against death; it was the nicker of a question. The answering shot from Drew’s Colt was lost in the battle din. He was upon the other horse before Shawnee had stopped breathing.

“Come on!” Drew’s voice was strident as he spurred, herding Boyd before him. Two of them, then three, four, as they came out on the bank of a millpond. Across that stretch of water there was safety, or at least the illusion of safety.

“Drew!” For the second time he was hailed. It was Sam Croxton, holding onto the saddle horn with both hands, a stream of red running from a patch of blood-soaked hair over one ear. He swayed, his eyes wide open as those of the frightened horses, but fastened now on Drew as if the other were the one stable thing in a mad world.

“Can you stick on?” Drew leaned across to catch the reins the other had dropped.

A small spark of understanding awoke in those wide eyes. “I’ll stick,” the words came thickly. “I ain’t gonna rot in that damned prison again—never!”

“Boyd ... on his other side! We’ll try gettin’ him across together.”

“Yes, Drew.” Boyd’s voice sounded unsteady, but he did not hesitate to bring his own mount in on Croxton’s right.

“You’d best let me take that theah jump first, soldier.” The stranger sent his horse in ahead of Drew’s. “It don’t necessarily foller that because that’s water a man can jus’ natcherly git hisself across in one piece. I’ll give it a try quicker’n you can spit and holler Howdy.”

As if he were one with the raw-boned bay he bestrode, he jumped his mount into the waiting pond. Still threshing about in the welter of flying water, he glanced back and raised a hand in a come-ahead signal.

“Bottom’s a mite missin’, but the drop ain’t so much. Better make it ‘fore them fast-shootin’ hombres back theah come a-takin’ you.”

Though they did not move in the same reckless fashion as their guide, somehow they got across the pond and emerged dripping on the other side. The determination which had made Croxton try the escape, seemed to fade as they rode on. He continued to hold to the horn, but he slumped further over in a bundle of misery. Their pond guide took Boyd’s station to the right, surveying the half-conscious man critically.

“This hoorawin’ around ain’t gonna do that scalpin’ job no good,” he announced. “He can’t ride far ‘less he gits him a spell of rest an’ maybe has a medicine man look at that knock—”

Croxton roused. “I stick an’ I ride!” He even got a measure of firmness into his tone. “I don’t go to no Yankee prison...” He tried to reach for the reins, but Drew kept them firmly to hand.

There was a shot behind them, three or four more fugitives plunged down to the millpond, and the last one in line fired back at some yet unseen pursuer.

“Then we git!” But across Croxton’s bowed shoulders the other shook his head warningly at Drew.

He was young and as whipcord thin and tough as most of those over-weary men from the badgered and now broken command, but he was not tense, riding rather with the easy adjustment to the quickened pace of a man more at home in the saddle than on foot. His weather-browned face was seamed with a scar which ran from left temple to the corner of his mouth, and his hair was a ragged, unkempt mop of brown-red which tossed free as he rode, since he was hatless.

With Croxton boxed between them, Drew and the stranger matched pace at what was a lope rather than a gallop as Boyd ranged ahead. Another flurry of shots sounded from behind, and they cut across a field, making for the doubtful cover of a hedge. There was no way, Drew



decided after a quick survey, for them to get back into town and join the general retreat. The Yankees must be well between them and any of the force across the Licking.

When they had pushed through the hedge they were faced by a lane running in the general northwest direction. It provided better footing, and it led away from the chaos at Cynthiana. With Croxton on their hands it was the best they could hope for, and without more than an exchange of glances they turned into it, the wounded man's horse still between them.

The cover of the hedge wall provided some satisfaction and Drew dared to slow their pace. Under his tan Sam was greenish-white, his eyes half closed, and he rode with his hands clamped about the saddle horn as if his grip upon that meant the difference between life and death. But Drew knew he could not hope to keep on much longer.

There might be Confederate sympathizers in the next farmhouse who would be willing to take in the wounded scout. On the other hand, the inhabitants could just as well be Union people. It was obvious that Sam could not keep going, and it was just as obvious to Drew that they—or at least he—could not just ride on and leave him untended by the side of the road.

“Boyd!” So summoned, the youngster reined in to wait for them. “You ride on! You, too!” Drew addressed the stranger.

Boyd shook his head, though he glanced at the winding road ahead. “I ain't leavin' you!” His lip was sticking out in that stubborn pout.

At that moment Drew could have lashed out at him and enjoyed it, or at least found a satisfaction in passing on some of his own exasperation and frustration.

“We got a far piece to travel,” commented the stranger. “An' I guess I'll string along with you, 'less, of course, this heah is a closed game an' you ain't sellin' any chips 'cross the table. Me, I'm up from Texas way—Anson ... Anse Kirby, if you want a brand for the tally book. An' most all a Yankee's good for anyway is to be shucked of his boots.” He freed one foot momentarily from the stirrup and surveyed a piece of very new and shiny footwear with open admiration. It was provided with a highly ornate silver spur, not military issue but Mexican work, Drew guessed.

“You from Gano's Company?” the scout asked.

Kirby nodded. “Nowadays, but it was Terry's Rangers 'fore I stopped me a saber with this heah tough old head of mine an' was removed for a while. That Yankee almost fixed me so m' own folks wouldn't know me from a fresh-skinned buffala—not that I got me any folks any more.” He grinned and that expression was a baring of teeth like a wolf's uninhibited snarl. “You one of Quirk's rough-string scout boys, ain't you? We sure raised hell an' put a chunk under it back theah. Them Yankees are gonna be as techy as teased rattlers. An' I don't see as how we can belly through the brush with this heah hombre. He's got him a middle full of guts to stick it this far. Long 'bout now he must have him a horse-size headache....”

Croxton swayed and only Drew's crowding their horses together kept the now unconscious scout from falling into the road dust. Kirby steadied the limp body from the other side.

“Keep pullin' him 'round this way, amigo, an' he'll be planted permanent, all neat an' pretty with a board up at his head.”

“There's a house—back there.” Boyd pointed to the right, where a narrow lane angled away from their road, a small house to be seen at its end.

Drew, Croxton's weight resting against his shoulder, studied the house. The distant crackle of carbine fire rippled across the fields and came as a rumble of warning. It was plain that

Croxton could not ride on, not at the pace they would have to maintain in order to outdistance pursuit; nor could he be left to shift for himself. To visit the house might be putting them straight into some Yankee's pocket, but it was the only solution open now.

"Hey, those mules!" Boyd had already ventured several horse lengths down the lane. Now he jerked a forefinger at two animals, heads up, ears pointed suspiciously forward, that were approaching the fence at a rocking canter. "Those are Jim Dandy's! You remember Jim Dandy, Drew?"

"Jim Dandy—?" the other echoed. And then he did recall the little Englishman who had been a part of the Lexington horse country since long before the war. Jim Dandy had been one of the most skillful jockeys ever seen in the blue grass, until he took a bad spill back in '59 and thereafter set himself up as a consultant trainer-vet to the comfort of any stable with a hankering to win racing glory.

To a man like Jim Dandy politics or war might not be all-important. And the fact that he had known the households of both Oak Hill and Red Springs could count for a better reception now. At least they could try.

"No use you gettin' into anything," Drew told the Texan. "You and Boyd go on! I'll take Croxton in and see if they'll take care of him."

Kirby looked back down the road. "Don't see no hostile sign heah 'bouts," he drawled. "Guess we can spare us some time to bed him down proper on th' right range. Maybeso you'll find them in theah as leery of strangers as a rustler of the sheriff—"

The Texan's references might be obscure, but he helped Drew transfer Croxton from the precarious balance in the wounded man's own saddle to Drew's hold, and then rode at a walking pace beside the scout while Boyd trailed with the led horse.

There was a pounding of hoofs on the road behind. A half dozen riders went by the mouth of the land at a distance-eating gallop. In spite of the dust which layered them Drew saw they were not Union.

"Them boys keep that gait up," Kirby remarked, "an' they ain't gonna make it far 'fore their tongues hang out 'bout three feet an' forty inches. That ain't no way to waste good hoss flesh."

"Got a good hold on him?" he asked Drew a moment later. At the other's nod he rode forward into the yard at the end of the lane.

"Hullo, the house!" he called.

A man came out of the stable, walking with a kind of hop-skip step. His blond head was bare, silver fair in contrast to Boyd's corn yellow, and his features were thin and sharp. It was Jim Dandy, himself.

"What's all this now?" he asked in that high voice Drew had last heard discussing the virtues of rival horse liniments at Red Springs. And he did not look particularly welcoming.

"Mr. Dandy—" Drew walked his horse on, Croxton sagging in his hold, his weight a heavy pull on his bearer's tired arms—"do you remember me? Drew Rennie, of Red Springs." He added that quickly for what small guarantee of respectability the identification might give. Certainly in his present guise he did not look Alexander Mattock's grandson.

Dandy rested his weight on his good leg and swung his shorter one a little ahead. And his hand went to the loose front of his white shirt.

“Now that’s a right unfriendly move, suh. I take it right unfriendly to show hardware ‘fore you know the paint on our faces—”

The smaller man’s hand fell away from his concealed weapon, but Kirby did not reholster the Colt which had appeared through some feat of lightning movement in his grip.

“You’re not going to take *my* horses!” Even if there was no gun in Dandy’s hand, his voice stated a fact they could not doubt he meant.

“Nobody’s takin’ hosses,” the Texan answered. “This heah soldier’s got him a mighty sore head, an’ he needs some fixin’. We ain’t too popular round heah right now, an’ he can’t ride. So—”

Boyd pushed up. “Mr. Dandy, you know me—Boyd Barrett. And this *is* Drew Rennie. We have Yankees after us. And you never said you were Union—”

Dandy shrugged. “No matter to me what you wear ... blue ... gray—you’re all a bunch of horse thieves, like as not. You, Mr. Boyd, what you doing riding with these here Rebs? And what’s the matter with that man? Got him a lick on the head, eh? Well—” he crossed with his lurching walk to stand by Drew, studying the now unconscious Croxton—”all right.” His voice was angry, as if he were being pushed along a path he disliked. “Get him into the stable. I ain’t yet took sides in this here bloody war, and I ain’t going to now. But the man’s hurt. Unload him and don’t tell me what he’s been doing back there to get him that knock. I don’t want to know.”

He led the way into the stable, and moments later Croxton was as easy as they could make him on an improvised bed of straw and clean horse blankets. Dandy turned to them with Croxton’s gun belt swinging free in his hand, still weighted down with two revolvers.

“You want these?”

Drew glanced at his two companions. His own carbine was gone; he had dropped it at the verge of the millpond when he had taken charge of Croxton. Boyd was without any weapons, and Kirby had only side arms. Drew started to reach for the belt and then shook his head. If Sam was able to ride soon, he would need those. And the rest of them could take their chances at getting more arms. Boyd opened his mouth as if to protest, but he did not say anything as Drew refused the Colts.

“You keep ‘em—for him.”

The ex-jockey nodded. “Better be riding on, Mr. Rennie. They’ll come looking, and I don’t fancy having any fight here. With luck we’ll get your friend on his feet all right and tight, and he can slip south when the dust is down a bit. But you’d better keep ahead of what can come down the pike now.”

Kirby moved, the spurs jangling musically on his boots. “I’ve been thinkin’ ‘bout that theah road,” he announced. “Any other trail outta heah we can take?”

“Cross the pasture—” Dandy directed with a thumb—”then a cornfield, and you’ll hit the pike again. Cuts off about a mile.”

“That sounds right invitin’.” The Texan led the way back to the yard and their waiting mounts. “Obliged to you, suh. Now,” he spoke to Drew, “I’d say it’s time to raise some dust. Ain’t far to sundown, an’ we oughta git some countryside between us an’ them rip-snortin’ javalinas—”

“Javalinas?” Drew heard Boyd repeat inquiringly.

“Kid—” the Texan reined his bay—”there is some mean things in this heah world. Theah is Comanches an’ Apaches, an’ a longhorn cow with a calf hid out in a thicket, an’ a rattler, what’s feelin’ lowdown in his mind. An’ theah’s javalinas, the wild boars of the Rio country. Then theah’s men what have had to ride fast on a day as hot as this, swallerin’ dust an’ thinkin’ what they’re gonna do when they catch up to them as they’re chasin’; an’ those men’re ‘bout as mean as the boars—”

Drew lifted his hand to Jim Dandy and followed the other two through the pasture gate. Now he grinned.

“You sound like one speakin’ from experience—of bein’ chased, that is.”

Kirby chuckled. “I’m jus’ a poor little Texas boy, suh. ‘Course we do a bit of fast ridin’. Mostly though I’ve been on the other end, *doin’* the chasin’. An’ I know how it feels to eat dust an’ git a mite riled doin’ it. I’d say we could maybe help ourselves a bit though.”

“How?” Boyd asked eagerly.

“You”—Drew rounded on him—”can cut cross-country and get home!” There was nothing in Boyd’s clothing or equipment to suggest that he had been a part of the now scattered raiders. “If the Yankees stop you,” Drew continued, “you can spin them a tale about riding out to see the fight. And Major Forbes’s name ought to help.”

Boyd’s scowl was a black cloud on his grimy young face. “I’m one of General Morgan’s men.”

“Only a fool,” remarked Kirby, “stops to argue with a mule, a skunk, a cook, or a boy what’s run away to join the army. You figgerin’ to take this kid home personal?”

“You’ll have to tie me to a horse to do it!” Boyd flared up.

“No thanks for your help.” Drew frowned at Kirby, then turned to Boyd again. “No, I can’t take you back now. But I’ll see that you do go back!”

Boyd laughed, high, with a reckless note. “I’m comin’ along.”

“As I was sayin’,” Kirby returned to his half suggestion of moments before, “we can see ‘bout helpin’ ourselves. Them Yankees are mighty particular ‘bout their rigs; they carry ‘nough to outfit a squad right on one trooper.”

Drew had already caught on. “Stage an ambush?”

“Well, now, let’s see.” Kirby looked down at his own gear, then critically inspected Drew and Boyd in turn. “We could do with carbines. Them blue bellies had them some right pretty-lookin’ hardware—leastways them back by the river did. An’ I don’t see no ration bags on them theah hosses you two are ridin’. Yes, we could do with grub, an’ rifle-guns ... maybe some blue coats.... Say as how we was wearin’ them we could ride up to some farm all polite an’ nice an’ maybe git asked in to rest a spell an’ fill up on real fancy eats. I ‘member back on the Ohio raid we came into this heah farm ... wasn’t nobody round the place at all. We sashayed into the kitchen an’ theah, jus’ sittin’ easylike an’ waitin’ right on the table, was two or three pies! Ain’t had me a taste since as good as them theah pies. But maybe with a blue coat on us we could do as well heah ‘bouts.”

There was merit in the Texan’s suggestion. Drew, from past experience, knew that. His only hesitation was Boyd. The youngster was right. Short of subduing him physically and taking him back tied to his saddle through the spreading Union web, Drew had no chance of returning Boyd to Oak Hill. But to lead him into the chancy sort of deal Kirby had outlined was entirely too dangerous.

“You mean—we hold up some Yankees and just take their uniforms an’ carbines an’ things?” It was already too late. Boyd had seized upon what must have seemed to him an idea right out of the dashing kind of war he had been imagining all these past weeks.

“It has been done, kid,” the Texan affirmed. “Course we got to find us two or three poor little maverick blue bellies lost outta the herd like. Then we cut ‘em away from the trail an’ reason with ‘em.”

“That ought to be easy.” Boyd’s enthusiasm was at the boiling point. “The Yankees are all cowards—”

Kirby straightened in his saddle, the lazy good humor gone from his face.

“Kid, don’t git so lippy ‘bout what you ain’t rightly learned yet. Yankees can fight—they can fight good. You saw ‘em do that today. And don’t you ever forgit it!”

Boyd was disconcerted, but he clung doggedly to his belief. “One of Morgan’s men can take on five Yankees.”

Drew laughed dryly. “You saw *that* happen just this mornin’, Boyd. And what happened? We ran. They fight just as hard and as long, and most of them just as tough as we do. And don’t ever think that the man facin’ you across a gun is any less than you are; maybe he’s a little better. Keep that in mind!”

“Yes, you read the aces an’ queens in your hand ‘fore you spreads your money out recklesslike,” Kirby agreed. “So, if we find the right setup, we move, but—”

Drew swung up one hand in the horseman’s signal of warning. “Something—or someone—is on the move ... ahead there!” he warned.

## 4. The Eleventh Ohio Cavalry

They had worked their way around the edge of the cornfield, and now they could look out on a hard-surfaced road which must be the pike. Riding along that in good order were a company of men—thirty, Drew counted. And four of those had extra horses on leading reins. He also saw ten carbines ... and the owners of those were alert.

“Stand where you are!” The slight man leading that skeleton troop posted ahead. His shell jacket had the three yellow bars of a captain on its standing collar, and Drew saluted. This was the first group of fugitives he had seen who were more than frightened men running their horses and themselves into exhaustion.

“Rennie, Private, Quirk’s Scouts,” Drew reported himself.

Kirby’s salute was delivered with less snap but as promptly. “Kirby, Private, Gano’s.”

“Captain William Campbell,” the officer identified himself crisply. “Any more of you?” He looked to Boyd and then at the cornfield beyond.

“Barrett’s a volunteer,” Drew explained. This was no time to clarify Boyd’s exact status. “There’re just the three of us.”

“You headin’ somewheah special, Cap’n?” the Texan asked. “Or jus’ travelin’ for your continued health?”

Campbell laughed. “You might call it that, Kirby. But if we stick together, I think all of us may stay healthy.”

Kirby turned his horse into the pike. “Sounds like a good argument to me, suh. You have any idea wheah at we are, or wheah we could be headin’?”

“Northwest is the best I can say. If we strike far enough to the west, we may be able to flank the troops spread out to keep us away from the river. Best plan for now, anyway. And the more men we can pick up, the better.”

“Scattered some, ain’t we?” Kirby assented. “You give the orders, Cap’n, suh. We ain’t licked complete yet.”

There was a low growl arising from the company on the pike as the Texan’s comment reached them. They might have run and gone on running most of that long day, but they were no longer running; they were moving in reasonable order and to some purpose, with a direction in view and a form of organization, no matter how patched together they were. Campbell spoke directly to Drew: “You know anything about this section of the country?”

“Some, but it’s been almost three years since I was here. I know nothin’ about any Union garrison—”

“Those we’ll have to worry about as they come. But you ride advance for us now. Send in any stragglers you come across. The night is almost here, and that’s in our favor.”

So Drew and Kirby, with Boyd trailing, ranged ahead of the small troop. And pick up more stragglers they did—some twenty men in the last hour before twilight closed down.

“I’m hungry,” Boyd said, approaching Drew. “There’re farms around. Why can’t we get something to eat?”

“Here.” Drew fumbled in the saddlebags he had transferred from Shawnee to this new mount back by the river. He handed over a piece of hardtack, flinty-surfaced and about as appetizing as a stone. “That’s the best you’ll get for a while.”

Boyd stared at it in dismay. “You can’t eat a thing like this! It’s a piece of rock.” Indignantly he hurled it away.

“You get down and pick that up! Now!”

Boyd, flushed and hot-eyed, gazed at Drew for a long moment. The flush faded and he moved uneasily in his saddle, but not out of the range of Drew’s attention. At length, unhappily, he dismounted and went to pick the gray-white chunk out of a weed tangle. Holding it gingerly, he came back to his horse.

“If you don’t want it—give!” Drew held out his hand.

Boyd, realizing the other meant just what he said, fingered the hardtack and finally dropped it into that waiting palm.

“You eat hard and you sleep on the soft side of a board—if you’re lucky enough to find a board. You ride till your seat is blistered and until you can sleep in the saddle. You drink mud green with scum if that’s all you can find to drink, and you think it’s mighty fine drinkin’, too. This ain’t—” Drew’s thoughts flitted back to his meeting with Aunt Marianna on the Lexington road—”all saber wavin’ and chargin’ the enemy and playin’ hero to the home folks; this is sweatin’ and dirt on you and your clothes, goin’ mighty hungry, and cold and wet—when it’s the season for goin’ cold and wet. It’s takin’ a lot of the bad, with not much good. And if you don’t cut off home now, you’ll ride our way, keepin’ your mouth shut and doin’ as you’re told!”

Boyd swallowed visibly. “All right.” But there was a firmness in that short answer which surprised Drew. The other sounded as if he meant it, as if he were swearing the oath of allegiance to the regiment. But *could* he take it? A few days on the run, and Boyd would probably quit. Maybe if they got into some town and the Yankees didn’t smoke them out right away, Drew could send a telegram and Boyd would be collected. Drew tried to console himself with that thought all the time another part of him was certain that Boyd intended to prove he could stick through all the rigors Drew had just outlined for him.

But in any event the boy’s introduction to war was going to be as unromantic as anyone could want, short of being thrown cold and untrained into a major battle. They must be prepared for a bad time until they made it out of the Union lines and south again.

The night closed down, dark and moonless, with a heaviness in the air which was oppressive. Campbell had to grant men and horses a breathing period. He put out pickets, leaving the rest of them to lie with their mounts saddled and to hand. Drew loosened the girth, stripped off saddle and blanket, and wiped down the sweaty back of his new mount. But he dared not leave the gelding free. So, against all good practice, he re-equipped the tired beast. No mount was going to be able to take that kind of treatment for long. They had a half dozen spare horses, and undoubtedly they could “trade” worn-out mounts for fresh ones along the way. But such ceaseless use was cruel punishment, and no man wanted to inflict it. War was harder on horses than men. At least the men could take their chances and had a fraction of free will in the matter.

Drew awoke at a tug of his sleeve, flailed out his arm, and struck home. Kirby laughed in the gray dawn.

“Now that theah, kid, is no way to go ‘round wakin’ up a soldier. He may take you for a blue belly as has come crawlin’ into his dreams. It’s all right, amigo—jus’ time to git on the prowl again.”

Feeling as if he had been beaten, Drew slowly got to his feet. Men were moving, falling into line. And one was arguing with Captain Campbell.

“It could work, Cap’n,” the trooper urged. “Ain’t a lot of the boys wearin’ Yankee truck they took outta the warehouses? Them what ain’t can act like prisoners. Jus’ say we’re the Eleventh Ohio—they’s stationed near Bardstown and it would seem right, them ridin’ down to take them some prisoners. The old man, he’s got a rich farm and sets a powerful good table. Might even give us a right smart load of provisions into the bargain. It’s worth a try, suh...”

“Rennie!” So summoned, Drew reported to their new commander.

“Know anything about a Thomas McKeever livin’ in this section?”

Drew’s memory produced a picture of a round-faced, cheerful man who liked to play chess and admired Lucilla’s pickled watermelon rind to the point of begging a crock of it every time he visited Red Springs.

“Yes, suh. He’s Union—got two sons with Colonel Wolford. Owns a big farm and raises prime mules—”

“You know him personally?”

“Yes, suh. He’s a friend of my grandfather; they used to visit back and forth a lot.”

“Then he’d know you.” Campbell’s fingernails rasped through the stubble on his chin.

“So Rennie heah could be one of our prisoners, suh. That theah might convince Mistuh McKeever we’s what we say—” the trooper pressed his point.

“Could be. It’s gospel truth we ain’t goin’ to get far with our bellies flat on our backbones. And it might work. Now, all of you men, listen...” Campbell explained, gave orders, and put them through a small drill. A dozen men without any Union uniform loot to distinguish them were told to play the role of prisoners; the others exchanged and drew out of saddlebags pieces of blue clothing to make their appearance as the Eleventh Ohio.

“They ain’t gonna expect too much.” The trooper who had first urged the plan was optimistic. “We can pass as close to militia—”

“You hope!” Kirby was in the prisoner’s section, and it was plain he did not relish a role which meant that he had to strip himself of weapons. “You—” he fixed his attention on the man to whom he must hand his Colts when the time came—“keep right ‘longside, soldier. If I want to get those six-guns, I want ‘em fast an’ I want ‘em sure—not ‘bout ten yards away wheah I can’t git my hands on ‘em!”

Their gnawing hunger drove them all into agreeing to the masquerade. Drew could not recall his last really full meal. Just thinking about food made a warm, sickish taste rise in his mouth. He brought out the hardtack which Boyd had so indignantly rejected the night before, and holding the chunk balanced on his saddle horn, rapped it smartly with the butt of a revolver. It broke raggedly across, and then he was able to crack it again between his fingers.

“Here—” He held out a two-inch piece to Boyd, and this time there was no refusal. The younger boy’s cheek showed a swollen puff as he sucked away at the fragment.

Drew offered a bite to the Texan.



“Right neighborly, amigo,” Kirby observed. “‘Bout this time, me, I’m ready to exercise m’ teeth on a stewed moccasin, Comanche at that, were anybody to ask me to sit down an’ reach for the pot.”

They rode on at a comfortable pace and for some reason met no other travelers on the pike. Drew found his new mount had no easy shuffle like Shawnee’s. The gelding was a black with three white feet and a proudly held head—might even be Denmark stock—but for some reason he didn’t relish moving in company. And, left without close enough supervision from his rider, he tended either to trot ahead or loiter until he was out of line. Drew was continually either reining him in or urging him on.

“Kinda a raw one,” Kirby commented critically. “He ain’t no rockin’-chair hoss, that’s for sure. If I was you, I’d look round for somethin’ better to slap m’ tree on—”

Drew pulled rein for the tenth time, his exasperation growing. “I might do just that.” Shawnee had been worth fifty of this temperamental blooded hunter.

“You take Tejano heah. He’s a rough-coated ol’ snorter—nothin’ to make an hombre’s eyes bug out—but he takes you way over yonder, an’ then he brings you back ... nothin’ more you can ask.”

Drew agreed. “Lost my horse back at the river,” he said briefly. “This was a pickup—”

“Tough luck!” Kirby was sincerely sympathetic. “Funny about you Kaintuck boys ... mostly you want a high-steppin’ pacer with a chief’s feathers sproutin’ outta his head. They has to have oats an’ corn an’ be treated like they was glass. I’d’ruther have me a range hoss. You can ride one of ‘em from Hell to breakfast—an’ maybe a mile or two beyond—an’ he never knows the difference. Work him hard all day, an’ maybe the next mornin’ when you’re set to fork leather again, he shows you a bellyfull of bedsprings an’ you’re unloaded for fair. A hoss like that has him wind an’ power to burn—”

“You raised horses before the war?”

Kirby swallowed what must have been the last soggy crumb of hardtack. “Well, we had a mind to try that. M’pa, he started him a spread down Pecos way. He had him a good stud-quarter hoss—one of Steel Dust’s git. Won two or three races, that stud did. Called him Kiowa. Pa made a deal with a Mex mustanger; he got some prime stuff he caught in the Panhandle. One mare, I ‘member—she was a natcherel pacer. Yeah, you might say as how we was gittin’ a start at a first-rate string. Me an’ m’ brothers, we was breakin’ some right pretty colts...”

His voice trailed into silence. Drew reined in the black again and asked another question:

“What happened ... the war?”

“What happened? Well, you might say as how Comanches happened. Me, I was trailin’ ‘long with this Mex mustanger to learn some of his tricks. When I came back, theah jus’ warn’t nothin’—nothin’ a man wants to remember after. Someday I’m gonna hunt me Comanches. Gonna learn me some tricks in this heah war I can use in that business!” There was no change in his expression. If anything, his drawl was a little softer and lazier, but the deadly promise in it reached Drew as clearly as if the other had burst out with the Rebel Yell.

“This is it!” Captain Campbell rode back along their line. It was a larger company; they had gathered in more fugitives this morning and had no stragglers. All they lacked was adequate arms to present a rather formidable source of trouble behind the Union lines. “We’re goin’ into the McKeever place. You men—remember, you’re prisoners!”

Very reluctantly those in that unhappy role unbuckled gun belts, passing their side arms over to their “captors.” There was a graveled drive branching out of the pike to their right with a grove of trees arching over it, so they rode into a restful green twilight out of the punishing sun.

Fields rippled lushly beyond that border of trees. There was a cleanness, a contentment, a satisfaction about this place which was no part of them or any men who passed so, armed, restless, tearing apart just such peace as enfolded them here. They rode out of urgency when the gravel of that well-raked drive shifted under the hoofs of their mounts.

“I’m sayin’ one thing loud an’ clear,” Kirby announced to those in his immediate vicinity as they neared a big brick house. “I may be playin’ prisoner to you boys, but I ain’t settlin’ for no prisoner’s rations. We all eat full plates in heah, let that be understood from the start.”

Campbell laughed. “Noted, Kirby. We’ll see that you desperate Rebs get all that’s comin’ to you.”

“Now that, Cap’n, is jus’ what I’m afraid of. We git all that’s *comin’*—that sounds a right smart better!”

“Company ahead, Cap’n!” The trooper who had suggested this action, indicated a man walking down the drive to meet their cavalcade.

“That’s Mr. McKeever.” Drew identified their host for Campbell.

But the captain was already moving ahead to meet the older man. He touched fingers to kepi—a neat blue kepi—in a smart salute.

“Chivers, Captain, Eleventh Ohio, sir. We’d like to make our noon halt here if you’ll grant permission.”

Thomas McKeever beamed. “No reason not, suh. Take your men over in the orchard, Captain. We can add a little something to your rations. Glad, always glad to entertain our boys.” His attention wandered to the score of “prisoners” in the center of the troop.

“Prisoners, Captain?”

“Some of Morgan’s horse thieves.” Campbell glanced back at the shabby exhibit. “You’ve heard the news, of course, sir? We smashed ‘em proper over at Cynthiana—”

“You did? Now that’s good hearin’, Captain. It deserves a regular celebration; it surely does. Morgan smashed! Was he taken too? Next time I trust they’ll put him in something stronger than that jail you Ohio boys had him in last time; he’s a slippery one.”

“Haven’t heard about that, sir. But his men are pretty well scattered. These aren’t going to trouble any one for a while.”

McKeever nodded. “I’ve a stout barn you’re welcome to use for a temporary lockup, Captain. Though I must say they don’t display much spirit, do they? Look pretty well beat.”

Drew rubbed his hand across his face, hoping the grime there—a mixture of road dust, sweat, and powder blacking—was an effective disguise. No use recalling the old days for Mr. McKeever. Allowing his shoulders to slump dispiritedly as he was herded by his file guard, he rode sullenly on to the orchard.

They stripped their saddles and allowed the horses freedom for the first time in hours, an act which was against prudence but which McKeever would expect of Union troops. Drew lay full length under the curving limbs of an apple tree, his head pillowed on saddlebags.

“Now I wonder”—Kirby dropped down, to sit with his back against the tree trunk—“why they always say a fella is dog-tired. A dog, he ain’t got him much to do ‘cept chase around on his own business. Soldier-tired—now that’s another matter. How ‘bout it, kid? You ready to ride right outta heah an’ chase General Grant clean back to Lake Erie?”

Boyd had stretched out only a hand’s length from Drew. There were dark smudges under his closed eyes, hardly to be told from the smears of dirt on his round cheeks, but there. He rolled his head on a hammock of grass and scowled at Kirby.

“General Grant can—” he added a remark which surprised Drew into opening his eyes. Kirby shook his head reprovingly.

“Now that ain’t no way for a growin’ boy to talk. An’ it sits on your tongue as easy as a fly on a mule’s ear, too. What kinda company you bin keepin’, kid? Rennie, this heah colt ain’t got no reason to cram grammar into a remark that way.”

Drew stretched, folded his arms under his head, and answered, in a voice he tried to make as blighting as possible: “Thinks it makes him sound like a man, probably. He’s findin’ out the army ain’t quite what he expected.”

“You shut up—!” Boyd might have added something to that, but Drew had moved. He leaned over the youngster, his hand hard and heavy on Boyd’s shoulder. And it was plain that, much as he wanted to, the other did not quite dare to move or shake off that grip.

“I’ve had about enough,” Drew said quietly. “The next town we hit you’re goin’ to stay there, until someone comes from back home to collect you. Nobody knows you’re with us, and you can go back to Oak Hill without any trouble from Union troops.”

Boyd’s eyes blazed. His mouth wasn’t shaping a small boy’s pout this time; it was an ugly line tight against his teeth.

“I ain’t goin’ home! I said you can’t make me, ‘less you tie me on a horse and keep me tied all the way. And I don’t think you can do that, Drew Rennie. I’d like to see you try it; I sure would!”

“He’s got you on a stand-off, I’d say,” Kirby remarked. “My, ain’t he the tough one though, horns sticking up an’ haired all over! Gentlemen—” he had glanced over their shoulder and was watching whatever was there—“company comin’. Mind your manners!”

Drew looked around. His hand clamped tighter on Boyd, keeping him pinned on his back. If he only had time ... but there was no way of disguising the younger boy. And Thomas McKeever, strolling with Captain Campbell, had already sighted them, stopped short, and now was moving swiftly in their direction.

“Boyd Barrett!”

Drew had to release his hold and Boyd sat up, brushing bits of grass from his shirt sleeves even as he returned Mr. McKeever’s stare with composure.

“Yes, suh?” Boyd was on his feet now, making his manners with the speed of one harboring a guilty conscience.

“What are you doing with this gang of cutthroats and banditti?” Mr. McKeever had an excellent voice to deliver such an inquiry; it could rattle the unaware into confusion, and sometimes even into quick confession, as he undoubtedly knew.

“I’m with General Morgan, Mr. McKeever.” Boyd did not appear too ruffled.

“I refuse to believe that even that unprincipled ruffian is robbing cradles to fill up his ranks, depleted as they may be—”

Boyd reddened. “General Morgan ain’t no ... no unprincipled ruffian!”

“Yeah,” Kirby drawled. As the other two, he had risen to his feet on the approach of the older man. “Them’s pretty harsh words, suh. Cutthroat now—I ain’t never slit me a throat in all my born days. What about you, Rennie? You done any fancy work with a bowie lately?”

Mr. McKeever favored the Texan with a passing frown; then his attention settled on Drew. “Rennie,” he repeated, and then said the name again with the emphasis of one making a court identification. “Drew Rennie!”

“Yes, suh.” As Boyd had done, Drew answered to the indictment of being where he was and who he was.

“I am most unhappy to see Alexander Mattock’s grandson and Meredith Barrett’s son in such company. Surely”—he turned to Captain Campbell—“these boys are not your regular prisoners—”

Campbell shook his head gravely. “Unfortunately, sir, they are indeed troopers with Morgan. And, as such, they are subject to the rules of war governing prisoners—”

“That does not prevent my seeing what I can do for both of you,” their host said quickly. “At least, Boyd, you are young enough to be released by the authorities. Be sure I shall do all I can to bring that about.”

As Boyd opened his mouth to protest, Drew spoke quickly:

“Thank you, suh. I know Cousin Merry will appreciate that.”

With a last assurance of his intention to help them, Mr. McKeever left. Boyd grinned.

“He did help me,” he observed. “He knows now I’m with Morgan, and nobody can say that’s not so!”

Kirby laughed. “Reckon that’s true, kid. You locked yourself right into the corral along with the rest of us bad men. Look’s like you’ve been outfought this time, Rennie.”

Drew threw himself back under the tree. So Boyd had won this round—they were still in Kentucky and not too far from Oak Hill.

## 5. Bardstown Surrenders

“Now that’s what I call true hospitality, gentlemen, true hospitality.” Kirby caressed his middle section gently with both hands, smiling dreamily into the lacing of apple boughs over his head. “I ain’t had me a feed like that since we took that sutler’s wagon back outside Mount Sterlin’. ‘Mos’ forgot theah was such vittles lyin’ ‘bout to be sampled. An’ you got us most of the cream, too, ‘cause you’re poor little misguided boys a-runnin’ ‘way to be with us desperate characters. Git me a bowie knife, an’ I’ll show you how to cut throats—all free, too.”

Drew laughed, but Boyd did not appear amused. They had been favored with a short but pungent lecture from Mr. McKeever, served along with food, which to Drew made it worth the return of listening decorously to a listing of their sins.

“I ain’t goin’ home,” Boyd repeated stubbornly.

“Well,” Kirby pointed out, “if he rides up to the Yankee prison camp, he ain’t gonna find you neither. So what’s the difference? I think we oughta be movin’ on, seein’ as how we ain’t really on speakin’ terms with the law heah ‘bouts.”

It would appear that Captain Campbell agreed with that. The order came to saddle up and move out. But they went with provision sacks slung from their saddles, a portion of McKeever’s bounty stowed away against tomorrow. And once they were past the house, the word came down the line for Drew to quit his prisoner’s role and join their commander.

Campbell held a fragment of map as he let his mount’s pace fall to a slow walk. “There are about a hundred Union infantry stationed at Bardstown, according to Mr. McKeever. Know anything about the town?”

“I was there once. My cousin went to St. Joseph’s for a term.”

“Remember enough to find your way around?”

“I don’t know, suh. But if there’s a Union garrison—?” He ended the sentence with an implied question.

“What are we going to do there?” The captain grinned. “We’re going to collect some arms, I hope. Supposing you were a Yankee commander, Rennie, and a bold, bad raider like General Morgan was to ride clean up to your door with a regiment or two tailing him and say: ‘Your guns, suh, or your life!’ What would you do, especially if your troops were mostly militia and green men who hadn’t ever been in a real fight?”

Drew understood. “Probably, suh, I’d tell General Morgan that he could have his guns, providin’ he kept his side of the bargain.”

“As far as the Yankees in Bardstown may know, General Morgan could be headed their way right now with a regiment. I don’t think they’ve had time yet to learn just how badly we were scattered back there by the Licking River. You willing to take the flag in when we get there, Rennie? Pick a couple of outriders to go with you!”

It was risky, but no more risky than bluffs he had seen work before. And they did need the weapons. Cutting westward now only kept them well inside Union territory. Somehow they would have to skulk or fight their way down through the southern part of Kentucky and then probably all the way across Tennessee—a tall order, but one which was just possible of accomplishment.

“I’ll do it, suh.” Riding into Bardstown was no worse than riding over the rest of this countryside where any moment they might be swept up by the enemy.

It was lucky they had brought rations with them from McKeever’s, for they took no more chances of trying for such supplies again. Once more they altered their advance, riding the pikes at night, hiding out by day.

Hills then, and among them Bardstown. Drew borrowed a carbine, stringing a dubiously white strip of shirt tail from its barrel, and flanked by Kirby and Driscoll, a trooper Campbell had appointed, rode slowly up the broad street opening from the pike. Great trees arched overhead, almost as they had across the drive of the McKeever place, and the houses were fine, equal to the best about Lexington.

A carriage pulled to the side, its two feminine occupants leaning forward a little under the tilt of dainty parasols, eyes wide. While their coachman stared open-mouthed at the three dirty, tattered cavalymen riding with an assumption of ease, though armed, down the middle of the avenue.

“You, suh.” It was the coachman who hailed Drew. “You soldier men?”

Drew reined in the black, who this time obeyed without protest. The weary miles had taught the gelding submission if not perfect manners. Transferring his reins to the hand which also steadied the butt of his carbine against his thigh so that his “flag” was well in evidence, Drew swept off his dust-grayed hat and bowed to the ladies in the carriage.

“General Morgan’s compliments, ladies,” he said, loud enough for his words to carry beyond the vehicle to the townspeople gathering on the walk. “Flag of truce comin’ in, ma’am.” He spoke directly to the elder of the two in the carriage. “Would you be so kind as to direct me to where I may find the Union commander?”

“You’re from John Hunt Morgan, young man?” She shut her parasol with a snap, held it as if she was considering its use as a weapon.

“Yes, ma’am. General Morgan, Confederate Army—”

She sniffed. “You’ll find their captain at the inn, probably. Yankees and whiskey apparently have an affinity for one another. So John Morgan’s coming to pay us a visit?”

“Maybe, ma’am. And where may I find the inn?”

“Straight ahead,” the girl answered. “You really are Morgan’s men?”

Kirby did not have a hat to doff, but his bow in the saddle was as graceful as Drew’s.

“That’s right, ma’am. My, did we know what we’d find in Bardstown now, we’d bin ridin’ in right sooner!”

“Suh! ... Louisa!” The elder lady’s intimidating glare was divided, but Drew thought that Louisa got more than a half share of it.

“No offense meant, ma’am. It’s jus’ that ridin’ ‘bout the way we do an’ all, we don’t git us a chance to say Howdy to ladies.” The Texan’s expression was properly contrite; his voice all diffidence.

“The inn, young men, is on down the street. Drive on, Horace!” she ordered the coachman. But as the carriage started, she pointed her parasol at Drew as a teacher might point an admonishing ruler at a pupil. “I hope you’ll find what you’re looking for, young man. In the way of Yankees....”

“We generally do, ma’am,” Kirby commented. “For us Yankees jus’ turn up bright an’ sassy all over the place.”

Drew laughed. “Bright and sassy, then on the run!” For the success of his present mission and all those listening ears he ended that boast in as fervent a tone as he could summon.

“See that you keep them that way!” She enforced that order with a snap of parasol being reopened as the carriage moved from the shade back into the patch of open sunlight.

“That sure was a pretty girl,” observed Driscoll as Drew and the Texan wheeled back into line with him. “Wish we could settle down heah for say two or three days. Git some of the dust outta our throats and have a chance to say Howdy to some friendly folks—”

“You’d be more likely sayin’ Howdy to a Yankee prison guard if you did that,” Drew replied. “Let’s find this inn and the garrison commander.”

“That’s the proper way of layin’ it out—the inn an’ *then* business. Yankees an’ whiskey go together; that’s what she said, ain’t it? I maybe don’t weah no blue coat regular, but whiskey sounds sorta refreshin’, don’t it, now?”

“Just so you only think that, Anse, and don’t try any tastin’,” Drew warned. “We make our big talk to this captain, and then we move out—fast. You boys know the drill?”

“Sure,” Driscoll repeated. “We’re the big raiders come to gobble up all the blue bellies, ‘less they walk out all nice an’ peaceful, leavin’ their popguns behind ‘em for better men to use. I’d say that theah was the inn, Rennie—”

They saw their first Yankees, a blot of blue by the horse trough at the edge of the center square. And Drew, surveying the enemy with a critical and experienced eye, was sure that he was indeed meeting either green troops or militia. They were as wide-eyed in their return stare as the civilians on the streets around.

Kirby chuckled. “Strut it up, roosters,” he urged from the corner of his mouth. “Cutthroats, banditti, hoss thieves—jus’ downright bad hombres, that’s us. They expect us to be on the peck, all horns an’ rattles. Don’t disappoint ‘em none! Their tails is half curled up already, an’ they’re ready to run if a horny toad yells Boo!”

To the outward eye the three riding leisurely down the middle of the Bardstown street had no interest in the soldiers by the trough. Drew in the middle, the white rag dropping from the barrel of his carbine, brought the black a step or two in advance. Just so had Castleman ridden into Lexington earlier, and that had been at night with a far more wary and dangerous enemy to face. The scout’s confidence rose as he watched, without making any show of his surveillance, the uneasy men ahead.

One of them broke away from the group, and ran into the inn.

“Wonder who’s roddin’ this outfit,” Kirby remarked. “That fella’s gone to rout him out. Do your talkin’ like a short-trigger man, Drew.”

They pulled rein in front of the inn and sat their horses facing the door through which the soldier had disappeared. His fellows edged around the trough and stood in a straggling line to front the Confederates.

“You!” Drew caught the eye of the nearest. “Tell your commanding officer General Morgan’s flag is here!”

The Yankee was young, almost as young as Boyd, but he had less assurance than Boyd. Now the boy stammered a little as he answered:

“Yes ... yes, sir.” Then he added in a rush, “General who, sir?”

“General John Hunt Morgan, Confederate Cavalry, Army of the Tennessee, detached duty!” Drew made that as impressive as he could, whether it was worded correctly according to military protocol or not. It was, he thought with satisfaction, a nicely rounded, important-sounding speech, although a bit short.

“Yes, sir!” The boy started for the door, but he was too late.

The man who erupted from that portal was short and stout, his face a dramatic scarlet above the dark blue of his unbuttoned coat. He stopped short a step or two into the open and stood staring at the three on horseback, that scarlet growing more dusky by the second.

“Who ... are ... you?” His demand was expelled in heavy puffs of breath.

“Flag from General Morgan,” Drew repeated. Then to make it quite plain, he added kindly, “General John Hunt Morgan, Confederate Cavalry, Army of the Tennessee, detached duty.”

“But, but Morgan was defeated ... at Cynthiana. He was broken—”

Slowly Drew shook his head. “The General has been reported defeated before, suh. No, he’s right here outside Bardstown. And I wouldn’t rightly say he was broken either, not with a couple of regiments behind him—”

“Couple of regiments!” The man was buttoning his coat, his red jowls sagging a little, almost as if Drew had used the carbine across his unprotected head. “Couple of regiments ... Morgan ...” he repeated dazedly. “Well,” sullenly he spoke to Drew, “what does he want?”

“You’re a captain,” Drew spoke crisply. “You’ll return with us to discuss surrender terms with an officer of equal rank!”

“Surrender!” For a moment some of the sag went out of the other.

“Two regiments—an’ you have maybe eighty or ninety men.” Kirby gazed with critical disparagement at such Union forces as were visible.

“One hundred and twenty-five,” the officer repeated mechanically and then glared at the Texan.

“One hundred and twenty-five then.” Kirby was willing to be generous. “All ready to hold this heah town. I don’t see no artillery neither.” He rose in his stirrups to view the immediate scene. “Goin’ to fight from house to house maybe—?”

“General Morgan,” Drew remarked to the company at large, “is not a patient man. But it’s your decision, suh. If you want to make a fight of it.” He shrugged.

“No! Well, I’ll talk ... listen to your terms anyway. Get my horse!” he roared at the nearest soldier.

They escorted the captain with due solemnity out of Bardstown to meet Campbell, a well-armed guard in evidence strung out on the pike. The Union officer picked up enough assurance to demand to see the General himself, but Campbell’s show of surprised hauteur at the request was an expert’s weapon in rebuttal; and the other not only subsided but agreed without undue protest to Campbell’s statement of terms.

The Union detachment in town were to stack their arms in the square, leaving in addition their rations. They were to withdraw, unarmed, to a field outside and there await the patrolling officer who would visit them in due course. Having agreed, the Union captain departed.

Campbell was already signaling the rest of the company out of cover.



“This is where we move fast. You all know what to do.”

But much had to be left to chance. Drew and Kirby surrendered their borrowed carbines to the rightful owners and prepared to join the first wave of that quick dash.

“*Yahhhh-aww-wha—*” There were no words in that, just the war cry which might have torn from an Indian warrior’s throat, but which came instead from between Kirby’s lips: the famous Yell with all its yip of victory as only an uninhibited Texan could deliver it. Then they were rushing, yelping in an answering chorus, four and five abreast, down the street under the shade of the trees, answered by screams and cries as the walks emptied before them.

Blue ranks broke up ahead, leaving rifles stacked, provisions in knapsacks. And the ragged crew struck at the spoil like a wave, lapping up arms, cartridge boxes, knapsacks. For only moments there was a milling pandemonium in the heart of Bardstown. Then once again that Yell was raised, echoed, and the pound of hoofs made an artillery barrage of sound. Armed, provisioned, and very much the masters of the scene, Morgan’s men were heading out of town on the other side, leaving bewilderment behind.

They pushed the pace, knowing that the telegraph wires or the couriers would be spreading the news. Perhaps the reputation of their commander might slow the inevitable pursuit, but it would not deter it entirely. They must put as much distance between themselves and the outfoxed Union garrison as they could. And Campbell continued to point them westward instead of south, since any enemy force would be marching in the other direction to cut them off.

Even if men could stand that dogged pace, driven by determination and fear of capture, horses could not. And through the next two days the inference was very clear: fall behind at your own risk; there will be no waiting for laggards to catch up. Nor any mounts furnished; you must provide your own.

Drew discovered the black gelding an increasing problem, but at least the horse provided transportation, and he tried to save the animal as best he could. Though when it was impossible to unsaddle, when one had to ride—and did—some twenty hours out of twenty-four, there was not much the most experienced horseman could do to relieve his mount.

Drew pulled up beside Kirby as he returned from a flank scout. The Texan had dropped to the rear of the small troop, holding his horse to not much more than a walk. Now and then he glanced to the receding length of the road as if in search of someone.

“Where’s Boyd?” Drew had ridden along the full length of the company and nowhere had he seen that blond head.

“Jus’ what I’m wonderin’.” Kirby came to a complete halt. “I came back a little while ago, and nobody’s seen him.”

Drew pulled in beside the other. His horse’s head hung low as the gelding blew in gusty snorts. He tried to remember when he had seen Boyd last and when he did, that memory was not too encouraging.

“With Hilders ... and Cambridge ...” he said softly.

“Yeah.” Kirby’s thought seemed to match his. “Hilder’s mare is jus’ about beat, an’ Boyd rides light; that bay he got is holdin’ up like a corn-fed stud.”

“They were talkin’ to him when I went out on point.” Drew followed his own line of thought. “And he won’t listen to me—”

“It don’t foller that because you advise a hombre for his own good, he’s goin’ to take kindly to your interest in him,” the Texan observed. “You tell him Hilders an’ Cambridge are wearin’ skunk stripes, an’ he’s apt to claim ‘em both as compadres. Suppose he don’t come in when we bed down; he coulda jus’ cut his picket rope an’ drifted, as far as we can prove.”

“Not if his bay turns up with one of them on top,” Drew replied.

“Them two are of the curly wolf breed.” Kirby shifted his newly acquired Enfield. “No tellin’ as how they would join up with us again did they make such a switch; might figure as how they could make it better time driftin’ on their own.”

The Texan had put his own fear into words. Drew pointed the gelding back down the road and booted the animal into a trot. A moment later he heard more drumming hoofs behind him; Kirby was following.

“This ain’t your trouble,” Drew reminded him.

“No, maybe it ain’t. But then, me, I’m jus’ a rough string rider from way back, an’ this may end in a smoke-up. Odds seem a mite one-sided now—Hilders is easy on the trigger. He won’t take kindly to anyone tryin’ to hang up his hide for dryin’—”

Drew studied the hoof-churned dust of the road. He could only hold a very slim hope of some trace along its margin. The gelding stumbled and tried to cut pace. Drew hardened his will, holding the animal to the trot. He knew that under saddle and blanket, sores were forming, that soon he would have no choice but a “trade” such as Hilders might be forcing now, though not at the expense of one of his own fellows.

Kirby was reading sign on the other side of the road. His sudden hand signal brought Drew to join him. Hoofprints marked the softer verge.

“Turned off not too long ago,” Drew commented.

Kirby nodded toward the brush. They were facing a small woodland into which a thin trace of path led. Good cover for trouble. Looping reins over his arm, Drew walked forward, Colt in hand, using scout tricks to cover the noise of his advance into the green shimmer of the trees.

The trail led ahead without any attempt at concealment. The other two troopers must have tricked Boyd into taking that way; maybe they had even put a revolver on him once they were off the road. It was only too easy for a man to straggle from the company and not be missed until hours and miles later.

“Now, sonny, there ain’t no use makin’ a big fuss....”

Drew dropped the reins and slipped on.

“You can see for yourself, boy, that m’ hoss ain’t gonna be able to git much farther. You can nurse him along an’ take it easy. Them blue bellies ain’t gonna be hard on a nice little boy like you—no, suh, they ain’t—even if they find you. We jus’ trade fair an’ square. No trouble....”

“Course,” another, harsher voice cut in, “if you want to make it rough, well, that’s what you’ll git! We’re takin’ that hoss, no matter what!”

“You ain’t!” There was a short snap of sound, the cocking of a hand gun.

“Pull that on me, will you!”

“I’ll shoot! I’m warnin’ you ... touch m’ horse, and I’ll shoot!” Boyd’s voice scaled higher.

Drew ran, his arm up to shield his face from the whip of branches. He came out at a small stream. Boyd was backed against a tree while the two others advanced on him from different directions.

“That’s enough!” Drew’s Colt was pointed at Hilders. The man’s head jerked around. “Get goin’,” the scout ordered.

Cambridge blinked stupidly, but Hilders took a step back to catch up the reins of a horse that stood dull-eyed, its head bent, pink foam roping from its muzzle as it breathed in heavy gasps.

“I said—get!” Drew advanced, and Hilders gave ground again, towing the trembling horse.

“Now, we don’t want no trouble,” Cambridge said hurriedly. “It woulda bin a fair trade.... Sonny, heah, ain’t got place in the company anyhow——”

“Get!” Drew’s weapon raised a fraction of an inch. Cambridge’s protest thickened into a mumble and he went. When both men had disappeared, Drew turned to Boyd.

“Put that away——” he flicked a finger at the other’s Colt——“and mount up. We’ll have to push to get back to the troop.”

He watched the other lead the bay away from the stream side. Kirby was right, the horse was in better condition than most of the others in the company, and sooner or later someone might again try to rank Boyd out of it. There were a good many in that hunted column who would see that in the same light as Hilders and Cambridge did and would say so, with the weight of public opinion to back them. Campbell had set their course for Calhoun—and in that town Boyd and the raiders must definitely part company.

## 6. Horse Trade

“What’s this heah Calhoun like?” Kirby watched Drew loosen the saddle blanket, lifting it from the gelding as gently as he could.

“Not much—” Drew was beginning, then he sucked in his breath and stood staring at the nasty sight he had just uncovered. He slung the blanket to the ground as Boyd came up, leading the bay. It was the younger boy who spoke first.

“You ain’t goin’ to try to ride him now, Drew!” That protest came spontaneously. Drew thought that Shawnee’s end had put the last bit of steel over his feelings, but he had to agree with Boyd now: no one with any humanity could make the gelding carry so much as a blanket over that back, let alone saddle and rider.

“Here!” Roughly, his face flushed, Boyd jerked on the reins of his own mount, bringing the bay sidling toward Drew. “You can take Bruce....”

He stooped, reaching for Drew’s saddlebags. “You have to ride scout. I’ll walk this one a while. Maybe he can carry me later. I ride light.”

Drew shook his head. “Not that light,” he commented dryly. “No, I guess this is where I do some tradin’—”

“House-smoke yonder ...” Kirby pointed. They could see the thin trail of smoke rising steadily this windless morning. “Best make it fast—the cap’n is already thinkin’ about pointin’ up an’ headin’ out.”

Drew loosened his side arms in their holsters. He always hated this business, but it was part of a day’s work in the cavalry now. He just hoped that he wouldn’t have to do his impressing at gun point. He entrusted saddle and blanket to Boyd, but made the other wait outside the farmyard twenty minutes later as he shepherded the gelding into the enclosure where chickens squawked and ran witlessly and a dog hurled himself to the end of a chain, giving tongue like a hound on a hot scent.

Drew skirted that defender, moving toward the barn. But he was still well away from the half-open door when a woman hurried out, a basket in her hands, her face picturing surprise and apprehension. She stopped short to stare at Drew.

“Who are you—what do you want?” Her two questions ran together in a single breathless sentence. Drew looked beyond her. No one else issued from the barn or came in answer to the dog’s warning. He took off his hat.

“I need a horse, ma’am.” He said it bluntly, impatiently. After all, how could you make a demand like that more courteous or soft? The very fact that he had been driven to this made him angry.

For a moment she looked at him uncomprehendingly, and then her eyes shifted to the gelding. She came forward a step or two, and there was a blaze of anger in the gaze she directed once more to the man.

“That horse’s galled raw!” She accused.

“Don’t you think I know it?” he returned abruptly. “That’s why I have to have another mount.”

A quick step back and she was between him and the door of the barn, holding the basket as a shield between them. It was full of eggs.

“You won’t get one here!” she snapped.

“Ma’am”—Drew had his temper under control now—“I don’t want to take your horse if you have one. But I’m under orders to keep up with the company. And I’m goin’ to do what I have to....”

He dropped the gelding’s reins, walked forward, hoping she wouldn’t make him push around her. But apparently she read the determination in his face and stood aside, her expression bleak now.

“There’s only King in there,” she said. “And I wish you the joy of him, you thief!”

King proved to be a stallion, stabled in a box stall. Drew hesitated. The stud might be mean, harder to handle even than the gelding. But it was either taking him or being put afoot. If he could back this one even as far as Calhoun tomorrow—or the next day—he might be able to make a better exchange in town. It would depend on just how hard the stallion was to control.

Making soothing noises, he worked fast to bit and bridle the big chestnut. His experience with the Red Springs stud led him aright now. He came out of the barn leading the horse while the dog, its first incessant clamor stilled, growled menacingly from the end of its chain. The woman had disappeared, maybe into the fields beyond in search of help. Drew departed at a swift trot to where he had left Boyd.

“That’s all horse!” Boyd eyed Drew’s trade excitedly.

“Too much so, maybe. We’ll see.” He saddled quickly, glad that so far the chestnut had proved amiable. But how the stud might behave in troop company he had yet to learn. He mounted and waited for any signs of resentment, remembering the woman’s warning. King snorted, pawed the dust a bit, but trotted on when Drew urged him.

Kirby whistled from where he rode with the rear guard as they rejoined the company. But Captain Campbell frowned. And King put on a display of fireworks which almost shook Drew out of the saddle, rearing and pawing the air.

“Makes like a horny one on the prod,” commented the Texan. “That’s stud’s a lotta hoss to handle, amigo.”

“Too much,” the captain echoed Drew’s earlier misgivings. “Keep him away from the rest until you’re sure he won’t start anything!”

But that order fitted in with Drew’s usual scouting duties. And when he did bed down for one of the fugitives’ limited halts he was careful to stake King away from the improvised picket lines.

Drew was eating a mixture of hardtack and cold bacon, the last of their captured provision from Bardstown, when Driscoll sauntered over to the small mess Kirby, Boyd, and Drew had established without any formal agreement.

“The boys are plannin’ ‘em a high old time,” Driscoll announced.

Kirby’s left eyebrow slanted up in quizzical inquiry. Drew chewed energetically and swallowed. It was Boyd who asked, “What do you mean?”

“Calhoun—that’s what I mean, sonny.” Driscoll squatted on his heels. “They ‘low as how they’re gonna do a little impressin’ in Calhoun.”

“The town’s not very big,” Drew observed. “A couple of stores, a church, maybe a smithy....”

Driscoll snickered. “Oh, the boys ain’t particular ‘long ‘bout now. They won’t be too choosy. Only thought I’d tell you fellas, seem’ as how you been ridin’ scout and ain’t maybe heard the plans. If you want to load up, better git into town early. Some of them fast workers from B Company are gittin’ set....”

“The cap’n know about this?” asked Kirby.

Driscoll shrugged. “He ain’t deaf. But the cap’n also knows as how you can’t be too big a gold-lace officer when you’re behind the enemy lines with men on the run. We’re gonna take Calhoun and take her good!” He grinned at the two veterans. “Jus’ like we took Mount Sterlin’.”

Kirby was sober. “There was a take theah which warn’t no good. Somebody cleaned out the bank, or else I wasn’t hearin’ too well afterward. I can see some impressin’—stuff an hombre can put in his belly as paddin’, an’ maybe what he can put on his back. That’s fair an’ square. The Yankees do it too. But takin’ a gold watch or money outta a man’s pants—now that’s somethin’ different again.”

Driscoll stood up. “Ain’t nobody said anything about gold watches or money or banks,” he replied stiffly. “There’s stores in Calhoun, and there’s men in this heah outfit what needs new shirts or new breeches. And since when have you seen any paymaster ridin’ down the pike with his bags full of bills, not that you can use that paper stuff for anythin’ like shoppin’, anyway!”

“Thanks for the tip,” Drew cut in. “We take it kindly.”

Driscoll’s ruffled feelings appeared soothed. “Jus’ thought you boys oughta know. Me, I have in mind gittin’ maybe two or three cans of them peaches like we got from the sutler’s wagon. Them were prime eatin’. General store might jus’ have some. Yankee crackers are right good, too. Say, that theah stud you got, Rennie, how’s he workin’ out?”

“So far no trouble,” Drew remarked. “Only I’m lookin’ for a trade—maybe in town.”

“Trade? Why ever a trade?”

“We got a couple of river crossin’s comin’ up ahead,” the scout explained. “And one of them is a good big stretch of deep water—you don’t go wadin’ across the Tennessee. I don’t want to beg for trouble, headin’ a stud into somethin’ as dangerous as that.”

Driscoll seemed struck by the wisdom of that precaution. “Now I heard tell,” he chimed in eagerly, “as how a mule is a right sure-footed critter for a river crossin’. An’ a good ridin’ mule could suit a man fine——”

“A mule!” Boyd exploded, outraged. But Drew considered the suggestion calmly.

“I’ll keep a lookout in town. May be swappin’ for that mule yet, Driscoll. You’ll have to pick up my share of peaches if that’s the way it’s goin’ to be.”

There were more plans laid for the taking of Calhoun as the hours passed and the harried company plodded or spurred—depending upon the nature of the countryside, the activity of Union garrisons, and their general state of energy at the time—southwest across the length of Kentucky. Days became not collections of hours they could remember one by one afterward, but a series of incidents embedded in a nightmare of hard riding, scanty fare, and constant movement. Not only horses were giving out now; they dropped men along the way. And some—like Cambridge and Hilders—vanished completely, either cut off when they went to “trade” mounts, or deserting the troop in favor of their own plans for survival.

The remaining men burst into Calhoun as a cloud of locusts descending on a field of unprotected vegetation. Drew did not know how much Union sentiment might exist there, but he judged that their actions would not leave too many friends behind them. Jugs had appeared, to be passed eagerly from hand to hand, and the contents of store shelves were swept up and out before the outraged owners could protest.

It had showered that morning, leaving puddles of mud and water in the unpaved streets. And at one place there was a mud fight in progress—laughing, staggering men plastering the stuff over the new clothes they had looted. Drew rode around such a party, the stud's prancing and snorting getting him wide room, to tie up at the hitching rail before the largest store.

A man in his shirt sleeves stood a little to one side watching the excitement in the street. As Drew came up the man glanced at the scout, surveying his shabbiness, and his mouth took on the harsh line of a sneer.

“Want a new suit, soldier?” he demanded. “Just help yourself! You're late in gettin' to it...”

Drew leaned against the wall of the store front. He was so tired that the effort of walking on into that madhouse, where men yelled, grabbed, fought over selections, was too much to face. This was just another part of the never-ending nightmare which had entrapped them ever since they had fled from the bank of the Licking at Cynthiana. Listlessly he watched one trooper snatch a coat from another, drag it on triumphantly over a shirt which was a fringe of tatters. He plucked at the front of his own grimy shirt, and then felt around in the pocket he had so laboriously stitched beneath the belt of his breeches, to bring out one creased and worn bill. Spreading it out, he offered it to the man beside him. To loot an army warehouse was fair play as he saw it. Morgan's command had long depended upon Union commissaries for equipment, clothing, and food. And a horse trade was something forced upon him by expediency. But he still shrank from this kind of foraging.

“A shirt?” he asked wearily.

The man glanced from that crumpled bill to Drew's tired face and then back again. The sneer faded. He reached out, closed the scout's fingers tight over the money.

“That's just wastepaper here, son. Come on!” Catching hold of Drew's sleeve so tightly that the worn calico gave in a rip, he guided the other into the store, drawing him along behind a counter until he reached down into the shadows and came up with a pile of shirts, some flannel, some calico, and one Drew thought was linen.

“These look about your size. Take 'em! You might as well have them. Some of these fellows will just tear them up for the fun of it.”

Drew fumbled with the pile, a flannel, the linen, and two calico. He could cram that many into his saddlebags. But the store owner thrust the whole bundle into his arms.

“Go ahead, take 'em all! They ain't goin' to leave 'em, anyway.”

“Thanks!” Drew clutched the collection to his chest and edged back along the wall, avoiding a spirited fight now in progress in the center of the store. Mud-spattered men came bursting back, wanting to change their now ruined clothing for fresh. Drew stiff-armed one reeling, singing trooper out of his path and was gone before the drunken man could resent such handling. With the shirts still balled between forearm and chest, he led King away from the store.

“Ovah heah!”

That hail in a familiar voice brought Drew's head around. Kirby waved to him vigorously from a doorway, and the scout obediently rehitched King to another rack, joining the Texan in what proved to be the village barber-shop.

Kirby was stripped to the waist, using a towel freely sopped in a large basin to make his toilet. His face was already scraped clean of beard, and his hair plastered down into better order than Drew had ever seen it, while violent scents of bay rum and fancy tonics fought it out in the small room.

"What you got there?" Boyd looked up from a second basin, a froth of soap hiding most of his face.

"Shirts—" Drew dropped his bundle on a chair. He was staring, appalled, into the stretch of mirror confronting him, unable to believe that the face reflected there was his own. Skinning his hat onto a shelf, he moved purposefully toward the row of basins, ripping off his old shirt as he went.

Where the barber had gone they never did know, but a half hour later they made some sweeping attempts to clean up the mess to which their efforts at personal cleanliness had reduced the shop, pleased once more with what they saw now in the mirror. They had divided the shirts, and while the fit was not perfect, they were satisfied with the windfall. Before he left the shop Kirby swept a half dozen cakes of soap into his haversack.

Boyd was already balancing a bigger sack, full to the top.

"Peaches, molasses, crackers, pickles," he enumerated his treasure trove to Drew. "We got us some real eats."

"Hey, you—Rennie!" As they emerged from the barber-shop Driscoll trotted up. "The cap'n wants to see you. He's on the other side of town—at the smithy."

Boyd and Kirby trailed along as Drew obeyed that summons. They found Campbell giving orders to the smith's volunteer aides, some engaged with the owner of the shop in shoeing the raiders' horses, others making up bundles of shoes to be slung from the saddles as they rode out.

"Rennie"—the captain waved him out of the rush and clamor of the smithy—"I want you to listen to this. You—Hart—come here!" One of the men bundling horseshoes dropped the set he was tying together and came.

"Hart, here, comes from Cadiz. Know where that is?"

Drew closed his eyes for a moment, the better to visualize the map he tried to carry in his head. But Cadiz—he couldn't place the town. "No, suh."

"It's south, close to the Tennessee line and not too far from the big river. There's just one thing which may be important about it; it has a bank and Hart thinks that there are Union Army funds there. We still have a long way to go, and Union currency could help. Only," Campbell spoke with slow emphasis, "I want this understood. We take army funds only. This may just be a rumor, but it is necessary to scout in that direction anyway."

"You want me to find out about the funds and the river crossin' near there?"

"It's up to you, Rennie. Hart's willin' to ride with you."

"I'll go." He thought the bank plan was a wild one, but they did have to have a safe route to the river.



“You’ll move out as soon as possible. We’ll be on our way as soon as we have these horses shod.”

Drew doubted that. What he had seen in the streets suggested that it was not going to be easy to pry most of the company out of Calhoun in a hurry, but that was Campbell’s problem. “I’ll need couriers,” he said aloud. It was an advance scout’s privilege to have riders to send back with information.

Campbell hesitated as if he would protest and then agreed. “You have men picked?”

“Kirby and Barrett. Kirby’s had scout experience; Barrett knows part of this country and rides light.”

“All right, Kirby and Barrett. You ready to ride, Hart?”

The other trooper nodded, picked up a set of extra horseshoes, and went out of the smithy. Campbell had one last word for Drew.

“We’ll angle south from here to hit the Cumberland River some ten miles north of Cadiz, Hart knows where. This time of year it ought to be easy crossin’. But the Tennessee—” he shook his head—“that is goin’ to be the hard one. Learn all you can about conditions and where it’s best to hit that....”

Drew found Hart already mounted, Kirby and Boyd waiting.

“Hart says we’re ridin’ out,” the Texan said. “Goin’ to cover the high lines?”

“Scout, yes. South of here. River crossin’s comin’ up.”

“No time for shadin’ in this man’s war,” Kirby observed.

“Shadin’?” Boyd repeated as a question.

“Sittin’ nice an’ easy under a tree while some other poor hombre prowls around the herd,” Kirby translated. “It’s a kinda restin’ I ain’t had much of lately. Nor like to....”

They put Calhoun behind them, and Hart led them cross-country. But at each new turn of the back country roads Drew added another line or two on the map he sketched in on paper which Boyd surprisingly produced from his bulging sack of loot.

The younger boy looked self-conscious as he handed it over. “Thought as how I might want to write a letter.”

Drew studied him. “You do that!” He made it an order. There had been no chance to leave Boyd in Calhoun. But there was still Cadiz as a possibility. He did not believe this vague story about Union gold in the bank. And the company might never enter the town in force at all. So that Boyd, left behind, would not attract the unfavorable attention of the authorities.

It began to rain again, and the roads were mire traps. As they struggled on into evening Kirby found a barn which appeared to be out by itself with no house in attendance. The door was wedged open with a drift of undisturbed soil and Boyd, exploring into a ragged straggle of brush in search of a well, reported a house cellar hole. The place must be abandoned and so safe.

“We’ll be in Cadiz tomorrow,” Hart said.

“An’ how do we ride in?” Kirby wanted to know. “Another bearer-of-the-flag stunt?”

“Is Cadiz a Union town?” Drew asked Hart.

The other laughed. "Not much, it ain't. This is tobacco country; you seen that for yourself today. An' there's guerrillas to give the Yankees trouble. They hole up in the Brelsford Caves, six or seven miles outta town. We can ride right in, and there ain't nobody gonna care."

"Nice to know these things ahead'a time," Kirby remarked. "So we ride in—lookin' for what?"

Hart glanced at Drew but remained silent. The scout shrugged. "Information about the rivers and any stray garrison news. You have kin here, Hart?"

"Some." But the other did not elaborate on that.

Drew was thinking about those guerrillas; their presence did not match Hart's story about the Yankee gold in the bank. Such irregulars would have been after that long ago. He didn't know why Hart had pitched Campbell such a tale, but he was dubious about the whole setup now. Better make this a quick trip in—and out—of town.

## 7. A Mule for a River

For a Confederate patrol, they looked respectable enough as they rode into Cadiz. Though they lacked the uniformity of a Yankee squad, their dark shirts, “impressed” breeches, and good boots gave an impression of a common dress, and Kirby had even acquired a hat.

They slung their captured rifles before entering town and progressed at a quiet amble which suggested good will. But there was no mistaking the fact that they attracted attention, immediately and to some purpose. A small boy, balancing on a fence, put his fingers to his mouth and released a piercing whistle.

King’s response to that was vigorous. Rearing, until he stood almost upright on his hind feet, the stallion pawed the air. Drew barely kept his seat. He fought with all his knowledge of horsemanship to bring the stud back to earth and under control. And he could hear Kirby’s laugh and Boyd calling out some inarticulate warning or advice.

“Better git that mule—or run down this one’s mainspring some,” the Texan said when Drew had King again with four feet on the ground, though weaving in a sideways dance.

“You men—what are you doing here?” A horseman looked over the heads of the crowd to the four troopers.

“Passin’ through, suh. Leastwise we was, until greeted—” Kirby answered courteously.

Drew assessed the questioner’s well-cut riding clothes, his good linen, and fine gloves. The rider was middle-aged, his authority more evident because of that fact. This was either one of the wealthy planters of the district or some important inhabitant of Cadiz. There was a wagon drawing up behind him, a span of well-cared-for mules in harness with a Negro driver.

The mules held Drew’s attention. King’s reaction to that sudden whistle was a warning. He had no wish to ride such an animal into a picket skirmish. The sleekness of the mules appealed to his desire to rid himself of the unmanageable stud.

Now he edged the sidling King closer to the wagon. The driver watched him with apprehension. Whether he guessed Drew’s intention or whether he dreaded the near approach of the stallion was a question which did not bother the scout.

“You there,” Drew hailed the driver. “I’ll take one of those mules!”

As always, he hated these enforced trades and spoke in a peremptory way, wanting to get the matter finished.

“You, suh—” the solid citizen turned his horse to face the scout—“what gives you the right to take that mule?”

With a visible sigh of relief, the Negro relaxed on the driver’s seat, willing to let the other carry on the argument.

“Nothing, except I have to have a mount I can depend upon.” Drew did not know why he was explaining, or even why he wanted the mule so acutely right now. Except that he was tired, tired of the days in the saddle, of being on the run, of these small Kentucky towns into which they rode to loot and ride off again. The Yankees in Bardstown had been fair game, and their bluff there had been an adventure. But Calhoun left a sour taste in his mouth, and he didn’t like the vague order which had brought him to Cadiz. So his dislike boiled over, to settle into a sullen determination to rid himself of one irritation—this undependable horse.

“Do I assume, suh, that you are part of General Morgan’s command?” Sharp blue eyes studied Drew across the well-curried backs of the mules.

“Yes, suh.”

The man gave a nod, which might have been for some thought of his own.

“We have heard some rumors of your coming, suh,” the other continued. “You, Nelson,” he spoke to the Negro, “take this team up to the livery stable and tell Mr. Emory I want Hannibal saddled! Then you bring him back here and give him to this gentleman!”

“Yes, suh. Hannibal—wi’ saddle—for this young gentlem’n.”

“Hannibal, suh,” the man said to Drew, “is a mule, but a remarkable one, riding trained and strong. I think you will find him quite usable. Do I understand we are about to be favored by a visit from General Morgan?”

Drew dismounted. Now he made a business of squinting up at the sun as if to tell time. “Not for a while, suh.” He remained cautious; though he guessed that his questioner’s sympathies were at least not openly Union.

There was a stir in the gathering crowd. Hart was leaning from his saddle, talking earnestly to two men flanking him on either side.

“May I offer you some refreshment, gentlemen. I am James Pryor, at your service—”

Automatically Drew responded to the manners of Red Springs. “Drew Rennie, suh. Anson Kirby, Boyd Barrett....” He looked around for Hart, only to see the other disappearing into an alley with his two companions from the crowd.

“Suh, that’s a right heartenin’ offer,” Kirby said, smiling. “Trail dust sure does make a man’s throat dryer’n an alkali flat!”

“Mark Hale over here has just the answer for that difficulty, gentlemen. If you will accompany me—”

They left the glare of the sunlit street, following their host into a small shop where a quantity of strange smells fought for supremacy. Kirby stared about him puzzled, but his look changed to an expression of pure bafflement and outrage as Pryor gave his order to the smaller man who came from a back room.

“Mark, these gentlemen need some of that good lemonade you make—if you have some cold and ready.”

Drew heard Kirby’s muffled snort of protest and wanted so badly to laugh that the struggle to choke off that sound was a pain in his chest. Mr. Pryor smiled at them blandly.

“M’ boys, nothing better on a really hot day than some of Mark’s lemonade. Nothing like it in this part of Kentucky. Ah, that looks like a draft fit for the gods, Mark, it certainly does!”

Hale had bobbed out of his inner room again, shepherding before him a Negro boy who walked with exaggerated caution, balancing a tray on which stood four tall glasses, beaded with visible moisture. There was a sprig of green mint standing sentry in each.

“Drink up, gentlemen.” Under Mr. Pryor’s commanding eye they each took a glass and a first sip.

But it was good—cool as it went slipping down the throat bearing that blessed chill with it, tart on the tongue, and fresh. Drew had sipped, but now he gulped, and he noted over the rim

of his own glass, that Kirby was following his example. Mr. Pryor consumed his portion at a more genteel rate of intake.

“This allays that trail dust of yours, Mr. Kirby?” He inquired with no more than usual solicitude, but there was a faint trace of amusement in his small smile.

Kirby met the challenge promptly. “Aby, suh, aby!” He raised his half-filled glass. “To your very good health, suh. I don’t know when I’ve had me a more satisfyin’ drink!”

Pryor bowed. He was still smiling as he glanced at Drew.

“You have business in Cadiz, suh? Beyond that of swapping that firebreather of yours for another mount, I mean? Perhaps I can be of service in some other way....”

Drew cradled his glass in both hands. The condensing moisture made it slippery, but the chill was pleasant to feel.

“Do you have any news about the Cumberland River, suh?” he asked. Pryor might have usable information, and there was no reason to disguise that part of their objective. Short of turning about and fighting their way through about a quarter of the aroused Yankee army, the fugitives did have to cross the Cumberland and the Tennessee, and do both soon.

“The Cumberland, suh, is not apt to give you much trouble.” Pryor sipped at his glass with a relish. “If, of course, you contemplate a try at the Tennessee—that will be a different matter. I trust your commander will be amply prepared for difficulties there. But General Morgan is not to be easily caught napping, or so his reputation stands. I wish you the best of luck.”

“Is that your horse out there, young man?” the proprietor of the drugstore addressed Drew. “That big stallion?”

Drew put his glass on the counter and spun around. “What’s he doin’ now?”

“Nothing,” Hale returned quickly. “Ransome!” Out of nowhere Hale’s servant appeared. “Get the saddlebags from that horse.”

Surprised at this highhanded demand for his property, Drew waited for enlightenment. When Ransome returned with the bags, Hale took them, moved quickly to a cabinet, and unlocked it. By handfulls he took small boxes from the shelves inside, added some paper packets, and then buckled the straps tightly over the new bulge.

“I understand,” he said in his dry, precise voice, “there is a pressing need for quinine, morphine, and the like in the South?”

Drew could only nod as Hale held out the bags.

“Give this to your surgeon, young man, with my compliments. There is little enough we can do, but this is something.”

Drew stammered his thanks, knowing that those boxes and packets crammed into his bags meant a fortune to a blockade runner, but far more to men in the improvised hospitals behind the gray lines. Hale waved away Drew’s thanks, adding only a last warning: “Keep your bags dry if you contemplate a river crossing! I would like to make sure that those drugs do reach the right hands intact.”

“Rennie!” Hart hailed him from the door. “There’s a boy here with a mule; he says it’s for you.”

Pryor put down his glass. “It’s Hannibal. I think you will find him acceptable, suh. An even-tempered animal for the most part, and the surest-footed one I have ever ridden.”

“Then you do *ride* him?” Boyd spoke for the first time.

“Naturally he has been ridden—by me. I would not offer him otherwise, suh!” Pryor’s flash of indignation was quick. “Hannibal’s dam was Dido, a fine trotting mare. He’s an excellent mount.”

The mule stood in the street, ears slightly forward, eyeing King warily. He was a big animal, groomed until his gray coat shone under the sun, wearing a well rubbed and oiled saddle and trappings. As Drew approached he lowered his head, sniffing inquiringly at the scout.

“Your new master, Hannibal,” Pryor addressed the animal with the gravity of one making a formal introduction. “You are about to be mustered into the cavalry.”

Hannibal appeared to consider this and then shook his big head up and down in a vigorous nod. Boyd laughed and Kirby offered vocal encouragement.

“Mount up an’ see if you have to go smoothin’ out any humps.”

“If you’re goin’ to ride that critter, git on!” Hart called. His tone expressed urgency as if he had learned something in town which should send them out of Cadiz in a hurry.

Drew’s previous experience with mules had not been as a rider. He had heard plenty about their sure-footedness, their ability to keep going as pack animals and wagon teams when horses gave out, their intelligence, as well as that stubbornness which lay on the darker side of the scales. He advanced on Hannibal now a little distrustfully, settling into the saddle on the animal’s back with the care of one expecting some unpleasant reaction. But Hannibal merely swung his head about as if to make sure by sight, as well as pressure of weight on his back, that his rider was safely aloft.

Relaxing, Drew saluted Pryor. “My thanks to you, suh.”

“Think nothing of it, young man. Luck to you—all of you.”

“That we can use, suh,” Kirby returned. “Adios....”

Hart’s impatience was so patent that Drew had only hasty thanks for Hale before the trooper had them on their way out of town. When they were at a trot Kirby joined their guide.

“How come you workin’ on your critter’s rump with a double of rope? Git sight of some blue belly hangin’ out to dry-gulch us?”

“We ain’t too welcome hereabouts.” Hart did look worried, and Drew was alert.

“Yankees?” he asked.

Hart shook his head. “Just some of the boys; they don’t want no attention pulled this way, not right now.”

The bank money—and the guerrillas. Yes, holding up the Cadiz bank if and when any gold reached there, would appeal to the local irregulars, who might be so irregular as to be on the cold side of the law, even in wartime with the enemy their victim. Drew fitted one piece to another and thought he could guess the full pattern.

Kirby looked from one to the other. Boyd was completely at a loss. A moment later the Texan spoke again.

“Me, I’m never one to argue with local talent, specially if they wear their Colts low and loose. Doin’ that is apt to make a man wolf meat. Wheah to now—this heah river?”

Drew nodded. The Cumberland must be scouted. And, after that, the more formidable barrier of the Tennessee. He had not needed Pryor’s warning about the latter. Ever since they had left

Bardstown and knew they were headed for that barrier, Drew had been carrying worry at the back of his mind.

But Pryor was also right about the Cumberland. Hart agreed to ride back to the company with the information to direct them to the best crossing. While Drew, Kirby, and Boyd went on to the last barrier between them and eventual escape southwest.

Here the Tennessee was a flood, a narrow lake more than a river. As they traveled its eastern bank Boyd halted now and again to study the waste of water dubiously.

“It’s wide,” he said in a subdued voice. Kirby spat accurately at a leaf drifting just below.

“Need us some fish fixin’s heah,” he agreed. “You swim?” he asked the other two.

There had been ponds at home where both of them in childhood had paddled about with most of the young male populations of Red Springs and Oak Hill. But whether they could trust that somewhat limited skill to get them over this flood was another matter.

“Some.” Boyd appeared to have discovered caution.

“Me, I’m not sayin’ yet,” Kirby commented. “Splashin’ ‘round some in a little-bitty wadin’ pool, an’ gittin’ out in this, don’t balance none. Ain’t every hoss takes kindly to water, neither. I’d say we’d better see what’s the chances of knockin’ together a raft or somethin’. ‘Less we can find us a boat.”

But boats were not to be found, unless they were willing to risk discovery by trying to cross near a well-settled district. And when Captain Campbell joined them that afternoon he insisted on the need of speed over a longer reconnaissance.

“The Yankees are closing in,” he told the trio by the river. “If we try to cross at a town, they’ll have a point to center on. Rafts, yes, we can try to build rafts—have to ferry over the men who can’t swim, and our gear. This is the time we must push—fast.”

The remote section of bank which Drew had chosen became a scene of activity as the company came in—a tight bunch—not long after Campbell. The stragglers came later, pushing beat-out horses, one or two riding double. They had no tools other than bowie knives, and their attempts at raft-building were not only awkward but in the most cases futile. When they did have a mat which would stick together after a fashion, they were determined to put it to the test at once.

None of them had much practice in getting horses over such a wide body of water, and there were a great many freely voiced suggestions concerning the best methods.

Kirby stood watching the first attempt, his face blank of expression, a sign Drew had come to recognize as the Texan’s withdrawal from a situation or action of which he did not approve. There were five men squeezed together on the flimsy-looking raft and they had strung out their mounts in a line, the head of one horse linked by leading rope to the tail of the one before him.

“You don’t think it’s goin’ to work?” Drew asked Kirby.

The Texan shrugged. “Maybe, only hosses don’t think like men. An’ a lotta hosses don’t take kindly to gittin’ wheah theah ain’t no footin’. Me, I want to see a little more, ‘fore I roll out—”

Kirby’s misgivings were amply justified. For that first voyage was doomed to a tragic and speedy end. The second horse in line, losing footing as the river bed fell away beneath him, reared in fright, caught his forefeet over the rope linking him to his fellow, and so jerked his head underwater by his own frenzied struggles. Before the men on the wildly dipping raft

were able to cut the now fright-maddened animals loose, three in that string had drowned themselves by their uncontrolled plunges, and the others were being dragged under.

Boyd dived from the upper bank before Drew could stop him. It was madness to go anywhere near the struggling horses. But somehow Boyd's blond head broke water at the side of the last gasping animal. He took a grip on the water-logged mane, his body bobbing up and down with the jerks of the horse's forequarters, until he had sawed through the lead cord and was able to start the mount back toward the shore, swimming beside him.

Drew was waiting with Kirby to give Boyd a hand up the bank.

"You could have been pulled under!"

Boyd was grinning. "But I wasn't. And the horse's all right, too." He patted the wet haunch of the shivering animal. "That was bad—they pulled each other down."

It was a disheartening beginning. But as the hours slipped by they had better success. One horse, two, three could be towed on separate ropes behind the raft. And in the morning there was a cockleshell of a boat oared in by one of the men who had found it downriver.

They had ferried and crossed well into the dusk of the evening. And at the first dawn they were at it again. Drew tried to remember how many times he had made that trip, swimming or rowing, always with some mount as his special charge. More than half the company had sworn they could not swim, and so the burden of the transfer fell upon their fellows.

"Rennie—" That was Campbell climbing up from the raft after another weary passage across. "There's trouble on the other side. You've been using that mule of yours to get some of the horses over, haven't you?"

Drew was so tired that words were too much trouble to shape. He nodded dully. Pryor had been right about Hannibal. The big mule had not only taken his own passage across the Tennessee as a matter-of-course proceeding, but had shouldered and urged along three horses as he went. And twice since then Drew had taken him back and forth to bring in skittish mounts causing trouble.

"That horse of mine's running wild; he broke out of the water twice." The captain caught at Drew's bare arm so hard his nails cut. "Think you could get him over with the mule's help?"

Drew wavered a little as he walked slowly to where he had picketed Hannibal after their last trip. He was tired, and although he had eaten earlier that morning, he was hungry again. It was warm and the sun was climbing, but the air felt chill against his naked body and he shivered. The one thing they were all getting out of this river business, Drew decided, were much-needed baths.

Kirby, his body white save for tanned face and throat, sun-darkened hands and wrists, crouched on the raft as Drew brought Hannibal down to that unwieldy craft.

"Tryin' for the cap'n's hoss?"

"What's wrong with it?" Drew helped the Texan push off.

"Reaches no bottom, an' then it plain warps its backbone tryin' to paw down the sky. Maybe that mule can git some sense into the loco critter. But I'm not buyin' no chips on his doin' it."

Drew located Campbell's horse, a rangy, good-looking gray which reminded him a little of the colt he had seen at Red Springs, snorting and trotting back and forth along the path they had worn on the banks during their efforts of the past twenty-four hours. One of the rear guard held its lead rope and kept as far from the skittish animal as he could.



“He’s plumb mean,” the guardian informed Drew. “When he jumps, get out from under—quick!”

Yet when Drew, mounted on Hannibal now, brought the horse down to the water’s edge, the horse appeared to go willingly enough. The scout tossed the lead rope to Kirby, waiting until the raft pushed off with its load of men and fringe of horses, then took to the river beside Campbell’s horse. When they reached the deeper section he saw the gray go into action.

Rearing, the horse appeared about to try to climb onto the raft. And the man holding its lead rope dropped it quickly. Drew, swimming, one hand on Hannibal’s powerful shoulder, tried to guide the mule toward the horse that was still splashing up and down in a rocking-horse movement. But the mule veered suddenly, and Drew saw those threatening hoofs loom over his own head. He pushed away frantically, but too late to miss a numbing blow as one hoof grazed his shoulder.

Somehow, with his other hand outflung, he caught Hannibal’s rope tail and held on with all the strength he had left, while the water washed in and out of a long raw gouge in the skin and muscles of his upper arm.

## 8. Happy Birthday, Soldier!

“No water here either.” Boyd climbed up the bank of what might once have been a promising stream. Carrying three canteens, he ran the tip of his tongue over his lips unhappily. “It sure is hot!”

They had turned off the road, which was now filled with men, horses, men, artillery, and men, all slogging purposefully forward. They composed an army roused out before daylight, on the move toward another army holed in behind a breastworks and waiting. And over all, the exhausting blanket of mid-July heat which pressed to squeeze all the vital juices out of both man and animal.

Drew touched his aching arm soothingly. It still hurt, although the rawness had healed during the weeks between that turbulent crossing of the Tennessee and this morning in Mississippi as they moved at the Union position on the ridge above the abandoned ghost town of Harrisburg. The remnant of Morgan fugitives, some eighty strong, had fallen in with General Bedford Forrest’s ranging scouts at Corinth, and had ridden still farther southward to join his main army just on the eve of what promised to be a big battle.

“Hot!” echoed Kirby. “A man could git hisself killed today an’ never know no difference.”

They were reluctant to re-enter the stream progressing along the road. The dust was ankle-deep there, choking thick when stirred by feet and hoof to a powdery cloud. In contrast, there were no clouds in the sky, and the sun promised to be a ball of brass very soon.

Yesterday had been as punishing. Men wilted in the road, overcome by heat and lack of water. If there ever had been any moisture in this country, it had long ago been boiled away. The very leaves were brittle and grayish-looking where they weren’t inches deep in dust.

As of last night, the Morgan men were an addition to Crossland’s Kentuckians under General Buford. The speech of the blue grass was familiar, but nothing yet had made them a part of this new army with which they marched.

Drew reached for one of the canteens. His worry over Boyd, dulled by the passing of time, stirred sluggishly. The other had kept up the grueling pace which had brought the fugitives across half of Kentucky, all of Tennessee, and into this new eddy of war, making no complaint after his first harsh introduction to action—which might be in part an adventure, but which was mostly something to be endured—with the dogged stubbornness of a seasoned veteran. And Boyd had manifestly toughened in that process. After Drew’s mishap in the river, Boyd had accepted responsibility, helping to keep the scout in the saddle and riding, even when Drew had been bemused by a day or two of fever, unaware of either their enforced pace or their destination.

No, somewhere along the line of retreat Drew had stopped worrying about Boyd. And now, with the youngster already appointed horse holder for the day’s battle, he need not think of him engulfed in action. Though any fighting future was decided mainly by the capricious chance which struck one man down and allowed his neighbor to march on unscathed.

“You men—over there—close up!” A officer, hardly to be distinguished from the men he rode among, waved them back to the column. Then they were dismounting. As Drew handed Hannibal over to Boyd’s care, he was glad again that the other was safely behind the battle line moving up in the thin woods.

During the night the enemy had thrown together the breastworks on the ridge, weaving together axed trees, timbers torn out of the abandoned houses of the village—anything the Union leader could commandeer for such use. And between that improvised fortification and the cover in which the Confederates now waited was a section of open ground, varying in width with the wanderings of a now dry river. Where the Kentuckians were stationed, there must have stretched about three hundred yards of that open, Drew estimated, and the woods bordering it on this side were so thin that any charge would take them into plain sight for five hundred yards of approach.

Fieldpieces brought into line on the woods side, hidden above by the breastworks, opened up in a dull *pom-pom* duel. Drew saw a shell strike earth not far away, bounce twice, still intact, and roll on toward the Confederate lines.

The *zip-zip* of the Miniés had not yet begun. And this waiting was the hardest part of all. Drew tried to pin all his powers of concentration on a study of the ground immediately before him, the slope up which they would have to win in order to have it out with the now hidden enemy. He made himself calculate just which path to take when the orders to charge came. Although his arm prevented his using a carbine or rifle, his two Colts were loaded, and one was in his hand. He glanced around.

Kirby? There was a Morgan trooper next—Drew tried to remember his name. Laswell ... Townstead ... no, Clinton! Tom Clinton. He'd done picket duty with Drew. And beyond Clinton—there was Kirby, his lips pulled tight in what might have been a grin, but which Drew thought was not. Then ... Boyd! But Boyd was back with the horses; he had to be!

Drew edged forward a little, trying to see better. If it were Boyd, he had to wrench him out of that line and get the boy back. A hot emotion close to panic boiled up in Drew.

Somewhere, through the pound of the artillery, a bugle blared. And Drew's muscles obeyed that call, even as he still tried to see who was fourth in line from him.

Slowly at first, they were on the move. The sun was up, shining directly into their faces. But in spite of the glare, they could still see the Union works and the flash of guns along it. They were moving faster, coming to a trot. Officers shouted here and there, trying to slow that steady advance—why?

Then, drowning out the bugles, the mutter and roar of the artillery, came the Yell. Their shambling trot quickened. Men were running now, forming a great wave to lick up at the breastworks. Men in that line did not know—or care—that they were moving without the promised support on right and left; they did not hear the disturbed orders of the officers still striving to slow them, to wrench them back into a battle plan already too broken to mend. All they cared about now was the field clear for running, the weapons in their hands, the enemy waiting under the hot morning sun.

Drew never remembered afterward that splendid useless charge except as chaos. He could not have told just when they were caught in a murderous crossfire which poured canister at their undefended flanks. A man went down before him, stumbling. The scout caught his foot against the writhing body, pitched head forward, and struck on his bad arm. For a moment or two the stabbing pain of that made the world red and black. Then Drew was up on one knee again, just in time to realize foggily that the Yankees were ripping at their flanks, that their charge was pocketed by lead and steel, being wiped out. He steadied his gun hand on the crook of his injured arm, tried to find some target, then fired feverishly without one, the gun's recoil sending shivers of pain through his whole shoulder and side.

The first wave of men had great gaps torn in its length. But those remaining on their feet still ran up the slope, screaming their defiance. A handful reached the breastworks. Drew saw one man by some strange fortune scramble to the top of that timber wall, stand balanced for a moment in triumph to take aim at a target below as if he himself were invulnerable, and then plunge, as might a diver cleaving a pool, out of sight on the other side.

Men faltered, the fire was breaking them, crumpling up the lines. All the Union might was concentrated in a lead-and-canister hail on the remnants of the brigade, making of the slope a holocaust in which nothing human could continue to advance.

But new lines of gray-brown came steadily from the woodland, racing, yelling, steadfast in their determination to storm that barricade and pluck out the Yankees with their hands. They were wild men, with no thought of personal safety. A color bearer went down. His standard was seized by his right rank man before its red folds hit the churned, stained ground, the soldier flinging aside his rifle to take tight grip on the pole. The line came on at a run. Now broken squads of Kentuckians re-formed; a battered lacework of what had been companies, regiments, joined the newcomers.

Drew was on his feet. Where Kirby or any others of the small Morgan contingent had vanished—whether Boyd *had* been with them—he did not know. He jammed his now empty Colt into its holster, drew its twin, still not wholly aware that the breastworks were too far away for small arms' fire to have any effect.

Now the whole world was no larger than that stretch of open ground and the breastworks, the men in blue behind them. Only the flanking fire still withered the gray lines, curling them up as the sun had withered and curled the leaves on the shrubs by the dried stream bed. This was walking stiff-legged through a bath of fire—sun fire, lead-death fire—with no end except the hope of reaching the ridge top and the fight waiting there.

But they could not reach that wall—except singly, or in twos and threes, then only to fall. And the waves of men no longer broke from the woods to lap up and recede sullenly down the slope. Out of nowhere, just as they fell back to the first fringe of trees, came an officer on a tall gray horse. His coat was gone, he rode in his shirt sleeves, and a bullet-torn tatter waved from one wide shoulder. Above prominent cheekbones, his eyes were hot and bright, his clipped beard pointed sharply from a jaw which must be grimly set, his face was flushed, and his energy and will was like a cloud to engulf the disheartened men as he bore down upon them.

His galloping course threaded through the shattered groups of Kentuckians, men fast disintegrating into a mob as the realization of their failure on the slope began to strike home—no longer a portion of an army believing in itself. But, sighting him, they followed his route with a rising wave of cheers—cheers which even though they came from dry throats rose in force and violence to that inarticulate Yell which had raised them past all fear up the hill.

From his saddle, the officer leaned to grab at a standard, whirling the flag aloft and around his head so that its scarlet length, crossed with the starred blue bands, made a tossing splotch of color, to hold and draw men's eyes. And now he was shouting, too, somehow his words carrying through the uproar in the woods.

“Rally! Rally on colors!”

“Forrest!” A man beside Drew whooped, threw his hat into the air. “The old man's here! Forrest!”

They were pulled together about that rider and his waving standard. Lines tightened, death-made gaps closed. They steadied, again a fighting command and not a crowd of men facing defeat. And having welded that force, Forrest did not demand a second charge. He was furiously angry—not with them, Drew sensed—but with someone or something beyond the men crowding about him. It was not until afterward that rumor seeped out through the ranks; it had not been Forrest’s kind of battle, not his plan. And he now had five hundred empty saddles to weight the scales after a battle which was not his.

Drew leaned against a bullet-clipped tree. Men were at work with some of the same will as had taken them to attack, building a barricade of their own, expecting a counterthrust from the enemy. He wiped his sweaty face with the back of his hand. His throat was one long dry ache; nowhere had he seen a familiar face.

Somewhere among this collection of broken units and scrambled companies of survivors he must find his own. He stood away from the tree, fighting thirst, weariness, and the shaking reaction from the past few hours, to move through the badly mauled force, afraid to allow himself to think what—or who—might still lie out on the ridge under the white heat of the sun.

“Rennie!”

Drew rounded a fieldpiece which had been manhandled off the firing line, one wheel shattered. He steadied himself against its caisson and turned his head with caution, fearing to be downed by the vertigo which seemed to strike in waves ever since he had retreated to the cover of the woods. He wanted to find the horse lines, to make sure that he had not seen Boyd on the field just before the bugle had lifted them all into that abortive charge.

It was Driscoll who hailed him. He had a red-stained rag tied about his forearm and carried his hand tucked into the half-open front of his shirt. Drew walked toward him slowly, feeling oddly detached. He noted that the trooper’s weathered face had a greenish shade, that his mouth was working as if he were trying to shape soundless words.

“Where’re the rest?” Drew asked.

Driscoll’s good hand motioned to the left. “Four ... five ... some there. Standish—he got it with a shell—no head ... not any more—” He gave a sound like a giggle, and then his hand went hastily to his mouth as he retched dryly.

Drew caught the other’s shoulder, shaking him.

“The others!” he demanded more loudly, trying to pierce the curtain of shock to Driscoll’s thinking mind.

“Four ... five ... some—” Driscoll repeated. “Standish, he’s dead. Did I tell you about Standish? A shell came along and—”

“Yes, you told me about Standish. Now show me where the others are!” Still keeping his shoulder grip, Drew edged Driscoll about until the trooper was pointed in the general direction to which he had gestured. Now Drew gave the man a push and followed.

“Rennie!” That was Captain Campbell. He was kneeling by a man on the ground, a canteen in his hand.

Drew lurched forward. He was so sure that that inert casualty was Boyd, and that Boyd was dead.

“Boyd—” he murmured stupidly, refusing to believe his eyes. The man lying there had a brush of grayish beard on his chin, a mat of hair which moved up and down as he breathed in heavy, panting gasps.

“Boyd?” This time the scout made a question of it.

One of the men in that little group moved. “He got it—out there.”

Drew shifted his weight. He felt as if he were striving to move a body as heavy and as inert as that of an unconscious man. It took so long even to raise his hand. Before he could question the trooper further, another was before him.

Kirby, his powder-blackened face only inches away from that of the man he had seized by a handful of shirt front, demanded: “How do you know?”

The man pulled back but not out of Kirby’s clutch. “He was right beside me. Went down on the slope before we fell back—”

So—Drew’s thinking process was as slow as his weary body—he had been right back there on the field! Boyd had been in the first line, and he was still out there.

Again, Drew made one of those careful turns to keep his unsteadiness under control. If Boyd was out there, he must be brought back—now! Hands closed on Drew’s shoulders, jerking him back so that he collided with another body, and was held pinned against his captor.

“You can’t go theah now!” Kirby spoke so closely to his ear that the words were a roaring in his head. But they did not make sense. Drew tried to wrench loose of that hold, the pain in his half-healed arm answering. Then there was a period he could not account for at all, and suddenly the sun was fading and it was evening. Somebody pushed a canteen into his hand, then lifted both hand and canteen for him so that he could drink some liquid which was not clear water but thick and brackish, evil-tasting, but which moistened his dry mouth and swollen tongue.

Through the gathering dusk he could see distant splotches of red and yellow—were they fires? And shells screamed somewhere. Drew held his head between his hands and cowered under that beat of noise which combined with the pulsation of pain just over his eyes. Men were moving around him, and horses. He heard tags of speech, but none of them were intelligible.

Was the army pulling out? Drew tried to think coherently. He had something to do. It was important! Not here—where? The boom of the field artillery, the flickering of those fires, they confused him, making it difficult to sort out his memories.

Again, a canteen appeared before him, but now he pushed it petulantly aside. He didn’t want a drink; he wanted to think—to recall what it was he had to do.

“Drew—!” There was a figure, outlined in part by one of those fires, squatting beside him. “Can you ride?”

Ride? Where? Why? He had a mule, didn’t he? Back in the horse lines. Boyd—he had left the mule with Boyd. Boyd! *Now* he knew what had to be done!

He moved away from the outstretched hand of the man beside him, got to his feet, saw the blot of a mount the other was holding. And he caught at reins, dragged them from the other’s hand before he could resist.

“Boyd!” He didn’t know whether he called that name aloud, or whether it was one with the beat in his head. Boyd was out on that littered field, and Drew was going to bring him in.

Towing the half-seen animal by the reins, Drew started for the fires and the boom of the guns. "All right!" The words came to him hollowly. "But not that way, you're loco! This way! The Yankees are burnin' up what's left of the town; that ain't the battlefield!"

Drew was ready to resist, but now his own eyes confirmed that. Fire was raging among the few remaining buildings of the ghost town, and shells were striking at targets pinned in that light, shells from Confederate batteries, taking sullen return payment for that disastrous July day.

A lantern bobbed by his side, swinging to the tread of the man carrying it. And, as they turned away from the inferno which was consuming Harrisburg, Drew saw other such lights in the night, threading along the slope. This was the heartbreaking search, among the dead, for the living, who might yet be brought back to the agony of the field hospitals. He was not the only one hunting through the human wreckage tonight.

"I've talked to Johnson," Kirby said. "It'll be like huntin' for a steer in the big brush, but we can only try."

They could only try ... Drew thought he was hardened to sights, sounds. He had helped bring wounded away from other fields, but somehow this was different. Yet, oddly enough, the thought that Boyd could be—*must* be—lying somewhere on that slope stiffened Drew, quickened his muscles back into obedience, kept him going at a steady pace as he led Hannibal carefully through the tangle of the dead. Twice they found and freed the still living, saw them carried away by search parties. And they were working their way closer to the breastworks.

"Ho—there—Johnny!"

The call came out of the dark, out of the wall hiding the Yankee forces.

Drew straightened from a sickening closer look at three who had fallen together.

"Johnny!" The call was louder, rising over the din from the burning town. "One, one of yours—he's been callin' out some ... to your left now."

Kirby held up the lantern. The circle of light spread, catching on a spurred boot. That tiny glint of metal moved, or was it the booted foot which had twitched?

Drew strode forward as Kirby swung the lantern in a wider arc. The man on the ground lay on his back, his hands moving feebly to tear at the already rent shirt across his chest. There was a congealed mass of blood on one leg just above the boot top. Drew knew that flushed and swollen face in spite of its distortion; they had found what they had been searching for.

Kirby pulled those frantic hands away from the strips of calico, the scratched flesh beneath, but there was no wound there. The leg injury Drew learned by quick examination was not too bad a one. And they could discover no other hurt; only the delirium, the flushed face, and the fast breathing suggested worse trouble.

"Sun, maybe." Kirby transferred his hold to the rolling head, vising it still between his hands while Drew dripped a scanty stream of the unpalatable water from the Texan's canteen onto Boyd's crusted, gaping lips.

"I'll mount Hannibal. You hold him!" Drew said. "He can't stay in the saddle by himself."

Somehow they managed. Boyd's head, still rolling back and forth, moved now against Drew's sound shoulder. Kirby steadied his trailing legs, then went ahead with the lantern. Before they moved off, Drew turned his head to the breastworks.

“Thanks, Yankee!” He called as loudly and clearly as his thirst-dried throat allowed. There was no answer from the hidden picket or sentry—if he were still there. Then Hannibal paced down the slope.

“The Calhoun place?” Kirby asked.

Hannibal stumbled, and Boyd cried out, the cry becoming a moan.

“Yes. Anse ...” Drew added dully, “do you know ... this was his birthday—today. I just remembered.”

Sixteen today.... Maybe somewhere he could find the surgeon to whom last night he had turned over the drugs in his saddlebags. The doctor’s gratitude had been incredulous then. But that was before the battle, before a red tide of broken men had flowed into the dressing station at the Calhoun house. The leg wound was not too bad, but the sun had affected the boy who had lain in its full glare most of the day. He must have help.

The saddlebags of drugs, Boyd needing help—one should balance the other. Those facts seesawed back and forth in Drew’s aching head, and he held his muttering burden close as Kirby found them a path away from the rending guns and the blaze of the fires.



## 9. One More River To Cross

“The weather is sure agin this heah war. A man’s either frizzled clean outta his saddle by the heat—or else his hoss’s belly’s deep in the mud an’ he gits him a gully-washer down the back of his neck! Me—I’m a West Texas boy, an’ down theah we have lizard-fryin’ days an’ twisters that are regular hell winds, and northers that’ll freeze you solid in one little puff-off. But then all us boys was raised on rattlesnakes, wildcats, an’ cactus juice—we’re kinda hardened to such. Only I ain’t seen as how this half of the country is much better. Maybe we shouldn’t have switched our range—”

Drew grinned at Kirby’s stream of whispered comment and complaint as they wriggled their way forward through brush to look down on a Union blockhouse and stockade guarding a railroad trestle.

“Weather don’t favor either side. The Yankees have it just as bad, don’t they?”

The Texan made a snake’s noiseless progress to come even with his companion’s vantage point.

“Sure, but then they should ... they ought to pay up somehow for huntin’ their hosses on somebody else’s range. We’d be right peaceable was they to throw their hoofs outta heah. My, my, lookit them millin’ round down theah. Jus’ like a bunch of ants, ain’t they? Had us one of Cap’n Morton’s bull pups now, we could throw us a few shells as would make that nest boil right over into the gully!”

“We’ll do something when the General gets here,” Drew promised.

Kirby nodded. “Yes, an’ this heah General Forrest, too. He sure can ramrod a top outfit. Jus’ prances round the country so that the poor little blue bellies don’t know when he’s goin’ to pop outta some bush, makin’ war talk at ‘em. You know, the kid’s gonna be hoppin’ to think he missed this heah show—”

“At least we know where he is and what he’s doin’.”

Kirby propped his chin on his forearm. “Jus’ ‘bout now he’s sittin’ down at the table back theah in Meridian with a sight of fancy grub lookin’ back at him. How long you think he’s gonna take to bein’ corraled that way?”

“General Buford gave him strict orders personally—”

“Nice to have a general take an interest in you,” Kirby commented. “You Kaintuck boys, you’re scattered all through this heah army. Want to stay with Boyd ‘cause he’s ailin’, so you jus’ find you a general from your home state an’ talk yourself into a transfer—”

“Notice you wanted me to talk you into one, too.”

“Well, Missouri, Mississippi, an’ Tennessee are a sight nearer Texas an’ home than Virginia. Anyway, theah warn’t much left of our old outfit, an’ this heah Forrest is headin’ up a sassy bunch. So I’m glad you did find you a general to sling some weight an’ git us into his scouts jus’ ‘cause he knew your grandpappy. Kaintucks stick together....”

There was a second of silence through which they could both hear the faint sounds of life from the stockade.

“M’ father was a Texan,” Drew said suddenly.

“Now that’s a right interestin’ observation,” Kirby remarked. “Heah I was all the time thinkin’ you was one of these heah fast-ridin’, fine-livin’ gentlemen what was givin’ some tone to the army. Not jus’ ‘nother range drifter from the big spaces. What part of Texas you from—Brazos?”

“Oh, I wasn’t born there. You had a war down that way, remember?”

“You mean when Santa Anna came trottin’ in with his tail high, thinkin’ as how he could talk harsh to some of us Tejanos?”

“No, later than that—when some of us went down to talk harsh in Mexico.”

“Sure. Only I don’t recollect that theah powder-burnin’ contest, m’self. M’pa went ... got him these heah fancy hoss ticklers theah.” Kirby moved his hand toward the spurs he had taken off and tucked into his shirt for safekeeping to muffle the jingle while they were on scout. “Took ‘em away from a Mex officer, personal. Me, I was too young to draw fightin’ wages in that theah dust-up.”

“My father wasn’t too young, and he drew his wages permanent. My grandfather went down to Texas and brought my mother back to Kentucky just in time for me to appear. My grandfather didn’t like Texans.”

“An’ maybe not your father, special?”

Drew smiled, this time mirthlessly. “Just so. You see, m’ father came up from Texas to get his schoolin’ in Kentucky. He was studyin’ to be a doctor at Lexington. And he was pretty young and kind of wild. He had one meetin’—”

“You mean one of them pistol duels?”

“Yes. So my grandfather warned him off seein’ his daughter. I never heard the rights of it, but it seems m’ father didn’t take kindly to bein’ ordered around.”

Kirby chuckled. “That theah feelin’ is borned right into a Texas boy. He probably took the gal an’ ran off with her—”

“You’re guessing right. At least that’s the story as I’ve put it together. Mostly nobody would tell me anything. I was the blacksheep from the day I was born—”

“But your ma, she’d give you the right of it.”

“She died when I was born. That’s another thing my grandfather had against me. I was Hunt Rennie’s son, and I killed my mother; that’s the way he saw it.”

Kirby rolled his head on his arm so that his hazel eyes were on Drew’s thin, too controlled features.

“Sounds like your grandpappy had a burr under his tail an’ bucked it out on you.”

“You might see it that way. You know, Anse, I’d like to see Texas—”

“After we finish up this heah war, compadre, we can jus’ mosey down theah an’ look it over good. Happen you don’t take to Texas, why, theah’s New Mexico, the Arizona territory ... clean out to California, wheah they dip up that theah gold dust so free. Ain’t nothin’ sayin’ a man has to stay on one range all his born days—”

“Looks like the war ain’t doin’ too well.” Drew was watching the activity in the stockade.

“Well, we lost us Atlanta, sure enough. An’ every time we close up ranks, theah’s empty saddles showin’. But General Forrest, he’s still toughenin’ it out. Me, I’ll trail along with him any day in the week.”

“Hey!” Kirby was drawing a bead on a shaking bush. But the man edging through was Hew Wilkins, General Buford’s Sergeant of Scouts. He crawled up beside them to peer at the blockhouse.

“They’re pullin’ out!” The men in blue coats were lining up about a small wagon train.

Wilkins used binoculars for a closer look. “Your report was right; those are Negro troops!”

“No wonder they’re clearin’ out—fast.”

“Cheatin’ us outta a fight,” Kirby observed with mock seriousness.

“All the better. Kirby, you cut back and tell the General they’re givin’ us free passage. We can get the work done here, quick.”

“Back to axes, eh, an’ some nice dry firewood—an’ see what we can do to mess up the railroads for the Yankees. Only, seems like we’re messin’ up a sight of railroads, all down in our own part of the country. I’d like to be doin’ this up in one of them theah Yankee states like New York, say, or Indiana. Saw me some mighty fine railroads to cut up, that time General Morgan took us on a sashay through Indiana.”

Kirby got to his feet and stretched. Drew unwound his own lanky length to join the other.

“Maybe the old man will be leadin’ us up there, too—” Wilkins put away the binoculars.

“Rennie, we’ll move on down there and see if we can pick up any information.”

Two months or a little more since Harrisburg. The brazen heat had given way to torrents in mid-August, and the rain had made quagmire traps of roads, forming rapids of every creek and river—bogging down horses, men, and guns. But it had not bogged down Bedford Forrest. And one section of his small force, under the command of General Buford leading the Kentuckians, had held the Union forces in check, while the other, under Forrest’s personal leadership had swung past Smith and his blue coats in a lightning raid on Memphis.

Now in September the rain was still falling in the mountains, keeping the streams up to bank level. And Forrest was also on the move. After the Memphis raid there had been a second honing of his army into razor sharpness, a razor to be brought down with its cutting edge across those railroads which carried the lifeblood of supplies to the Union army around Atlanta.

Blockhouses fell to dogged attack or surrendered to bluff, the bluff of Forrest’s name. The Kentucky General Buford was leading his division of the command up the railroad toward the Elk River Bridge and that was below the scouts now, being abandoned by the Union troopers.

Two factors had brought Drew into Buford’s Scouts. If Dr. Cowan, Forrest’s own chief surgeon, had not been the medical officer to whom Drew had by chance delivered those saddlebags of drugs, and if Abram Buford had not been a division commander, Drew might not have been able to push through his transfer. But Cowan had spoken to Forrest, and General Buford had known both the Barretts and the Mattocks all his life.

Boyd had recovered speedily from the leg wound, but his convalescence from heat exhaustion and the ensuing complications was still in progress, though he had reached the point that only General Buford’s strict orders had kept him from this second raid into enemy territory. Now he was safe in a private home in Meridian, where he was being treated as a son of the house, and Drew had even managed to send a letter to Cousin Merry with that information. He only hoped that she had received it.

As for the change in commands, Drew was content. Perhaps the more so since the news had come less than two weeks earlier that John Morgan was dead. He had gone down fighting,

shooting it out with Yankee troopers in a rain-wet garden in Tennessee on a Sunday morning. Men were dying, dead ... and maybe a cause was dying, too. Drew's thought flinched away from that line now, trying to keep to the job before them. There was the abandoned stockade to destroy, the trestle and bridge to knock to pieces, and if they had time, the tracks to tear up, heat, and twist out of shape.

Wilkins stood behind a pile of wood cut for engine fuel. "They are on the run, all right. Headin' toward Pulaski."

"Think they'll make a stand there?"

"One guess is as good as another. If they do, we'll smoke them out. Keep 'em busy and chase 'em clean out of their hats and back to camp."

The destruction of the blockhouse and the trestle could be left to the army behind; the scouts moved on again.

"The boys are havin' themselves a time." Kirby returned to his post with the advance. "Tyin' bowknots in rails gits easier all the time. When this heah campaign is over, we'll know more 'bout takin' railroads apart than the fellas who make 'em know 'bout puttin' 'em together."

"Trouble!" Drew reined in Hannibal and waved to Wilkins. "There's a picket up there...."

Kirby's gaze followed the other's pointing finger. "Kinda green at the business," he commented critically. "Sorta makin' a sittin' target of hisself. Like to tickle him up with a shot. We don't git much action outta this."

"I'd say we're plannin' to go in now."

A squad of Buford's advance filtered up through the trees, and an officer, his insignia of rank two-inch strips of yellowish ribbon sewed to the collar of a mud-brown coat, was conferring with Wilkins. Then the clear notes of the bugle charge rang out.

Forrest's men were as adept as Morgan's raiders in making a show of force seem twice the number of men actually in the field. They now whirled in and out of a wild pattern which should impress the Yankee picket with the fact that at least a full regiment was advancing.

Three miles from Pulaski the Yankees made a stand, slamming back with all they had, but Buford was pushing just as hard and determinedly. Gray-brown boiled out of cover and charged, yelling. That electric spark of reckless determination which had taken the Kentucky columns up the slope at Harrisburg flashed again from man to man. Drew tasted the old headiness which could sweep a man out of sanity, send him plunging ahead, aware only of the waiting enemy.

The Union lines broke under those shock waves; men ran for the town behind them. But there was no taking that town. By early afternoon they had them fenced in, held by a show of force. Only in the night, leaving their fires burning, the Confederates slipped away.

Rains hit again; guns and wagons bogged. But they kept on into rough-and-rocky country. They had taken enough horses from the Union corrals at the blockhouses to mount the men who had tramped patiently along the ruts in just that hope. Better still, sugar and coffee from the rich Yankee supply depot at the Brown farm was now filling Rebel stomachs.

Drew sat on his heels by a palm-sized fire, watching with weary content the tin pail boiling there. The aroma rising from it was one he had almost forgotten existed in this world of constant riding and poor forage.

"Hope it kicks in the middle an' packs double." Kirby rested a tin cup on one knee, ready and waiting. "Me, I like mine strong enough to rest a horseshoe on ... gentlelike."

“Yankees are obligin’, one way or another.” Drew licked his fingers appreciatively. He had been exploring the sugar supply. “I’ve missed sweetenin’.”

“Drink up, boys, and get ready to ride,” Wilkins said, coming out of the dark. “We’ve marchin’ orders.”

Kirby reached for the pot and poured its contents, with careful measurement, into each waiting cup. “Wheah to now, Sarge? Seems like we’ve covered most of this heah range already.”

“Huntsville. We have to locate a river crossin’.”

Drew looked up. “Startin’ back, Sarge?”

“Heard talk,” Wilkins admitted. “Most of the blue bellies in these parts are turnin’ lines to aim square at us. We can’t take on all of Sherman’s bully boys—”

“Got him riled, though, ain’t we? All right.” Kirby was energetically fanning the top of his steaming cup with his free hand. “Git this down to warm m’ toes, Sarge, an’ I’ll stick them same toes in the stirrups an’ jingle off. Come on, Drew, no man never joined up with the army to git hisself a comfortable life....”

Certainly that last statement of the Texan’s was proven correct during the next six days. A feint toward the Yankee garrison at Huntsville occupied the enemy until the wagon train and artillery moved on to the Tennessee River. And along its northern banks, Buford’s Scouts ranged. Already high for the season the waters were still rising. And all the transportation they could collect were three ferry boats at Florence and a few skiffs, not enough to serve all the Confederate force pushing for that escape route.

Athens, which Forrest had occupied on the upswing of the raid, was already back in Union hands, and the blue forces were closing in, in a countrywide sweep, backing the gray cavalry against the river.

By the third of October Buford had the boats in action, ferrying across men, equipment, and artillery in a steady stream of night-and-day oar labor. The stout General, mounted on a big mule, a large animal to carry a large man, gave the scouts new orders.

“Try downriver, boys. We’re in a pinchers here, and they may be goin’ to nip us—hard!” He rolled a big cheroot from a Yankee commissary store between his teeth, watching the wind whip the surface of the river into good-sized waves about the laboring boats. “Anything usable below Florence ... we want to know about it, and quick!”

Wilkins led them out at a steady trot. “We’ll take a look around Newport. Rough going, but I think I remember a place.”

However, the possibilities of Wilkins’ “place” did not seem too promising to Drew when they came out on a steep bluff some miles down the Tennessee.

“This is a heller of a river,” Kirby expressed his opinion forcibly. “Always spittin’ back in an hombre’s face. We’ve had plenty of trouble with it before.”

They were on a bank above a slough which was not more than two hundred feet wide. And beyond that was an island thickly overgrown with cane, oak, and hickory. The upper end of that was sandy, matted with driftwood, some of it partially afloat again.

“Use that for a steppin’ stone?” Drew asked.

“Best we’re goin’ to find. And if time’s runnin’ out, we’ll be glad to have it. Rennie, report in. We’ll do some more scoutin’, just to make sure there’ll be no surprises later.”

For more than thirty-six hours Buford had been ferrying. Artillery, wagons, and a large portion of his division were safely across. When Drew returned to the uproar along the river he found that the second half of the retreating forces, commanded by Forrest, were in town. And it was to Forrest that Drew was ordered to deliver his report.

He would never forget the first glimpse he'd had of Bedford Forrest—the officer sitting his big gray charger in the midst of a battle, whirling his standard to attract a broken rabble of men, knitting out of them, by sheer force of personality, a refreshed, striking force. Now Drew found himself facing quite a different person—a big, quiet, soft-spoken man who eyed the scout with gray-blue eyes.

“You’re Rennie, one of that Morgan company who joined at Harrisburg.”

“Yes, suh.”

“Morgan’s men fought at Chickamauga ... good men, good fighters. Said so then, never had any reason to change that. Now what’s this about an island downriver?”

Drew explained tersely, for he had a good idea that General Forrest wanted no wasting of time. Then at request he drew a rough sketch of the island and its approaches. Forrest studied it.

“Something to keep in mind. But I want to know that it’s clear. You boys picket it. If there’s any Union movement about, report it at once!”

“Yes, suh.”

If Yankee scouts had sighted the island, either they had not reported it or their superiors had not calculated what its value might be for hunted men—and to a leader who was used to improvising and carrying through more improbable projects than the one the island suggested.

At Shoal Creek a rear guard was holding off the Union advance which had started from Athens, the two pronged pinchers General Buford had foreseen. And now the island came into use.

Saddles and equipment were stripped from horses and piled into the boats brought down from Florence. Then the mounts were driven to the top of the bluff and over into the water some twenty feet below. Leaders of that leap were caught by their halters and towed behind the boats, the others swimming after.

Men and mounts burrowed back into the concealment of those thick canebrakes and were hidden along the southern shore of the overgrown strip of water-enclosed land. The Union pursuers came up on the bluff, but they did not see the ferrying from the south bank of the island, ferrying which kept up night and day for some forty-eight hours.

“Cold!” Kirby and Drew crouched together behind a screen of cane on the north side of the island, watching the bank above for any hostile move on the part of the enemy.

“General Forrest says no fires.”

“Yeah. You know, I jus’ don’t like this heah spread of water. This is the second time I’ve had to git across it with Old Man Death-an’-Disaster raisin’ dust from my rump with a double of his encouragin’ rope. Seems like the Tennessee ain’t partial to raidin’ parties.”

“Makes a good barrier when we’re on the other side,” Drew pointed out reasonably.

“So—”

Drew's Colt was already out, Kirby's carbine at ready. But the man who had cat-footed it through the cane was General Forrest himself.

"I thought"—the General eyed them both—"I would catch some of you young fools loafin' back heah as if nothin' was goin' on. If you don't want to roost heah all winter, you'd better come along. Last boats are leavin' now."

As they scrambled after their commander Drew realized that the General had made it his personal business to make sure none of the north side pickets were left behind in the last-minute withdrawal.

They piled into one of the waiting boats, catching up poles. Forrest took another. Then he balanced where he stood, glaring toward the bow of the boat. A lieutenant was there, his hands empty.

"You ... Mistuh—" Forrest's voice took on the ring Drew had heard at Harrisburg. "Wheah's your oar, Mistuh?"

The man was startled. "As an officer, suh—"

Still gripping his pole with one hand, the General swung out a long arm, catching the lieutenant hard on one cheek with enough force to send him over the gunwale into the river. The lieutenant splashed, flailing out his arms, until he caught at the pole Drew extended to him. As they hauled him aboard again, the General snorted.

"Now you, Mistuh officer, take that oar theah and git to work! If I have to knock you over again, you can just stay in. We shall all pull out of this together!"

The lieutenant bent to the oar hastily as they moved out into the full current of the river.

## 10. “Dismount! Prepare To Fight Gunboats!”

“Drew!”

He turned his head on the saddle which served him as a temporary pillow and was aware of the smell of mule, strong, and the smell of a wood fire, less strong, and last of all, of corn bread baked in the husk, and, not so familiar, bacon frying—all the aromas of camp—with the addition of food which could be, and had been on occasion, very temporary. Squinting his smarting eyes against the sun’s glare, Drew sat up. With four days of hard riding by night and scouting by day only a few hours behind him, he was still extremely weary.

Boyd squatted by his side, a folded sheet of paper in his hand.

“... letter ...”

Drew must have missed part during his awakening. Now he turned away from the sun and tried to pay better attention.

“From who?” he asked rustily.

“Mother. She got the one you sent from Meridian, Drew! And when Crosely went home for a horse she gave him these to bring back through the lines. Drew, your grandfather’s dead....”

Odd, he did not feel anything at all at that news. When he was little he had been afraid of Alexander Mattock. Then he had faced out his fear and all the other emotions bred in him during those years of being Hunt Rennie’s son in a house where Hunt Rennie was a symbol of black hatred; he had faced up to his grandfather on the night he left Red Springs to join the army in ‘62. And then Drew had discovered that he was free. He had seen his grandfather as he would always remember him now, an old man eaten up by his hatred, soured by acts Drew knew would never be explained. And from that moment, grandfather and grandson were strangers. Now, well, now he wished—for just a fleeting second or two—that he did know what lay behind all that rage and waste and blackness in the past. Alexander Mattock had been a respected man. As hardly more than a boy he had followed Andy Jackson down to New Orleans and helped break the last vestige of British power in the Gulf. He had bred fine horses, loved the land, and his word was better than most men’s sworn oaths. He had had a liking for books, and had served his country in Congress, and could even have been governor had he not declined the nomination. He was a big man, in many ways a great and honorable man. Drew could admit that, now that he had made a life for himself beyond Alexander Mattock’s shadow. A great man ... who had hated his own grandson.

“This is yours....” Boyd pulled a second sheet from the folds of the first. Drew smoothed it out to read:

My dear boy:

Your letter from Meridian reached me just two days ago, having been many weeks on the way, and I am taking advantage of Henry Crosely’s presence home on leave to reply. I want you to know that I do not, in any way, consider you to blame for Boyd’s joining General organ’s command. He had long been restless here, and it was only a matter of time and chance before he followed his brother.

I know that you must have done all that you could to dissuade him after your aunt’s appeal to you, but I had already accepted failure on this point. Just as I know that it was your efforts



which established him under good care in Meridian. Do not, Drew, reproach yourself for my son's headstrong conduct. I know Boyd's stubbornness. There is this strain in all the Barretts. You may not have heard the news from Red Springs, though I know your aunt has endeavored to find a means of communicating it to you. Your grandfather suffered another and fatal seizure on the third of August and passed away in a matter of hours.

I do not believe that it will come as any surprise to you, my dear boy, that he continued in his attitude toward you to the last, making no provision for you in his will. However, both Major Forbes and Marianna believe this to be unfair, and they intend to see that matters are not left so.

If and when this cruel war is over—and the news we receive each day can not help but make us believe that the end is not far off—do, I beg of you, Drew, come home to us. Sheldon spoke once of some plan of yours to go west, to start a new life in new surroundings. But, Drew, do not let any bitterness born out of the past continue to poison the future for you.

Perhaps what I say may be of value since I have always held your welfare dear to me, and you have a place in my heart. Melanie Mattock Rennie was my dearest friend for all of her life, your father, my cousin. And you were Sheldon's playmate and comrade for his short time on this earth.

Come home to us, I ask you to do this, my dear boy. We shall welcome you.

I pray for you and for Boyd, that you may both be brought safely through all the dangers which surround a soldier, that you may come home to us on a happier day. Your concern for and care of Boyd is something which makes me most grateful and happy. He had lost a brother, one of his own blood, but I content myself with the belief that he has with him now another who will provide him with what guidance and protection he can give.

Remember—we want you both here with us once more, and let it be soon.

With affection and love,

Drew could not have told whether her "Meredith Barrett" at the bottom of the page was as firmly penned as ever. To him it was now wavering from one misty letter to the next. Slowly he made a business of folding the sheet into a neat square of paper which he could fit into the safe pocket under his belt. A crack was forming in the shell he had started to grow on the night he first rode out of Red Springs, and he now feared losing its protection. He wanted to be the Drew Rennie who had no ties anywhere, least of all in Kentucky. Yet not for the world would he have lost that letter, though he did not want to read it again.

"Rennie! Double-quick it; the General's askin' for you!"

Boyd started up eagerly from his perch on another saddle. He was, Drew decided, like a hound puppy, so determined to be taken hunting that he watched each and every one of them all the time. He had been allowed to ride on this return visit to West Tennessee with the condition that he would act as one of Drew's scout couriers, a position which kept him under his elder's control and attached to General Buford's Headquarters Company.

Kirby reached out a brown hand to catch Boyd by the sleeve and anchor him.

"Now, kid, jus' because the big chief sends for him, it ain't no sign he's goin' to take the warpath immediately, if not sooner. Ease off, an' keep your moccasins greased!"

Drew laughed. Nobody who rode with Forrest could complain of a lack of action. He had heard that some general in the East had said he would give a dollar or some such to see a dead cavalryman. Well, there had been sight of those at Harrisburg and some at the

blockhouses. Forrest stated that Morgan's men could fight; he did not have to say that of his own.

Now they were heading into another sort of war altogether. Drew hadn't figured out just how Bedford Forrest intended to fight river gunboats with horse soldiers, but the scout didn't doubt that his general had a plan, one which would work, barring any extra bad luck.

They were setting a trap along the Tennessee right now, lying in the enemies' own back pasture to do it. South, downriver, was Johnsonville, where Sherman had his largest cache of supplies, from which he was feeding, clothing, equipping the army now slashing through the center of the South. They had been able to cripple his rail system partially on that raid two weeks earlier; now they were aiming to cut the river ribbon of the Yankee network.

Buford's division occupied Fort Heiman, well above the crucial section. The Confederates also held Paris Landing. Now they were set to put the squeeze on any river traffic. Guns were brought into station—Buford's two Parrots, one section of Morton's incomparable battery with Bell's Tennesseans down at the Landing. They had moved fast, covered their traces, and Drew himself could testify that the Yankees were as yet unsuspecting of their presence in the neighborhood.

He found General Buford now and reported.

"Rennie, see this bend...." The General's finger stabbed down on the sketch map the scouts had prepared days earlier. "I've been thinkin' that a vedette posted right here could give us perhaps a few minutes of warning ahead when anything started to swim into this fishnet of ours. General Forrest wants some transports, maybe even a gunboat or two. We're in a good position to deliver them to him, but before we begin the game, I want most of the aces right here—" He smacked the map against the flat of his other palm.

"A signal system, suh. Say one of those—" Drew pointed to the very large and very red handkerchief trailing from Buford's coat pocket. "Wave one of those out of the bushes: one wave for a transport, two for a gunboat."

The General jerked the big square from his pocket, inspected it critically, and then called over his shoulder.

"Jasper, you get me another one of these—out of the saddlebags!"

When the Negro boy came running with the piece of brilliant cloth, Buford motioned for him to give it to Drew.

"Mind you, boy," he added with some seriousness, "I want that back in good condition when you report in. Those don't grow handily on trees. I have only three left."

"Yes, suh," Drew accepted it with respect. "I'm to stay put until relieved, suh?"

"Yes. Better take someone to spell you. I don't want any misses."

Back at the scout fire Drew collected Boyd. This was an assignment the boy could share. And shortly they had hollowed out for themselves a small circular space in the thicket, with two carefully prepared windows, one on the river, the other for their signal flag.

It was almost evening, and Drew did not expect any night travel. Morning would be the best time. He divided the night into watches, however, and insisted they keep watch faithfully.

"Kinda cold," Boyd said, pulling his blanket about his shoulders.

"No fire here." Drew handed over his companion's share of rations, some cold corn bread and bacon carefully portioned out of their midday cooking.

“Member how Mam Gusta used to make us those dough geese? Coffee-berry eyes.... I could do with some coffee berries now, but not to make eyes for geese!”

Dough geese with coffee-berry eyes! The big summer kitchen at Oak Hill and the small, energetic, and very dark skinned woman who ruled it with a cooking spoon of wood for her scepter and abject obedience from all who came into her sphere of influence and control. Dough geese with coffee-berry eyes; Drew hadn't thought of those for years and years.

“I could do with some of Mam Gusta's peach pie.” He was betrayed by memory into that wistfulness.

“Peach pie all hot in a bowl with cream to top it,” Boyd added reverently. “And turkey with the fixin's—or maybe young pork! Seems to me you think an awful lot about eatin' when you're in the army. I can remember the kitchen at home almost better than I can my own room....”

“Anse, he was talkin' last night about some Mexican eatin' he did down 'long the border. Made it sound mighty interestin'. Drew, after this war is over and we've licked the Yankees good and proper, why don't we go down that way and see Texas? I'd like to get me one of those wild horses like those Anse's father was catchin'.”

“We still have a war on our hands here,” Drew reminded him. But the thought of Texas could not easily be dug out of mind, not when a man had carried it with him for most of his life. Texas, where he had almost been born, Hunt Rennie's Texas. What was it like? A big wild land, an outlaws' land. Didn't they say a man had “gone to Texas” when the sheriff closed books on a fugitive? Yes, Drew had to admit he wanted to see Texas.

“Drew, you have any kinfolk in Texas?”

“Not that I know about.” Not for the first time he wondered about that. There had been no use asking any questions of his grandfather or of Uncle Murray. And Aunt Marianna had always dismissed his inquiries with the plea that she herself had only been a child at the time Hunt Rennie came to Red Springs and knew very little about him. Odd that Cousin Merry had been so reticent, too. But Drew had pieced out that something big and ugly must have happened to begin all the painful tangle which had led from his grandfather's cold hatred for Hunt Rennie, that hatred which had been transferred to Hunt Rennie's son when the original target was gone.

When Drew first joined the army and met Texans he had hoped that one of them might recognize his name and say:

“Rennie? You any kin to the Rennies of—” Of where? The Brazos, the Rio country, West Texas? He had no idea in which part of that sprawling republic-become-a-state the Rennies might have been born and bred. But how he had longed in those first lonely weeks of learning to be a soldier to find one of his own—not of the Mattock clan!

“Yes, I would like to see Texas!” Boyd pulled the blanket closer about his shoulders, curling up on his side of their bush-walled hole. “Wish these fool Yankees would know when they're licked and get back home so we could do somethin' like that.” He closed his eyes with a child's determination to sleep, and by now a soldier's ability to do so when the opportunity offered.

Drew watched the river. The dusk was night now with the speed of the season. And the crisp of autumn hung over the water. This was the twenty-ninth of October; he counted out the dates. How long they could hold their trap they didn't know, but at least long enough to wrest from the enemy some of the supplies they needed far worse than Sherman's men did.

General Buford had let four transports past their masked batteries today because they had carried only soldiers. But sooner or later a loaded ship was going to come up. And when that did—Drew’s hand assured him that the General’s red handkerchief was still inside against his ribs where he had put it for safekeeping.

In the early morning Drew slipped down to the river’s edge behind a screen of willow to dip the cold water over his head and shoulders—an effective way to clear the head and banish the last trace of sleep.

The sun was up and it must have been shortly before eight when they sighted her, a Union transport riding low in the water, towing two barges. A quick inspection through the binoculars he had borrowed from Wilkins told Drew that this was what the General wanted. He passed the signal to Boyd.

“*Mazeppa*,” he read the name aloud as the ship wallowed by their post. She was passing the lower battery now, and there was no sign of any gunboat escort. But when their quarry was well in the stretch between the two lower batteries, they opened fire on her, accurately enough to send every shell through the ship. The pilot headed her for the opposite shore, slammed the prow into the bank, and a stream of crew and men leaped over at a dead run to hunt shelter in the woods beyond.

Men were already down on the Confederate-held side of the river, trying to knock together a raft on which to reach their prize. When that broke apart Drew and Boyd saw one man seize upon a piece of the wreckage and kick his way vigorously into the current heading for the stern of the grounded steamer. He came back in the *Mazeppa*’s yawl with a line, and she was warped back into the hands of the waiting raiders.

There was a wave of gray pouring into the ship, returning with bales, boxes, bundles. Then Drew, who had snatched peeps at the activity between searching the upper waters for trouble, saw the gunboats coming—three of them. Again Boyd signaled, but the naval craft made better speed than the laden transport and they were already in position to lob shells among the men unloading the supply ships, though the batteries on the shore finally drove them off.

In the end they fired the prize, but she was emptied of her rich cargo. Shoes, blankets, clothing—you didn’t care whether breeches and coats were gray or blue when they replaced rags—food.

Kirby came to their sentry post, his arms full, a beatific smile on his face.

“What’ll you have, amigos—pickles, pears, Yankee crackers, long sweetenin’—” He spread out a variety of such stores as they had almost forgotten existed. “You know, seein’ some of the prices on this heah sutlers’ stuff, I’m thinkin’ somebody’s sure gittin’ rich on this war. It ain’t nobody I know, though.”

They kept their trap as it was through the rest of the day and the following night without any more luck. When the next fish swam into the net it approached from the other side and not past the scout post. The steamer *Anna* progressed from Johnsonville, ran the gantlet of the batteries, and in spite of hard shelling, was not hit in any vital spot, escaping beyond. But when the transport *Venus*, towing two barges and convoyed by the gunboat *Undine*, tried to duplicate that feat they were caught by the accurate fire of the masked guns. Trying to turn and steam back the way they had come, they were pinned down. And while they were held there, another steamer entered the upper end of the trap and was disabled. Guns moved by sweat, force, will and hand-power, were wrestled around the banks to attend to the *Undine*. And after a brisk duel her officers and crew abandoned her.

“We got us a navy,” Kirby announced when he brought their order to leave the picket post. “The Yankees sure are kind, presentin’ us with a couple of ships jus’ outta the goodness of their hearts.”

The *Undine* and the *Venus*, manned by volunteers, did steam with the caution of novice sailors upriver when on the first of November troops and artillery started to Johnsonville.

“Hi!” One of the new Horse Marines waved to the small party of scouts, weaving in and out to gain their position at the head of the column. “Want to leave them feed sacks for us to carry?”

Kirby put a protecting hand over his saddle burden of extra and choice rations.

“This heah grub ain’t gonna be risked out on no water,” he called back. “Nor blown up by no gunboat neither.”

Those fears were realized, if not until two days later, when the scouts were too far ahead to witness the defeat of Forrest’s river flotilla. The *Undine*, outfought by two Yankee gunboats, was beached and set afire. The same fate struck the *Venus* a day afterward. But by that time the raiders had reached the bank of the river opposite Johnsonville and were making ready to destroy the supply depot there.

Drew, Kirby, and Wilkins, with Boyd to ride courier, had already explored the bank and tried to estimate the extent of the wealth lying in the open, across the river.

“Too bad we jus’ can’t sorta cut a few head outta that theah herd,” Kirby said wistfully. “Heah we are so poor our shadows got holes in ‘em, an’ lookit all that jus’ lyin’ theah waitin’ for somebody to lay a hot iron on its hide—”

“More likely to lay a hot iron on your hide!” countered Drew. But he could not deny that the river landing with its thickly clustered transports, gunboats and barges, the acres of shoreline covered with every kind of army store, was a big temptation to try something reckless.

They had illustrious company during their prowling that afternoon. Forrest himself and Captain Morton, that very young and very talented artillery commander, were making a reconnaissance before placing the batteries in readiness. And during the night those guns were moved into position. At midafternoon the next day the reduction of Johnsonville began.

Smoke, then flame, tore holes in those piles of goods. Warehouses blazed. By nightfall for a mile upriver and down they faced a solid sheet of fire, and they smelled the tantalizing odor of burning bacon, coffee, sugar, and saw blue rivers of blazing liquid running free.

“I still say it’s a mighty shame, all that goin’ to waste,” commented Kirby sadly.

“Well, anyway it ain’t goin’ into the bellies of Sherman’s men,” Drew replied.

The Confederate force was already starting withdrawal, battery by battery, as the wasteland of the fire lighted them on their way. And now the Yankee gunboats were burning with explosions of shells, fired by their own crews lest they fall into Rebel hands. It was a wild scene, giving the command plenty of light by which to fall back into the country they still dominated. The reduction of the depot was a complete success.

Scouts stayed with the rear guard this time, so it was that Drew saw again those two who had so carefully picked the gun stands only twenty-four hours before. General Forrest and his battery commander came down once more to survey the desolation those guns had left as a smoking, stinking scar.

Drew heard the slow, reflective words the General spoke:

“John, if you were given enough guns, and I had me enough men, we could whip old Sherm clean off the face of the earth!”

And then the scout caught Kirby’s whisper of assent to that. “The old man ain’t foolin’; he could jus’ do it!”

“Maybe he could,” Drew agreed. He wished fiercely that Morton did have his guns and Forrest all the men who had been wasted, who had melted away from his ranks—or were buried. A man had to have tools before he could build, but their tools were getting mighty few, mighty old, and.... He tried to close his mind to that line of thought. They were on the move again, and Forrest had certainly proven here that though Atlanta might be gone, there was still an effective Confederate Army in the field, ready and able to twist the tail of any Yankee!

## 11. The Road to Nashville

Sleet drove at the earth with an oblique, knife-edged whip. The half-ice, half-rain struck under water-logged hat brims, found the neck opening where the body covering, improvised from a square of appropriated Yankee oilcloth, lay about the shoulders.

“I’m thinkin’ we sure have struck a stream lengthwise.” Kirby’s Tejano crowded up beside Hannibal. “Can’t otherwise be so many bog holes in any stretch of country. An’ if we ever do come across those dang-blasted ordnance wagons, we won’t know ‘em from a side of ‘dobe anyway.”

They had reined in on the edge of a mud hole in which men sweated—in spite of the sleet which plastered thin clothing to their gaunt bodies—swore, and put dogged endurance to the test as they labored with drag ropes and behind wheels encrusted with pendulous pounds of mud, to propel a supply wagon out of the bog into which it had sunk when the frozen crust of the rutted road had broken apart. The Army of the Tennessee, now fighting storms, winter rains, snow and hail, was also fighting men as valiantly, engaged in General Hood’s great gamble of an all-out attack on Nashville. They had a hope—and a slim chance—to sweep through the Union lines back up into Tennessee and Kentucky, and perhaps to wall off Sherman in the south and repair the loss of Atlanta.

Hannibal brayed, shifting his weary feet in the churned-up muck of the field edge. The ground, covered with a scum of ice at night, was a trap for animals as well as vehicles. Breaking through that glassy surface to the glutinous stuff beneath, they suffered cuts deep enough to draw blood above hoof level.

Drew called to the men laboring at the stalled wagon.

“Ordnance? Buford’s division?”

He didn’t really expect any sort of a promising answer. This was worse than trying to hunt a needle in a stack of hay, this tracing—through the fast darkening night—the lost ordnance wagons, caught somewhere in or behind the infantry train. But ahead, where Forrest’s cavalry was thrusting into the Union lines at Spring Hill, men were going into battle with three rounds or less to feed their carbines and rifles. Somehow the horse soldiers had pushed into a hot, full-sized fight and the scouts had to locate those lost wagons and get them up to the front lines.

A living figure of mud spat out a mouthful of that viscous substance in order to answer.

“This heah ain’t no ordnance—not from Buford’s neither! Put your backs into it now, yo’ wagon-dogs! Git to it an’ push!”

Under that roar the excavation squad went into straining action. Oxen, their eyes bulbous in their skulls from effort, set brute energy against yokes along with the men. The mud eventually gave grip, and the wagon moved.

Drew rode on, the two half-seen shapes which were Boyd and Kirby in his wake. A dripping branch flicked bits of ice into his face. The dusk was a thickening murk, and with the coming of the November dark, their already pitiful chance of locating the wagons dwindled fast.

There was a distant crackle of carbine and rifle fire. The struggle must still be in progress back there. At least the stragglers about them were still moving up. No retreat from Spring Hill, unless the Yankees were making that. All Drew’s party could do was to continue on

down the road, asking their question at each wagon, stalled in the mud or traveling at a snail's pace.

"D'you see?" Boyd cried out. "Those men were barefoot!" Involuntarily he swung one of his own booted feet out of the stirrup as if to assure himself that he still had adequate covering for his cold toes.

"It ain't the first time in this heah war," Kirby remarked. "They'll ketch 'em a Yankee. The blue bellies, they're mighty obligin' 'bout wearin' good shoes an' such, an' lettin' themselves be roped with all their plunder on. Some o' 'em, who I had the pleasure of surveyin' through Sarge's glasses this mornin', have overcoats—good warm ones. Now that's what'd pleasure a poor cold Texas boy, makin' him forgit his troubles. You keep your eyes sighted for one of them theah overcoats, Boyd. I'll be right beholden to you for it."

Hannibal brayed again and switched his rope tail. His usual stolid temperament showed signs of wear.

"Airin' th' lungs that way sounds like a critter gittin' set to make war medicine. A hardtail don't need no hardware but his hoofs to make a man regret knowin' him familiar-like—"

Drew had reached another wagon.

"Ordnance? Buford's?" He repeated the well-worn question without hope.

"Yeah, what about it?"

For a moment the scout thought he had not heard that right. But Kirby's crow of delight assured him that he had been answered in the affirmative.

"What about it?" Boyd echoed indignantly. "We've been huntin' you for hours. General Buford wants...."

The man who had answered Drew was vague in the dusk, to be seen only in the limited light of the lantern on the driver's seat. But they did not miss the pugnacious set of knuckles on hips, nor the truculence which overrode the weariness in his voice.

"Th' General can want him a lotta things in this heah world, sonny. What the Good Lord an' this heah mud lets him have is somethin' else again. We've been pushin' these heah dang-blasted-to-Richmond wagons along, mostly with our bare hands. Does he want 'em any faster, he can jus' send us back thirty or forty fresh teams, along with good weather—an' we'll be right up wheah he wants us in no time—"

"The boys are out of ammunition," Drew said quietly. "And they are tryin' to dig out the Yankees."

"You ain't tellin' me nothin', soldier, that I don't know or ain't already heard." The momentary flash of anger had drained out of the other's voice; there was just pure fatigue weighting the tongue now. "We're comin', jus' as fast as we can—"

"You pull on about a quarter mile and there's a turnout; that way you'll make better time," Drew suggested. "We'll show you where."

"All right. We're comin'."

In the end they all pitched to, lending the pulling strength of their mounts, and the power of their own shoulders when the occasion demanded. Somehow they got on through the dark and the cold and the mud. And close to dawn they reached their goal.

But that same dark night had lost the Confederate Army their chance of victory. The Union command had not been safely bottled up at Spring Hill. Through the night hours Schofield's



army had marched along the turnpike, within gunshot of the gray troops, close enough for Hood's pickets to hear the talk of the retreating men. Now they must be pursued toward Franklin. The Army of the Tennessee was herding the Yankees right enough, but with a kind of desperation which men in the ranks could sense.

Buford's division held the Confederate right wing. Drew, acting as courier for the Kentucky general, saw Forrest—with his tough, undefeated, and undefeatable escort—riding ahead.

They had Wilson's Cavalry drawn up to meet them. But they had handled Wilson before, briskly and brutally. This was the old game they knew well. Drew saw the glitter of sabers along the Union ranks and smiled grimly. When were the Yankees going to learn that a saber was good for the toasting of bacon and such but not much use in the fight? Give him two Colts and a carbine every time! There was a fancy dodge he had seen some of the Texans use; they strung extra revolver cylinders to the saddle horn and snapped them in for reloading. It was risky but sure was fast.

"They've got Springfields." He heard Kirby's satisfied comment.

"I'm goin' to get me one of those," Boyd began, but Drew rounded on him swiftly.

"No, you ain't! They may look good, but they ain't much. You can't reload 'em in the saddle with your horse movin', and all they're good for in a mixup is a fancy sort of club."

The Confederate infantry were moving up toward the Union breastworks, part of which was a formidable stone wall. And now came the orders for their own section to press in. They pushed, hard and heavy, while swirls of blue cavalry fought, broke, re-formed to meet their advance, and broke again. They routed out pockets of blue infantry, sending some pelting back toward the Harpeth.

A wave of retreating Yankees crossed the shallow river. Forrest's men dismounted to fight and took the stream on foot, the icy water splashing high. It was wild and tough, the slam of man meeting man. Drew wrested a guidon from the hold of a blue-coated trooper as Hannibal smashed into the other's mount with bared teeth and pawing hoofs. Waving the trophy over his head and yelling, he pounded on at a knot of determined infantry, aware that he was leading others from Buford's still-mounted headquarter's company, and that they were going to ride right over the Yankee soldiers. Men threw away muskets and rifles, raised empty hands, scattered in frantic leaps from that charge.

Then they were rounding up their blue-coated prisoners and Drew, the pole of the captured guidon braced in the crook of his elbow as he reloaded his revolver, realized that the shadows were thickening, that the day was almost gone.

"Rennie!" Still holding the guidon, Drew obeyed the beckoning hand of one of the General's aides. He put Hannibal to a rocking gallop to come up with the officer.

"Withdrawin'—behind the river. Pass the word to gather in!"

Drew cantered back to wave in Kirby, Boyd, and the others who had made that charge with him. It was retreat again, but they did not know then that Franklin had cost them Hood's big gamble. Forty-five hundred men swept out of the gray forces—killed, wounded, missing, prisoners. Five irreplaceable generals were dead; six more, wounded or captured. The Army of the Tennessee was slashed, badly torn ... but it was not yet destroyed.

That night the cavalry was on the march, driven by Forrest's tireless energy. They hit skirmishers at a garrisoned crossroads, using Morton's field batteries to cut them a free path. And through the bitter days of early December they continued to show their teeth to some purpose.

Blockhouses along the railroads and along the Cumberland were taken, with Murfreesboro their goal. Life was a constant alert, a plugging away of weary men, worn-out horses, bogged-down wagons, relieved now and then from the morass of exhaustion by sharp spurts of fighting, the satisfaction of rounding up a Yankee patrol or blockhouse squad, the taking of some supply train and finding in its wagons enough to give them all mouthfuls of food.

Murfreesboro was strongly garrisoned by the enemy, too strong to be stormed. But on the morning of the seventh a Yankee detachment came out of that fort and Forrest's men deployed to entice them farther afield. Buford's command was lying in wait—let the blue bellies get far enough from the town and they could cut in between, perhaps even overrun the remaining garrison and accomplish what Forrest himself had believed impossible, the taking of Murfreesboro.

They made part of that ... fought their way into the town. Drew pounded along in a compact squad led by Wilkins. He saw the sergeant sway in the saddle, dropping reins, his face a clay-gray which Drew recognized of old. Snatching at the now trailing rein, Drew jerked the other's mount out of the main push.

The sergeant's head turned slowly; his mouth looked almost square as he fought to say something. Then he slumped, tumbling from the saddle into the embrace of an ornamental bush as his horse clattered along the sidewalk. Drew knew he was already dead.

Buford's men went into Murfreesboro right enough, well into its heart. But they could not hold the town. Only that thrust was deep and well timed; it saved the whole command. For, though they did not know it yet, on the pike the infantry had broken. For the first time Forrest had seen men under his orders run from the enemy in panic-stricken terror. Only the cavalry had saved them from a wholesale rout.

Drew trudged over the stubble of a field, leading Hannibal and Wilkins' mount. There had been no way of bringing the sergeant's body out of town, and Drew had reported the death to Lieutenant Traggart, who officered the scouts. He felt numb as he headed for the spark of fire which marked their temporary camp, numb not only with cold and hunger, but with all the days of cold, hunger, fighting, and marching which lay behind. It seemed to him that this war had gone on forever, and he found it very hard to remember when he had slept soundly enough not to arouse to a quick call, when he had dared to ride across a field or down a road without watching every bit of cover, every point on the landscape which could mask an enemy position or serve the same purpose for the command behind him.

As he came up to the fire he thought that even the flames looked cold—stunted somehow—not because there had not been enough wood to feed them, but because the fire itself was old and tired. Blinking at the flames, he stood still, unaware of the fact that he was swaying on feet planted a little apart. He could not move, not of his own volition.

Someone coughed in the shadow fringe beyond the light of those tired flames. It was a short hard cough, the kind which hurt Drew's ears as much as its tearing must have hurt the throat which harbored it. He turned his head a fraction to see the bundle of blankets housing the cougher. Then the reins of mule and horse were twisted from his stiff fingers, and Kirby's drawl broke through the coughing.

“You, Larange, take ‘em back to the picket line, will you?”

The Texan's hands closed about Drew's upper arms just below the arch of his shoulders, steered him on, and then pressed him down into the limited range of the fire's heat. From somewhere a tin plate materialized, and was in Drew's hold. He regarded its contents with eyes which had trouble focusing.

A thick liquid curled stickily back and forth across the surface of the plate as he strove to hold it level with trembling hands. Into the middle of that lake Kirby dropped white squares of Yankee crackers, and the pungent smell of molasses reached Drew's nostrils, making his mouth water.

Snatching at the crackers, he crammed his mouth with a dripping square coated with molasses. As he began to chew he knew that nothing before that moment had ever tasted so good, been so much an answer to all the disasters of the day. The world shrank; it was now the size of a battered tin plate smeared with molasses and the crumbs of stale crackers.

Drew downed the mass avidly. Kirby was beside him again, a steaming tin cup ready.

"This ain't nothin' but hotted water. But maybe it can make you think you're drinkin' somethin' more interestin'."

With the tin cup in his hands, Drew discovered he could pay better attention to his surroundings. He glanced around the small circle of men who messed together. There was Larange, coming back from the horse lines, Webb, the Tennessean from the mountains, Croff and Weatherby, Cherokees of the Indian Nations, and Kirby, of course. But—Drew was searching beyond the Texan for the other who should be there.

Absently he sipped the hot water, almost afraid to ask a question. Then, just because of his inner fears, he forced out the words: "Where's Boyd?"

When Kirby did not answer, Drew's head lifted. He put down his cup and caught the Texan's arm.

"He made it out of town; I know that. But where *is* he?"

"Ovah theah." Kirby nodded at the blanket-wrapped figure in the shadows. "Seems like he ain't feelin' too well..."

Drew wasted no time in getting to his feet. On his hands and knees, he scrambled across the space separating him from the roll of blankets. His questing hand smoothed across a ragged bullet tear in the top one, recognizing it to be Kirby's by that mark. The pale oval of Boyd's face turned toward him.

"What's the matter, boy?"

Drew could hear the other's harsh, fast breathing just as he had when they had found the injured boy at Harrisburg. Drew's fingers touched a burning-hot cheek.

"Got ... me ... sniffles." Boyd's mumble ended in another bout of those sharp coughs. "Member—sniffles? Hot soup an' bricks in bed, an' onion cloth for the throat..." He repeated all the Oak Hill remedies for a severe cold.

Bricks to warm the bed, hot soup of Mam Gusta's expert concocting, a thick onion poultice to ease the pain in throat and chest and draw out inflammation: every one of those were as far beyond reach now as Oak Hill itself! For a moment Drew was gripped with a panic born of utter frustration.

"Shelly? You there, Shelly?" Boyd's hoarse voice came from the dark. "I'm sure thirsty, Shelly!"

Drew turned his head. Kirby had been behind him, but now the Texan was back to the fire, ladling more hot water out of the pot. When he returned, Weatherby was with him. Drew slipped his arm under that restlessly turning head to support the boy while the Texan held the tin cup to Boyd's lips. They got a few mouthfuls into him before he turned his head away with a ghost of some of his old petulance.

“I’m hungry, Shelly. Tell Mam Gusta....”

Weatherby squatted down on the other side of Boyd’s limp body and put his hand to the boy’s forehead.

“Fever.”

“Yes.” Drew knew that much.

“There’s a farmhouse two miles that way.” Weatherby nodded to the south. “Maybe nobody there, but it will be cover—”

“You can find it?” Drew demanded.

The Cherokee scout answered quickly. “Yes. You tell the lieutenant, and we’ll go there.”

Kirby’s hand rested on Drew’s shoulder for a moment. “I’ll track down Traggart. You and Weatherby here get the kid into that cover as quick as you can. This ain’t no weather for an hombre with a cough to be out sackin’ in the bush.”

Kirby was back again before they had rigged a blanket stretcher between two horses.

“The lieutenant says to stay with th’ kid till mornin’. He’ll send the doc along as soon as he can find him. Trouble is, we may have to ride on tomorrow....”

But Drew put that worry out of his mind. No use thinking about tomorrow; the present moment was the most important. With Weatherby as their guide, they started off at a walk, heading into the night across ice-rimmed fields while the rising wind brought frost to bite in the air they pulled into their lungs.

There was no light showing in the black bulk of the house to which Weatherby steered them. It was small, hardly better than a cabin, but the door swung open as Kirby knocked on it; and they could smell the cold, stale odor of a deserted and none-too-clean dwelling. But it was shelter, and exploring in the dark, Kirby announced that there was firewood piled beside the hearth.

By the light of the blaze Weatherby brought alive they found an old bedstead backed against the wall, a tangle of filthy quilts cascading from it. One look at them assured Drew that Boyd would be far better left in his blankets on the floor itself.

The Cherokee scout prowled the room, looking into the rickety wall cupboards, venturing through another door into a second smaller room, really a lean-to, and then going up the ladder into a loft.

“They left in a hurry, whoever lived here,” he reported. “They left this—” He held out a dried, shrunken piece of shriveled salt beef.

“We can boil it,” Kirby suggested. “Make a kinda broth; it might help the kid. Any sign of a pot—?”

There was a pot, encrusted with corn-meal remains. Weatherby took it outside and returned, having scrubbed its interior as clean as possible, and filling it with a cup or so of water.

“There’s a well out there.”

Boyd was asleep, or at least Drew hoped it was sleep. The boy’s face was flushed, his breathing fast and uneven. But he hadn’t coughed for some time, and Drew began to hope. If he could have a quiet day or two here, he might be all right. Or else the surgeon could send him along on one of the wagons for the sick and wounded—the wagons already on the move south. If the doctor would certify that Boyd was ill....

Weatherby was busily shredding the wood-hard beef into the pot of water. His busy fingers stopped; his dark eyes were now on the outer door. Drew stiffened. Kirby's fingers closed about the butt of a Colt.

“What—” Drew asked in the faintest of whispers.

The Cherokee dropped the remainder of the uncut beef into the pot. Knife in hand, he moved with a panther's fluid grace to the begrimed window half-covered with a dusty rag.

## 12. Guerrillas

Boyd stirred. “Shelly?” His call sounded loud in the now silent room. Drew set his hand across the boy’s mouth, dividing his attention between Boyd and Weatherby. They had no way of putting out the fire, whose light might be providing a beacon through the dark. The Indian moved back a little from the window.

“Riders ... coming down the lane.” His whisper was a thread.

Now Drew could hear, too, the ring of hoofs on the iron-hard surface of the ground. A horse nickered—one of those which had brought Boyd’s stretcher, or perhaps one of the newcomers.

Kirby whipped about the door and was now lost in the shadows of the next room. Weatherby looked to Drew, then to the loft ladder against the far wall. In answer to that unspoken question, Drew nodded.

As the Cherokee swung up into the hiding place, Drew eased one of his Colts out of the holster, pushing it under the folds of the blankets around Boyd. Then he swung the pot, with its burden of beef and water, out over the fire—to hang on its chain to boil.

“Shelly?” Boyd asked again. His eyes were open, too bright, and he stared about him, plainly puzzled. Then he looked up at his nurse, and his forehead wrinkled with effort. “Drew?”

But Drew was listening to those oncoming hoofs. The strangers would see two horses. If they came in, they would find two men—it was as simple as that. And if they wore the wrong color uniforms, Weatherby above, and Kirby in the lean-to, would be ready and waiting for trouble. Drew laid fresh wood on the fire. Since he could not hide, he felt he’d better get as much light as possible in case of future trouble. The last they had heard the Yankees were concentrating at Murfreesboro and Nashville. But scouts would be out, dogging the flanks of the Confederate forces, just as he had done the opposite during the past few days.

There was silence now in the lane, a suspicious quiet. Drew deduced that the riders had dismounted and might be closing in about the cabin. A prickle of chill climbed his spine. He touched the lump under the blanket which was his own insurance.

The door burst open, sent banging inward by a booted foot. And at the same time a small pane in an opposite window shattered, the barrel of a rifle thrust in four inches, covering him. Drew remained where he was, his left arm thrown protectingly across Boyd.

“Now ain’t this somethin’?” The man who had booted in the door was grinning down at the two on the hearth. He wore a blue coat right enough, but it was slick with old grease across the chest, stained on one shoulder, and his breeches were linsey-woolsey, his boots old and scuffed. And his bush of unkempt hair was covered with a battered hat topping a woolen scarf wound about ears and neck.

The chill on Drew’s spine was a band of ice. This was no Union trooper. The scout could identify a far worse threat now—bushwhacker ... guerrilla, one of the jackals who hung on the fringe of both armies, looting, killing, and changing sides when it suited their purposes. Such a man was a murderer who would kill another for a pair of boots, a whole shirt, or the mere whim of the moment.

“Come in, Simmy, we’s got us a pair o’ Rebs,” the man bawled over his shoulder, and then turned to Drew. “Don’t you go gittin’ no ideas, sonny. Jas’ thar, he’s got a bead right on yuh,

an' Jas' he's mighty good with that rifle gun. Now, you jus' pull out that Colt o' yourn an' toss it here. Make it fast, too, boy. I'm a mighty unpatient man—"

Drew pulled free the Colt still in its holster, tossing it across the floor so that it spun against the fellow's boot. The big hairy hand scooped it up easily and tucked the weapon barrel down in his belt.

A second man, smaller, with a thin face which had an odd lopsided look, squeezed through the door and sidled along the wall of the room, his rifle pointed straight at Drew's head. He spat a blotch of tobacco juice on the hearth, spattering the edge of the top blanket which covered Boyd.

"What's th' matter wi' him?" he demanded.

"He's sick," Drew returned. "You Union?"

The big man grinned. "Shore, sonny, shore. We is Union ... scouts ... Union scouts." He repeated that as if pleased by the sound. "An' you is Rebs, which makes you our prisoners. So he's sick, eh? What's the matter?"

"I don't know." Drew's fingers were only inches away from the Colt under the blanket. But he could dare no such move with that rifle covering him from the window.

"Jas', any sign out thar?" the big man called.

"Petey ain't seen any, jus' two horses." The words came from behind the still ready rifle.

"Wai, tell him to look round some more. An' you kin come in, Jas'. These here Rebs ain't gonna be no trouble—is you, sonny?"

Drew shook his head. Luck appeared to be on his side. Once Jas' was in here, they could hope to turn tables on the three of them, with Weatherby and Kirby taking them by surprise.

Jas' appeared in the doorway a moment or so later. He was younger than his two companions, younger and more tidy. His coat was also blue, and he wore a forage cap pulled down over hair very fair in the firelight. There was a fluff of young beard on his chin, and he carried himself with the stance of a drilled man. Deserter, thought Drew.

The newcomer surveyed Drew and Boyd expressionlessly, his eyes oddly shallow, and tramped past them to hold his hands to the blaze on the hearth, keeping his rifle between his knees. Then he reached up with his weapon, hooked the barrel in the chain supporting the pot, and pulled that to him, sniffing at the now bubbling contents.

"You, Reb"—the big man towered over Drew—"git this friend o' yourn an' drag him over thar. Us wants to git warm."

"Drew?" Boyd looked up questioningly, his feverish gaze passing on to the guerrilla.

"Where's Shelly?"

The big man's grin faded. His big boot came out, caught Drew's leg in a vicious prod.

"Who's this here Shelly? Whar at is he?"

"Shelly was his brother," Drew said, nodding at Boyd. "He's dead."

"Dead, eh? How come sonny boy here's askin' for him then?" He leaned over them, and his fingers grabbed and twisted at the front of Drew's threadbare shell jacket. "I ask yuh, Reb, whar at is this heah Shelly?" He seemed only to flick his wrist, but the strength behind that move whirled Drew away from Boyd, brought him part way to his feet, and slammed him against the wall—where the big man held him pinned with small expenditure of effort.

“Shelly’s dead.” Somehow Drew kept his voice even. Kirby ... Weatherby ... They were there. “Boyd’s out of his head with fever.”

Jas’ let the pot swing back over the fire, moving toward Boyd to lean over and stare at the boy’s flushed face.

“Might be so,” Jas’ remarked. “Two horses, two men. Neither one much to bother about.”

“Better be so!” The big man held Drew tight to the wall and cuffed him with his other hand. Dazedly, his head ringing, Drew slipped to the floor as the other released him. “Now”—that boot prodded Drew again—“git your friend over thar, Reb.”

Drew stumbled back and went on his knees beside Boyd. His fingers groped under the edge of the blanket, closing on the Colt. Jas’ was inspecting the pot again, and Simmy had moved forward to share the warmth of the hearth. With the revolver still in his hand, though concealed by the blanket, Drew pulled Boyd away from the fire as best he could, aware the big man was watching closely.

Jas’ reached up to the crude mantel shelf, brought down a wooden spoon, and wiped it on a handkerchief he pulled from an inner pocket.

“This ain’t fancy grub,” he observed to the room at large, “but it’s better than nothin’. You want Simmy to bring in Petey, Hatch?”

“Th’ cap’n’s comin’.” Simmy’s remark was made in a tone of objection.

Hatch swung his head around to eye the smaller man.

“You bring Petey in!” he ordered. “Now!” he added.

For a second or two it appeared that Simmy might rebel, but Hatch stared him down. Jas’ scooped out a spoonful of the pot’s contents and blew over it.

“You fixin’ on havin’ a showdown with the captain, Hatch?” he asked.

The big man laughed. “I has me a showdown with anyone what gits too big for his breeches, Jas’. You, Reb—” he indicated Drew, with a thumb poking through a ragged glove—“supposin’ you jus’ show us what you got in them pockets o’ yourn.”

Jas’ laughed. “Don’t figure to find anything worth takin’ on a Reb do you, Hatch? Most of ‘em are poorer’n dirt.”

“Now that’s whar you figger wrong, Jas’.” Hatch shook his head as might one deploring the stupidity of the young. “Lotsa them little Reb boys has got somethin’ salted ‘way, a nice watch maybe, or a ring or such. Them what comes from th’ big houses kinda hold on to things from home. What you got, Reb?”

“A gun—in your back!”

Jas’ spun in a half crouch, his rifle coming up. There was the explosion of a shot, making a deafening clap of thunder in the room. The younger bushwhacker cried out. His rifle lay on the floor, and he was holding a bloody hand. Kirby stood in the doorway, a Colt in each hand. And now Drew produced his own hidden weapon, centering it on Hatch.

The door burst open for the second time as Simmy was propelled through it, his hands shoulder high, palm out, and empty. Weatherby came behind him, a gun belt slung over one shoulder, two extra revolvers thrust into his own belt.

“They got Petey,” Simmy gabbled. “Got him wi’ a knife!” His forward rush brought him against the wall, and he made no move to turn around to face them. He could only plaster his



body tight to that surface as if he longed to be able to ooze out into safety through one of its many cracks.

“Shuck th’ hardware!” Kirby ordered.

Hatch’s grin was gone. The fingers of his big hands were twitching, and the twist of his mouth was murderous.

“Lissen—” the Texan’s tone was frosty—“I’ve a finger what cramps on m’ trigger when I git riled, an’ I’m gittin’ riled now. You loose off that theah fightin’ iron, an’ do it quick!”

Hatch’s hand went to his gun. He jerked it from the holster and slung it across the floor.

“Now th’ one you got holdin’ up your belly ... an’ your knife!”

The Colt that Hatch had taken from Drew and a bowie with a long blade joined the armament already on the boards. Drew made a fast harvest of all the weapons.

“Well, we sure got us some bounty hunter’s bag,” Kirby observed as he and Weatherby finished using the captives’ own belts to pinion them.

“There may be more comin’; they talked about some captain.” Drew brought Boyd back to the warmth of the fire.

Weatherby nodded. “I’ll scout.” He disappeared out the door.

Jas’ was rocking back and forth, holding on one knee the injured hand Kirby had roughly bandaged; his other arm was fastened behind him. There were tears of pain on his cheeks, but after his first outcry he had not uttered a sound. Hatch, on the other hand, had been so foul-mouthed that Kirby had torn off a length of the bed covering and gagged him.

Simmy sat now with his back against the wall, watching their every move. Of the three, he seemed the likeliest to talk. Kirby appeared to share in Drew’s thoughts on that subject, for now he bore down on the small man.

“You expectin’ some friends?” Compared to his tone of moments earlier, the Texan’s voice was now mildly friendly. “We’d like to know, seein’ as how we’re thinkin’ some hospitable thoughts ‘bout entertainin’ them proper.”

Simmy stared up at him, bewildered. Kirby shook his head, his expression one of a man dealing with a stubbornly stupid child.

“Lissen, hombre, me—I’m from West Texas, an’ that theah’s Comanche country, leastwise it was Comanche country ‘fore we Tejanos moved in. Now Comanches, they’re an unfriendly people, ‘bout the unfriendliest Injuns, ‘cept ‘Paches, a man can meet up with. An’ they have them some neat little ways of makin’ a man talk, or rather yell, his lungs out. It ain’t too hard to learn them tricks, not for a bright boy like me, it ain’t. You able to understand that?”

Kirby did not scowl, he did not even touch the little man. But as one drawling word was joined to the next, Simmy held his body tighter against the wall, as if to escape by pushing.

“I ain’t done nothin’!” he cried.

“That’s what I said, little man. You ain’t done nothin’. But you’re goin’ to do somethin’—talk!”

Simmy’s pale tongue swept across working lips. “What ... you want—wantta ... know?” he stuttered.

“You expectin’ to meet some friends heah?”

“Th’ rest o’ the boys an’ th’ cap’n; they may be ketchin’ up.”

“How many ‘boys’?”

Simmy’s tongue tripped again. He swallowed. Drew thought he was trying to produce a crumb of defiance. Kirby reached out, selecting Hatch’s bowie knife from the cache of captured weapons. He weighed it across the palm of his hand as if trying its balance and then, with deceptive ease, flipped it. The point thudded into the wall scant inches away from Simmy’s right ear, and the little man’s head bobbed down so that his nose hit one of his hunched-up knees.

“How many ‘boys’?” Kirby repeated.

“Depends....”

“On what?”

“On how good th’ raidin’ is. After a fight thar’s always some pickin’s.”

Drew was suddenly sick. What Simmy hinted at was the vulture work among the dead and the wounded too enfeebled to protect themselves from being plundered. He saw Kirby’s lips set into a thin line.

“Kinda throw a wide rope, don’t you, little man? How many ‘boys’?”

“Maybe five ... six....”

“An’ this heah cap’n?”

“He tells us wheah thar’s good pickin’s.” For a moment the man produced a spark of spite. “He’s a Reb, like you——”

“Have you used this place before?” Drew broke in. If this were either a regular or temporary rendezvous for this jackal pack, the quicker they were away, the better.

“No, the cap’n said to meet here tonight.”

“I don’t suppose he said *when*?” Kirby’s question was answered by a shake of Simmy’s unkempt head.

Boyd suddenly moved in his cocoon of blankets, struggling to sit up, and Drew went to him.

He was coughing again with a strangling fight for breath which was frightening to watch. Drew steadied him until the attack was over and he lay in the other’s arms, gasping. The liquid in the pot on the fire was cooked by now. Perhaps if Boyd had some of that in him.... But dared they stay here?

Kirby squatted back on his heels as Drew settled Boyd on his blankets and went to unhook the pot. Then the Texan supported the younger boy as Drew ladled spoonfuls of the improvised broth into his mouth.

“Th’ doc’ll come,” Kirby murmured. “Croff promised to guide him heah. But this gang business——”

“I don’t see how we can move him now....” Drew was feeding the broth between Boyd’s lips, trying to ease the cough, his wits too dulled to tackle any problem beyond that.

“Which means we gotta keep company from movin’ in. If we could raise us a few of the boys now....” Kirby was speculative.

“If you went back to camp, gave the alarm. Traggart doesn’t want a gang like this runnin’ loose around here. They say they’re Union; maybe they do have some connection with the Yankees.”

“With a Reb cap’n throwin’ in with ‘em? Most of these polecats play both sides of the border when it’ll git them anythin’ they want. An’ they could try an’ pay their way with the Yankees by tellin’ ‘bout our movements heah.”

“Could you make it to camp, fast?”

Kirby grunted. “Sure, easy as driftin’ downriver on one of them theah steamers. But leavin’ you heah with that mess of skunks is somethin’ else.”

“Weatherby’s out there. Anything or anyone gettin’ by him would have to come in on wings.”

“An’ wings don’t come natural to this breed of critter! All right, I don’t see how theah’s much else we can do. We can’t go pullin’ the kid ‘round any more. I’ll give Weatherby the high sign an’ make it back as quick as I can. Let’s see if these heah ropes is staked out tight.”

He made a careful inspection of their three captives’ bonds, and Drew laid the assorted armament to hand. But Kirby hesitated by the door.

“You keep your eyes peeled, amigo. Weatherby—he can pull that in-and-out game through the loft like he did before. But one man can’t be all over the range at once.”

“I know.” Drew studied the remnants of battered furniture about the room. He thought he could pull the bed frame across the outer door, and shove the table and bench in front of the door to the lean-to. And there was a section of wall right under the broken window which could not be seen by anyone outside. “I’ve some precautions in mind.”

“I’m ridin’ then. See you.” Kirby was gone with a wave of hand.

Boyd was quiet again. The broth must have soothed him. Drew shifted the other’s body to the floor on the spot of safety under the window. As he returned to gather up the arms he noted that Jas’ was watching him.

Some of the first shock of his wound had worn off so that the guerrilla was not only aware of his present difficulties but was eyeing Drew in a manner which suggested he had not accepted the change in their roles as final. Drew hesitated. He could tie back that wounded hand, too, but he was sure the other could not use it to any advantage, and Drew could not bring himself to cause the extra pain such a move would mean. Not that he had any illusions concerning the bushwhacker’s care for him, had their situation been reversed.

Simmy, once Kirby had gone, moved against the wall, holding up his head with a sigh of relief. He, too, watched Drew move the furniture. And when the scout did not pay any attention to him he spoke. “Wotcha gonna do wi’ us, Reb?”

Hatch’s eyes, over the gag, were glaring evil; Jas’ was watching the two Confederates with an intent measuring stare; but Simmy wilted a little when Drew looked at him directly.

“You’re prisoners of war. As Union scouts...”

Simmy wriggled uncomfortably, and Drew continued the grilling.

“You *are* Union scouts?”

“Shore! Shore! We’s Union, ain’t we, Jas’?” he appealed eagerly to his fellow.

Jas’ neither answered nor allowed his gaze to wander from Drew.

“Then you’ll get the usual treatment of a prisoner.” Drew was short, trying to listen for any movement beyond the squalid room. Weatherby was out there, and Drew put a great deal of trust in the Cherokee’s ability. But what if the “captain” and the remaining members of this outlaw gang arrived before Kirby returned with help? Seeing that Boyd appeared to be asleep, Drew once again inspected his weapons, checking the loading of revolvers and rifle.

Jas’s rifle was one of the new Spencers. The Yankees loaded those on Sunday and fired all week, or so the boys said. It was a fine piece, new and well cared for. He examined it carefully and then looked up to meet Jas’s flat stare, knowing that the guerrilla’s hate was the more bitter for seeing his prized weapon in the enemy’s hands.

The Spencer, Simmy’s Enfield, old and not very well kept, five Colts beside his own, Hatch’s bowie knife and another, almost as deadly looking, which had been found on Jas’, equipped Drew with a regular arsenal. But it was not until he settled down that Drew knew he faced a far more deadly enemy—sleep. The fatigue he had been able to battle as long as he was on the move, hit him now with the force of a clubbed rifle. He knew he dared not even lean back against the wall or relax any of his vigilance, not so much over the prisoners and Boyd, as over himself.

Somehow he held on, trying to move. The pile of wood by the hearth was diminishing steadily. He would soon have to let the fire die out. To venture out of the house in quest of more fuel was too risky. And always he was aware of Jas’s tight regard. Simmy had fallen asleep, his thin, weasel face hidden as his head lolled forward on his chest. Hatch’s eyes were also closed.

Drew straightened with a start, conscious of having lost seconds—or moments—somewhere in a fog.

He jerked aside, perhaps warned by his scout’s sixth sense more than any real knowledge of danger. There was a searing flash beside his head, the bite of fire on his cheek. If he had not moved, he would have received that blazing brand straight between the eyes. Now he rolled, snapping out a shot.

A man shouted hoarsely and Drew strove to avoid a kick, struggling to win to his feet, unable to tell just what was happening.

## 13. Disaster

Simmy's animallike howling filled the room. Jas', his hand bleeding afresh, sopping through the bandage his captors had twisted about the wound, sprawled forward, clawing with those reddened fingers for the Spencer. While Hatch, eyes and upper portions of his hair-matted cheeks bulging over the gag, kicked out, striving to come at Drew with the frenzy of a man making a last desperate play.

The brand Jas' had hurled was smoldering on Boyd's blankets. Drew sent it flying with the toe of his boot and made a quick movement to stamp out a small spurt of flame. Then he kicked it again, spinning the Spencer back against the wall.

Simmy's cry died to a whimper. A wide stain spread over his nondescript coat just above the belt, and Drew knew that his first shot had found that target. But he was in charge of the situation once again. Both Hatch and Jas' had subsided, the one eyeing the threat of Drew's weapon, the other again nursing his hand, his face drawn into a grin of agony.

The smell of burning cloth was a sour stench. Drew moved to beat out a new blaze in the bedcovers. He coughed in acrid smoke and felt the smart of the burn along his neck and jaw where the brand had hit him. Simmy rolled on the floor, bent double.

"Drew!" Boyd was struggling free of his blankets, up on one elbow, staring about him as one who had wakened into a nightmare rather than having come out of such a dream.

"It's all right...."

But was it? Hatch had subsided. Jas' was quiet; there was nothing to fear from Simmy. Only that same sense which was part of any scout's equipment nagged at Drew, warning him that the crisis was not over.

He went down on one knee beside Simmy, endeavoring to roll him over to examine his wound. The guerrilla's mouth was slackly open, his small, predator's eyes were oddly bewildered, as if he could not comprehend what had happened to him or why. As Drew fumbled with his clothing to lay bare the wound, Simmy twisted, his legs pulling up a little. Then his head rolled, and Drew sat back on his heels. There was no longer any need for aid.

Boyd still rested on his elbow, listening. He could hear Hatch's thick breathing and Jas's, a crack of charred wood breaking on the hearth, a slashing against the broken window ... the storm had begun again. Only those were not the sounds they were listening for.

Drew visited in turn each of the flimsy barricades he had erected after Kirby left. He had no way of telling time. How long had it been since the Texan left? It could not be too far from morning now, yet the sky outside the windows was still as black as night.

"Drew!" Boyd pulled his other hand free, pointing to the ceiling over their heads.

The loft! And the route Weatherby had made use of when he had gone up that ladder, dropped out of a window above, and returned with his prisoner through the front door. But if the Cherokee had come back to the cabin, surely the disturbance in the room below would have brought him down. Unless he was otherwise occupied.... How? And by whom?

Drew went to the foot of the ladder, not looking up to show his suspicion, but only to listen. He was certain he heard a scraping sound. Was it someone making his way through a small window? No one who had been weeks in Weatherby's company could believe that the Indian would betray his movements in that manner.

Drew left the ladder, collected the Spencer, and joined Boyd. The rest of the weapons lay at hand, and Drew sorted them out swiftly, piling them between Boyd and his own post. From here, as he had earlier planned, they had both doors, two windows, and the ladder to the loft under surveillance. The other window was over the level of their heads. As long as they kept below its sill, anyone shooting through it could not touch them.

Boyd hitched his shoulders higher against the wall. He was still flushed, his eyes too bright, but he was certainly more himself than he had been any time since they had brought him here. Now he reached for one of the Colts, resting it on his body at chest level.

“Who are they?” he whispered, glancing at the prisoners.

“Guerrillas,” Drew replied.

“More company comin’?”

“Might be. Anse went for the boys.”

But Boyd’s chin lifted an inch or two, a slight gesture to indicate the ceiling again. He brought his other hand up, and using both, cocked the Colt, that click carrying with almost a shot’s sharp twang through the room.

Jas’ was again staring at Drew, his lips a silent snarl. But the scout believed that as long as he was alert, weapons in hand, he had nothing more to fear from his prisoners. They had made their reckless gamble and had lost.

The opening at the top of the ladder was a square of dark, hardly touched by the flickering light of the dying fire.

“You theah....” The barking hail came from without, strident, startling. “We have you surrounded.”

It was the voice of an educated man with the regional softening of vowels. Simmy’s cap’n? What then had happened to Weatherby? Boyd braced the barrel of his Colt on a bent knee, its sights centered on the front door. But Drew still watched the loft opening.

“Last chance ... come out with your hands up!” The voice was very close now. And the unknown apparently knew at least part of the situation in the cabin. Which meant either very clever scouting, or that they had taken Weatherby. But Drew, knowing the habits of the guerrillas, dared not follow that last thought far. He tried to locate the man outside; he was in front all right, but surely not directly in line with the door.

“Cap’n!” Jas’ called, his gaze daring Drew to shoot. “There’s only two of ‘em, and one’s sick.”

There was a flicker of movement in the trap opening. Drew fired, to be answered by a yelp of pain and surprise. Perhaps he had not entirely removed one of the attackers from the effective list, but the fellow would be more cautious from now on.

There was only a short second between his shot and an answering fusillade from outside. The panes in the other windows shattered and Hatch, gurgling incoherently behind his gag, kicked to roll himself behind the flimsy protection of the bedstead.

“You almost got one of your own men then!” Drew called. Feverishly he tried to think of a way to play for time. Weatherby might be dead, but Kirby could have reached the headquarters camp and already be well on his way back with reinforcements.

Hatch’s gurgling was louder. And now Jas’ had transferred his attention to the broken windows and what might be beyond them. There was a creaking above. Drew tried to deduce

from those sounds whether one man or two moved overhead. The fire was dying fast. Should he try to urge it into new life with the last of the wood, or would the dark be more to his benefit?

Shots again, but not crashing through the windows now; these were outside. A man screamed shrilly. Then a horse cried in pain. Drew heard the pounding of hoofs, and in the loft a quick shuffling. More shots....

Boyd laughed hysterically, and then coughed, until he bent over the Colt he still grasped, gasping. Drew steadied him against his shoulder, trying to picture for himself what was happening outside. It sounded very much as if Kirby's relief force had arrived and that the "cap'n" and his gang were in retreat.

"Drew! Everythin' all right?" There was no mistaking Kirby's voice.

He had brought not only four other scouts from the camp, but also Lieutenant Traggart and the doctor. And as the major portion of that relief force crowded into the room Drew leaned back against the wall, very glad to let other authority take over.

"Guerrilla scum," was the lieutenant's verdict on their prisoners. "They say they're Union ... or ours, whichever works best at the time. There's another one dead out there, and he's wearing one of *our* cavalry jackets!"

"Officer's?" Drew wondered if they had picked off the "cap'n."

"No, you thinkin' he was this renegade officer Kirby was talkin' about? I don't think this is the one. He's a pretty nasty-lookin' specimen, though. Four of 'em at least got away. We'll take these two into camp and see what they can tell us. The General will be interested. I'd say this one's a Yankee deserter." He studied Jas'.

The young man in the blue jacket spat, and one of the scouts hooked his fingers in the other's collar, jerking him roughly to his feet.

"Mount and start back with them!" Traggart ordered. "How's the boy, suh?"

Boyd had wilted back into his blankets when the stimulation of the fight was gone. He was still conscious, but his coughing shook his whole body.

"Lung fever, unless he gets the right care." The surgeon was going about his business with dispatch. "I hate to move him, but there's no sense in remaining here as a target for more of this trash." He glanced at Jas' and Hatch impersonally. "Lucky we brought the wagon. Tell Henderson to bring it up. We'll take him to the Letterworth house for now—"

Reeling a little when he tried to walk, Drew found himself sharing the accommodation of the wagon with Boyd, a canvas slung across them to keep off the gusts of rain. He fell asleep as they bumped along, unable to fight off exhaustion any longer.

Twenty-four hours later he was back on duty with the advance. Boyd was housed in such comfort as any could hope to find, and the cavalry was on the move. Buford's men were to picket along the Cumberland River. There was a new feel to the army. Drew sensed it as he rode with the small headquarters detachment. Empty saddles, too many of them, and the growing belief—evidenced in mutters passed from man to man—that they were engaged in a nearly hopeless bid.

Franklin, which for Drew had been a wild gallop across some fields, a strip of cloth seized from the enemy to set beneath a guidon of their own, had been a major disaster for the Army of the Tennessee. Forrest's energy and drive kept the cavalry a sharp-edged weapon, still to

be used with telling effect. But they all sensed the clouds gathering over their heads, not those laden with the eternal chill rain, but ones which carried with them a coming night.

It was so cold that men had to use both hands to cock their revolvers. And Drew saw Croff swing from the saddle, draw his belt knife to cut the hoof from a dead horse. The Cherokee glanced up as he looped his grisly trophy to his saddle horn.

“Need the shoe,” he explained briefly. “Runner has one worn pretty thin.” He patted the drooping neck of his mount.

Hannibal walked around the dead horse carefully. The mule was only a skeleton copy of the sturdy, well-cared-for animal Drew had ridden out of Cadiz. But he would keep going until he dropped, and his rider knew it.

“Any trace of Weatherby?” Drew asked. The disappearance of the other Cherokee scout at the cabin battle had continued as a mystery for their own small company. None of those who had known him could credit the Indian being taken unawares by the guerrilla force. He had vanished somewhere in the dark of the night, and none of their searching a day later, interrupted by orders to move, had turned up a clue.

“Not yet,” Croff answered. “He may have made too wide a circle and run into a Yankee picket. Someday, perhaps, we shall know. Look there!”

From their screen of cover they watched a blue cavalry patrol trot along a lane.

“Headin’ for th’ home corral, an’ lookin’ twice over each shoulder while they do it,” commented Kirby. “Was we to let out a yell now, they’d drag it so fast they’d dig their hoofs in clear down to the stirrup leathers.”

Drew shook his head. “Those are General Wilson’s men ... can’t be sure with them that they wouldn’t come poundin’ up, sabers out, tryin’ to take a prisoner or two. Anyway, we don’t stir them up, that’s orders.”

Kirby sighed. “Too bad. Cold as it is, a little fightin’ would warm an hombre up some. You know, for sure, the only way we’re gonna git outta this heah war is to fight our way out.”

Croff reined his patient mount around. “The big fight is comin’—”

“Nashville?” Drew asked, aware of a somber shadow closing in on them all.

The Cherokee shrugged. “Nashville? Maybe. The signs are not good.”

“It’s when the signs ain’t good,” Kirby observed, “that fellas lean on their hardware twice as hard. Heard tell of gunfighters knotchin’ their irons for each man they take in a shootout. Me, I’m kinda workin’ the same idea for battles. An’ I have me a pretty good tally—Shiloh, Lebanon, Chickamauga, Cynthiana twice, Harrisburg, an’ a mixed herd o’ little ones. Gittin’ pretty long, that line o’ knotches.” His voice trailed away as he watched the disappearing Yankee cavalymen, but somehow Drew thought he was seeing either more or less than blue-coated men riding under a sullen December sky.

Yes, a long tally of battles, and all those small fights in between which sometimes a man could remember better than the big ones, remember too often and too well.

“The wagons pulled out of the Letterworth place this mornin’,” Drew said. “They were gone when I stopped by at noon—”

“Goin’ south? Any news of the kid?”

“They took him along.” There was a faint ray of comfort in the thought that Boyd had been judged well enough to be moved with the rest of the sick and wounded up from the temporary



hospitals and shelters in the neighborhood. The seriously ill certainly could not be moved. But he wished he could have seen the boy; there was no telling when and where they would meet again.

“Well,” Kirby pointed out, “if the doc took him, it means they thought he was able to make it. He’s young an’ tough. Bet he’ll be back in line soon.”

“They’ll travel slow,” Croff added. “Drivin’ hogs and cattle and all those wagons, they ain’t goin’ to push.”

Forrest, along with his prisoners, wagons, sick and wounded, the barefoot, and dismounted men, was driving four-footed supplies south on his way to the Tennessee River, and he was not likely to risk or relinquish any of the spoil. Buford’s Kentuckians lay in wait along the Cumberland, hoping perhaps to echo, if only faintly, their earlier successes against the gunboats and supply transports. And at Nashville a battle was shaping....

Drew had ridden in to report when the first of the new retreat orders came. General Buford, who had invited Drew up to the fire, sat listening as the scout held his stiff hands to the blaze and listed the sum total of the day’s comings and goings as far as Yankee patrols were concerned.

“No sign of that missin’ scout?” the General asked when Drew’s account was finished. “Pour yourself a cup of that, boy! It ain’t coffee. In fact, I don’t inquire too deeply into what Lish does bring me to drink nowadays. But it’s kind of comfortin’ to have something warm under your belt in this weather. Blame-coldest, wettest winter I ever did see! No sign of Weatherby?” he repeated as Drew sipped from the tin cup his superior had pushed into his hands, not only grateful for the warmth spreading through his insides, but also for the heat of the container he cupped between his palms.

“No, suh, no sign at all.”

“Hmm. That’s strange.” The General edged his solid bulk forward on his stool, which creaked as his weight shifted. He poured himself a cup of the same brew he had urged upon the scout. “Those were guerrillas right enough. Scum from both sides, just out like buzzards to pick up what they could. Only they were too far into our lines ... and bolder than most. Doesn’t fit somehow.”

“Might be cover for Union scouts after all, suh?”

Buford shrugged. “Not very likely. If Weatherby does report in, send him to me! Oh, by the way, Rennie, you’re promoted to sergeant to take Wilkins’ place.” The General sat gazing into the cup he held, but it was plain his thoughts were far from the current substitute for coffee.

“Thank you, suh.”

Buford glanced up. “Thank—? Oh, the sergeant business. Lieutenant Traggart put you in for the first openin’ some time ago. You had your trainin’ with Morgan, and you learned well. John Morgan ... hard to think of him dead now. And Pat Cleburne ... and all the rest. We have to close ranks and do double duty for all of them.” Again he was speaking his thoughts, Drew was sure. “Well, Sergeant Rennie, we will, we will!”

The courier who stumbled into the room, lurched against the rude wooden table, almost rebounding from it to fall. He was nearly out on his feet, feet where broken boots were mired within inches of their tops. Drew put down his cup and jumped up to steady the man.

“General Forrest’s compliments, suh. Will you bring up the division to join General Chalmers? The battle’s on at Nashville, and it may be necessary to form a rear guard for a retreat—” He got the message out mechanically in a croak.

So they went to start the first move in a vast job of salvage. Buford’s men marched fast to come between a broken army and the full force of enemy pursuit. For Franklin, having bled the Army of the Tennessee of its strength, was only the beginning of chaos. Nashville crushed the remains, and the remnants fled, a crippled despairing flight of the defeated. The big gamble was totally lost.

It was Forrest who commanded that hastily formed rear guard. Its stiff spine was his cavalry, with the addition of two brigades of infantry—Alabama and Georgia troops. Snapping at them was Union cavalry in full force. Not snapping at their heels, for it was fang to fang; the Confederates only gave ground fighting. Day darkened on the field and they were in hand-to-hand assault. A man marked musket or carbine flash to sight on the enemy.

And as time became a nightmare of almost continuous battle, the rain lashed at the struggling men with a whip of icy water. Fighters crouched behind rail fences while the Union cavalry charged across black fields, hoofs drumming on the ground, and the sputtering fire of carbines making an uneven kind of lightning along the improvised wood barricades. Black tree trunks gleamed greasily in the wet; and here and there, out of defiance, the war whoop of the Yell cut eerily through the melee.

After evacuating Columbia, they closed ranks and stiffened again, knowing that they must be the wall between the disorganized rabble of the army and the thrust of the Yankee forces coming confidently to finish them off. Cavalry, volunteers from the infantry, fragments of commands all, but still with enough cohesion behind a commander they trusted to fall back in fighting order ... and fighting—even to countercharge when the need and the occasion offered.

Drew, Kirby, Croff, and Webb circled around a wagon, bringing the driver to a halt, his mule team standing with drooping heads, blowing and puffing so that their ribs showed as bony bars through their wet hides.

“Git!” The driver raised his whip as a weapon of offense until he saw where Croff’s carbine was aimed. A little pale, he sank back on the seat. A bush of whiskers hid most of his dirty face, and there was something about him which reminded Drew of the guerrilla Simmy.

“Watta yuh want?” he whined.

“Orders,” Drew told him shortly. “Pull over there and dump your load!”

“Whose orders?” The driver bristled, still fingering his whip.

“General Forrest’s. Now get to it!” Drew put snap in that. “All right, boys,” he called to the patiently waiting line of infantrymen, “here’s another one ready to carry you as soon as you empty it.”

The ragged half company fanned forward, bearing down upon the wagon as if it were a Yankee stronghold. They swarmed over and in it, pitching the contents out on the ground in spite of the futile protests of the driver.

“Lordy! Lordy!” One of the willing unloaders paused, his arms about a box. He was staring into its interior, bemused. “Lookit what’s heah! I ain’t seen such a lovely, lovely sight since I had me a chance on the river at that blue-belly supply ship!”

He placed the box with exaggerated care on the ground and dived into it, coming up with a can in each hand. "Boys, we has us a treasure; we sure enough has!" He was immediately the core of a group eager to share in his find. The driver half raised his whip. Kirby brought his horse closer to the wagon, caught at the lash, pulling the stock out of the other's hands with a quick jerk.

"Reckon the boys must have lighted on your own private cache, eh, fella? Don't hump your tail none 'bout it. They ain't in no mood to listen to any palaver on the subject. Better ride it out peaceablelike."

"Much obliged, Sarge." The original finder of the treasure trove broke from the circle and handed Drew some crackers. "The boys want you should have a taste, too."

Drew laughed and began sharing the windfall with the scouts.

"Better break it up, soldiers. The General wants us on the move."

They were already busy throwing the last articles out of the wagon, settling in. Barefoot, cold, hungry, until the last few minutes, they were Forrest's indomitable rear guard, riding between brisk spats with the enemy.

Kirby tested the edge of a cracker between his teeth as they trotted on in search for another wagon to turn over to the infantry.

"This heah army is bound to git mounted, one way or the other," he commented. "Hope we have some more luck like that in the next wagon, too."

## 14. Hell in Tennessee

“At least we have that river between us now,” Drew said. Behind them was Columbia, where Forrest had bought them precious hours of traveling time with his truce to discuss a prisoner exchange. Along the banks of the now turbulent Duck River not a bridge or boat remained to aid their pursuers. Buford’s Scouts had had a hand in that precaution.

“Yeah, an’ Forrest’s waitin’ for the Yankees to try an’ smoke him out. It’s ‘bout like puttin’ your hand in a rattler’s den to git him by the tail, I’d say. But I’d feel a mite safer was theah an ocean between us. Funny, a man is all randy with his tail up when he’s doin’ the chasin’, but you git mighty dry-mouthed an’ spooky when the cards is slidin’ the other way ‘crost the table. Seems like we has been chased back an’ forth over these heah rivers so much, they ought to know us by now. An’ be a little more obligin’ an’ do some partin’, like in that old Bible story—let us through on dry land. Man, how I could do with some *dry* land!” Kirby spoke with unusual fervor.

Croff laughed. “No use hopin’ for that. Anyways, we have business ahead.”

Just as they had rounded up wagons to transport the infantry between skirmishes, so now they were on the hunt for oxen to move the guns. The bogs—miscalled “roads” on their maps—demanded more animal power than the worn-out horses and mules of the army could supply. Oxen had to be impressed from the surrounding farms for use in moving the wagons and fieldpieces relay fashion, with those teams sometimes struggling belly deep. Having pulled one section to a point ahead, they were driven back to bring up the rear of the train.

“Not enough ice on the ground; it’s rainin’ it now!” Kirby’s shoulders were hunched, his head forward between them as if, tortoisewise, he wanted to withdraw into a nonexistent protecting shell.

“Just be glad,” Drew answered, “you ain’t walkin’. I saw an ox fall back there a ways. Before it was hardly dead the men were at it, rippin’ off the hide to cover their feet—bleedin’ feet!”

“Oh, I’m not complainin’,” the Texan said. “M’boots still cover me, anyway. Me, I’m thankful for what I got—can even sing ‘bout it.”

His soft, clear baritone caroled out:

“And now I’m headin’ southward, my heart is full of woe,  
I’m goin’ back to Georgia to find my Uncle Joe,  
You may talk about your Beauregard an’ sing of General Lee,  
But the gallant Hood of Texas played Hell in Tennessee.”

Some sardonic Texan, anonymous in the defeated forces, had first chanted those words to the swinging march of his western command—“The Yellow Rose of Texas”—and they had been passed from company to company, squad to squad, by men who had always been a little distrustful of Hood, men who had looked back to the leadership of General Johnston as a good time when they actually seemed to be getting somewhere with this endless-seeming war.

There was a soft echo from somewhere—“...played Hell in Tennessee-ee-ee.”

“Sure did,” Webb commented. “But this country comin’ up now ain’t gonna favor the blue bellies none.”

He was right. Both sides of the turnpike over which the broken army dragged its way south were heavily wooded, and the road threaded through a bewildering maze of narrow valleys, gorges, and ravines—just the type of territory made for defensive ambushes to rock reckless Yankees out of their saddles. The turnpike was to be left for the use of the rear guard of fighting men, while the wagon trains and straggling mass of the disorganized Army of the Tennessee split up to follow the dirt roads toward Bainbridge and the Tennessee River.

“Know somethin’?” Webb demanded suddenly, hours later, as they were on their way back with their hard-found quota of oxen and protesting owners and drivers. “This heah’s Christmas Eve—tomorrow’s Christmas! Ain’t had a chance to count up the days till now.”

“Sounds like we is gonna have us a present—from the Yankees. Hear that, amigos?” Kirby rose in his stirrups, facing into the wind.

They could hear it right enough, the sharp spatter of rifle and musket fire, the deeper sound of field guns. It was a clamor they had listened to only too often lately, but now it was forceful enough to suggest that this was more than just a skirmish.

Having seen their oxen into the hands of the teamsters, they settled down to the best pace they could get from their mounts. But before they reached the scene of action they caught the worst of the news from the wounded men drifting back.

“... saw him carried off myself,” a thin man, with a bandaged arm thrust into the front of his jacket, told them. “Th’ Yankees got ‘cross Richland Creek and flanked us. General Buford got it then.”

Drew leaned from his saddle to demand the most important answer. “How bad?” Abram Buford might not have had the dash of Morgan, the electric personality of Forrest, but no one could serve in his headquarters company without being well aware of the steadfast determination, the regard for his men, the bulldog courage which made him Forrest’s dependable, rock-hard supporter in the most dangerous action.

“They said pretty bad. General Chalmers, he took command.”

“Christmas present,” Kirby repeated bleakly. “Looks like Christmas ain’t gonna be so merry this year.”

They had lost Buford and they were forced back again, disputing savagely—hand to hand, revolver against saber, carbine against carbine—to Pulaski. Seven miles, and the enemy made to pay dearly for every foot of that distance.

It was Christmas morning, and Drew chewed on a crust of corn pone, old and rock-hard. He wondered dully if his capacity to hold more than a few crumbs had completely vanished. And he allowed himself for one or two long moments to remember Christmas at Oak Hill—where he had managed to spend a more festive day than at Red Springs in the chilly neighborhood of his grandfather. Christmas at Oak Hill ... Sheldon, Boyd, Cousin Merry, Cousin Jeff, too, before he died back in ‘59.

Drew opened his eyes and saw a fire, not the flames of brandy flickering above a plum pudding, or the quiet, welcoming fire on a hearth, but rather a violent burst of yellow-and-red destruction punctured by bursts of exploding ammunition. These were the stores Forrest had ordered destroyed because the men could transport them no further.

The word was out that they were going to make a firm stand near Anthony’s Hill, again to the south. And they had been hard at work there to fashion a stopper which would either suck the venturesome enemy into a bad mauling, as Forrest hoped, or else just hold him to buy more time.

There the turnpike descended sharply with a defile between two ridges, ridges which now housed Morton's battery, ready to blast road and hollow below. Felled timber, rails, stones, anything which could shelter a man from lead and steel long enough for him to shoot his share back, had been woven together, and a mounted reserve waited behind to prevent flanking. A good stout trap—the kind Forrest had used to advantage before and which had enough teeth in it to crush the unwary.

“Dilly, Dilly, come and be killed,” Drew repeated to himself that tag from some childhood rhyme or story as he waited at the mouth of the gorge to play his own part in the action to come. A small force of mounted men, scouts, and volunteers from various commands were bait. It was their job to make a short stiff resistance, then fly in headlong retreat, enticing the Union riders into the waiting ambush.

“Who's this heah Dilly?” Kirby wanted to know. “Some Yankee?”

Drew laughed. “Might be.” He sagged a little in the saddle. Sleep during the past ten days had come in small snatches. Twice he had caught naps lying in stalled wagons waiting for fresh teams to arrive, and both times he had been awakened out of dreams he did not care to remember, to ride with gummy eyelids and a sense of being so tired that there was a fog between him and most of the world. It was two days now since Buford had been wounded. The news was that the big Kentucky general would recover. And it was a whole twenty-four hours since he watched the Christmas fires Forrest had lit in Pulaski, the fires which had devoured what they no longer had the animal power to save.

Here in the mouth of the gorge the silence was almost oppressive. He heard a smothered cough from one of the waiting men, a horse blow in a kind of wheeze. Then came the call of a bugle from down the road.

Theirs, not ours, Drew thought. Hannibal shook his head vigorously, as if bitten by a sadly out-of-season fly. The captain commanding their company of bait signaled an advance. And they followed the familiar pattern of weaving in and out of cover to enlarge the appearance of their force.

Firing rent the quiet of a few minutes earlier. Drew snapped a shot at the Yankee guidon bearer, certain he saw the man flinch. Then, with the rest, he sent Hannibal on the best run the mule could hold, back into the waiting mouth of the hollow. They pounded on, eager to present such a picture of wholesale rout that the Union men would believe a soft strike, perhaps an important bag of prisoners, lay ahead, needing only to be scooped in.

Perhaps it was the reputation for wiliness Forrest had earned which put the Yankee commander on his guard. There was no headlong chase down the ambush valley as they had hoped and planned to intercept. Instead, dismounted men came at a careful, suspicious pace, cored around a single fieldpiece, a small answer to their trap.

But when that blue stream funneled into the hollow, the jaws snapped away. Canister from Morton's guns laid a scythe along the Union advance, cutting men to ground level. The Yell shrilled along the slopes, and men jumped trees and rail barricades, pouring down in an assault wave not to be turned aside. The Yankee gun, its eight-horse team, men who stood now with their hands high, horses for riders who were no longer to need them. Three hundred of those horses from the lines behind the dismounted skirmishers—far more valuable than any inanimate treasure to men who had lost mounts—one hundred and fifty prisoners.

Kirby rode back from the eddy in the road, his mouth a wide grin splitting his skin-and-bone face. He had a length of heavy blue cloth across the saddle before him and was smoothing it lovingly with one chilblained hand.

“Got me one of them theah overcoats,” he announced. “Sure fine, like to thank General Wilson for it personal. If I could git me in ropin’ distance of him to do that.”

The small success of the venture was not a complete victory. His dismounted cavalry overrun or thrust back, Wilson brought up infantry, and they settled down to a dogged attack on the entrenched Confederates on the ridges.

Union forces bored in steadily, slamming the weight of regiments against the flanks of the defenders. And slowly but inexorably, that turning movement pushed the Confederates in and back. Drew, riding courier, brought up to the ridge where Forrest sat on the big gray King Phillip, statue-still, immovable.

“General, suh, the enemy is in our rear—”

Forrest turned his head abruptly, the statue coming to life. And there was impatience in the answer which was certainly meant for all the doubters at large and not to one sergeant of scouts relaying a message.

“Well, ain’t we in theirs?”

General Armstrong, his men out of ammunition, made his own plea to fall back. But the orders were to hold. Hood was at Sugar Creek with the army; he must have time to cross. It was late afternoon when Forrest at last ordered the withdrawal, and they made it in an orderly fashion.

Through the night the rear guard toiled on and a little after midnight they reached the Sugar in their turn. Drew splashed cold water on his face, not only to keep awake, but to rinse off the mud and grime of days of riding and fighting. He could not remember when he had had his clothes off, had bathed or worn a clean shirt. Now he smeared his jacket sleeve across his face in place of a towel and tramped wearily back to the fire where his own small squad had settled in for what rest they could get.

Croff was sniffing the air, hound fashion.

“Ain’t gonna do you no good,” Webb told him sourly. “Theah ain’t nothin’ in the pot, nor no pot neither—’less Kirby ‘membered to stow it last time. Lordy, m’ back an’ m’ middle are clean growed together, seems like.”

“Feast your eyes, man! Jus’ feast your eyes!” Kirby unrolled his prized coat. In its folds was a greasy package which did indeed give up a treasure—a good four-inch-thick slab of bacon squeezed in with a block of odd, brownish-yellow stuff.

They crowded around, dazzled by the sight of bacon, real bacon. Then Drew pointed at the accompanying block.

“What’s that? New kind of hardtack?”

“Nope. That theah’s vegetables.” Kirby spoke with authority.

“Vegetables?”

“Yeah. These heah Yankee commissaries bin workin’ out new tricks all th’ time. They takes a lot of stuff like turnips, carrots, beets, all such truck, an’ press it into cakes like this. ‘Course you have to be careful. I heard tell as how one blue belly, he chawed the stuff dry an’ then drank water; it bloated him up like a cow in green cane. Poor fella, he jus’ natchelly suffered from bein’ so greedy. But you drop it in water an’ give it a boil....”

“Looks like hay,” Drew commented without enthusiasm. He picked it up and sniffed dubiously.

“Man,” Webb said, “if the Yankees can eat hay, then we can too. An’ I’m hungry ‘nough to chaw grass, were you to show me a tidy patch an’ say go to it! How come you know all ‘bout this hay-stuff, Anse?”

“We found some of it on the *Mazeppa*. The lieutenant told us how it worked—”

“The *Mazeppa*!” Webb breathed reverently, and there was a moment of silence as they all recalled the richness of that capture. “We shore could do with another boat like that one. Too bad this heah crick ain’t big ‘nough to float a nice bunch of supplies in, right now.”

Kirby produced the pail dedicated to the preparation of coffee. But since coffee was so far in the past they could not even remember its smell or taste, no one protested his putting the vegetable block to the test by setting it boiling in the sacred container.

“Don’t look like much.” Webb fanned away smoke to peer into the pail. Kirby had also produced a skillet, made from half of a Yankee canteen, into which he was slicing the bacon.

“It’s fillin’,” he retorted sharply. “An’ you didn’t pay for it, did you? A man who slangs th’ cook—an’ the grub—now maybe he ain’t gonna find his plate waitin’ when it’s time to eat—”

Webb drew back hurriedly. “I ain’t sayin’ nothin’, nothin’ at all!”

Drew grinned. “That’s being wise, Will. Times when a man can talk himself right out of a good piece of luck. It’s hot and fillin’, and you got bacon to give it some taste....”

With hot food under their belts, a fire, and no sign of orders to move, they were content. Kirby and Croff followed the old Plains trick of raking aside the fire, leaving a patch of warmed earth on which all four could curl up together, two men sharing blankets. As the Texan squirmed into place beside him Drew felt the added warmth of the plundered coat Kirby pulled over them. This had not been too bad a day after all, or rather yesterday had not; it was now not too far before dawn. They had made their play at Anthony’s Hill and had come out of it with horses, some food, and a few incidental comforts like this coat. Now after eating, they had a chance to sleep. It seemed that Forrest was going to pull it off neatly again. Drowsily Drew watched the rekindled fire. They would make it, after all.

He awoke to find a thick white cotton of fog enfolding the bivouac. The preparations they had made again of rail and tree breastworks to greet the Union advance were no easier to see than the men crouched in their shadows. It would be a blind battle if Wilson’s pursuit caught up before this cleared; one would only be able to tell the enemy by his position.

But there was no hanging back on the part of the Yankees that morning. Slowly, maybe blindly, but with determination, they were picking their way ahead, reaching the creek bank. If they could cut through Forrest’s present lines, thrust straight ahead, they could smash the demoralized straggle of Hood’s main command, and the Army of the Tennessee would cease to exist.

The blue coats were shadows in the fog, the first advance wading the creek now, their rifles held high. And as that line closed up and solidified into a wall of men, a burst of flame met them face-on. It was brutal, almost one-sided. The Yankees were on their feet, pacing into a country they could not clearly distinguish. While their opponents had “picked trees” and were firing from shelter with accuracy to tear huge gaps in that line.

Men stopped, fired, then broke, running back to the creek for the safety which might lie beyond that wash of icy water. And as they went, ranks of the defenders rose and raced after them, hooting and calling as if on some holiday hunt. Now the cavalry moved in in their turn, cutting savagely at the Union flanks, herding the dismounted Yankees back through the lines



of their horse holders as the Morgan men had been driven at Cynthiana. Wild with fright, horses lunged, reared, tore free from men, and raced in and out, many to be caught by the gray coats. It was a rout and they pushed the Union troops back, snapping up prisoners, horses, equipment—whipping out like a thrown net to sweep back laden with spoil.

These attackers were the rear guard of a badly beaten army, but they did not act that way. They rode, fought, and out-maneuvered their enemies as if they were the fresh advance of a superior invading force. And the swift, hard blows they aimed bought not only time for those they defended, but also the respect, the irritated concern of the men they turned time and time again to fight against.

Having pushed Wilson's troopers well back, the Confederates withdrew once more to the creek, waiting for what might be a second assault. They ate, if they were lucky enough to have rations, and rested their horses. Corn was long gone, so mounts were fed on withered leaves pulled from field shocks, from any possible forage a man could find.

Drew led the gaunt rack of bones that was Hannibal to the creek, letting the mule lip the water. But it was plain the animal was failing. Drew shifted his saddle from that bony back to one of the horses they had gathered in during the morning. But the Yankee gelding was little improvement. In the mud, constantly cut by ice, too wet most of the time, a horse's hoofs rotted on its feet. And the dead animals, many of them put out of their misery by their riders, marked with patches of black, brown, gray, the path of the army. A man had to harden himself to that suffering, just as he had to harden himself to all the other miseries of war.

War was boredom, and it was also quick, exciting action such as they had had that morning. It was fighting gunboats along the river; it was the heat and horror of that slope at Harrisburg, the cold and horror of Franklin. It was riding with men such as Anson Kirby, being a part of a fluid weapon forged and used well by a commander such as Bedford Forrest. It was a way of life....

The scout's hand paused in his currying of Hannibal as that idea struck him for the first time. Now he thought he could understand why Red Springs and all it stood for was so removed and meaningless, was lost in the dim past. To Drew Rennie now, the squad, his round of duties, the army—these were home, not a brick house set in the midst of green fields and smooth paddocks. The house was empty of what he had found elsewhere—acceptance of Drew Rennie as a person in his own right, friendship, an occupation which answered the restlessness which had ridden him into rebellion. He stood staring at nothing as he thought about all that.

Kirby startled him out of his self-absorption. "Butt your saddle, amigo! We're hittin' the trail again."

As he swung up on the Yankee horse and took Hannibal's lead halter, Drew asked a question: "Ever seem to you, Anse, like the army's home? Like it's always been, and you've always been a part of it?"

Kirby shot him a quick glance. "Guess we all kinda feel that sometimes. Gits so you can hardly remember how it was 'fore you joined up. Me, I sometimes wonder if I jus' dreamed Texas outta m' head. Only I keep remindin' myself that someday I can go back an' see if it's jus' the way I dreamed it. Kinda nice to think 'bout that."

They cut away from the main line of march, ranging out and ahead. Stragglers from the army must be moved forward, directed.

And they came upon one of those, a tall man, limping on feet covered with strips of filthy rag. But he still had his musket, and on its bayonet was stuck a goodly portion of ham.

He had been sitting on a tree trunk, but at the approach of the scouts he moved to meet them.

“Howdy, fellas,” he spoke in a hoarse voice, and wiped a running nose on his sleeve. “What command you in?”

“Forrest’s Cavalry ... Scouts—”

“Forrest’s!” He took another eager step forward. “Now theah’s a command! Ain’t bin for you boys, th’ blue bellies woulda gulped us right up! Nairy a one of us’d got out of Tennessee.”

“You ain’t rightly out yet, amigo,” Kirby pointed out. “Kinda lost, ain’t you?”

The man shrugged and grinned wryly. “Feet ain’t too good. But I’m makin’ it, fast as I can.”

“Can you fork a mule?” Drew asked. “This one is for ridin’. We’ll take you to one of the wagons—”

“Now that’s right kind of you boys, right kind.” The man hobbled up to Hannibal as if he feared they might withdraw their offer. “Say, you hungry? Git us wheah we can light a spell, an’ I’ll divide my rations with you.” He waved the musket with its impaled ham.

“Maybe we’ll do jus’ that,” Kirby promised.

Drew dismounted to give the straggler a leg up on Hannibal before they headed on toward the Tennessee and the promise of a breathing space.

## 15. Independent Scout

“What did the doc say?” Kirby, his blue overcoat a splotch of color against the general drabness of the winter scene, came up towing Hannibal and his own mount.

“Doesn’t think he should try it.” Drew made a lengthy business of pulling on the knitted gloves he had acquired only that morning as a swap for a captured Yankee Colt.

The infantry, back under the solid security of Joe Johnston’s leadership, had marched on into North Carolina—to face Sherman’s destructive sweep there. In the west, the only effective Confederate force still in the field east of the Mississippi was Forrest’s Cavalry. And they had been granted twenty days’ furlough to return home if they could get there, and gather clothing and fresh horses. The sun was far down the western horizon of the Confederacy, but to the men who rode with Forrest it had not yet set.

“Th’ kid wants to go....”

That was the worst of it. When they listened to Boyd’s eager talk, saw him make the effort to get on his feet again, they were almost convinced that the youngster could make the trip back through enemy-held territory to Oak Hill. Kirby, though he had no ties in Kentucky, was willing to chance the journey to help Boyd home. But those miles between, where they must skulk and maybe even fight their way—living out, eating very light—Boyd could not stand that. The surgeon’s verdict was that such an idea was utter folly.

“I’ll try to get a letter through with one of the boys,” Drew said. “Major Forbes ought to be able to furnish Cousin Merry with safe conduct on that side; we could have the General take care of it from this end. Then she could take him home with her when he was able to travel.”

“You write the letter fast. The Kaintucks are makin’ tracks today—”

Drew swung into the saddle, and they headed back to camp.

“Now that we ain’t headin’ north, you thinkin’ of joinin’ Croff an’ Webb?”

Men on furlough had been given their orders to collect supplies from home, but also to devil the Yankees when and where they could. They were to fire into transports along the rivers and rout and capture any Union patrols small enough to be attacked when and where they came across them. The Cherokee scout and others who could not return home asked for their own type of furlough, determined to hunt the district below Franklin. Since such men could be of great nuisance value well within the enemy lines, they were granted permission and were even now preparing to move out.

Drew, who had held off from committing himself to the expedition until he had the final verdict on Boyd, knew that Kirby was eager to go. And Drew felt that old restlessness, which gripped him whenever he thought of spending days in camp. He could do nothing for Boyd, but they might be able to accomplish something in Tennessee.

“All right.” He saw Kirby grin at his answer. The plan was one after the Texan’s heart, and Drew knew what it had meant to him to hold back from it.

“You tell the kid?”

“Dr. Fairfax did.” At least he had not had to deliver that blow, a small relief which did not, however, lighten his sense of responsibility.

“How’d he take it?”

“Quiet—on the surface.”

The Boyd who once would have fought stubbornly to get his own way, the Boyd who would have pulled himself out of that big rocker and announced fiercely that he was riding home whether the doctor said Yes or No—that Boyd was gone. Perhaps this new acceptance of hard facts was a matter of growing up. Drew clung to that. There was little he could do, except not go home without him.

“The kid’s gonna be all right?”

“Doc hopes so, if he takes it easy.”

“Ever feel like this heah war’s runnin’ down?”

“I don’t see how we can keep on much longer.”

“Some of the boys are talkin’ Texas. Git us down theah an’ we can go off—be a republic again. Wouldn’t be the first time the Tejanos stood up all by themselves. Supposin’ this fightin’ heah stops ... you ridin’ for Texas?”

“I might.”

Kirby slapped his hand on the horn of his Mexican saddle. “Now that’s what an hombre wants to hear. You change pasture on a good colt, makes him even fatter! Come blue bellies all ovah this heah territory, we jus’ shift range. An’ nobody gonna take Texas! Even the horny toads would spit straight in a Yankee’s eye—”

“How ‘bout it, Sarge?” They were at the cluster of rail-walled huts where the scouts had established a temporary headquarters. Webb hailed them from the door of one of those dwellings where he was rolling up the rubber cloth laid over corn husks to form the floor. “You Kaintuck bound?”

“No. Ridin’ with you boys. Doc thinks Boyd can’t try it.”

“Good enough, Sarge. We’re pullin’ out soon as Injun draws us some travelin’ rations. Jus’ enough to get us theah. We can eat off the Yankees later.”

Since 1861 the clothing of the Confederate Army at large had never matched the colorful sketches hopefully issued by the Quartermaster General’s department. Perhaps in Richmond or some state capitol the gold-lace exponents did appear in tasteful and well-tailored gray with the proper insignia of rank. Forrest’s men, equipped from the first by the unwilling enemy, wore blue, a blue tempered tactfully and ingeniously by butternut shirts, dyed breeches—when there was time to do any dyeing—and slouch hats. But as Drew rode out with his squad he might have been leading a Union rather than a Rebel patrol, which, of course, was part of the necessary cover for venturing into the jaws of a very alert lion.

Parts of West Tennessee were still Confederate-held and through those they rode openly. But the countryside could offer them nothing in the way of forage. Two armies had stripped it bare during the past few months. Sometimes foraging parties on opposite sides had been known to combine forces under a private truce, or had fought brisk, bitter skirmishes to decide which would collect the spoils. If there remained a hog or chicken still running loose, it certainly possessed the power of invisibility.

They slipped across the river in one of the boats kept by local contacts acting in the scouts’ service. Drew questioned the boy who owned their transportation.

“Sure they’s bummers-out. Yankees say they’s ourn, but they ain’t!” he returned indignantly. “They ain’t ridin’ for nobody but their own selves. Cut off a Yankee an’ shoot him for the boots on his feet—do the same if they want a hoss. Git ketched an’ they tell as how they’s

scouts, workin' secret-like. Scouts o' ourn—if we ketch 'em; Yankees—do the blue bellies take 'em. But they ain't nothin' but lowdown trash as nobody wants, for sure!" He dug his pole into the water as if he were impaling a guerrilla on it. "They's mean, plenty mean, suh. Don't go foolin' 'round them!"

"Any special place they hang out?" Drew wanted to know.

The boy shook his head. "Oh, they holes up now an' then somewheahs. But they's a lotta empty houses 'bout nowadays. An' the bummers kin hide out good without no one knowin' they be theah—till they git ready to jump. Cut off a supply wagon or raid a farm or somethin' like that."

"Ridin' the south side of the law." Kirby settled his gun belt in a more comfortable circle about his thin middle. "Bet they know all the tricks of hoppin' back an' forth 'cross the border ahead of the sheriff, too. Time somebody collected bounty on those wolves' scalps."

Ridding the country of such vermin was indeed a worthy occupation. And their private quest for an answer to Weatherby's fate might be a part of that. But their first duty was to the army: The gathering of information, and any discomfort they could deal the Yankees, must be their primary project.

Croff brought them into a camping site he had chosen for just such use. It lay at the head of a small rocky ravine down the center of which ran an ice-sealed thread of stream. It was not quite a cave, but provided shelter for them and their mounts. It was a clear night, and the ground was reasonably hard.

They ate hard salt beef and cold army bread made with corn meal, grease, and water the night before.

"Leave here in the early mornin'." The Cherokee outlined his suggestions. "There's a road leadin' to the turnpike that's three or four miles from here. Last I heard, a bridge had washed out on the pike. Anybody ridin' from Pulaski to Columbia has to turn out and take this other way—"

"Good cover on it?" Drew asked.

"The best."

"I jus' got me one question," Kirby interrupted. "Say we was to gobble us up a bunch of strayin' Yankees along this road, what're we gonna do with 'em after? Four of us don't make no army, an' we ain't gonna be able to detach no prisoner guard. 'Course theah are them what's said from the first that the only good Yankees are them laid peacefullike in their graves. But I don't take natural to shootin' men what are holdin' up the sky with both hands."

"Orders are to spread confusion," Drew observed. "I'd say if we hit quick and often, take a prisoner's boots, maybe, and his horse, and his gun—"

"Also," Webb added, "his rations an' his overcoat, be he wearin' one."

"Then turn him loose, after parolin' him—"

"The Yankees don't honor a parole no more," Kirby objected.

"What if they don't? A lot of men comin' in sayin' they've been paroled will stir up trouble. Remember, from what we've heard, a lot of the Yankees ain't any happier about fightin' on and on than we are. So we take prisoners, get their gear, keep what we can use, destroy the rest, and turn the men loose. If we can move around enough, maybe we can draw some of Wilson's men out of that big army he's supposed to be gatherin' to hit us south. It's the old game Morgan played."

Croff grunted. "It may be old, but I've seen it work. All right, we parole prisoners and light out cross-country after a strike."

"I've been thinkin'—" Kirby was checking the loading of his Colts—"if we start heah, we can sorta work our way in, coyote right up close to Franklin. They'll be expectin' us to light out for the home range, not go jinglin' in to wheah they've forted up. Might raise a sight of smoke that way. Git Wilson's boys on the prod, for sure."

"Franklin—?" Croff repeated.

"Little below, maybe. From what that boy said, those bushwhackers move around pretty free," Drew reminded him, certain the Cherokee was back to the desire to search for Weatherby.

"We'll see what kind of luck we have along this road, Injun-scouted. You take first watch, Injun?"

"Yeah." Drew heard rather than saw the Cherokee leave their camp, bound for a lookout point. The other three bedded down, anxious to snatch as much rest as possible.

Long before dawn they were on the move again, threading through the winter-seared woods. Croff brought them out unerringly behind a sagging rail fence well masked with the skeleton brush of the season. There was equally good cover on the other side of the road. Kirby climbed the fence, investigating a dark splotch on the surface of the lane.

"Fresh droppin's. Been a sight of trailin' 'long heah recent."

The rest was elementary. There was no need for orders. Croff and Webb holed up on one side of the lane well apart; Drew and Kirby did the same on the other. Waiting would be sheer boredom and in this weather the height of discomfort.

The gray of early morning sharpened the land about them. Boyd would have enjoyed this game of tweaking a wildcat's tail. Drew chewed his lower lip, tasting the salt of sweat, the grit of road dust. Just now was no time to think of Boyd; he must concentrate on the business before him.

He heard the sharp chittering of an aroused squirrel, repeated in two shrill bursts. But his own ear close to the ground told him they were to expect company. There was the regular thud of horses' hoofs, the sound of mounts ridden in company and at an even pace. The only remaining question was whether it was a Union patrol and small enough for the four of them to handle.

One, two ... two more ... five of them, topping a small rise. A cavalry patrol ... and the odds were not too impossible.

Drew sighted sergeant's stripes on the leader's jacket. It would depend upon how alert that noncom was. Wilson was drawing in new levies, so these men could be new to the district, even green in the army.

The Yankee sergeant was past Kirby's post now, and after him the first two of his squad. He paid no attention to the bushes.

Webb's carbine and Kirby's Colts cracked in what seemed like a single spat of sound. One of the troopers in the rear shouted, grabbing at a point high on his shoulder, the other one was thrown as his horse reared, its upraised forefeet striking another man from the saddle as he endeavored to turn his mount.

Drew fired, and saw the sergeant's carbine fall as he caught at the saddle horn, his arm hanging limp.

“Surrender!” As Drew shouted that order into the tangle below, he leaped to the right. A single shot clipped through the bushes where he had been, answered by a blast from Webb.

Then hands were up, men stared white-faced and sullen at the fence behind which might be a whole company of the enemy. Drew came into the open, the Spencer he had taken from Jas’ covering the sergeant. For the expression on the noncom’s face suggested that, wounded as he was, he would like nothing better than to carry on the struggle—with Drew as his principal target.

“Go ahead, get it over with!” He spat at Drew.

For a second Drew was bewildered, and then he suddenly guessed that the Union soldier expected to be shot out of hand.

His anger was hot. “We don’t shoot prisoners!”

“No? The evidence is not in favor of that statement,” the Yankee spoke dryly, his accent and choice of words that of an educated man.

“What brand you think we’re wearin’, fella?” Kirby had come out of concealment, his Colt steady on the captives.

“Guerrillas, I’d say,” the sergeant returned hardily. Drew realized then that their mixture of clothing must have stamped them as the very outlaws they wanted to hunt down, as far as the Union troopers were concerned.

“Now that’s wheah you’re sure jumpin’ your fences,” Kirby’s half grin vanished. “We’re General Forrest’s men, not guerrillas. Or ain’t you never heard tell of Forrest’s Cavalry? Seems like anyone wearin’ blue an’ forkin’ a hoss ought to know who’s been chasin’ him to Hell an’ gone over most of Tennessee. Lucky I ain’t in a sod-pawin’ mood, hombre, or I might jus’ want to see how a blue-belly sarge looks without an ear on his thick skull, or maybe try a few Comanche tricks of hair trimmin’! Guerrillas—!”

The Union sergeant glanced from Kirby and Drew to his own men. One was sitting on the edge of the road, nursing his head between his hands. Another had his hand to his shoulder, and the sticky red of fresh blood showed between his fingers. The two others, very young, stood nervously, their hands high. If the Yankee noncom was thinking of trying something, his material was not promising. Drew broke the moment of silence with a warning.

“You’re surrounded, subject to fire from both sides, Sergeant! I suggest surrender. You will be treated as prisoners of war and given parole. *We are* from General Forrest’s command. We’re scouts. Believe me, if we had wished to, we could have shot every one of you out of the saddle before you knew we were here. Guerrillas would have done just that.”

The logic of that argument reached the Union sergeant. He still eyed Drew straightly, but there was a ruefulness rather than hostile defiance in his voice as he asked:

“What do you plan to do with us?”

“Nothing.” Drew was crisp. “Give us your parole, leave your arms, your horses, your rations—if you are carrying any. Then you are free to go.”

“We’ve been ordered not to take parole,” the sergeant objected.

“General Forrest hasn’t given any orders not to grant it,” Drew countered. “As far as I am concerned, you can take it, we’ll accept your word.”

“All right.” The other dismounted awkwardly, and with one hand unbuckled his saber, dropping his belt and gun.

Kirby went among the men gathering up their weapons. Then he and Drew tended the slight wounds of their enemies.

“You’ll both do until you can get to town,” Drew told them. “And you’ve a road and plenty of daylight to help you foot it....”

To Drew’s surprise, the sergeant suddenly laughed. “This ain’t going to sit well with the captain. He swore all you Rebs were run out of here a couple of weeks ago.”

“You can assure him he’s wrong.” Drew saw a chance to confuse the enemy. “We’re very much around. You’ll be seem’ a lot of us from now on, a lot more.”

They watched the squad in blue, now afoot, plod on down the road. When they were out of sight around a bend, Webb and Croff came out of hiding to inspect the spoil. Unfortunately the Yankees had not possessed rations, but their opponents acquired five horses, five Springfields, four sabers, and three Colts, as well as welcome rounds of ammunition—a fine haul.

Croff methodically smashed the stocks of the Springfields against a rock and pitched the ruined weapons back of the fence. They had seen during the retreat just how useless those rifles were for mounted men. The sabers were broken the same way, but the rest of the plunder was shared.

Webb appropriated one of the captured mounts. They stripped the others of their gear, taking what they wanted in the way of blankets and saddle equipment, and were putting the horses on leading ropes when a volley of shots ripping through the early morning froze them. Croff whirled to face the road down which the Yankees had vanished.

“Came from that direction—”

They mounted, taking not the open road but a cross route the Cherokee indicated. Coming out on the crest of a slope, they were above another of those hollows through which the road ran. And in that way lay still blue figures. Drew’s carbine swung up as men broke from ambush and headed toward those forms. No Confederate force would have wantonly butchered unarmed and wounded men, nor would the Yankees. Which left the scum they both hated—the bushwhackers!

Just as the crack of the murder guns had earlier torn the quiet, so did the Confederate answer come now. Three of those advancing on their victims dropped. One more cried out, staggering toward the concealing bush. Then more broke from cover beyond, going into flight up the other rise.

“Croff! Webb! After them!” The Cherokee scout was already booting his horse into a run.

Drew and Kirby reached the road together. Slipping from Hannibal, Drew knelt by the Union sergeant, turning the man over as gently as he could. But there was no hope. The Yankee’s eyes opened; he stared up with a cold and terrible hate.

“Shot us ... after all ... murder—” he mouthed.

“No!” Drew cried his protest. “Not us—”

But that head rolled on his arm, and Drew was forced to swallow the fact that the other had died believing that treachery. Kirby arose from the examination of the rest of the bodies.

“Got ‘em all. Musta bin as easy as shootin’ weanlin’s. They didn’t have a chance! We got three—” He made a circle about one of the dead guerrillas—“but that don’t balance none.”

Drew lowered the dead sergeant to the surface of the road.



“It sure doesn’t!” he said bleakly. “We’ll go after them—if we have to ride clear to the Ohio!”

## 16. Missing in Action

“I’ve counted twenty at least,” Webb said over his shoulder. The scouts were belly-flat in cover, looking down into a scene of some activity. It almost resembled the cavalry camp they had left behind them to the south. There were the same shelters ingeniously constructed of brush and logs and a picket line for horses and mules. This hole must harbor a high percentage of deserters from both armies.

“Only four of us,” Kirby remarked. “Course I know we’re the tall men of the army, but ain’t this runnin’ the odds a mite high?”

Croff chuckled. “He’s got a point there, Sarge.”

“Seein’ as how what happened back there on the road could be pinned on us, we have to do something,” Drew returned. This whole section of country would boil over when those bodies were discovered. “And we ain’t the only ones. Any of our boys comin’ through here on furlough are like to be jumped for it if the Yankees catch them.”

“That’s the truth if you ever spoke it, Sarge. I can see some hangin’s comin’ out of that ambush.”

“Theah’s still twenty hombres down theah, an’ four of us. We can pick off a few from up heah, but they ain’t gonna wait around to git sniped. So, how we gonna spread ourselves—?”

Kirby’s was the unanswerable question. They had trailed the fugitives from the ambush back to this tangled wilderness with infinite caution, bypassing two sentries so well posted and concealed they had been forced to judge that the motley collection of guerrillas were as experienced at this trade as the scouts. There was no time to try to round up any other bands of homing Confederates or prowling scouts, even if they knew where they could be located. This was really a Yankee problem partly as well.

Because of that murderous ambush, the local Union commander should be out for blood. But how could they get into enemy hands the information about this rats’ nest?

“We can’t take ‘em ourselves, and we’ve no time to round up any of the boys who might be passin’ through.”

“So we jus’ leave heah an’ forgit it?” Webb demanded.

“There’s another way—risky, but it might work. Take the Yankees off our trail and put them to doing something for us....”

“Sic ‘em in heah, eh?” Kirby was watching Drew with dancing eyes. “How?”

“Yeah, how? Ride up to their camp an’ say, ‘We know wheah at theah’s some bushwhackers, come’n see’?” Webb asked scornfully. “After this mornin’ they won’t even listen to a truce flag, I’m thinkin’.”

Croff nodded. “That’s right.”

“Supposin’ those sentries we passed back there were knocked out and two of us took their places and the other two then laid a trail leadin’ here?”

“Showin’ themselves for bait, plainlike?” Kirby asked.

“If we have to. The alarm will have gone out. I’m bettin’ there’re patrols thick on that road.”

“Any blue bellies travelin’ theah now are gonna be bunched an’ ready to shoot at anything movin’.”

“So,” Croff cut in over Webb’s instant objection, “you get some Yankees a-hittin’ it up after you, and you run for here. They’re not all dumb enough to ride right into this kind of country.”

“We’ll have to work it so they’ll keep comin’. When you see them headin’ into the gorge after us, you move out of the sentry posts back across this ridge and start cuttin’ this camp down to size—pick off those horses and put ‘em afoot. That’ll keep them here till the Yankees come.”

“You know,” Kirby said, “it’s jus’ crazy enough to work. Lordy—if it was summer, I’d say we all had our brains sun-cured, but I’m willin’ to try it. Who does what?”

“Croff and Webb’ll take out the sentries. We’ll go hunt us up some Yankees.” As Kirby said, it was a wild plan anchored here and there on chance alone. But the scouts were familiar with action as rash as this, which *had* worked. And they still had a few hours of daylight left in which to try it.

They let a supply train go by on the road undisturbed. It was, Drew noted, well guarded and the guard paid special attention to the woods and fields flanking them. The word had certainly gone out to expect dire trouble along that section of countryside.

“Have to be kinda hopin’ for the right-sized herd,” Kirby observed. “Need a nice patrol. Too bad we ain’t able to rope in, to order, jus’ what we need.”

He went to a post farther south along the pike, and Drew settled himself in his own patch of cover, with Hannibal close at hand. The passing of time was a fret, but one they were used to. Drew thought over the plan. Improvisation always had to play a large part in such a project, but he believed they had a chance of success.

A bird note, clear and carrying, broke the silence of the winter afternoon. Drew cradled the Spencer close to him. That was Kirby’s signal that around the bend he had sighted what they wanted.

It was a patrol, led by a bearded officer with a captain’s bars on his shoulders—quite an impressive turnout, consisting of some thirty men and two officers. Watching them ride toward him, Drew’s mouth went dry, a shiver ascending his spine. To play fox to this pack of hounds was going to be more of a task than he had anticipated. But it had to be done.

He fired, carefully missing the captain by a small margin, as he saw the spark his bullet struck from a roadside stone. Then he pumped one shot after another over the heads of the startled men. As he mounted Hannibal he caught a glimpse of Kirby cutting across the slope. The Texan rode Indian fashion with most of his mount between him and the return fire from the road. Drew kicked Hannibal into a leap, taking him half way out of range and out of sight.

Then, with Kirby, he was pounding away. A branch was bullet-clipped over his head, and he heard the whistle of shots. Unless he was very lucky, this might be one piece of recklessness he would pay for dearly. But he also heard what he had hoped for—the shouts of the hunters, the thud of hoofs behind.

Now it was a game, much the same as the one they had played to lead the Union troops into the cavalry trap at Anthony’s Hill. They showed themselves, to fire and fall back, riding a crisscross pattern which would confuse the Yankees as to whether they were pursuing two men or more. Drew watched for the landmarks to guide them back. Less than half a mile

would bring them to the gorge. Then they must ride fast to put a bigger gap between them and the enemy so they could go to cover before they struck the valley of the guerrilla camp.

They must depend upon Croff and Webb having successfully taken over the sentry posts. But Drew faced those heights with some apprehension. Kirby, on one of his cross runs, pulled near.

“They’re laggin’. Better give ‘em somethin’ to try an’ bite on!” He brought his bay to a complete stop and aimed. When his carbine barked, a horse neighed and went down. Then Kirby flinched, his weapon fell from his hand, and he caught quickly at the horn of his saddle. From the foremost of the blue riders there was a wild yell of exultation.

Drew whirled Hannibal and brought him at a run to the Texan’s side.

“How bad?”

“Jus’ creased me.” But Kirby’s expression gave the lie to his words. “Git goin’ ... don’t be a dang-blasted fool!”

Drew scooped up the reins the other had let fall. Kirby must not be allowed to lag. To be captured now was to lose all hope of being taken as an ordinary prisoner of war. He booted Hannibal into the rocking gallop the big mule was capable of upon occasion, and pulled the bay along. Kirby was clinging to the horn, his language heated as he alternately ordered or tried to abuse Drew into leaving him.

The Texan’s plight had applied any spur the pursuers might have needed. Confident they were now going to gather in at least two bushwhackers, the shouting behind took on a premature shrilling of triumph. There was a blast of shooting, and Drew marveled that neither man nor horse was hit again.

He was into the mouth of the gorge, still leading Kirby’s horse, but a glance told him that the Texan would not be able to hold on much longer. He was gray-white under his tan, and his head bobbed from side to side with the rocking of the horse’s running stride.

Their pursuers pulled pace a little, maybe fearing a trap. Drew gained a few precious seconds by the headlong pace he had set from the time Kirby had been wounded. But they dared not try to get up the steep sides of the cut now.

He dared not erupt into the bushwacker campsite, or could he? If Croff and Webb were now making their way to the heights above, ready to fire into the camp as they had planned, wouldn’t that keep the men there busy and cover his own break into the valley?

He heard firing again; this time the sound was ahead of him. Croff and Webb were starting action, which meant that the Yankees would be drawn on to see what was up. Kirby’s horse was running beside Hannibal. The Texan’s eyes were closed, his left shoulder and upper sleeve bloody.

Riding neck and neck, they burst out of the gorge as rifle bullets propelled from a barrel. The impetus of that charge carried them across an open strip. There were yells ... shots.... But Drew’s attention was on keeping Kirby in the saddle.

Hannibal hit a brush wall and tore through it. Branches whipped back at them with force enough to throw riders.

Kirby was swept off, gone before Drew could catch him. Then Hannibal gave a wild bray of pain and terror. He reared and Drew lost grasp of the bay’s reins. The riderless horse drove ahead while Drew tried to control the mule and turn him.

Tossing his head high, Hannibal brayed again. A man scuttled out of the brush, and Drew only half saw the figure snap a shot at him.

He was aware of the sickening impact of a blow in his middle, of the fact that suddenly he could pull no air into his straining lungs. The reins were out of his hands, but somehow he continued to cling to the saddle as the mule leaped ahead. Then under Hannibal's hoofs the ground gave way, both of them tumbling into the icy stream. And for Drew there was instant blackness, shutting out the need for breath, the terrible agony which shook him.

"... dead. Get on after the others!"

The words made no sense. He was cold, wet, and there was a throbbing pain beating through him with every thrust of blood in his veins. But he could breathe again and if he lay very still, his nausea eased.

Then he heard it—not quite a bray, but a kind of moaning. The sound went on and on—shutting everything else out of his ears—to hurt not flesh, but spirit. He could stand it no longer.

With infinite labor, Drew turned his head. He felt the rasp of grit on the skin of his burned cheek, and that small pain became a part of the larger. He opened his eyes, setting his teeth against a wave of nausea, and tried to understand what had happened to him.

Water washed over his legs and boots, numbing him to the waist. But his arms, shoulders, and head were above its surface as he lay on his side, half braced against a rock. And he could see across the stream to the source of that mournful sound.

Hannibal was struggling to get to his feet. There was a wound in his flank, a red river rilling from it to stain the water. And one of his forelegs was caught between two rocks. Throwing his head high, the mule bit at the branches of a willow. Several times he got hold and pulled, as if he could win to his feet with the aid of the tooth-shredded wood. Shudders ran across his body, and the sound he uttered was almost a human moan of pain and despair.

Drew moved his arm, dully glad that he could. His fingers seemed stiff—as if his muscles were taking their own time to obey his will—but they closed on one of the Colts which had not been shaken free from his holster when he fell. He pulled the weapon free, biting his lip hard against the twinges that movement cost him.

Steadying the weapon on his hip, he took careful aim at Hannibal's head and fired. The recoil of the heavy revolver brought a small, whistling cry of pain out of him. But across the stream, the mule's head fell from the willows, and he was mercifully still.

The sky was gray. Drew heard a snap of shots, but they seemed very far away. And the leaden cold of the water crept farther up his body, turning the throb into a cramp. He tried not to cry out; for him there would be no mercy shot.

The rising tide of cold brought lethargy with it. He felt as if all his strength had drained into the water tugging at him. Again, the dark closed in, and he was lost in it.

Warm ... he was warm. And the painful spasms which had torn at him were eased. He still had a dull ache through his middle, but there was warm pressure over it, comforting and good. He sighed, fearful that a sudden movement might cause the sharp pains to return.

Then he was moved, his head was raised, and something hard pressed against his lower lip so that he opened his mouth in reflex. Hot liquid lapped over his tongue. He swallowed and the warmth which had been on the outside was now within him as well, traveling down his throat into his stomach.

More warmth, this time on his forehead. Drew forced his eyes open. Memory stirred, too dim to be more than a teasing uneasiness. Action was necessary, important action. He focused his eyes on a brown face bearing a scruff of beard on cheeks and chin.

“Webb....” It was very slow, that process of matching face to name. But once he had done it, memory brightened.

“What happened—?”

They had ridden into the guerrilla camp site, he and Kirby, with the Yankees on their heels. Painfully he could recall that. Then, later he had been lying half in, half out of a creek, sicker than he had ever been in his life. And Hannibal ... he had shot Hannibal!

Webb’s hand came out of the half dark, holding the tin cup to his mouth again.

“Drink up!” the other ordered sharply.

Drew obeyed. But he was not so far under, now. Objects around him took on clarity. He was lying on the ground, not too far from a fire, and there were walls. Was he in a cabin?

There had been a cabin before, but he had not been the sick one then. The guerrillas!

“Bushwhackers?” He got that out more clearly. A shadow which had substance, moved behind Webb. Croff’s strongly marked features were lined by the light.

“Dead ... or the Yankees have them.”

Webb was making him drink again. With the other supporting his head and shoulders, Drew was able to survey his body. A blanket was wrapped tightly about his legs, and over his chest and middle a wet wad of material steamed. When Webb laid him flat again, the two men, working together, wrung out another square of torn blanket, and substituted its damp heat for the one which had been cooling against him.

“What’s the ... matter—? Shot?”

Croff reached to bring into the firelight a belt strap. Dangling it, he held the buckle-end in Drew’s line of vision. The plate was split, and embedded in it was an object as big as Drew’s thumb and somewhat resembling it in shape.

“We took this off you,” the Cherokee explained. “Stopped a bullet plumb center with that.”

“Ain’t seen nothin’ like it ‘fore,” Webb added, patting the compress gently into place. “Like to ripe you wide open if it hadn’t hit the buckle! You got you a bruise black as charcoal an’ big as a plate right across your guts, but the skin’s only a little broke wheah the plate cut you some. An’ if you ain’t hurt inside, you’re ‘bout the luckiest fella I ever thought to see in my lifetime!”

Drew moved a hand, touching the buckle with a forefinger. Then he filled his lungs deeply and felt the answering pinch of pain in the region of the bruise Webb described.

“It sure hurts! But it’s better than a hole.”

A hole! Kirby! Drew’s hand went out to brace himself up, the compress slid down his body, and then Webb was forcing him down again.

“What you tryin’ to do, boy? Pass out on us agin? You stay put an’ let us work on you! This heah district’s no place to linger, an’ you can’t fork a hoss ‘til we git you fixed up some.”

Drew caught at the hand which pinned his shoulder. “Will, where’s Anse? You got him here too?” He rolled his head, trying to see more of the enclosure in which he lay, but all he faced

was a wall of rough stone. Webb was wringing out another compress, preparing to change the dressing.

“Where’s Anse?” Drew demanded more loudly, and there was a faint echo of his voice from overhead.

Croff flipped off the cooling compress as Webb applied the fresh one. But Drew was no longer lulled by that warmth.

“He ain’t here,” replied the Cherokee.

“Where then?” Drew was suddenly silent, no longer wanting an answer.

“Looky heah, Drew”—Webb hung over him, peering intently into his face—“we don’t know wheah he is, an’ that’s Bible-swear truth! We saw you two come out into the valley, but we was busy pickin’ off hosses so them devils couldn’t make it away ‘fore the Yankees caught up with ‘em. Then the blue bellies slammed in fast an’ hard. They jus’ naturally went right over those bushwhackers. Maybe so, they captured two or three, but most of them was finished off right theah. We took cover, not wantin’ to meet up with lead jus’ because we might seem to be in bad company. When all the shootin’ was over an’ you didn’t come ‘long, me and Injun did some scoutin’ ‘round.

“We found you down by that crick, an’ first—I’m tellin’ it to you straight—we thought you was dead. Then Injun, he found your heart was still beatin’, so we lugged you up heah an’ looked you over. Later, Injun, he went back for a look-see, but he ain’t found hide nor hair of Anse—”

“He was hit bad—in the shoulder—” Drew looked pleadingly from one to the other—“when we smashed into that brush he was pushed right out of the saddle, not far from that crick where you found me. Injun, he could still be out there now ... bleedin’—hurt...”

Croff shook his head. “I backtracked all along that way after we found you. There was some blood on the grass, but that could have come from one of the bushwhackers. There was no trace of Anse, anywhere.”

“What if he was taken prisoner!” Neither one of them would meet his eyes now, and Drew set his teeth, clamping down on a wild rush of words he wanted to spill, knowing that both men would have been as quick and willing to search for the Texan as they had to bring Drew, himself, in. No one answered him.

But Croff stood up and said quietly: “This is a pretty well-hidden cave. The Yankees probably believe they’ve swept out this valley. You stay holed up here, and you’re safe for a while. Then when you’re ready to ride, Sarge, we’ll head back south.”

He stopped to pick up his carbine by its sling.

“Where’re you going?”

“Take a look-see for Yankees. If they got Anse, there’s a slim chance we can learn of it and take steps. Leastwise, nosing a little downwind ain’t goin’ to do a bit of harm.” He moved out of the firelight with his usual noiseless tread and was gone.

## 17. Poor Rebel Soldier....

“Sergeant Rennie reporting suh, at the General’s orders.” Drew came to attention under the regard of those gray-blue eyes, not understanding why he had been summoned to Forrest’s headquarters.

“Sergeant, what’s all this about bushwhackers?”

Drew repeated the story of their adventure in Tennessee, paring it down to the bald facts.

“That nest was wiped out by the Yankee patrol, suh. Afterward Private Croff found a saddlebag with some papers in it, which was in the remains of their camp. It looks like they’d been picking off couriers from both sides. We sent those in with our first report.”

The General nodded. “You stayed near-by for a while after the camp was taken?”

“Well, I was hurt, suh.”

He saw that General Forrest was smiling. “Sergeant, that theah story about your belt buckle has had a mighty lot of repeatin’ up and down the ranks. You were a lucky young man!”

“Yes, suh!” Drew agreed. “While I was laid up, Privates Croff and Webb took turns on scout, suh. They located some of our men hidin’ out—stragglers from the retreat. They also rounded up a few of the bushwhackers’ horses and mules.”

Forrest nodded. “You returned to our lines with some fifteen men and ten mounts, as well as information. Your losses?”

Drew stared at the wall behind the General’s head.

“One man missin’, suh.”

“You were unable to hear any news of him?”

“No, suh.” The old weariness settled back on him. They had hunted—first Croff and Webb—and then he, too, as soon as he was able to sit a saddle. It was Weatherby’s fate all over again; the ground might have opened and gulped Kirby down.

“How old are you, Sergeant?”

Drew could not see what his age had to do with Kirby’s disappearance, but he answered truthfully: “Nineteen—I had a birthday a week ago, suh.”

“And you volunteered when—?”

“In May of ‘62, suh. I was in Captain Castleman’s company when they joined General Morgan—Company D, Second Kentucky. Then I transferred to the scouts under Captain Quirk.”

“The big raids ... you were in Ohio, Rennie? Captured?”

“No, suh. I was one of the lucky ones who made it across the river before the Yankees caught up—”

“At Chickamauga?”

“Yes, suh.”

“Cynthiana”—but now Forrest did not wait for Drew’s affirmative answer—”and Harrisburg, Franklin.... It’s a long line of battles, ain’t it, boy? A long line. And you were nineteen last



week. You know, Rennie, the Union Army gives medals to those they think have earned them.”

“I’ve heard tell of that, suh.”

The General’s hand, brown, strong, went to the officer’s hat weighing down a pile of papers on the table. With a quick twist, Forrest ripped off the tassled gold cord which distinguished it, smoothing out the loop of bullion between thumb and forefinger.

“We don’t give medals, Sergeant. But I think a good soldier might just be granted a birthday present without any one gittin’ too excited about how military that is.” He held out the cord, and Drew took it a bit dazedly.

“Thank you, suh. I’m sure proud....”

A wave of Forrest’s hand put a period to his thanks.

“A long line of battles,” the General repeated, “too long a line—an end to it comin’ soon. Did you ever think, boy, of what you were goin’ to do after the war?”

“Well, there’s the West, suh. Open country out there—”

Forrest’s eyes were bright, alert. “Yes, and we might even hold the West. We’ll see—we’ll have to see. Your report accepted, Sergeant.”

It was plainly a dismissal. As Drew saluted, the General laid his hat back on the tallest pile of papers. Busy at the table, he might have already forgotten Drew. But the Kentuckian, pausing outside the door to examine the hat cord once more, knew that he would never forget. No, there were no medals worn in the ragged, thin lines of the shrinking Confederate Army. But his birthday gift—Drew’s fist closed about the cord jealously—that was something he would have, always.

Only, nowadays, how long was “always”?

“That’s a right smart-lookin’ mount, Sarge!” Drew looked at the pair of lounging messengers grinning at him from the front porch of headquarters. He loosened the reins and led the bony animal a step or two before mounting.

Shawnee, nimble-footed as a cat, a horse that had known almost as much about soldiering as his young rider. Then Hannibal, the mule from Cadiz, that had served valiantly through battle and retreat, to die in a Tennessee stream bed. And now this bone-rack of a gray mule with one lop ear, a mind of his own, and a gait which could set one’s teeth on edge when you pushed him into any show of speed. The animal’s long, melancholy face, his habit of braying mournfully in the moonlight—until Westerners compared him unfavorably with the coyotes of the Plains—had earned him the name Croaker; and he was part of the loot they had brought out of the bushwhackers’ camp.

As unlovely as he appeared, Croaker had endurance, steady nerves, and a most un-mulelike willingness to obey orders. He was far from the ideal cavalry mount, but he took his rider there and back, safely. He was sure-footed, with a cat’s ability to move at night, and in scout circles he had already made a favorable impression. But he certainly was an unhandsome creature.

“Smart actin’s better than smart lookin’,” Drew answered the disparagers now. “Do as well yourselves, soldiers, and you’ll be satisfied.”

Croaker started off at a trot, sniffing, his good ear twitching as if he had heard those unfriendly comments and was storing them up in his memory, to be acted upon in the future.

January and February were behind them now. Now it was March ... spring—only it was more like late fall. Or winter, with the night closing in. Drew let Croaker settle to the gait which suited him best. He would visit Boyd and then rejoin Buford's force.

The army, or what was left of it hereabouts, was, as usual, rumbling with rumor. The Union's General Wilson had assembled a massive hammer of a force, veterans who had clashed over and over with Forrest in the field, who had learned that master's tricks. Seventeen thousand mounted cavalymen, ready to aim straight down through Alabama where the war had not yet touched. Another ten thousand without horses, who formed a backlog of reserves.

In the Carolinas, Johnston, with the last stubborn regiments of the Army of the Tennessee, was playing his old delaying game, trying to stop Sherman from ripping up along the coast. And in Virginia the news was all bad. The world was not spring, but drab winter, the dying winter of the Confederacy.

Wilson's target was Selma and the Confederate arsenal; every man in the army knew that. Somehow Bedford Forrest was going to have to interpose between all the weight of that Yankee hammer and Selma. And he had done the impossible so often, there was still a chance that he *could* bring it off. The General had a free hand and his own particular brand of genius to back it.

Drew's fingers were on the front of his short cavalry jacket, pressing against the coil of gold cord in his shirt pocket. No, the old man wasn't licked yet; he'd give Wilson and every one of those twenty-seven thousand Yankees a good stiff fight when they came poking their long noses over the Alabama border!

"He gave you what?" Boyd sat up straighter. His face was thin and no longer weather-beaten, and he'd lost all of that childish arrogance which had so often irritated his elders. In its place was a certain quiet soberness in which the scout sometimes saw flashes of Sheldon.

Now Drew pulled the cord from his pocket, holding it out for Boyd's inspection. The younger boy ran it through his fingers wonderingly.

"General Forrest's!" From it he looked to the faded weatherworn hat Drew had left on a chair by the door. Boyd caught it up and pulled off the leather string banding its dented crown. Carefully he fitted on Forrest's gift and studied the result critically. Drew laughed.

"Like puttin' a new saddle on Croaker; it doesn't fit."

"Yes, it does," Boyd protested. "That's right where it belongs."

Drew, standing by the window, felt a pinch of concern. He found it difficult nowadays to deny Boyd anything, let alone such a harmless request.

"The first lieutenant comin' along will call me for sportin' a general's feathers on a sergeant's head," he protested. "Nothin' from Cousin Merry yet? Maybe Hansford didn't make it through with my letter. He hasn't come back yet.... But—"

"Think I'd lie to you about that?" Boyd's eyes held some of the old blaze as he turned the hat around in his hands. "And what I told you is the truth. The surgeon said it won't hurt me any to ride with the boys when you pull out. General Buford's ordered to Selma and Dr. Cowan's sister lives there. He has a letter from her sayin' I can rest up at her house if I need to. But I won't! I haven't coughed once today, that's the honest truth, Drew. And when you go, the Yankees are goin' to move in here. I don't want to go to a Yankee prison, like Anse—"

Drew's shoulders hunched in an involuntary tightening of muscles as he stared straight out of the window at nothing. Boyd had insisted from the first that the Texan must be a prisoner. Drew schooled himself into the old shell, the shell of trying not to let himself care.

"General Buford said I was to ride in one of the headquarters wagons. He needs an extra driver. That's doin' something useful, not just sittin' around listenin' to a lot of bad news!" The boy's tone was almost raw in protest.

And some of Boyd's argument made sense. After the command moved out he might be picked up by a roving Yankee patrol, while Selma was still so far behind the Confederate lines that it was safe, especially with Forrest moving between it and Wilson.

"Mind you, take things easy! Start coughin' again, and you'll have to stay behind!" Drew warned.

"Drew, are things really so bad for us?"

The scout came away from the window. "Maybe the General can hold off Wilson ... this time. But it can't last. Look at things straight, Boyd. We're short on horses; more'n half the men are dismounted. And more of them desert every day. Men are afraid they'll be sent into the Carolinas to fight Sherman, and they don't want to be so far from home. The women write or get messages through about how hard things are at home. A man can march with an empty belly for himself and somehow stick it out, but when he hears about his children starvin' he's apt to forget all the rest. We're whittled 'way down, and there's no way under Heaven of gettin' what we need."

"I heard some of the boys talkin' about drawin' back to Texas."

"Sure, we've all heard that big wishin', but that's all it is, just wishin'. The Yankees wouldn't let up even if they crowded us clear back until we're knee-deep in the Rio Grande. It's close to the end now—"

"No, it ain't!" Boyd flared, more than a shade of the old stubbornness back in his voice. "It ain't goin' to be the end as long as one of us can ride and hold a carbine! They can have horses and new boots, their supplies, and all their men. We ain't scared of any Yankee who ever rode down the pike! If you yell at 'em now, they'd beat it back the way they came."

Drew smiled tiredly. "Guess we're on our way now to do some of that yellin'." The end was almost in sight; every trooper in or out of the saddle knew it. Only some, like Boyd, would not admit it. "Remember what I say, Boyd. Take it slow and ride easy!"

Boyd picked up Drew's hat again, holding it in the sunlight coming through the window. The cord was a band of raw gold, gleaming brighter, perhaps, because of the shabbiness of the hat it now graced.

"You don't ride easy with the General," he said softly. "You ride tall and you ride proud!"

Drew took the hat from him. Out of the direct sunbeam, the band still seemed to hold a bit of fire.

"Maybe you do," he agreed soberly.

Now Boyd was smiling in turn. "You carry the General's hatband right up so those blue bellies can get the shine in their eyes! We'll lam 'em straight back to the Tennessee again—see if we don't!"

But almost three weeks later the Yankees were not back at the Tennessee; they were dressing their lines before the horseshoe bend of the defending breastworks of Selma. Everything which could have gone wrong with Forrest's plans had done just that. A captured courier had

given his enemies the whole framework of his strategy. Then the cavalry had tried to hold the blue flood at Bogler's Creek by a tearing frantic battle, whirling Union sabers against Confederate revolvers in the hands of veterans. It had been a battle from which Forrest himself broke free through a lane opened by the action of his own weapons and the concentrated fury of his escort.

Out of the city had steamed the last train while a stream of civilian refugees had struggled away on foot, the river patrolled by pickets of cavalry ordered to extricate every able-bodied man from the throng and press him into the struggle. Forrest's orders were plain: Every male able to fight goes into the works, or into the river!

Now Drew and Boyd were with the Kentuckians, forming with Forrest's escort a small reserve force behind the center of that horseshoe of ramparts. Veterans on either flank, and the militia, trusted by none, in the middle. Thin lines stretched to the limit, so that each dismounted trooper in that pitiful fortification was six or even ten feet from his nearest fellow. And gathering under the afternoon sun a mass of blue, a vast, endless ocean....

The enemy was dismounted, too, coming in on a charge as fearless and reckless as any the Confederates had delivered in the past. With the sharpness of one of their own sabers, they slashed out a trotting arc of men, cutting at Armstrong's veterans in the earthworks to be curled back under a withering fire, losing a general, senior officers, and men. But the rebuff did not shake them.

A second Union attack was aimed at the center, and the militia broke. Bugles shrilled in the small reserve, who then pushed up to meet that long tongue of blue licking out confidently toward the city. This time there was no stopping the Yankee advance. The reserve neither broke nor followed the shambling panic-stricken flight of the militia, but were pushed back by sheer weight of numbers to the unfinished second line of the city's defenses.

Blue—a full tidal wave of it in front and wedges of blue overlapping the gray flanks and appearing here and there even to the rear—

Having thrown away his rifle, Drew was now firing with both Colts, never sure any of his bullets found their targets. He stood shoulder to shoulder with Boyd in a dip of half-finished earthwork when the bugle called again, and down the ragged line of gray snapped an order unheard before—

“Get out! Save yourselves!”

Boyd fired, then threw his emptied Colt into the face of a tall man whose blue coat bore a sergeant's stripes. His own emptied guns placed in their holsters, Drew caught up the carbine the Yankee had dropped. He gave Boyd a shove.

“Run!”

They dodged in and out of a swirling mass of fighting men, somehow reaching the line of horse holders. Drew found Croaker standing stolidly with dragging reins, got into the saddle, and reached down a hand to aid Boyd up behind him. In the early dusk he saw General Forrest—his own height and the proportions of his charger King Phillip distinguishable even in that melee—gathering about him a nucleus of resistance as they battled toward the city. And Drew headed Croaker in the General's direction.

Boyd pawed at his shoulder as they burst into a street at the bone-shaking gallop which was the mule's fastest gait. A blue-coated trooper sat with his back against the paling of a trim white fence, one lax hand still holding the reins of a horse. Drew pulled Croaker up so Boyd could slip down. As he pulled loose the reins the Yankee slid inertly to the ground.

A squad of blue coats turned the corner a block away, heading for them. Somewhere ahead, the company led by the General was fighting its way through Selma. Drew was driven by the necessity of catching up. The two armies were so mingled now that the wild disorder proved a cover for escaping Confederates.

Twilight was on them as they hit the Burnsville road, coming into the tail end of the command of men from a dozen or more shattered regiments, companies, and divisions, who had consolidated in some order about Forrest and his escort. These were all veterans, men tough enough to fight their way out of the city and lucky enough to find their mounts or others when the order to get out had come. They were part of the striking force Forrest had built up through months and years—tempered with his own particular training and spirit—now peeled down to a final hard core.

In the darkness their advance tangled with a Union outpost, snapping up prisoners before the bewildered Yankees were aware that they, too, were not Wilson's men. And the word passed that a Fourth United States Regulars' scouting detachment was camped not too far away.

"We can take 'em, suh." Drew caught the assurance in that.

"We shall, we certainly shall!" Forrest's drawl had sharpened as if he saw in the prospect of this small engagement a chance to redeem the futile shame of those breaking lines at Selma.

"Not you, suh!"

That protest was picked up, echoed by every man within hearing. Finally the General yielded to their angry demands that he not expose himself to the danger of the night attack.

They moved in around the house, and somehow confidence was restored by following the old familiar pattern of the surprise attack—as if in this small action they were again a part of the assured troops who had fought gunboats from horseback, who had tweaked the Yankees' tails so often.

Drew and Boyd were part of the detachment sent to approach the fire-lighted horse lot, coming from a different angle than the main body of the force. It was the old, old game of letting a dozen do the work of fifty. But before they had reached the rail fence about that enclosure, there was a ripple of spiteful Yankee fire.

"Come on!" The officer outlined against one of the campfires, lurched and caught at the rails as the men he led crawled over or vaulted that obstruction, overrunning the Union defenders with the vehemence of men determined to make up for the failure of the afternoon. It was a sharp skirmish, but one from which they came away with prisoners and a renewed belief in themselves. Though they did not know it then, they had fought the last battle of the war for the depleted regiments of cavalry of the Army of the Tennessee. The aftertaste of Selma had been bitter, but the small, sharp flurry at the Godwin house left them no longer feeling so bitter.

"Where're we goin'?" Boyd pushed his horse up beside Croaker as they swung on through the dark.

"Plantersville, I guess." But something inside Drew added soundlessly: On to the end now.

"We're not finished—" Boyd went on, when Drew interrupted:

"We're finished. We were finished months ago." It was true ... they had been finished at Franklin, their cause dead, their hopes dead, everything dead except men who had somehow kept on their feet, with weapons in their hands and a dogged determination to keep going. Why? Because most of them could no longer understand any other way of life?

There was that long line of battles General Forrest had named.... And marching backward through weeks, months, and years a long line of men, growing more and more shadowy in memory. Among them was Anse—Drew tried not to think about that.

Now, out of the dark there suddenly arose a voice, singing. Others picked up the tune, one of the army songs. Just as Kirby had sung to them on the big retreat, so this unknown voice was singing them on to whatever was awaiting at Plantersville. The end was waiting and they would have to face it, just as they had faced carbine, saber, field gun and everything else the Yankees had brought to bear against them.

Drew joined in and heard Boyd's tenor, high but on key, take up the refrain:

“On the Plains of Manassas the Yankees we met,

We gave them a whipping they'll never forget:

But I ain't got no money, nor nothin' to eat,

I'm afraid that tonight I must sleep in the street.”

The Army of the Tennessee hadn't seen the Plains of Manassas, maybe, but they had seen other fields and running Yankees in their time.

Drew found himself slapping the ends of his reins in time to the tune. “I'm a poor Rebel soldier, and Dixie's my home—”

Croaker brayed loudly and with sorrowful undertone, and Drew heard a laugh, which could only have come from General Forrest, floating back to him through the dawn of a new morning.

## 18. Texas Spurs

The soft wind curled languidly in through the open church window, stirring the curly lock which Boyd now and then impatiently pushed away from his eyes ... was a delicate fingertip touch on Drew's cheek. A subdued shuffle of feet could be heard as the congregation arose. It was Sunday in Gainesville, and a congregation such as could only have gathered there on this particular May 7, 1865. Rusty gray-brown, patched, and with ill-mended tears, which no amount of painstaking effort could ever convert again into more than dimly respectable uniforms, a sprinkling of civilian broadcloth and feminine bonnets. And across the church a smaller block of once hostile blue....

As the recessional formed, prayer books were closed to be slipped into pockets or reticules. The presiding celebrant moved down from the altar, his surplice tugged aside by the wandering breeze revealing the worn cavalry boots of a chaplain.

“For the beauty of the earth,  
For the beauty of the skies,  
For the love which from our birth  
Over and around us lies.”

Men's voices, hesitant and rusty at first, then rose confidently over the more decorous hum of the regular church-goers as old memories were renewed.

“Lord of all, to Thee we raise  
This our Hymn of grateful praise.”

The hymn swelled, a mighty, powerful wave of sound. Drew's hard, calloused hands closed on the back of the pew ahead. Hearing Boyd's voice break, Drew knew that within them both something had loosened. The apathy which had held them through these past days was going, and they were able to feel again.

“Drew—” Boyd's voice quavered and then steadied, “let's go home....”

They had shared the talk at camp, the discussion about slipping away to join Kirby Smith in Texas, and some had even gone before the official surrender of Confederate forces east of the Mississippi three days earlier. But when General Forrest elected to accept Yankee terms, most of the men followed his example. Back at camp they were making out the paroles on the blanks furnished by the Union Command, but so far no Yankee had appeared in person. The cavalry were to retain their horses and mules, and whole companies planned to ride home together to Tennessee and Kentucky. Drew and Boyd could join one of those.

As they moved toward the church door now three of the Union soldiers who had attended the service were directly ahead of them in the aisle. Boyd caught urgently at Drew's arm.

“Those spurs—look at his spurs!” He pointed to the heels of the middle Yankee. Sunlight made those ornate disks of silver very bright. Drew's breath caught, and he took a long stride forward to put his hand on the blue coat's shoulder. The man swung around, startled, to face him.

“Suh, where did you get those spurs?” Drew's tone carried the note of one who expected to be answered promptly—with the truth.

The Yankee had straight black brows which drew together in a frown as he stared back at the Confederate.

“I don’t see how that’s any business of yours, Reb!”

Drew’s hand went to his belt before he remembered that there wasn’t any weapon there, and no need for one now. He regained control.

“It’s this much my business, suh. Those spurs are Mexican. They were taken from a Mexican officer at Chapultepec, and the last time I saw them they were worn by a very good friend of mine who’s been missing since February! I’d like very much indeed to know just how and where you got them.”

Lifting one booted foot, the Yankee studied the spurs as if they had somehow changed their appearance. When his eyes came back to meet Drew’s his frown was gone.

“Reb, I bought these from a fella in another outfit, ‘bout two or three weeks ago. He was on sick leave and was goin’ home. I gave him good hard cash for ‘em.”

“Did he say where he got them?” pressed Drew.

The other shook his head. “He had a pile of stuff—mostly Reb—buckles, spurs, and such. Sold it all around camp ‘fore he left.”

“What outfit are you?” Boyd asked.

“Trooper, any trouble here?” A Yankee major bore down on them from one side, a Confederate captain from the other.

“No, suh,” Drew replied quickly. “I just recognized a pair of spurs this trooper is wearin’. They belonged to a friend of mine who’s been missin’ for some time. I hoped maybe the trooper knew something about him.”

“Well, do you?” the major demanded of his own man.

“No, sir. Bought these in camp from a fella goin’ on furlough. I don’t know where he got ‘em.”

“Satisfied, soldier?” the officer asked Drew.

“Yes, suh.” Before he could add another word the major was shepherding his men away.

“I’m sorry.” The Confederate captain shook his head. “Pity he didn’t have any more definite information for you.” He glanced at Drew’s set face. “But, Sergeant, the news wasn’t all bad—”

“No, suh. Only Anse never would have parted with those while he was alive and could prevent it—never in this world!”

“Where was your friend when he was reported missin’?”

“We were on scout in Tennessee, and both of us were wounded. I was found by our men, but he wasn’t. There was just a chance he might have been taken prisoner.”

“Men’ll be comin’ back from their prisons now. What’s his name and company, Sergeant? I’ll ask around.”

“Anson Kirby. He was with Gano’s Texans under Morgan, and then he transferred with me into General Buford’s Scouts. He’s about nineteen or twenty, has reddish hair and a scar here—” With a forefinger Drew traced a line from the left corner of his mouth to his left temple. “He was shot in the left shoulder pretty bad when we were separated.”



The captain nodded. "I'll keep a lookout. A lot of Texans pass through here on their way home."

"Thank you, suh. Should you have any news, I'd be obliged to hear it. My name's Drew Rennie, suh, and you can address a message care of the Barrett's, Oak Hill. That's in Fayette County, Kentucky."

But the chance of ever receiving any such news was, Drew thought, very improbable. That afternoon when he tried to find Boyd, he, too, was missing and none of the headquarters company knew where the boy had gone.

"Ain't pulled out though," Webb assured. "Said as how you two were plannin' to head north with the Kaintuck boys right after the old man says good-bye. Guess I'll trail 'long with you for a spell. You gotta cross Tennessee to git to Kaintuck."

"Goin' home, Will?"

"Guess so. Heard tell as how they burned out m' old man. Dunno, that theah's sure hard-scrabble ground; we never did make us a good crop on it. Maybe so, we'll try somewheah's else now. Sorta got me an itchin' foot. Maybe won't tie down anywheah for a spell."

"What about you, Injun?" Drew turned to Croff.

"Goin' back to the Nations. Guess they had it hard there too, General Watie and the Union 'Pins' raidin' back and forth. They'll need schools though, and someone to teach 'em—"

"You a teacher, Injun?" Webb was plainly startled.

"Startin' to be one, before the bands started playin' Dixie so loud," Croff said, smiling.

"Maybe I've forgotten too much, though. I have to see if I can fit me in behind a desk again."

"Heah's th' kid—"

Drew looked up at Webb's hail. Boyd walked toward them, his saddlebags slung over one shoulder, under his arm the haversack for rations which normally hung from any forager's saddle horn. He dropped them by the fire and held two gleaming objects out to Drew.

"Anse's spurs! How did you get them?"

"Sold m' horse to the sutler at the Yankee camp. Then bought 'em. That trooper gave 'em to me for just what he paid: five dollars hard money. Said as how he could understand why you wanted to have them—"

"But your horse!"

Boyd grinned. "Looky here, Drew, more'n half of this heah Reb army is footin' it home. I guess I can cross two little states without it finishin' me off—leastwise I reckon anyone who has toughened it out with General Forrest can do that much."

Drew turned the spurs around in hands which were a little shaky. "We got Croaker, and we'll take turns ridin'. No, two states ain't too far for a couple of troopers, specially if they have them a good stout mule into the bargain!"

\*\*\*\*\*

A hot copper sun turned late Kentucky May into August weeks ahead of season. Thunder muttered sullenly beyond the horizon. And a breeze picked up road dust and grit, plastering it to Croaker's sweating hide, their own unwashed skin.

“Better ... ride....” Licking dust from his lips, Drew watched the weaving figure on the other side of the mule with dull concern. They were steadying themselves by a tight grip on the stirrups, and Croaker was supporting and towing them, rather than their steering him.

Boyd’s head lifted. “Ride yourself!” He got a ghost of his old defiance into that, though his voice was hardly more than a harsh croak of whisper. “I ain’t givin’ in now!”

He leashed his stirrup hold, staggering forward a step or two, and would have gone face-down on the turnpike if Drew had not made a big effort to reach him. But the other’s weight bore him along, and they both sprawled on the road. Croaker came to a halt, his head hanging until he could have nuzzled Drew’s shoulder.

They had made a brave start from Alabama, keeping up with the company they joined until they were close to the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Then a blistered heel had forced Drew into the rider’s role for two days, and they had fallen behind. The rations they had drawn had been stretched as far as they would go. Even though there were people along the way willing to feed a hungry soldier, there were too many hungry soldiers. The farther north they traveled there was also a growing number of places where a blue coat might be welcome, but a gray one still signified “enemy.”

Drew moved, and raised Boyd’s head and shoulders to his knee. If he could summon enough energy to reach the canteen hanging from Croaker’s saddle.... Somehow he did, recklessly spilling a cupful of its contents on Boyd’s face, and turning road dust into flecks of mud which freckled the gaunt cheeks.

“Ain’t goin’ t’ ride—” Boyd’s eyes opened and he took up the argument again.

“Well,” Drew lashed out, “I can’t carry you! Or do you expect to be dragged?”

Boyd’s face crumpled and he flung up his arms to hide his eyes.

“All right.”

With the aid of a sloping bank and an effort which left them both weakly panting, Boyd was mounted and they started their slow crawl once more.

“Drew!”

He raised his head. Boyd had straightened in the saddle and was pointing ahead, though his outstretched hand was shaking. “We made it—there’s home!”

Beyond was the green of trees, a whole line of trees curving along a gravel carriage drive. But somehow Drew could not match Boyd’s joy. He was tired, so tired that he was aware of nothing really but the aching weariness of his body.

They turned into the drive, the gravel crunching into his holed boots while the tree shadows made a green twilight. Croaker came to a stop, and Drew’s eyes raised from the gravel to the line of one step and then another. His gaze finally came to a broad veranda ... to someone who had been sitting there and who was now on her feet, staring wide-eyed back at the three of them. Then the gravel came up in a wave and he was swallowed up in it and darkness—

The sun, warm through the window, awoke a glint of reflection from the top of the chest of drawers where rested a round cord of bullion with two tassels and a pair of fancy spurs. The wink of light was reflected again from the mirror before which Drew stood.

“Jefferson’s shirt has long enough sleeves, but all these billows!” Cousin Merry’s tongue clicked against her teeth in exasperation. Her hand was in the middle of Drew’s back, gathering up a good pleating of linen, but he still had extra folds of cloth to spare over his

ribs. Four days of rest and plenty of food was not sufficient to restore any padding to his frame. “You certainly grew one way, but not the other!”

Boyd, established in the big chair by the window, laughed.

“I could take a few tucks,” Drew offered.

“*You* could take a few tucks!” Her astonished face showed in the glass above his shoulder.

“Oh, I’m not too bad with a needle. Did you note those neat patches on my breeches—?”

“I noted nothing about those breeches; they went straight into the fire! Such rags....”

“Miss Merry, ma’am—” small Hetty showed an eager face around the corner of the door—  
”Majuh Forbes and Missus Forbes—they’s downstairs.”

Drew faced away from the mirror. “Why?” he demanded with almost hostile emphasis.

Meredith Barrett untied the strings of her sewing apron. “Hetty, tell Mam Gusta to set out some of the English biscuits and make tea.” Then she turned back to face Drew. “Why, Drew? Rather—why not? They’re your kin, and I think that Marianna feels it deeply that you came here and not to Red Springs. Not to go home....”

“Home?” There was heat in that. “You, if anyone, know that Red Springs was never really my home. And Forbes is an officer in the Union Army. This is no time for a Reb to camp out in his house. My grandfather wanted the place to be just Aunt Marianna’s, didn’t he?” He paused by the chest of drawers, his hand going out to the spurs, the gold cord. Three years—in a way a small lifetime—all to be summed up now by a slightly tarnished cord from a general’s hat, a pair of spurs a young Texan had jauntily worn.

But it *was* a lifetime. He was not a boy any more, to have to endure his elders making decisions for him. His future was his own, and he had earned the right to that. Drew did not know that his face had hardened, that he suddenly looked a stranger to the woman who was watching him with concern.

“Please, Drew, you mustn’t allow yourself to be so bitter—”

“Bitter? About Red Springs, you mean? Lord, I never wanted the place. I hate every brick of it, and I think I always have. But I don’t hate Forbes or Aunt Marianna if that’s what you’re afraid of. It’s just that I have no place there any more.”

Her mouth tightened. “But you have! You owe it to Marianna to listen to her now. This is important, Drew, more important than you can guess. No, Boyd—” her gesture checked her son as he arose from the chair—”this is none of your affair. Come with me, Drew!”

He picked up a borrowed coat, also much too wide for him, pulled it on over the bunchiness of his shirt, and followed her, swallowing what he knew to be a useless protest.

The parlor was as bright with sun as the upper room had been. As Drew entered a pace or two behind Cousin Merry, the officer in blue strode away from the hearth to meet them. But Aunt Marianna forestalled her husband’s greeting, rising suddenly from a chair, her crinoline rustling across the carpet. She held out her hands, and then hesitated, studying Drew’s face, looking a little daunted, as if she had expected something she did not find. The assurance she had displayed at their last meeting on the Lexington road was missing.

“Drew?”

He bowed, conscious that he must present an odd figure in the ill-fitting clothing of Meredith Barrett’s long dead husband.

Major Forbes held out his hand. "Welcome home, my boy."

My boy. Consciously or unconsciously the major's tone strove to thrust Drew into the past, or so he believed. The major might almost be considering Drew an unruly schoolboy now safely out of some scrape, welcome indeed if he would settle down quietly into the conventional mold of Oak Hill or Red Springs. But he was no schoolboy, and at that moment the parlor of Oak Hill, for all its luxury and warmth, was a box sealing him in stifling confinement which he could no longer endure. Drew held tight control over that resurgence of his old impatience, knowing that his first instinct had been right: the old life fitted him now no better than his coat. But he answered civilly:

"Thank you, suh."

His proper courtesy apparently reassured his aunt. She came to him, her hands on his shoulders as she stood on tip-toe to kiss his cheek. "Drew, come home with us, dear—please!"

He shook his head. "I don't belong at Red Springs, ma'am. I never did."

"Nonsense!" Major Forbes put the force of a field officer's authority into that denial. "I do not and never did agree with many of Alexander Mattock's decisions. I do so even less when they pertain to your situation, my boy. You have every right to consider Red Springs your home. You must come to us, resume your interrupted education, take your proper place in the family and the community—"

Drew shook his head again. The major paused. He had been studying Drew, and now there was a faint shadow of uneasiness in his own expression. He might be slowly realizing that he was not fronting a repentant schoolboy rescued from a piece of regrettable youthful folly. A veteran was being forced against his will to recognize the stamp of his own experience on another, if much younger, man.

"What are your plans?" he asked in another tone of voice entirely.

"Drew—" Major Forbes waved aside that tentative interruption from Cousin Merry.

"I don't know. But I can't stay here." That much he was sure of, Oak Hill, Red Springs, all of this was no longer necessary to him any more than the outgrown toys of childhood could hold the interest of a man. Once, hurt and seeking for freedom, he had thought of the army as home. Now he knew he had yet to find what he wanted or needed. But there was no reason why he could not go looking, even if he could not give a name to the object of such a search. "I might go west. It's all new out there, a good place to start on my own."

There was a catch of breath from Aunt Marianna. The look she gave Cousin Merry held something of accusation. "You told him!"

"Told me what, ma'am?"

"That your father is alive...." She saw his surprise.

"Is that true, suh?" Drew appealed to the major.

Forbes scowled, tugging at the belt supporting his saber. "Yes. We found some letters among your grandfather's papers after his death. Your father wasn't killed; he was in a Mexican prison during the war. When he escaped and returned to Texas, your grandfather had already been there and taken your mother away. Hunt Rennie was too ill to follow immediately. Before he had recovered enough to travel, he was informed his wife was dead, and he was allowed to believe that you died with her—at birth."

“But why?” Alexander Mattock had disliked, even hated his grandson. So why should he have lied to keep Drew with him at Red Springs?

“Because of Murray,” Cousin Merry said slowly, sadly. “It was a cruel thing to do, so cruel. Alexander Mattock was a hard man. He couldn’t bear opposition; it made him go close to the edge of sanity, I truly believe. I know we are not supposed to speak ill of the dead, but I can’t forgive him for what he did to those two. Melanie and Hunt were so young, young and in love. And your Uncle Murray deliberately pushed that quarrel on Hunt. Jefferson was there; he tried to stop it. The duel was *not* Hunt’s fault——”

“Uncle Murray and my father fought a duel?” Drew demanded.

“Yes. Murray was badly wounded, and for a time his life was despaired of. Your grandfather swore out a warrant against Hunt for attempted murder! So he and Melanie ran away. They were so pitifully young! Melanie was just sixteen and Hunt two years older, though he seemed a man, having lived such a hard life on the frontier. They went back to Texas, and she was very happy there—I had some letters from her. Yes, she was happy until the War with Mexico began. Then Hunt was reported killed, his father, too. And she was left all alone with distant kin of theirs. So your grandfather went down to fetch her home. I’ll always believe he really wanted to punish her for going against his will. She died——” her voice broke——”she died, because she had no will to live, and *then* he was sorry. But just a little, not enough to blame himself any. Oh, no—it was still all Hunt’s wickedness, he said, every bit of it! He was a hard man....” Cousin Merry faced Aunt Marianna with her chin up as if daring the other to object what she’d just said.

Drew returned to the news he still found difficult to believe. “So my father’s alive, Major. Well, that gives me some place to go—Texas....”

“Hunt Rennie’s not in Texas.” Cousin Merry spoke with such certainty that all three of them gave her their full attention.

“I married Jefferson Barrett six months after Melanie eloped. We went to Europe then for almost two years of traveling. Part of our mail must have been lost. Hunt surely wrote to me! He liked Jefferson in spite of the differences in their ages. If I had only had the chance to tell him the truth about you, Drew. But I never knew he was alive either. You remember Granger Wood, Justin?”

Major Forbes nodded. “He went out to California in ‘50.”

“Yes, and when the war broke out he rode back across the Arizona and New Mexico territories with General Johnston to enlist in the Confederate forces. A month ago he came back here and he called to tell me he saw Hunt in Arizona in ‘61. He had a horse-and-cattle ranch there, also some mining holdings.”

“Drew”—Aunt Marianna caught his arm——”you won’t be so foolish as to go out into that horrible wilderness hunting a man who doesn’t even know you’re alive—who’s a perfect stranger to you? You must be sensible. We know that Father’s will was very unjust, and we are not going to abide by its terms—half of Red Springs will be yours.”

Gently Drew released himself from her hold. “Maybe Hunt Rennie doesn’t know I exist; maybe we won’t even like each other if and when we do meet—I don’t know. But Red Springs ain’t my kind of world any more. And I won’t take anything my grandfather grudged givin’ me. I may be young, only in another way, I’m old, too. Too old to come under a schoolin’ rein again.” He glanced across her shoulder, noticing that his speech had registered with the major.

“You’re not goin’ to start out this very afternoon, are you?” Forbes asked.

Drew relaxed and laughed a little self-consciously, knowing that his uncle had ceded him the victory in this first skirmish.

“No, suh. You know, I brought two things home from the army—and one of them was a pair of Texas spurs. A mighty good man wore those. You’d have to ride proud and tall in the saddle to match him. I told him once I was goin’ to see Texas, and he said there was nothing to make a man stay on the range where he had been born. Since I’ve always wanted to know what kind of a man Hunt Rennie was—is—now maybe I’m goin’ to do just that.”

THE END

\*\*\*\*\*

*I'm Julie, the woman who runs [Global Grey](#) - the website where this ebook was published. These are my own formatted editions, and I hope you enjoyed reading this particular one.*

*If you have this book because you bought it as part of a collection – thank you so much for your support.*

*If you downloaded it for free – please consider (if you haven't already) making a small [donation](#) to help keep the site running.*

*If you bought this from Amazon or anywhere else, you have been ripped off by someone taking free ebooks from my site and selling them as their own. You should definitely get a refund :/*

*Thanks for reading this and I hope you visit the site again - new books are added regularly so you'll always find something of interest :)*