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THE GINGER STAR

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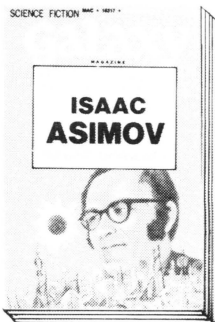


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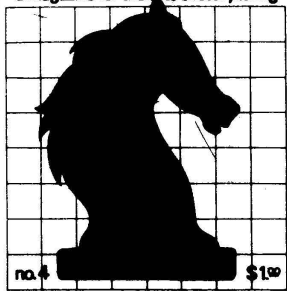
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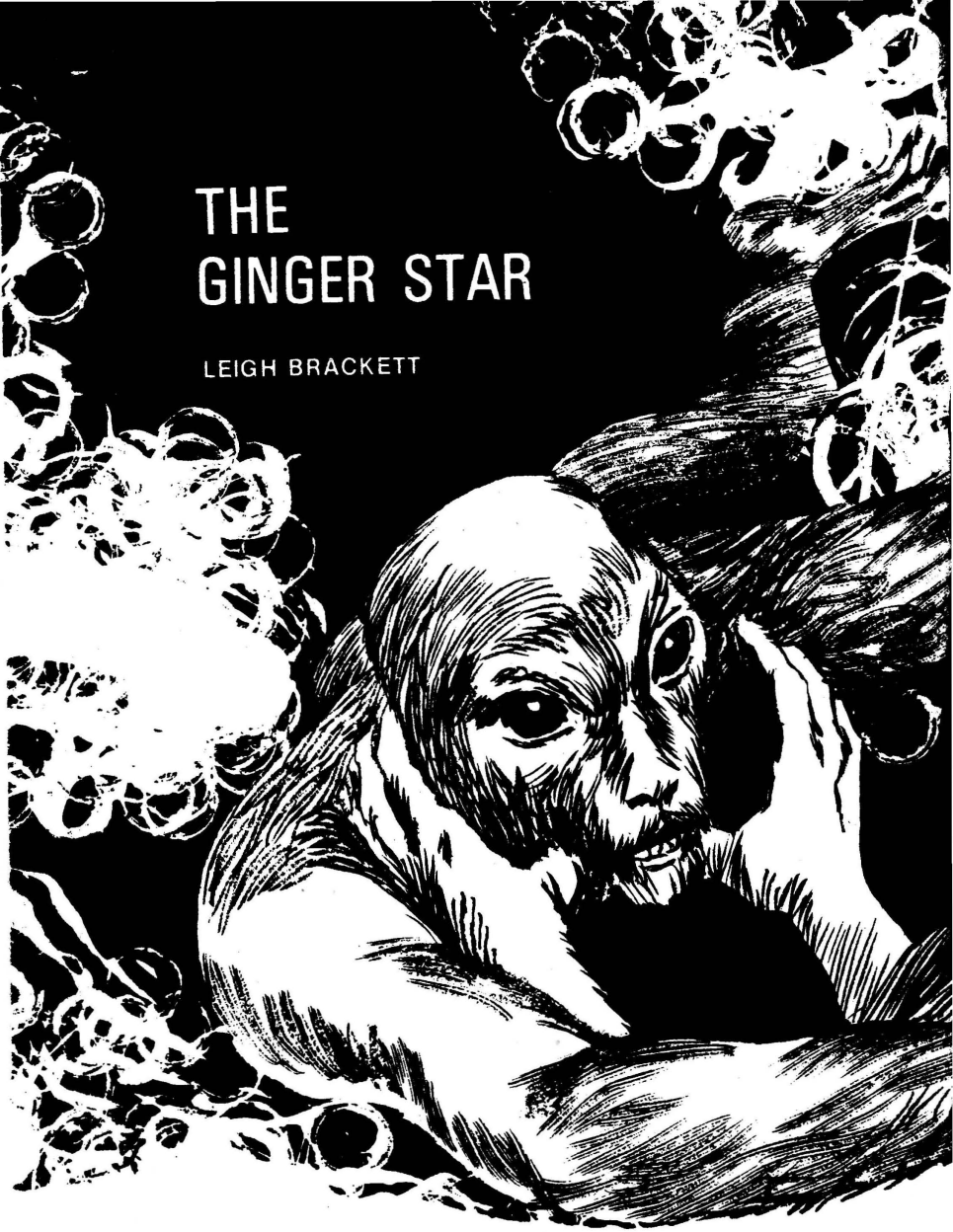
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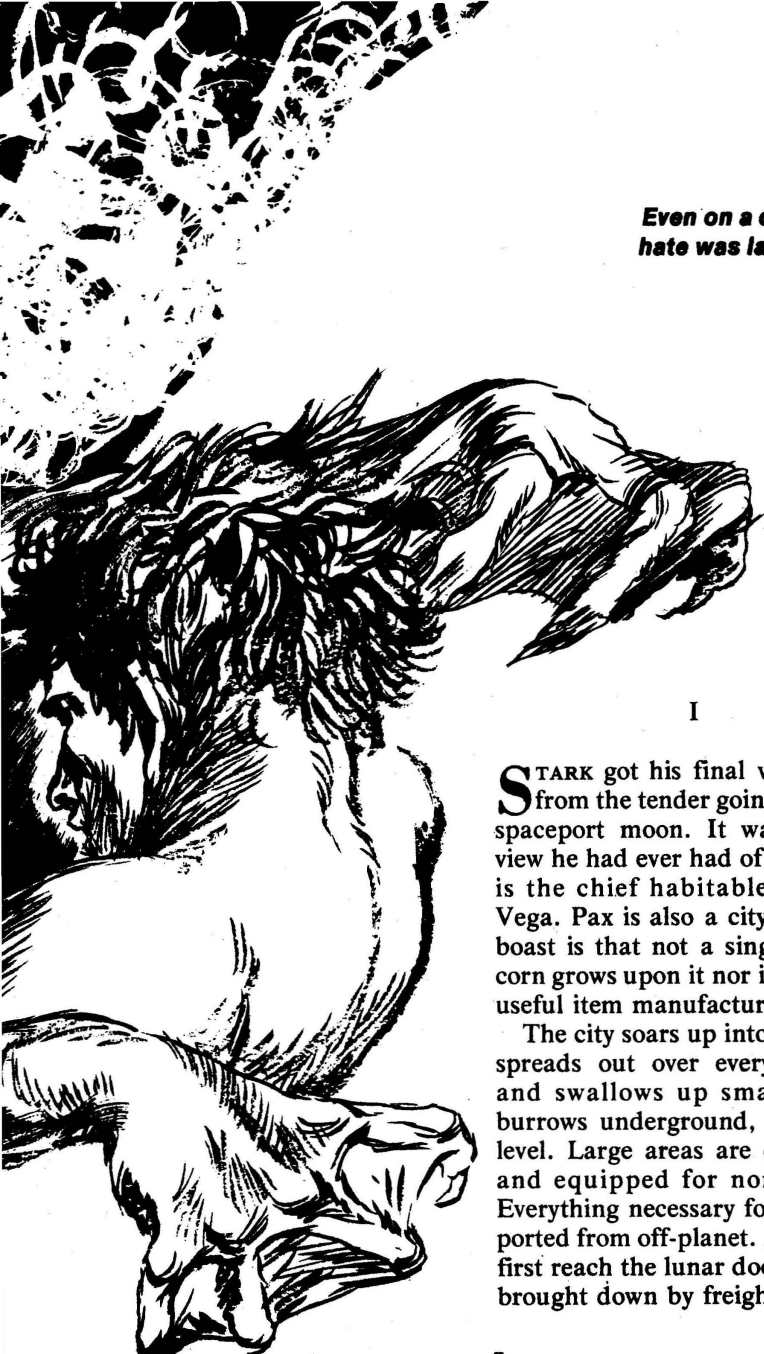
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THE GINGER STAR

LEIGH BRACKETT



PART ONE



***Even on a dying world
hate was last to leave!***

I

STARK got his final view of Pax from the tender going out to the spaceport moon. It was the best view he had ever had of Pax, which is the chief habitable planet of Vega. Pax is also a city. Its proud boast is that not a single grain of corn grows upon it nor is one single useful item manufactured.

The city soars up into the sky. It spreads out over every landmass and swallows up small seas. It burrows underground, level below level. Large areas are conditioned and equipped for non-humans. Everything necessary for life is imported from off-planet. All supplies first reach the lunar dock, then are brought down by freight tenders.

Nothing lives on Pax but bureaucrats, diplomats and computers. For Pax is the administrative center of the Galactic Union, a federation of worlds flung across half the Milky Way and including, very incidentally, the worlds of little Sol. On Pax the millions of problems besetting the billions of people inhabiting thousands of diverse planets are reduced to tidy and presumably manageable abstractions on tapes, cards and endless sheets of paper.

A paper world, Stark thought, full of paper people.

Stark had to admit, though, that Simon Ashton was not made of paper. Time, and accomplishments in planetary administration, had promoted Ashton to a comfortable office at the Ministry of Planetary Affairs and a comfortable apartment in a mile-high building he need never have left except to take one of the moving walkways to his work. Still, Ashton had never lost his rawhide, taut-wire energy. He went often into the field, knowing that the problems of real beings in actual places could not be properly solved merely by the regurgitation of data from a bank of clacking machines.

But Ashton had gone once too often into the field. The last time he had not come back.

Stark had received that information on one of the untamed worlds outside the Union where life was a little more relaxed for people like

himself. He was, as the old phrase had it, a wolf's head—a totally masterless man. In a society where everyone respectable belonged to something, he owed allegiance only where he chose to, usually for pay. He was a mercenary by trade, and there were enough little wars going on both in and out of the Union, enough remote peoples calling on him for the use of his talents, to guarantee him a reasonable living doing what he did best.

Fighting.

Stark had begun fighting almost before he could stand. Born in a mining colony in Mercury's Twilight Belt, he had fought to live on a planet that did not encourage life. His parents dead, his foster-parents a tribe of sub-human aborigines clawing a precarious existence from the sun-stricken valleys, he had been forced to fight. He had fought, without success, the men who had slaughtered those foster-parents and had put him in a cage, a snarling curiosity. Later he had fought for a different kind of survival—the survival in himself of human feeling, human soul.

But he would never have got past Square One without Simon Ashton.

Stark could remember vividly the heat, the raw pain of loss, the bars, the men who had laughed and tormented him. Then Ashton had come. Ashton the wielder of authority, the savior. That had been the beginning of the life of Eric John Stark, as distinguished from

N'Chaka, the Man-Without-a-Tribe.

Twice orphaned, Stark/N'Chaka had gradually accepted Ashton as his father-in-being. More than that, he had accepted Ashton as his friend. During his growth to manhood Ashton had been nearly his sole companion because they had been much alone in the frontier stations to which Ashton was assigned. Ashton's kindness, his counsel, his patience, his strength and his affection, were stamped indelibly on Stark. He had even found his name through Ashton, who had searched the records of Mercury Metals and Mining to track down his parents.

And now Simon Ashton was missing. Lost on the world circling a ginger star somewhere at the back of beyond, out in the Orion Spur. A newly discovered, newly opened world called Skaith that hardly anyone had ever heard of, except at Galactic Center.

Skaith was not a member of the Union but did have a consulate. Someone there had called to the Union for help. Ashton had responded, taking the first ship out.

Ashton, after reaching the place, had perhaps exceeded his authority. Even so, his superiors had done their best for him. But the local powers had closed the consulate and refused entrance to officers of the Union. All attempts to discover Ashton's whereabouts or the reason for his disappearance had failed.

Stark had caught the first avail-

able ship outbound for Galactic Center and Pax. Looking for Ashton he considered his personal business.

The weeks he had spent at Pax had been neither pleasant nor easy. He had had to do a great deal of talking and convincing, and after that, much learning. He was glad to be leaving, impatient to get on with the job.

As the world-city dropped behind him, he breathed more freely. Presently the enormous intricacies of the lunar spaceport engulfed him, sorted him, tagged him, eventually spewed him into the bowels of a cargo liner that took him about a third of the way to his destination. There were three transfers after that, each into a still more doubtful vessel, the last a rickety old tramp—the only sort of ship that served Skaith.

Stark endured the voyage, continuing by means of tapes the education into things Skaithian he had begun at Pax. He was not popular among his fellow-travelers. His cabinmate complained that Stark twitched and growled in his sleep like an animal, and there was something in the gaze of Stark's pale eyes that disconcerted the others. They called him "the wild man" behind his back, stopped trying to lure him into games, the discussion of schemes for turning a quick profit, or personal reminiscences.

The tramp trader made several

planetfalls along the way but eventually creaked and rattled out of FTL drive within sight of Skaith.

It was the fourth month, by Galactic Arbitrary Time, after Ashton's disappearance.

Stark destroyed his tapes and collected his few belongings. The rickety trader settled down on the rickety starport outside the city of Skeg.

Stark was the first man off the ship.

HIS papers gave his right name, which meant nothing here, but they did not mention Pax as point of origin. They said that he was an Earthman, which he was in a way, and a dealer in rarities, which he was not.

At the barrier shed a couple of surly customs-men confiscated his purely defensive stunner—he could have it back, they said, when he left. They searched him and his meager luggage for other weapons. He was then given a terse lecture, in bad Universal, on the rules and regulations governing life in Skeg. Finally he was sent on his way with the parting information that all roads out of Skeg except that one to the starport were closed to off-worlders. He was not under any circumstances to leave the city.

He rode the ten miles in a jolting cart past plantations of tropical fruits, waterlogged paddies where some form of grain was growing

lushly, and patches of jungle. Gradually the smell of mud and vegetation became overlaid by a smell of sea-water—warm, salt and stagnant. Stark did not much like it.

When the cart topped a line of jungled hills, Stark found he did not much like the look of the sea, either. Skaith had no moon so there were no tides to stir it. There was a milky, greasy sheen to the surface. Skaith's senile ginger-colored sun was going down in a fury of crimson and molten brass, laying streaks of unhealthy brilliance across the water. It seemed a perfect habitat for the peculiar creatures said to live in it.

Beside the sea, on the bank of a river, lay Skeg. The river had grown thin with age, too weak to do more than trickle through a narrow passage where the silt of centuries had formed a bar almost closing its mouth. There was a ruined fortress-tower set on low cliffs to guard a vanished harbor. But the city itself looked lively enough, with lamps and torches glowing brighter as the sun sank.

Presently Stark saw the first of the Three Ladies: magnificent star-clusters, the ornament of Skaith's night skies, that made it almost impossible to come by a decent darkness. He glowered at the lady, admiring her beauty but thinking that she and her sisters could make things difficult for him.

As though things would not be

difficult enough in any case . . .

At last the cart clumped into town. Skeg was essentially one great open market where practically anything could be bought or sold. Shops and stalls were brightly lighted. Vendors with barrows cried their wares. People from all over the Fertile Belt—tall leather-clad warrior-burghers from the outlying city-states, as well as the small silken folk of the tropics—mingled with the off-worlders who had come to traffic, exchanging precious foreign items like iron pigs for drugs, or for artifacts looted from Skaith's plentiful supply of ruins.

And of course there were the Farers. Everywhere. A conglomerate of all the races, dressed or undressed in every imaginable fashion, trooping about, lying about, doing whatever happened to occur to them from moment to moment. These careless itinerant children of the Lords Protector neither toiled nor spun but blew lightly with the winds of the world. Stark noticed some off-worlders among them, drifters who had found the good life here in the warm twilight of a planet where nothing was forbidden and where, if you belonged to the right group, everything was free.

Stark paid off his driver and found lodgings at an inn catering to off-worlders. The room was small but reasonably clean, and the food, when he sampled it, not at all bad.

Still, he was not interested in

comfort. He was interested in Ashton.

When he had fed, he approached the landlord in the common-room of the inn. It was built in the breezy tropical style of Skeg, being mostly windows with reed curtains that rolled down to shut out the rain. It was not raining now and the sea-wind blew through, heavy and damp.

"How do I find the Galactic Union consulate?"

The landlord stared. He was reddish of color, with a face of stone and startlingly light, very cold gray eyes.

"Consulate? Didn't you know?"

"Know what?" asked Stark, looking suitably blank.

"There isn't one. Not any more."

"But I was told . . ."

"The Farers wrecked it, not quite four months ago. Sent the consul and his staff packing. They . . ."

"The Farers?"

"Surely you were told about them at the starport. All that human garbage littering up the streets."

"Oh, yes," said Stark. "I was just surprised that they should concern themselves with a consulate. They seem—well, so indolent."

"All they need is the word," said the landlord sourly. "When the Wandsmen say go, they go."

Stark nodded. "I was warned about the Wandsmen, too. Pain of death and all that. They seem im-

portant men on Skaith."

"They do the dirty work for the Lords Protector. The Chief Wandsman of Skeg, the almighty Gelmar, led the Farers. He told the consul to get gone and stay gone, they wanted no more outside interference. In fact, it looked for a while as though they might kick out all us off-worlders and close the starport. They didn't, quite. Need imports too badly. But they treated us like criminals."

Stark nodded sympathetically. "What was the row about?"

"Some damned official busybody from Pax. It's a fairly open secret that he was here to arrange emigration from one of the city-states. More fool he."

"Trouble-maker, hey? What happened to him?"

"Who knows? Except the Wandsmen." The cold eyes regarded Stark suspiciously. "Got a particular interest?"

"Hardly."

"Then drop the subject. We've had trouble enough already. What did you want with the consulate, anyway?"

"Some routine business about travel papers. It will have to wait till my next port of call, I guess."

Stark bade the landlord good night and walked out.

Some damned busybody from Pax.

Ashton.

And only the Wandsmen knew what had happened to him.

STARK walked through the crowded streets, a dark man in a dark tunic, a big man powerfully muscled, who carried himself as lightly and easily as a dancer. He was in no hurry. He let the city flow around him, absorbing it through all his senses. He was aware of the lights, the colors, the mingled smells, the strange musics made by unnameable instruments and alien voices, the bright banners that hung above the sin-shops, the movements of people. And underneath it all he sensed a rich, ripe stink of decay. Skaith was dying, of course, but it did not seem to him to be dying well.

He could see no reason to delay sticking his head into the noose. So presently he entered a tavern and began his work.

He went about it most discreetly. He had spent what had seemed an eternity at Pax, going with bitter patience through all the existing information about Skaith, learning the language, learning as much as was known about the people and the customs, talking to the ex-consul in an effort to learn more. It was of course too late to save Ashton if the Wandsmen had decided he should die. But vengeance—vengeance was always possible. Rescue or revenge—for either, Stark needed all the knowledge he could get.

But the facts available at Pax had proved not really extensive. Contact with Skaith had first been made only a dozen or so years

before. The consulate had not been established until five years later. Considerable was known about Skeg and the adjacent country. A little was known about the city-states. Almost nothing was known about the lands beyond the Fertile Belt where most of the population of Skaith was now gathered. There were plenty of tall tales about the Barrens and the People of the Barrens. Perhaps some were true, perhaps not.

Nor was much known about the Lords Protector. No one knew exactly what they looked like or where they dwelled except the Wandsmen, who kept that knowledge a high and holy secret. The beliefs of various sects and cults only confused matters. Stark remembered well the consul's report. In part it had said:

The Lords Protector, reputed to be "undying and unchanging," were apparently established long ago by the then ruling powers, as a sort of super-benevolence. The Great Migrations were beginning, the civilizations of the north were breaking up as the people moved away from the increasing cold, and there was certain to be a time of chaos with various groups competing for new lands. Then and later, when some stability was reestablished, the Lords Protector were to

prevent total trampling of the weak by the strong. Their law was simple: succor the weak, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, strive always for the greatest good of the greatest number.

It appears that through the centuries that law was carried far beyond its original intent. The Farers and the many smaller nonproductive fragments of this thoroughly fragmented culture are now the greater number, with the result that the Wandsmen, in the name of the Lords Protector, hold a third or more of the population in virtual slavery to supply the rest.

It is quite obvious to me that upon learning of the intention of the Irnanese to emigrate, the Wandsmen took immediate and violent action. If Irnan were to succeed, other communities would follow—leaving the Wandsmen and their charges in sad state. The Irnans' call for help was relayed by this consulate. So Ashton's disappearance and the forcible closing of the consulate came as a shock to us but hardly as a surprise.

What Stark wanted to do was seek out Gelmar and tear him slowly and painfully into small bits until he told what he had done to Ashton. This was not possible be-

cause of the Farers—the devoted, perpetual, ever-ready, instant mob. So Stark set himself out as bait.

For two days he walked quietly in the streets, sat quietly in the taverns, talked quietly to anyone who would listen. He asked lots of questions, occasionally letting slip the name Irnan.

On the evening of the second day the bait was taken.

II

HE WAS in the principal street of Skeg, in the main market square, watching a troupe of acrobats. They were performing indifferent stunts with a minimum of skill when someone came and stood close to him, very close, warm and breathing.

He looked down. A girl—a Farer, stark naked except for body-paint laid on in fanciful loops and spirals. Her hair hung over her shoulders like a cloak. She looked up at Stark and smiled.

"My name is Baya," she said. It meant Graceful, and that she was. "Come with me, stranger."

"Sorry. I'm not in the market."

She continued to smile. "Love can come later, if you wish. Or not, if you wish. But I can tell you something about the man Ashton. He who took the road to Irnan."

He said sharply, "What do you know about that?"

"I am a Farer. We know many things."

"Very well, then. Tell me about Ashton."

"Not here. Too many eyes and ears, and the subject is forbidden."

"Then why are you willing to talk?"

Her eyes and her warm mouth told him why she was willing. But she said, "I don't care for rules, any rules. You know the old fortress on the cliffs? Go there now. I'll follow."

Stark hesitated, frowning and suspicious.

She shrugged. "It's up to you."

She drifted off into the crowd. Stark considered. She was bait for a trap, probably. But he reminded himself that so was he—or trying to be. He began to walk casually along the street toward the lower end. There it narrowed into a quiet lane that extended to the river.

A bridge had stood here once. Now there was only a ford paved with stones. A man dressed in a yellow robe picked his way across it, his skirts tucked up and his wet thighs flashing. Half a dozen men and women followed him in a body, holding each other's hands. Stark turned onto the broken pavement of the embankment.

The fortress loomed ahead, the sea lapping the cliffs below it. The ginger star was setting in its usual lurid manner. The tideless water gleamed, gradually taking on a sheen of pearl overlaying brass. Things swirled and splashed in it, and there was a strange far-off

sound of hooting voices that made Stark shiver. The consul had dutifully written down what had been told to him about the Children of the Sea-Our-Mother but obviously had not believed it. Stark kept an open mind.

In a few moments he reached the fortress. Its ancient walls towered above him, still with the stillness of idle centuries, the gaping doors and window-niches dark and empty. He leaned against a column and waited, tasting the dankness of the air.

The girl came, padding on bare feet. And there was someone with her, a tall man who wore a rich tunic of somber red and carried a wand of office. A man of proud calm face, a man of power who had never known fear.

"I am Gelmar," he said, "Chief Wandsman of Skeg."

Stark nodded.

"Your name is Eric John Stark," said Gelmar. "You are an Earthman, like Ashton."

"Yes."

"What are you to Ashton?"

"Friend. Foster-son. I owe him my life." Stark clenched his fists. "I want to know what happened to him."

"And perhaps I'll tell you," said Gelmar easily. "But first you must tell me who sent you."

"No one. When I heard that Ashton was missing, I came."

"You speak our language. You know about Irnan. You must have

been at Galactic Center, to learn these things."

"I went there to learn."

"And then you came to Skaith because of your love for Ashton?"

"Yes."

"I don't think I believe you, Earthman. I think you were sent to make more mischief here."

In the reddening dusk, Stark saw that they were looking at him oddly. When Gelmar spoke again his tone had changed subtly, as though he were now posing questions of greater urgency.

"Who is your master? Ashton? The Ministry?"

Stark said, "I have no master." His ears were stretched. It seemed to him that he had heard small sounds.

"A wolf's-head," said Gelmar softly. "Where is your home?"

"Nowhere."

"A landless man." This was beginning to have a ritual sound. "Who are your people?"

"I have none. I was not born on Earth. I have another name—N'Chaka, Man-Without-a-Tribe."

Baya exhaled sharply. "Let me ask him," she said. Her eyes were bright, catching the afterglow. "A wolf's-head, a landless man, a man without a tribe." She touched Stark with a small hand, and the fingers were cold as ice. "Will you join with me and be a Farer? Then you will have one master—love. And one home—Skaith. And one people. Us."

Stark said, "No. It is not my nature to join."

She drew back from him sharply, her eyes still brighter as if with some light of their own.

She said to Gelmar, "It is he. It is the Dark Man of the prophecy."

Astonished, Stark blurted, "What prophecy?"

"That is something they could not tell you at Pax," said Gelmar. "The prophecy was not made until after we banished the consul. But we have been waiting for you."

The girl gave a sudden cry—a signal?—and then Stark heard the small sounds become large ones. He whirled to face the onslaught he had been expecting.

They came around the fortress, perhaps twenty of them, male and female, leaping grotesques of all shapes and sizes. Careless garments flapped. Hands brandished sticks and stones. Some were chanting, "Kill, kill!"

Stark said, "I thought it was forbidden to kill."

Gelmar smiled. "Not when I order it."

Baya drew a long pin like a stiletto from the darkness of her hair.

Stark looked this way and that to find a way of escape. Gelmar moved toward the seaward edge of the cliff, giving his Farers free room as the stones began to fly.

Out over the water, the hooting voices called and chuckled.

Stark sprang like a wild beast and bore Gelmar into the sea.

THEY sank to a slimy bottom. It had been instantly apparent that Gelmar could not swim. Stark held him down relentlessly until his struggles weakened. Then he brought him to the surface and let him breathe. The gasping Gelmar stared at him in such pop-eyed amazement that Stark laughed. Up on the cliff the stunned Farers stood in a ragged line.

"The Children of the Sea-Our-Mother," Stark said. "I am told they eat men."

"They do," rasped Gelmar, strangling. "You must be insane!"

The Wandsman goggled at him.

"What have I to lose?" said Stark, and pushed him under. When he let Gelmar up again the last of the Chief Wandsman's arrogance was gone, lost in a paroxysm of retching.

The hooting voices had come closer. There was a new note in them of alert interest, as when hounds pick up a scent.

"Two questions," said Stark. "Is Ashton alive?" Gelmar choked and gagged, and Stark shook him. "Do you want the Children to share you? Answer me!"

Feebly Gelmar answered. "Yes. Yes. He's alive."

"Do you lie, Wandsman? Shall I drown you?"

"No! The Lords Protector wanted him alive. To question. We captured him on the road to Irnan."

"Where is he?"

"North: Citadel of the Lords Pro-

tector . . . at Worldheart."

The Farers had begun wailing, a collection of banshees. They were forming a chain down the cliff, reaching out their hands to succor Gelmar. The first of the Three Ladies silvered sky and sea. There was a great and savage joy in Stark's belly.

"One more question. What prophecy?"

"Gerrith . . . wise woman of Irnan." Gelmar was finding his tongue as the seaward hoots came nearer. "She prophesied that an off-worlder would come, would destroy the Lords because of Ashton." Gelmar's eyes yearned toward the steep shore.

"Ah," said Stark. "Did she now? Maybe she was right."

He thrust Gelmar from him, toward the reaching hands, and did not wait to see whether or not he made it. Across the warm and somehow unclean water Stark glimpsed flashes of white in the cluster-light like many swimmers tossing spray.

Stark kicked off his sandals, put his head down. He sprinted for the bar at the river mouth.

The rush of his passage blotted out other noises. Yet he knew the things were gaining on him. He managed to lengthen his stroke just a fraction more. Then he began to feel the vibrations, a sort of booming in the water as something displaced it with rhythmic blows. He was aware of a body, immensely

strong, impossibly swift, pulling ahead of him.

Instead of turning and fleeing blindly, as he was expected to, Stark swerved to the attack.

III

QUICKLY Stark realized he had made a mistake. Possibly his last one.

He had the advantage of surprise but that was short-lived. In the matter of strength and reflexes he was as near the animal as a man can reasonably be. But the creature he fought with was nearer, a lot nearer, and was in its own element. Stark grappled with it and it shot upward from the water like a tarpon, breaking his grip. He saw it briefly above him in the cluster-light, outstretched arms shaking diamond drops, body girdled with foam. It looked down at him, laughing, and its eyes were like pearls. Then it was gone in a curving arc that carried it beneath the surface. Its form was manlike, except that there seemed webs of skin in odd places and the head was earless.

And it was somewhere beneath him now, out of sight.

Stark rolled and dived.

The thing circled him round, flashed over him, and again was gone. It was having fun.

Stark came back to the surface. Farther out, the splashing had ceased. He could see heads bobbing

about and hear those hateful voices hooting and ha-ha-ing. For the moment the pack seemed to be standing off, allowing their leader to play out his game.

There was nothing Stark could see between himself and the silty bar. He set off toward it again, swimming madly.

For a while nothing happened. Now the bar was so tantalizingly close that he almost thought he might make it. Then a powerful hand closed on his ankle and drew him smoothly under.

Recklessly expending strength because there was nothing to save it for, he bent his knees, doubling his body against the thrust of the water that wanted to keep it stretched. He grasped his own ankle, found the odd hand that did not belong there, and shifted his grip to the alien wrist. And all the time he and the sea-thing were plunging deeper and the milky light was growing dimmer.

The arm was long and furred. Stark felt the powerful muscles imbedded in a layer of fat. His grip kept slipping, and he knew that if he lost it he was finished. He had been overbreathing while he swam, storing up oxygen, but he was using it at a great rate and his heart was already hammering. His fingers clawed and tore, moving convulsively toward the point of leverage.

The smooth descent stopped. The creature turned its head and Stark saw the blurred face, eyes

filmed and staring, bubbles trickling from a vestigial nose. The free arm that had been oaring them downward now swung over, not toward his hands but toward the back of his neck. The game was over.

Stark sunk his head between his shoulders. Talons ripped at the wet ridges of muscles. His own hand found a grip in a web of skin backing the creature's armpit. He straightened his body with a violent thrust and his ankle came free. He pulled himself under the creature's arm.

This Child of the Sea had also made a mistake. It had underestimated its victim. The humans who came its way—capsized fishermen or ritual offerings provided by the landbound worshippers of the Sea-Our-Mother, were easy prey. They knew that they were doomed. Stark was not so sure, and he had the thought of Ashton and the prophecy to bolster him. He managed to clamp his arms around the sinewy neck from behind, to lock his legs around the incredibly powerful body.

Then he hung on.

The creature rolled and sounded, fighting to shake him off. It was like riding an angry whale, and Stark was dying, dying, tightening his hold in a blind red rage, determined not to die first.

When the sodden cracking of the neckbones came at last, he could hardly believe it.

He let go. The body fell away from him, dribbling dark bubbles from nose and mouth where the trapped breath vented. Stark went like an arrow for the surface.

Instinct made him break quietly. He hung there, savoring the deliciousness of new air in his lungs, trying not to sob audibly as he gulped it in. He could not at first remember why this was imperative. Then, as the ringing darkness in his mind began to clear, he could hear again the laughing, hooting voices of the pack, waiting for their leader to bring them meat. And he knew that he dared not rest.

The battle had carried him beyond the bar, beyond the narrow boat-channel. Which was as well because he could not in any case go back to Skeg. The group on the cliff, like the Children, were still waiting. He could see them only as a dark blob in the distance, and he was sure they could not see him at all. With any luck they might think he had perished in the sea.

With any luck. Stark smiled cynically. It was not that he did not believe in luck. It was only that he had found it to be an uncertain ally.

With infinite caution, he swam the short distance to the far bank of the river and crawled out on dry land. There were ruins here, a tangle of old walls long abandoned and overgrown with vines. They made excellent cover. Stark went in among them and sat down, leaning

his back against warm stone. Every joint and muscle was a separate anguish; bruised, strained and clamoring.

A voice said, "Did you kill the thing?"

Stark looked up. A man stood in a gap in the wall on the landward side. It was almost as though he had been waiting for Stark's arrival. He wore a robe, and though the cluster-light altered colors Stark was sure the robe was yellow.

"You're the man I saw at the ford."

"Yes. Gelmar and the girl came after you, and then a gang of Farers. The Farers threw stones at us and told us to go away. So we crossed back. I left my people and came down here to see what was happening." He repeated, "Did you kill the thing?"

"I did."

"Then you'd better come away. They're not entirely seabound, you know. They'll be swarming here in a few minutes, hunting you." He added, "By the way, my name is Yarrod."

"Eric John Stark." He rose, suddenly aware that seaward the voices of the Children had fallen silent. Too much time had passed. They would know by now that something had gone wrong.

YARROD set off through the ruins. Stark followed until they had gone what he thought a safe

distance from the bar. Then he set his hand on Yarrod's shoulder and halted him.

"What have you to do with me, Yarrod?"

"I don't know yet." He studied Stark in the cluster-light. Yarrod was a tall man, wide in the shoulder, bony and muscular. Stark guessed that he was a warrior by trade, masquerading for some reason as something else. "Perhaps I'm curious to know why Gelmar would want to kill an off-worlder in a place where killing is forbidden even to the Farers."

From the sea there came a wild howling of grief and rage that set Stark's hackles bristling.

"Hear that?" said Yarrod. "They've found the body. Now Gelmar will know you killed the thing, and he'll assume that you could be alive. He's bound to try and find you. Would you like to be hunted through these ruins by the Farers—or will you trust me to give you safe hiding?"

"I seem not to have much choice," said Stark, and shrugged. But he went warily behind Yarrod.

The tone of the howling changed as some of the creatures, judging by the distant sounds, began to clamor onto the bar.

"What are they? Beast or human?"

"Both. A thousand years ago or so, some people got the idea that the only salvation was for man to return to the Sea-Our-Mother from

whose womb we came. And they did. Had their genes altered by some method still known then, to speed up the adaptation. And there they are, losing more of their humanness with every generation. But happier than we are."

He increased his pace and Stark matched it, the savage howling growing fainter in his ears. The consul might doubt the story told about the Children of the Sea. Stark did not. Not any more.

As though reading his thoughts, Yarrod chuckled. "Skaith is full of surprises. You've another just ahead."

High on the bank above the ford of the river rose part of a barrel arch. Although intact overhead it was open at both ends—which in that gentle climate scarcely mattered. Drooping vines acted as curtains. A fire burned inside, and the half-dozen men and women Stark had seen before with Yarrod sat by it in a close group, heads together, arms intertwined. They neither moved nor looked up as Stark and Yarrod entered.

"Pretty good, aren't they?" said Yarrod. "Or do you know?"

Stark clawed back through his mental file on Skaith. "They're pretending to be a pod. And you're supposed to be a pod-master."

A pod, according to the file, was a collection of people so thoroughly sensitized by a species of group therapy that they no longer existed as individuals but only as interde-

pendent parts of a single organism. The pod-master trained them, then kept them fed and washed and combed until such time as the hour arrived for Total Fulfillment. That was when one of the components died and the whole organism went, finding escape at last. The average life of a pod was four years. Then the pod-master started over again with another group.

"Pod-masters can go anywhere," said Yarrod. "They're nearly as holy as Wandsmen." He turned to the group. "All right, friends, you may breathe again, but not for long. Gelmar and his rabble will be coming soon, looking for our guest. Breca, go keep watch on the ford, will you?"

The group broke up. A tall woman, evidently Breca, gave Stark a strangely penetrating look, then vanished without a sound through the vines. Stark studied the faces of the remaining five in the firelight. They were strong faces, alert and wary, intensely curious, as though he might mean something to them.

One of the five, a big man with a contentious air and a jealous eye, whom Stark disliked on sight, asked Yarrod, "What was all that howling from the bar?"

Yarrod nodded at Stark. "He killed a Child of the Sea."

"And lived? I don't believe it!"

"I saw it," said Yarrod curtly. "Now tell us, Stark. Why did Gelmar set the Farers on you?"

"Partly because I had been ask-

ing about Ashton. And partly because of a prophecy."

They all expelled breath sharply, as the Farer girl had.

"What prophecy?"

"Someone called the wise woman of Irnan predicted that an off-worlder would destroy the Lords Protector because of Ashton." He added evenly, "But you know all about that, don't you?"

"We're all from Irnan," said Yarrod. "We waited there for Ashton but he never arrived. Then the wise one, Gerrith, made her prophecy and the Wandsmen killed her. What was Ashton to you?"

"What is a father to a son, a brother to a brother?" Stark moved, easing the aches of his body. But there was no ease for the deeper pain, and they saw that in his expression and were disturbed.

"You people of Irnan decided to leave this planet, which I can readily understand. Through the GU consul at Skeg and keeping the matter very confidential, you then applied for help. The Ministry of Planetary Affairs agreed to find you a suitable place on another world, and to supply the ships for your emigration. Ashton reached Skaith from the Ministry to make the final arrangements. As someone said, the more fool he—because your plans had stopped being confidential. Who talked?"

"None of us," said Yarrod. "Probably someone at the consulate. Perhaps Ashton was careless."

"Gelmar captured him. On the Irnan road."

"Did Gelmar tell you that?"

"He tried to have me killed. So I took him with me into the sea, and gave him a choice—drown or talk."

Yarrood groaned. "You took him into the sea. Don't you know that it is forbidden, absolutely forbidden on pain of death, to lay heads upon or interfere with a Wandsman in any way?"

"I was already under pain of death, and it seemed to me in any case that Gelmar needed a lesson in manners."

They stared at him. Then one of them laughed, and then they all laughed except the big man with the jealous eye who only showed his teeth. Yarrood said, "You may be the Dark Man at that!"

The curtain of vines rustled as Breca returned.

"A party," she said, "is coming to the ford. About twenty of them, and in a hurry."

YARROOD reacted swiftly. "In here," he said in Stark's ear, and motioned to a fissure in the stonework at one side. It was barely large enough to accept Stark's body and of no size at all to permit any motion, offensive or defensive. He hesitated. "Make up your mind," said Yarrood. "Unless you hide, we'll have to give you up to save ourselves."

Stark accepted the inevitable. He

slid himself into the aperture, which was screened within seconds by the meager possessions of the Irnanese—leather bottles, sacks of meal and dried meat, a spare shift apiece—and by the "pod" itself. For the Irnanese quickly huddled in their tight group before the heap of dunnage. Stark had some difficulty breathing, and he could not see anything, but he had been in worse places. Provided the Irnanese did not sell him out. He settled himself to endure.

Soon Gelmar entered the vault. Stark could hear him quite clearly, speaking to Yarrood.

"May your people know peace and quick fulfillment, Master. I am Gelmar of Skeg."

Courtesy required that Yarrood should identify himself in turn. He did so, giving a totally false name and place of origin, and ending with a gravely unctuous, "What may I do for you, my son?"

"Has anyone passed this way? A man, an off-worlder, fresh from the sea, perhaps hurt?"

"No," said Yarrood, his voice steady and unconcerned. "I've seen no one. Besides, who escapes from the sea? I've heard the Children hunting within the hour."

"Perhaps the Master is lying," said a girl's voice spitefully, and Stark knew it well. "The Master was at the ford. He saw us."

"And your people threw stones," said Yarrood sternly. "My pod became frightened. It has cost me

much effort to calm it. Even Farers should have more respect."

"One must forgive them," said Gelmar. "They are the children of the Lords Protector. Do you lack for anything? Food? Wine?"

"There is enough. Perhaps tomorrow I shall go to Skeg and ask."

"Provisions will be given gladly."

There were some parting formalities. Gelmar and the girl apparently left the vault, and in a moment Stark could hear whoops and cries as the Farers went haring away through the ruins.

Looking for me, he thought, and was glad of his hiding place. A sorry rabble they were but one against twenty, and the one unarmed, were unpleasant odds. Would they return? Stark stayed in the crevice.

Yarrod took no chances either. He began to lead his pod in a kind of litany, a murmurous chant that almost put Stark to sleep.

The chanting faded gently to a small contented humming—and, sure enough, then there were voices and sounds outside.

Yarrod's words came through clearly. "You didn't find him?"

Rather distantly, Gelmar answered, "No trace. But the Children have been on the bar."

"No doubt they have already shared him, then."

"No doubt. Still, if you should see him . . . The man is a law-breaker, and dangerous. He laid

hands on me. Imagine! Being an off-worlder he might not respect your robe either."

"I have no fear, my son," said Yarrod. "What do we all wish for but fulfillment?"

"Ah—death," said Gelmar. "Good night, Master."

"Good night. And please to take your unruly flock with you. Each time the tranquility of my pod is disturbed, the day of release is that much delayed."

Stark heard Gelmar's footfalls departing. The commotion outside dwindled to silence.

After what seemed an interminable wait, Yarrod and the others dismantled the pile of bundles. "Keep your voice down," he cautioned. "I think Gelmar left a few behind. It's like trying to count vermin so I can't be sure, but I didn't see the girl go."

Stark stood up and stretched. The pod had broken up and the woman Breca was missing, presumably on watch.

"Now then," said Yarrod brusquely. "We of the pod have a decision to make."

They all eyed Stark.

"You believe he is the Dark Man?" That from the big Irnanese who had spoken skeptically before.

"I think it likely. Gelmar appeared certain."

"But suppose he is not the Dark Man. Suppose we rush back to Irnan only to learn as much. Then all our work is wasted and our

mission is thrown away for nothing."

There were mutters of assent.

"You have a point, Halk. What do you suggest?"

"That we let him get to Irnan by himself. If he is truly the Dark Man, he'll make it."

"I don't particularly want to go to Irnan," remarked Stark, with a certain dangerous cheerfulness. "Ashton's not there."

"And well we know that," said Yarrod. "Where is he?"

"In the Citadel of the Lords Protector, at Worldheart—wherever that is."

"North, in any case," said Yarrod. "And in any case, you must go to Irnan."

"Why?"

"So that Gerrith, the daughter of Gerrith, may say if you are truly the Dark Man of the prophecy."

"Oh. Gerrith had a daughter."

"All wise women have daughters if they can possibly manage it. Otherwise the precious genes are lost. And you see, Stark, we must know for sure or we cannot follow you. And without us and our help, you would find it hard to accomplish your mission."

"He'll find it hard anyway," said Halk. "But he might as well cooperate." He spoke directly to Stark. "You can't get away from Skaith now. Not through the starport. And there is no other way."

"Since I have no wish to leave, it scarcely matters, does it?" Stark

turned to Yarrod. "Maybe I can solve the immediate problem. Obviously you couldn't have come here to rescue me, so you must have had another reason. What was it?"

"We of Irnan," Yarrod replied angrily, "are no longer allowed to travel without a special permit from the Wandsmen, and we didn't think they would give us one for this journey. That's why we're flapping about in this silly pod disguise. We came to Skeg to perhaps find out what the Galactic Union intends to do about us, if anything. I don't suppose they told you at Pax?"

"As a matter of fact, they did."

The whole group moved a step closer.

"What will they do? Will they send someone?"

"They have sent someone," Stark said. "Me."

A stunned silence. Then Halk asked, "Officially?" The sneer was audible.

"No. They tried officially to reopen contact with Skaith, and got nowhere."

"So they sent you. Who is your master, then?"

Stark took Halk's meaning and grinned. "No one. I'm a mercenary by trade. Since I was going after Ashton anyway, the Minister asked me to find out what I could here and report to him—if I survived. I take no orders from him and he takes no responsibility for me."

"Then," said Yarrod, "that is

the best we can hope for?"

"Short of an invasion, yes. And the Galactic Union dislikes force. So if you want freedom you'll have to fight for it yourselves." Stark shrugged. "You must be aware that Skaith is not considered the most important planet in the galaxy."

"Except by us who are obliged to live on it," said Yarrod. "Very well, then. We go back to Irnan. Agreed?"

Even Halk had to admit that they had got what they came for—news of Pax's intentions, satisfactory or not. No justification remained for lingering at Skeg.

"Yet we mustn't go too quickly," said Yarrod, frowning. "That would give us away. Gelmar will expect me in Skeg tomorrow, and surely he is keeping some sort of watch on this side of the river."

Halk said sarcastically, "And what about the grand ambassador? We can hardly add him to the pod."

"He must go on ahead of us, tonight. He can wait at the . . ."

Breca came quickly through the vines, motioning for silence. "I hear them, coming this way."

"Stark . . ."

"Not in that hole again, thank you. It was a good hole and welcome at the time, but it can entrap me. Did they search the roof?"

"They did." The pod began organizing itself, soundlessly and in haste.

"Then they'll likely not bother

again." Stark went out through the rearward arch, letting the vines fall back quietly into place. He stood for a moment, head cocked. He could hear people moving about some distance away. If they thought they were being stealthy they were much mistaken. The beautiful sky glowed with its islands of milky fire. In the cluster-light, Stark studied the broken masonry of the vault and then began to climb.

IV

THE top of the vault offered reasonable cover behind crumbling bits of wall still standing above its edges. He had no more than settled himself when Baya and two men came in view. She was leading the others, both of them obviously bored and as pettish as babies. One was tall and spindly, totally naked except for body-paint that looked as though he had rolled in it. His hair and beard were full of rubbish. The other man was shorter and ran to fat, and that was all Stark could see of him because he was completely wrapped in bright cloth that covered even his face. The folds were stuck full of flowers.

"Let's go back now, Baya," said the tall one, turning toward the ford. "You've seen there's no one here."

"The Dark Man died in the sea," said the shorter one, his voice squeaking impatiently through his veils. "The Children shared him.

How could it be otherwise?"

Baya lifted her shoulders as though a breath of cold air had touched her. She shook her head.

"I spoke to him," she said. "I touched him. There was something about him—strength, a terrible strength. He killed a Child of the Sea, remember?"

So they knew that, did they? Stark listened the harder.

"You're being silly," said the short one, and hopped up and down like a rabbit. "Girl-silly. You saw his muscles, and you want him to be alive. You're sorry he didn't love you before he died."

"Hold your tongue," said Baya. "Maybe he's dead and maybe he isn't—but if he isn't, someone is hiding him. Stop whining and look around."

"We've already searched everywhere . . ."

The tall man sighed. "We'd better do as she says. You know what a terrible temper she has."

They wandered off, out of Stark's sight but not out of his hearing. Baya continued to stand where she was, frowning at the firelight flickering from the vault. Then she sauntered over, her insolent body agleam in the light of the Three Ladies. Stark lost sight of her too, since she was directly beneath him, but he could hear the vines rustle as she swept them aside.

"Master—"

Yarrodd's angry voice sounded from the vault. "You have no

business here. Get out."

"But Master, I'm only curious," said Baya. "I might even want to join a pod myself one day, when I'm tired of being a Farer. Tell me about them, Master. Is it true that they forget about everything, even love?"

The vines swished as she entered the vault and let them fall behind her.

The words from within were now too muffled for Stark to follow. In a few moments, though, he heard a squeal of pain from Baya and the vines thrashed wildly as she and Yarrodd came through them. Yarrodd had his hand wound cruelly in her hair. He marched her, crying and struggling, away from the vault. He took her to the river bank and pushed her in.

"You've done enough mischief for one day," he said. "If you come near my pod again I'll make you regret it." He spat and added, "Farer trash! I have no need of you."

He left her and strode back to the vault. She stood in the shallow water of the ford and shook her fists at him, screaming.

"You live on the bounty of the Lords Protector just the same as we do! What makes you so much better, you . . ." She poured out obscenities, then choked on her own rage and ended up coughing.

There was a sudden delighted outcry from among the ruins where her two companions were poking

around. She came up the bank.

"Have you found him?"

"We found love-weed! Love-weed!" The two Farers reappeared, waving handfuls of something they had grubbed up, chewing greedily. The tall one held some out to Baya.

"Here. Forget the dead man. Let us love and enjoy."

"I don't feel like loving now." She turned away, toward the vault. "I feel like hating. Pod-masters are supposed to be holy men. This one is full of hate."

"Perhaps it's because we threw stones," said the short one, cramming his mouth full.

"Who cares?" said the tall one, and grabbed Baya by the shoulder. "Eat this, and you'll feel like loving." He pushed some of the weed by main force into Baya's mouth.

She spat it out. "No! I must talk to Gelmar. I think there's something . . ."

"Later," said the tall Farer. "Later." He laughed, and the short one laughed, and they shoved Baya back and forth between them. The struggle seemed to pleasure them and hasten the action of the drug. Baya pulled the bodkin from her hair. She slashed the naked one once, not deeply, and they laughed some more and took the bodkin away from her. Then they worried her down to the ground and began beating her.

The roof of the vault was not high. Stark came down off it in one jump. The Farers neither heard nor

saw him. They were far too busy, and Baya was screaming at the top of her lungs. Stark hit the tall one a chopping blow at the base of the skull and he fell. Another blow, and the short one followed him without a groan, strewing the last of his flowers. Stark heaved the bodies aside. Baya looked up at him, her eyes wide and dazed. She said something, perhaps his name. He could not be sure. He found the nerve-center in the side of her neck and pressed it, and she was quiet.

He saw that Yarrod had come out and was standing over him, looking like thunder.

"That was ill-done," cried Yarrod. "You fool, who cares what happens to a Farer?"

"You're the fool," said Stark. "You gave yourself away. She was going to tell Gelmar that the pod-master was a fraud." He lifted the girl smoothly to his shoulder and stood up.

"She saw you, I suppose."

"I think so."

"And these?"

The two men had begun to snore heavily. They smelled of a sweet-sour pungency. Their mouths were open and smiling.

"No," said Stark. "But they heard Baya. About you, I mean. They may remember."

"All right," said Yarrod, still angry. "I suppose it makes no difference who's to blame. The only choice we have now is to run, and run fast."

He looked across the river to the lights of Skeg and then went stamping back to the vault.

WITHIN minutes they were on their way through the sprawling ruins and into the jungle. The Three Ladies smiled serenely. The warm air was moist, heavy with the odors of night-flowering creepers, mud and decay. Nameless things scuttled and clicked, bickering in tiny voices around their feet. Stark adjusted Baya's light weight more comfortably across his shoulders, and remembered with a pang of yearning the clean bitter corpse of Mars.

"The roads are closed to off-worlders," he said. "I suppose you've thought of that."

"You don't imagine we came here by the road, do you?" Yarrod snorted. "We got out of Irnan by pretending to be a hunting party. We left our mounts and all our proper gear at a place on the other side of the hills, then walked in by a jungle path." He squinted at the sky. "We can be there by tomorrow noon, if we drive ourselves."

"There's a chance, isn't there," said Stark, "that Gelmar will think you've moved your people out because of the disturbance? And that Baya simply ran off? She stabbed one of her friends, you know."

"Of course there's a chance. He can't be sure of anything, can he? He can't even be sure whether

you're dead or alive. So if you were Gelmar, what would you do?"

"I'd send word along to be on watch—especially in Irnan." And he cursed the name of Gerrith, wishing that she had kept her mouth shut.

"She got her death by it," said Yarrod curtly. "That should be punishment enough."

"It's my death that I'm like to get by it that worries me," said Stark. "If I'd known about the damned prophecy, I'd have laid my plans differently."

"Well," said Halk, smiling his fleering smile at Stark, "if it's a true prophecy, and you are a fated man, you have nothing to fear."

"The man who doesn't fear doesn't live long. I fear everything." He patted Baya's bare thigh. "Even this."

"In that, you're well advised. You'd do best to kill it."

"We'll see," said Stark. "No need to hurry."

They moved on, following a quiet green star that Yarrod called the Lamp of the North.

"If Gelmar does send word to Irnan, he'll do it in the usual manner, by messenger, by the roads. Barring accident, we should be well ahead."

"If," said Halk, "the Dark Man and his baggage don't slow us down."

Stark showed the edges of his teeth. "Halk," he said, "I have a feeling that you and I are not going

to be the best of friends."

"Bear with him, Stark," said Yarrod. "He's a fighter, and we need swords more than we need sweet tempers."

That at least was true. Stark saved his breath for walking. And there was plenty of that for all of them.

IT WAS daybreak and they had stopped to rest, high on the shoulder of a jungle hill. The dreaming sea lay far behind them, all its deadliness hidden by distance. The morning mists took fantastic colors from the rising of the ginger star. The Irnanese faced eastward and each one poured a small libation. Even Baya bowed her head.

"Hail, Old Sun, we thank you for this day," they muttered, and sounded as though they meant it. Then Halk, as usual, spoiled the effect. He turned defiantly to Stark.

"We were not always paupers, hoarding our little daylight, grudging every scrap of metal so that we could still have a knife to cut our meat. There were ships on that sea. There were machines that flew in the air, and all manner of things that are only legend now. Skaith was a rich world once, as rich as any."

"It lived too long," said Yarrod. "It's senile and mad, growing more so with every generation. Come and eat."

They sat down and began sharing out meager rations of food and sour wine. When Baya's turn came they passed her by.

Stark asked, "Is there none for the girl?"

"We've been feeding her and the likes of her all our lives," said Breca. "She can do without."

Halk nodded approvingly.

Stark divided his own ration and gave her half. She took it and ate quickly, saying nothing. She had been docile enough since regaining consciousness, going along on her own feet with only a small amount of whimpering. Stark, leading her like a puppy by a halter around her neck, knew she was afraid. She was surrounded by people who made no secret of their hatred and with no protective Wandsman at hand to whip them into line. Her eyes were large and hollow. Her body-paint was a sorry mess, all sweated and smeared.

"The old civilizations," said Yarrod, around a flap of tough bread, "for all their technology, never achieved space-flight. I suppose they were busy with more important things. So there was no escape, for them or for us. No hope of it. Then suddenly there was talk that starships had landed, talk about a Galactic Union and other worlds. You see what that did to us after we learned the rumors were true. There was hope. We could escape."

Stark nodded. "I can see also

why the Wandsmen would be unhappy about the idea. If the providers start leaving, their whole system collapses."

Halk leaned toward Baya. "And it will collapse. For leave we shall. And what will you do then, little Farer girl? Eh?"

She shrank away from him, but he kept on at her until he brought her deep anger flaring up.

"It will never happen," she snarled at him. "The Protectors won't let it. They'll hunt you all down and kill you." She looked hatefully at Stark. "Off-worlders have no business here, making trouble. They should never have been allowed to come."

"But they did come," said Stark, "and things will never be the same." He smiled at Baya. "If I were you I'd start thinking about learning to scratch for myself. And of course, you could always emigrate."

"Emigrate," said Halk. "Ha! Then they'd have to do more than just love and enjoy."

"Skaith is dying," said Baya. "What else is there to do but enjoy? While one can?"

Stark shook his head. "Skaith will last out your lifetime, and one or two more. So that's not much of a reason."

She cursed him and began to cry furiously. "You're wicked. You're all wicked. You'll all die just like that woman Gerrith. The Lords Protector will punish you. They

defend the weak, they feed the hungry, they shelter the . . ."

"You can keep that," said Halk, and cuffed her. She shut up, but her eyes still smoldered. Halk lifted his hand again.

"Let her be," said Stark. "She didn't invent the system." He turned to Yarrod. "If Irnan is as closely watched as you say, how shall I get in and out of the city without being seen?"

"You won't have to. The wise woman's grotto is in the foothills at the head of the valley."

"You mean the daughter? Don't they watch her, too?"

"Like hawks." And Yarrod added grimly, "We can handle that."

Halk was still looking at Baya, full of malice. "What will you do with her?"

"Turn her loose, when her tongue can do us no harm."

"When will that be? No, give her to me, Dark Man. I'll see to it that she's harmless."

"No."

"Why the tender concern for her life? She is ready enough to take yours."

"She had reason to hate and fear me." Stark looked at Baya's tear-stained face and smiled again. "Besides, she was acting only from the noblest motives."

"Hell," said Yarrod, "who isn't?"

When they had eaten they started off again, pushing themselves to

the limit of endurance—which meant past Baya's limit. Stark carried her part of the time, staggering with weariness and fully conscious of every ache bequeathed him by the late Child of the Sea. They climbed steadily and the ginger star climbed above them. About mid-morning they crossed the ridge and began going down, which was easier at first and then harder as the grade became steeper. The dim path switched back and forth across the face of the slope but in many places Yarrod led them straight down in order to save time.

They did not quite kill themselves. They did not quite reach the place they had hoped to attain by noon, either. Stark judged that Old Sun was at least an hour past zenith when Yarrod at last signaled a halt.

They were in a dense grove of trees, the pale trunks grooved and ridged, the dark foliage shutting out the sky. Moving cautiously, Yarrod walked on with only Halk for a companion. Stark handed Baya's leash to Breca and rushed to join them. The two were expert woodsmen, he noticed, making hardly a sound as they progressed. When they reached the edge of the grove they became even more careful, peering out from behind the trees.

Stark saw a broad sunny meadow. There was a ruined tower some distance into it that might once have been a mill or part of a fortified dwelling. Two men in

bright tunics and leather jerkins sat in the doorway of the tower, relaxed and at ease, their weapons leaned beside them. It was too far away to see their faces. Scattered about between the grove and the tower, a dozen or so rusty-brown animals, large and shaggy, fed contentedly on lush grass. There were no sounds except the natural ones: breeze rustling overhead, animals cropping.

Yarrod was satisfied. He had expected no less. He turned to summon the others.

And Stark caught his shoulder in a grip of iron. "Wait."

Where a moment ago there had been no sounds, now all at once there were a multitude.

"Men. There. And there . . ."

It was plain for all to hear—the creak of sandal-leather, the clink of metal, the swift stealthy motion.

"All around us, closing in . . ."

YARROD shouted. The Irnanese, aware they were in a trap, began to run. Baya stumbled and fell, or perhaps deliberately lay down. At any rate, they left her. Voices called out peremptory orders to halt. There was a loud trampling of feet. The Irnanese fled out across the meadow toward the tower where their weapons were. Arrows flew, whickering in the bright air. Two Irnanese fell and only one got up again. They dodged in and out among the animals, now snorting and bellowing. Then Stark saw that

the men in the doorway had not moved and he knew they were dead.

The meadow stretched wide and naked in the sunlight. Suddenly a flight of arrows left the tower and stuck quivering in the ground.

Yarrodd stopped. No hiding place, no hope. Men were coming out of the grove behind, arrows nocked. More men came out of the tower, kicking the two bodies aside. A small rufous man led them. He wore a dark-red tunic and carried no weapon but his wand of office. Halk breathed one word, a name, and he breathed it like a curse.

"Mordach!"

Stark had made his own decision. Those arrows were long and sharp and he was sure that he could not outrun them. So he too stood and waited, having no wish to die in this meaningless place, under the ginger star.

"Who is Mordach?" he snapped.

"Chief Wandsman of Irnan," said Yarrodd, his voice breaking with rage and despair. "Someone talked. Someone betrayed us."

The men formed a wall around them. Mordach approached and smiled up at the tall Irnanese.

"Ah, the hunting party," he said. "In strange attire, and without weapons. Yet I see that you did find game of sorts." His gaze fastened on Stark, who decided that perhaps he ought to have chanced the arrows after all.

"An off-worlder," said Mordach,

"where off-worlders are forbidden. And traveling with a company of law-breakers. Was this what you went to find? Someone purporting to fulfill your prophecy?"

"Perhaps he does fulfill it, Mordach," said Halk wickedly. "Gelmar thought so. Gelmar tried to kill him and could not."

Thank you, friend, thought Stark, and felt his guts tighten.

Two men came up, supporting Baya between them. "We found her in the grove. She doesn't look to be one of them."

"I'm a Farer," said Baya. She fell on her knees before Mordach. "In the name of the Lords Protector . . ." She held out the end of the halter and shook it. "He took me by force all the way from Skeg."

"He?"

"That man. The off-worlder. Eric John Stark."

"Why?"

"Because he lived when he ought to have died." Trembling with malevolence she glared at Stark. "He escaped from us, into the sea. You know what that means— Yet he lived. He killed a Child of the Sea, and lived. And I saw him." She had strength and breath enough to scream, "He is the Dark Man of the prophecy! Kill him! Kill him now!"

"There," said Mordach absently, and caressed her tangled hair. He considered Stark, his eyes hooded and cold. "So. And perhaps even Gelmar could be mis-

taken. Either way . . ."

"Kill him," Baya whimpered.
"Please. Now."

"Killing is a solemn matter," Mordach said, "and salutary. It ought not to be wasted." He motioned to some of his men. "Bind them. Securely, very securely, and especially the off-worlder." He lifted Baya to her feet. "Come, child, you're safe now."

"Mordach," said Yarrod. "Who betrayed us?"

"You did," said Mordach. "Yourselves. All your preparations took time and effort, and some of them were observed. You and Halk are known to be among the most active of the Emigration Party. These others were known to be associates. When you all went off together to hunt, we were curious to know what the quarry might be. So we followed you as far as the tower, then awaited your return." His gaze wandered again to Stark. "You were bringing him back to Gerrith's daughter, weren't you?"

Yarrod did not answer, but Mordach nodded.

"Of course you were. And of course they must meet, and I promise you they shall—openly, where all can see."

He went off with Baya, who looked back once over her shoulder as the men-at-arms moved in with leather thongs to bind the captives. They were of a type Stark had not seen before, having lint-white hair and sharply slanted cheekbones

and slitted yellow eyes that gave them the look of wolves. Certainly they were not Farers.

"Farers are only a mob, for trampling and tearing," Yarrod said. "Wandsmen in the city-states like to have a little force of mercenaries for the serious work, and they recruit them along the Border. These are from Izvand, in the Inner Barrens." His head hung in shame and misery. But he lifted it fiercely when one of the mercenaries brought a halter for his neck, so that he might take the rope easily and with a semblance of pride. "I'm sorry," he said, and would not meet Stark's eye.

And now it was Stark's turn to wear a halter and walk behind in the dust while Baya rode.

So at length the Dark Man came to Irnan.

V

IT WAS a gray city, walled in stone, set on a height roughly in the center of a broad valley green with spring. Mordach and his prisoners and his mercenaries had journeyed a long way north, leaving tropical summer far behind. All around Irnan stretched tilled fields and pastures. Orchards were in blossom, a froth of pink and white oddly tarnished by the light of the ginger star.

A road led to the city. There was much traffic on it: farm carts, people going to and coming from

work in the fields or driving beasts before them, traders and long strings of pack-animals jingling with bells. Stark noted a troop of mountebanks, a caravan of traveling scores of both sexes with bright banners advertising their wares, and the motley assortment of wanderers that seemed omnipresent on Skaith. Mordach's party went down the middle of the road, four men-at-arms riding in front and clashing short spears rhythmically against their shields. A clear way was made, and behind them the folk stood along the roadside ditches and stared and pointed and whispered, and then began to follow.

Two Wandsmen, in green tunics that indicated their lesser rank, strode out of the gate to meet Mordach, a rabble of Farers following at their heels. Within minutes the word was running ahead like wildfire.

"The Dark Man! They've taken the Dark Man!"

More Wandsmen appeared as though from between the paving stones. A crowd gathered, clotting around Mordach's party like swarming bees. The mercenaries drew their ranks tighter, until their rusty-haired mounts all but trod upon the captives. Their spears pointed outward, forming a barrier against the press of bodies.

"Keep up, keep up," shouted the captain of the Izvandians. "If you fall, we can't help you."

They passed beneath the arch of the great gate. Stark saw that the stone was stained and weathered, the carvings grown dim with time. A winged creature with a sword in its claws crouched on the capstone, fierce jaws open to bite the world. The valves of the gate were strong, sheathed in cured hides as hard as metal. It gave on a passage through the thickness of the wall, a dark tunnel where every sound was caught and compressed and the din of voices was stunning. Then they were in the square beyond and forcing their way between market stalls toward a central platform built stoutly of wood and higher than the jostling heads of the mob. Some of the mercenaries stood guard while others dismounted and hurried the captives up a flight of steps.

Atop the platform were stalwart posts, permanently placed and black with use. Quickly Stark and Yarrod and the others were bound to them. The mercenaries took up stations at the edges of the platform, facing outward. The two Wandsmen in green went away; apparently Mordach had sent them on some errand. Mordach himself addressed the crowd. Much of what he said was drowned by shouts and howls but there was little doubt about the burden of his speech. Irnan had sinned, and the guilty were about to pay.

Stark flexed himself against the hide ropes. They cut his flesh but did not give. The post was firm as a

tree. He leaned back against it, easing himself as much as possible, and looked at this place where presumably he was about to die.

"What do you think now, Dark Man?" asked Halk. He was bound to the post on Stark's left, Yarrod on Stark's right.

"I think," said Stark, "that we'll soon know whether Gerrith had the true sight."

The crowd was still growing. People came until it seemed that the space could hold no more, and still they arrived. Around the inner sides of the square stood buildings of stone, narrow and high, shouldering together, slate roofs peaked and shining in the sun. The supper windows were filled with onlookers. After a while there were folk straddling the rooftrees and perching on the gutters, and the tops of the outer walls were packed.

Stark noticed two distinct elements in the crowd, and they seemed not to mingle. Foremost around the platform, doing all the screaming, were the Farers and the other flotsam. Beyond them, and quite quiet, were the people of Irnan.

"Any hope from those?" asked Stark.

Yarrod tried to shrug. "Not all of them are with us. Our people have lived in this place a long time and the roots go deep. And Skaith, for all its faults, is the only world we know. Some find the idea of leaving it frightening and blasphemous.

They won't lift a hand to help us. About the others . . . I don't know. After all, what can they do for us?"

Mordach was urging the mob to be patient. Still they pushed, many clamoring for blood. A band of women forced their way to the steps and began to climb. They wore black bags over their heads, bags that covered their faces. Otherwise they were naked and their skin was like tree-bark with long exposure.

"Give us the Dark Man, Mordach!" they cried. "Let us take him to the mountain top and feed his strength to Old Sun!"

Mordach held up his staff to halt them, spoke to them gently.

Stark asked, "What are they?"

"They live wild in the mountains. Once in a while, when they get hungry, they come in. They worship the sun, and any man they can manage to capture they sacrifice. They believe that they alone keep Old Sun alive." Halk laughed. "Look at the greedy beasts! They'd like to have all of us."

Arms like gnarled branches reached and clawed.

"They will die soon enough, little sisters," promised Mordach. "They will feed Old Sun, and you shall watch and sing the Hymn of Life."

Gently he urged them back, and reluctantly they returned to the crowd. Then a tumult inundated the doors of one of the buildings overlooking the square. A procession moved out from it, the green Wandsmen leading and a fringe of

Farers flapping at the sides and rear. At the center Stark made out a dozen or so men and women in sober gowns, chains of office around their necks. They walked in an odd manner, and as they neared he could see that they were bound in a way that forced them to bend forward and shuffle like penitents.

A low groan arose from the people of Irnan. Yarrod muttered between his teeth, "Our chiefs and elders."

Stark thought he saw the beginning of movement among the Irnanese. He hoped they would rush the crowd and rescue their leaders by force. That might trigger a general revolt. But the movement rippled and died. The procession reached the steps and climbed haltingly while the mob jeered. The elders were herded onto the platform and made to stand, and Mordach pointed his staff at them in a gesture of wrath and accusation.

"You have done wickedness," he cried in a voice that rang across the square. "Now you shall do penance!"

The crowd screamed. Many threw things. The citizens of Irnan stirred uneasily. They muttered, but still they did not move.

"They're afraid," Yarrod said. "The Wandsmen have packed the town with Farers, as you see. One word, and they'll start tearing Irnan apart stone by stone."

"Hell, the Irnanese outnumber them."

"Not the Irnanese in sympathy with us. And the Wandsmen hold hostages." He nodded his red head at the elders standing bent in the sun.

There was a smell in the air now. The hot, close and frightening smell of mob; mob excited, hungry, dreaming blood and death. The primitive in Stark knew that sweaty acidity all too well. The ropes cut him, the post was hard against his back. The ginger star burned him with brassy light and his own sweat ran down.

Someone shouted, "Where is the wise woman?"

Other voices took up the cry, howled it back and forth between the gray walls.

"Where is the wise woman? Where is Gerrith the Younger?"

Mordach calmed them. "She has been sent for."

Yarrod yelled at Mordach, "Do you plan to murder her as you did her mother?"

Mordach only smiled and said, "Wait."

The crowd became increasingly restless. Bands began looting the market stalls, snatching food and produce. Wine and drugs passed freely. Stark wondered how much longer Mordach could control them.

Then the cry went up from the gate. "The wise woman! Gerrith is coming."

An expectant quiet settled over the square. Hundreds of heads

turned, and it seemed as though the Irnanese all drew one deep breath and held it.

Men-at-arms appeared, opening a way through the press. Behind them rolled a cart, a farm-cart soiled and reeking with the work of the fields. After that marched more men-at-arms.

In the cart stood two Wandsmen, each clinging with one hand to the jolting stakes and holding with the other the tall figure of a woman between them.

SHE WORE a great black veil that enveloped her from head to heels, a single shroudlike garment that concealed her face and all else save her height. Set upon her head and circling the veil was a diadem the color of old ivory.

"The Robe and Crown of Fate," said Yarrod, and the folk of Irnan let out their pent breath in a savage wail of protest.

The mob drowned it in their own blood-cry.

The cart crossed the square, halted at the platform steps. The woman was made to leave it and climb. The diadem appeared first above the level of the platform floor. It looked to be frail and old, and its ornament was a circle of tiny grinning skulls. Then there was the sway of dark draperies and Gerrith, wise woman of Irnan, stood before Mordach with the Wandsmen on either side.

Because of the veil Stark could not be sure. But he thought Gerrith was looking past Mordach, straight at him.

Yet she spoke to Mordach, and her voice was clear and sweet and ringing, without a hint of fear.

"This was not well done, Mordach."

"No?" he said. "Let us see." He turned from her, speaking over the heads of his Farers to the people of Irnan. His voice carried to the walls. "You of Irnan. Watch now and learn!"

He turned again to Gerrith and pointed his wand at Stark. "What do you see there, daughter of Gerrith?"

"I see the Dark Man."

"The Dark Man of your mother's prophecy?"

"Yes."

Well, thought Stark, and what else could she say?

"The Dark Man, supposed to destroy. There he stands bound and helpless, waiting for death." Mordach laughed heartily, as though he found these human lapses from reason genuinely amusing. "He will destroy nothing. Do you recant, woman? Do you admit the lie?"

"No."

"Then you are no wiser than your mother, and your sight is no more true. Do you hear out there, you of Irnan?" Again his words carried far. And where they did not reach, other tongues took them up and

passed them on. The whispering rose like surf against the walls, up to the windows and the rooftops. "Your prophecy is false, your wise woman a liar, your Dark Man a sham!"

In one swift motion he ripped crown and veil from Gerrith.

Astonishment, surprise, shock, outrage . . . Stark could hear the outbursts from the Irnanese beyond the delighted screaming of the mob.

Gerrith stood tall and calm, as though she had expected to be thus denuded. And naked she was, smooth skin warm bronze with the sunlight on it and a thick braid of bronzy hair hanging down her back. Her body was strong and straight and proud, not flinching before the lewdness of the crowd. Nudity was commonplace on Skaith and hardly to be noticed, but this was different. This was a stripping of more than the mere body. Mordach was exhibiting her. He was attempting to strip her soul.

He tossed the black veil to the mob and let them tear it to bits. The diadem he smashed beneath his feet and kicked the old yellowed fragments contemptuously away.

"There are your robe and crown," he said. "We shall have no more wise women at Irnan."

This, too, she had expected. Her reply was ready. "And you will have no more Irnan to rob, Mordach." She spoke with the tongue of prophecy, and the huge crowd fell

silent. "The Crown has come with us from the old Irnan, all through the Great Wandering and the centuries of rebuilding. Now you have destroyed it and the history of Irnan is finished."

Mordach shrugged and said, "Bind her."

But before the men-at-arms could reach her she turned and raised her arms and cried out in a wonderful ringing voice.

"Irnan is finished! You must go and build a new city, on a new world."

Then she submitted herself to the binding. Mordach cried cuttingly, "Pray do not go at once, people of Irnan! Stay a while and watch the Dark Man die."

Laughter swept the mob. "Yes, stay!" they jeered. "Don't leave us now. At least wait for ships."

Yarrood, bound to his post, threw back his head. A harsh wild scream rose from him.

"Rise up, you dogs! Rise up and tear them. Where are your guts, your pride, your manhood . . ."

The madness was on him, the madness that makes dead men and heroes. Mordach lifted his hand. One of the Izvandians stepped up and quite impersonally thrust his short spear into Yarrood's breast. A clean and merciful stroke, Stark noticed, though he was sure Mordach would have preferred something more lingering. Yarrood sagged against the post.

"Cut him down," said Mordach.

"Throw his body to the crowd."

The tree-bark women commenced a shrill chanting, raising their arms to the sun.

Yarrood's red head, cometlike, marked his passage. Stark preferred not to watch what happened after that, though he could not shut out the sounds. He lifted his gaze to the walls of Irnan, to the windows and the rooftops. He was peripherally aware of Gerrith being bound to the post Yarrood had just quitted.

At Stark's other side, Halk was weeping.

Mordach and the other Wandsmen stood benignly watching their flock, talking among themselves, planning the next act, the dramatic climax of their lecture on the folly of rebellion. Many of the Irnanese were going now. They had their cloaks pulled over their heads, as though they could not bear any more. They melted away into the narrow streets around the square.

Gerrith was speaking. "So they leave us," she said.

Stark turned his attention to her. She was looking at him. Her eyes were a warm gold-bronze in color, honest eyes, sorrowful but calm.

"It seems that Mordach is right, that my mother's prophecy was born of her own desires and not the true sight. So you will die for nothing and that is a great pity." She shook her head. The bronze braid had fallen forward over her shoulder and the shining end of it moved between her breasts. "A

great pity." She studied him, his size and strength, the structure of his facial bones, the shape of his mouth, the expression of his eyes. She appeared full of regret and compassion. "I'm sorry. Why did you come here?"

"Looking for Ashton."

She seemed astounded. "But..."

"And that's what Gerrith predicted, isn't it? So maybe after all..."

She would have spoken again but he cautioned her to silence. The Wandsmen were still conversing. The men-at-arms had returned to their positions, looking disdainfully at the mob that growled and howled and bestially tore. Stark glanced again at the windows.

Was he imagining...?

No longer were they crowded with watchers. The shutters were pulled to, but not closed, as though to hide what went on in the rooms behind them yet leave a view of the square. There were still people on the roofs but not so many as before. And there was movement of a furtive sort behind turrets and chimney-stacks. Stark took a deep breath and allowed himself a small bit of hope.

He also braced himself for action.

Mordach came and stood before him.

"Well," he said, "and how shall the Dark Man die? Shall I give him to the Little Sisters of the Sun? Shall I let my Farers play with him?

Or shall I have him flayed?" The tip of his wand traced lines on Stark's skin. "Slowly, of course. A strip at a time. Yes. And whom shall we call to flay our Dark Man? The Izvandians? No, this is not their affair." He looked at the Irnanese elders standing bowed in their shackles. "It is their affair. They planned to desert us, to deny their duty to their fellow men. They fell into the error of selfishness and greed. The Dark Man is their symbol. They shall flay him!"

The crowd was overjoyed.

Mordach took a dagger from his belt. He thrust it into the hand of a graybeard, who stared back at him with loathing and dropped it.

Mordach smiled. "I haven't said the alternative, old man. The choice is simple. A strip of his skin, or your life."

"Then," said the graybeard, "I must die."

"As you wish," said Mordach. He turned toward the nearest man-at-arms.

Stark heard the ripping thud of arrow into flesh, saw the feathered butt rise out of Mordach's breast as though it had suddenly blossomed there. Mordach drew in one shocked breath, a kind of inverted scream. He looked up and saw all the shuttered windows opening and men with bows standing in them. He saw the shafts beginning to pour like rain, and then he went to his knees and watched his Izvandians drop, and his green Wandsmen. He

turned his face to Stark and the wise woman, a face filled with horrible doubt. Stark was glad Mordach had that to take with him into the dark.

The graybeard had been a warrior in his time. He touched Mordach's body with his foot and said fiercely, "Dog. Death to all like you!"

More archers appeared on the walls, on the roofs. They were shooting into the mob now. There was a great squalling and shrieking, a mighty surge of panic.

Stark saw a body of mercenaries come in from the gate. At the same time, from the side streets, citizens of Irnan were streaming back into the square, armed with anything they could get their hands on. Among them was one group, well armed and keeping close order, that cut their way through the pack with ruthless efficiency, heading for the platform. They gained it. A few stayed to hold the steps. The others hustled the elders down and cut the captives loose. Stark and the survivors of Yarrod's band caught up weapons from the dead Izvandians. They rushed down the steps and closed ranks around Gerrith and the elders. They started to fight their way back into the streets.

Some of the Farers, crazy with drugs and fanatic hatred, rushed the group, careless of the swords. The Irnanese cried, "Yarrod! Yarrod!" It got to be a chant. They killed their way across the square to the rhythm of it.

They passed into a narrow street between buildings of gray stone that had grown up during the centuries and then grown together overhead, so that in some places the street was more like a tunnel. It was quiet here. They hurried on, as rapidly as the elders could move, and presently entered a doorway. Beyond it was a hall of some size, hung with banners and furnished with one great table and a row of massive chairs. People were gathered there. Immediately the elders were helped to the chairs. Somebody shouted.

"Armorer! Come here and get these shackles off."

A swordsman had brought a cloak to Gerrith and covered her with it. She was standing beside Stark. She turned to him with a fey look and spoke.

"Mother always knows best."

VI

HALK'S eyes were red with rage and weeping but his mouth smiled, all teeth and vengefulness.

"They don't need us here, Dark Man. Are you coming?"

Stark glanced questioningly at Gerrith. She nodded. "Go if you will, Stark. Your bane is not in Irnan."

He wondered if she knew of another place where it could be.

He went back into the streets with Halk. Bands of citizens were

hunting down Farers like rabbits in the twists and turns of the narrow ways. It was obvious that the Irnanese had matters firmly in hand. Archers were taking up new positions around the great gate where scores of Farers were shrieking and trampling each other, fighting to get out and away. Stark saw no Izvandians. With their paymaster dead, he guessed that they had simply retired to their barracks to let the battle go on without them. The treebark women had taken refuge underneath the platform, more to escape the crush, apparently, than because they were afraid. They were chanting ecstatically, busy with the task of feeding Old Sun. The ginger star was feasting well today.

There was really not much left to do. A few last pockets of resistance remained, and the work of mopping up of strays. But the fight was won—had been won, really, with that first flight of arrows. Mordach's body still lay on the platform. The little man had pushed too hard. Take the folk whom Yarrod had said would not lift a hand to save him and his followers. Those reluctant ones had lifted both hands to save their elders and their wise woman, to cleanse themselves of the shame Mordach had put upon them.

Halk sallied on alone to exact still more payment for Yarrod. Stark could not see that he was needed anywhere so he put up his

sword and climbed to the platform. Among the sprawled bodies he found the fragmented old ivory of the trampled crown. One little skull was still intact, grinning as though it could taste the blood that speckled it. Stark retrieved the skull, clutched it in his fist. He descended the steps again, the voices of the tree-bark women shrill in his ears. He hoped he would never meet a pack of them baying on their own mountain-tops. He made his way through the streets, returning to the council hall.

There he found a bustle of messengers, people coming and going, a feeling of urgency. Not seeing Gerrith anywhere, he tucked away the small skull in the rags of his tunic. He was wondering what to do next when a man came up to him and said, "Jerann asks that you come with me."

"Jerann?"

The man indicated Graybeard. "The chief of our Council. I am to see that you have everything you need."

Stark thanked the man and followed him. They trudged along a corridor and up a winding stair to another corridor, thence into a chamber with narrow windows set in the thickness of the stone walls. A fire burned on the hearth. The chamber had a bed, a chest, a settle, all heavy and well-made. A rug of coarse wool adorned the floor. A curtained alcove contained a stone bath reached by three steps.

Serving men were waiting with pails of steaming water and rough towels. Gratefully Stark consigned himself to their care.

An hour later he was washed, shaved and dressed in a clean tunic. As he finished the last of a solid meal, the man came again and reported that Jerann required Stark's presence in the council hall.

Freed of his shackles, Jerann was tall, erect and soldierly. He still wore that look of fierce pride but he was under no illusions. He was certain that the revolt would bring quick reprisal.

"We are all fated men now," he said. "We can only face boldly what destiny brings us. For good or evil, the die is cast."

He gave Stark a hard, measuring look. All the members of the Council were gazing at him thus. Stark knew what they were thinking. Why an off-worlder? And what was there about him that had triggered this sudden stunning break from all history, all custom, all law? What had he bestowed on them, freedom and new life—or utter destruction?

Stark had no answers for them. The prophecy had held only that he would destroy the Lords Protector. It had not predicted the subsequent effects. Besides, he had little faith in prognostication . . .

"Eric John Stark, Earthman, tell us how you came to Skaith. And how you came to Irnan. And why."

Though knowing perfectly well

that Jerann had already heard the story Stark told it again, carefully and in detail. He told of Ashton, of Pax; he made a special point of how the matter of emigration stood with the Ministry of Planetary Affairs.

Jerann said, "Then it seems we must believe in Dark Men and prophecies, and go our way in blind hope."

"What about the other city-states?" asked Stark. "They must be in much the same straits as Irnan. Will they rise to help you?"

"I don't know. We'll do what we can to persuade them, naturally. My guess is that they will prefer to wait and see."

"Wait and see what?"

"If the prophecy is a true one." Jerann turned to an aide. "Have the Izvandian brought to me." As the man hurried away, Jerann said to Stark, "We must learn as soon as possible whether it is true or not."

There was a wait, an awkwardness. A vacuum of uneasy silence within the encompassing sounds of triumph from the streets outside. The Council members were tired and showing strain. The enormity of the commitment Irnan had made this day weighed on them heavily.

A knot of people came in, clustered around one tall lint-haired warrior. Stark noticed the gold ornaments on his harness, the torque and armbands. A chief, probably captain of the mercenaries. He was marched up the hall

to where the Council sat, and he stood facing Jerann without emotion.

Jerann said coldly, "Greetings, Kazimni."

The Izvandian said, "I see you, Jerann."

JERANN took up a heavy sack from the table. "This is the gold owed to you."

"To my dead as well? There are families."

"To your dead as well." He weighed the sack in his hand. "And there is in addition half as much again."

"If you wish to bribe us to leave Irnan," said Kazimni contemptuously, "keep your gold. We have no further business here."

Jerann shook his head. "No bribe. Payment for services."

Kazimni cocked one pale insolent eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Some of our people are going into the Barrens. A small party. We want you to escort them as far as Izvand."

Kazimni did not bother to ask why a party of Irnaneses were going into the Barrens. It was no concern of his.

"Very well," he said. "Give us time to bury our dead and make ready for the journey. We'll go when Old Sun rises." And he added, "With our arms."

"With your arms," said Jerann. He gave Kazimni the gold and spoke to the Irnaneses escort, "You

heard. Give them what they need of supplies."

"Better to give them the sword," muttered one of the Irnanese. But they took Kazimni away obediently enough.

Stark asked, "Why Izvand?"

"Because it is that much closer to the Citadel. And for that distance you will have the protection of an escort. From there you must make your own arrangements. I warn you—do not underestimate the dangers."

"Where exactly is this Citadel? Where is Worldheart?"

"I can tell you where tradition puts them. The fact you will learn for yourself."

"The Wandsmen know."

"Yes. But none are left alive in Irnan to tell us."

So that was no help. "Where is Gerrith?"

"She had returned to her own place."

"Is that safe? The countryside must be full of wandering Farers."

"She's well guarded," Jerann said. "You'll see her in the morning. Go now and rest. It's a long road you've come, and a longer one you'll be taking tomorrow."

All night, during the intervals of sleep, Stark could hear the restless voices of the city, where preparations were being made for war. The revolt was well begun. But it was only a beginning. He felt guilty for setting the peoples of an entire

planet at each other's throats just so two men, off-worlders at that, could escape from it. Still, there had been no help for it. Perhaps it would turn out for the best—at least from the standpoint of the Irnanese.

Well, he thought, that was for the future and it was Gerrith's job to look ahead, not his. He slept. In the dark morning he arose and dressed and was waiting patiently when the man came to summon him.

Jerann was below in the council hall. Halk was there too, and Breca, and two others of Yarrod's party.

"I am sorry," the old man said, "that Irnan cannot spare you the men you ought to have. We need them here."

Halk said, "We'll have to rely on being quick and hard to see. But with the Dark Man to lead us, how can we fail?"

Stark, who would just as soon have gone on alone, said nothing. Food was brought, and strong bitter beer. After they had breakfasted, Jerann rose and said,

"It is time. I'll ride with you as far as the wise woman's grotto."

The square was eerily quiet in the chill first light of dawn. Some of the bodies had been taken away. Others were piled stiffly, awaiting the carts. The tree-bark women were gone. Sentries manned the wall and the guard-towers by the gate.

The Izvandians, about sixty of them, were already mounted, men and animals alike blowing steam in the cold air. Beasts had been brought for Stark and his party. They mounted and fell in behind the troop. Kazimni rode by and gave them a curt greeting.

Old Sun came up. The gates creaked open. The cavalcade moved out.

The road, so crowded and noisy the day before, was deserted except for the occasional dead. Some of the Farers had not run fast enough. Morning mist rose thick and white from the fields. Stark breathed deeply, relishing the fresh clean smell of growing things.

He became aware that Jerann was watching him. "You're glad to leave the city. You don't like being within walls."

Stark laughed. "I didn't realize it was so apparent."

"I am not acquainted with Earthmen," said Jerann courteously. "Are they all like you?"

"They find me quite as strange as you do." Stark's eyes held a gleam of amusement. "Perhaps even stranger."

The old man nodded. "Gerrith said . . ."

"A wolf's head, a landless man, a man without a tribe." Stark lifted his head, looking northward. "Earthmen killed my parents. They would have killed me too, except for Ashton."

Jerann glanced at Stark's face

and shivered slightly. He did not speak again until, at the upper end of the valley, they reached the wise woman's grotto.

ONLY Stark and Jerann turned aside. The cavalcade went on, moving at a steady walking pace that covered a surprising amount of ground without tiring the animals. Stark slid off the soft woolly-haired hide of the saddle-pad and followed Jerann up a steep path, coming finally to a hillside where naked rock jutted, forming rough pillars on either side of a cave. A party of men on guard there rose from around their fire and spoke to Jerann. The wise woman was within, and safe.

Inside the cave was hewed an antechamber, where Stark supposed that folk must wait to hear the oracle. At the far end hung heavy curtains of some purple stuff that looked as though it had done duty for many Gerriths. These bore solemn designs embroidered in black. All in all, not a cheerful room. And cold, with the dusty tomb-smell of places shut away forever from the sun.

An old woman parted the curtains and signed to them to enter. She wore a sweeping gray gown and her face was all bony sternness. She looked at Stark as though she would tear him with her sharp gaze, rip away his flesh and see what was beneath it.

"My old mistress died because of you," she said. "I hope it was not for nothing."

"So do I," said Stark, and stepped past her into the inner room.

This was somewhat better. There were rugs and hangings to soften the stone, pierced lamps for light and a brazier for warmth. But it was still a cave. Gerrith looked out of place in it with her youth and her golden coloring. She was made for sunlight.

She sat in a massive chair behind a massive table. A wide and shallow bowl of silver stood on the table, filled with clear water.

"The Water of Vision," she said, and shook her head. "It has given me nothing." There were shadows around her eyes and her face was drawn. "I never had my mother's gift. I never wanted it, though she assured me it would come in its own time whether I wanted it or not. My own gift is small and not to be commanded at will. It's worse than having none at all. Always before, at least, I was able to use the Crown, and I think something of my mother and all the other Gerriths down through the centuries lived on in it and could speak through it. Now there is no Crown and, as Mordach said, no wise woman in Irnan."

Stark reached beneath his tunic. "Maybe this will help you."

He opened his palm. The little yellow skull grinned up at her.

Her face changed. "It is enough," she cried.

He handed the skull to her. She leaned over the bowl, holding the gruesome talisman between her hands. The water rippled as though in a sudden wind and then was still.

Stark and Jerann waited. And it seemed to Stark that the clear water turned red and thick, and that shapes moved in it, shapes that raised goose-pimples on his skin.

Gerrith was startled. "You saw?"

"Something." The water was clear again. "What were they?"

"I don't know, but they stand between you and the Citadel." She stood up. "I must go with you."

Jerann had been standing in the chamber, observing. He said, "But Lady! You can't leave Irnan now . . ."

"My work in Irnan is finished. Now the Water of Vision has shown me where my path lies."

"Has it shown what the end of that path will be?"

"No. You must find your own strength and your own faith, Jerann." She smiled at him with genuine affection. "You've never lacked for either. Go back to your people." She turned suddenly and laughed at Stark. "Not so down-cast, Dark Man. I'll not burden you with bowls and braziers and tripods. Only this." She placed the small skull in a pouch at her girdle. "Know that I can ride and shoot as well as any." She called to the old woman and disappeared through

the hangings into some inner chamber.

Jerann looked at Stark. There seemed nothing to say. They nodded to each other and Jerann left. Stark waited, scowling at the placid water in the silver bowl and cursing wise women. Whatever it was he had glimpsed there he would as soon not have seen until met life-size.

In a short time Gerrith returned, wearing tunic and riding cloak. She and Stark walked together out of the cave and down the steep path. The old woman stood in the cave entrance and watched them with eyes like cold-steel daggers. Stark was glad when the trees hid them from her sight. At the foot of the path a gnarled old man had brought Gerrith's mount, with a sack of provisions tied to the saddle pad. She thanked him and bade him goodbye, and the two rode off.

They caught up to the party around noon, Old Sun throwing brassy shadows under the rusty bellies of the beasts. Halk shrugged upon seeing Gerrith.

"We shall have all the bogies on our side now," he said, and his mouth twisted in what might pass for a smile. "At least we learn one thing. The wise woman has enough faith in her mother's prophecy to put herself at risk."

THEY moved steadily toward the Barrens, at night checking their course by the Lamp of the North.

At first the road ran among mountains. There were peel-towers on the ridges, falling down, and ruins of fortified villages that stuck to the cliffs like wasps' nests. But the mountains were still inhabited. For three days a band of shaggy people followed them, going along their own secret trails parallel to the road. They carried crude weapons and ran with a curious loping stride, bent forward from the waist.

"One of the Wild Bands," Gerrith said. "They obey no law at all except that of blind survival. They even come as far as Irnan sometimes. The Wandsmen hate them because they kill Wandsmen and Farers as readily as they kill us."

The Izvandian escort was too strong to be attacked, and there were no stragglers. At night, beyond the meager fires, Stark could hear stealthy rustlings. Several times the Izvandian sentries loosed arrows at things creeping toward the picket lines. They killed one of the intruders and Stark looked at the body in the light of morning. His nose wrinkled. "Why do they want to survive?" he wondered aloud.

They left the heap of bones unburied on the stony ground.

The mountains dwindled to hills covered with dark, stunted scrub. Beyond, to the north, the land flattened out to the horizon, a treeless immensity of white and gray-green, a spongy mossiness flecked

by countless icy ponds. The wind blew, sometimes hard, sometimes harder. Old Sun grew more feeble by the day. The Irnanese were stoical, riding the cold hours uncomplaining, wrapped in frosty cloaks. The Izvandians were comfortable and gay. This was their own, their native land.

Stark rode often beside Kazimni.

"In the days when Old Sun was young," Kazimni would say, and spin out one of the thousand or so legends he seemed to have at his fingertips, all telling of warmth and richness and the fatness of the land. The men of those days had been giants, the women beautiful and willing beyond belief. Warriors had had magic weapons that killed from afar, fishermen had worked magic boats that sailed the skies. "Now it is as you see it," he would finish. "But we survive. We are strong. We are happy."

"Good," said Stark on one occasion. "I congratulate you. And where is this place they call World-heart?"

Kazimni shrugged. "North." *

"That's all you know?"

"Yes. If it exists at all."

"You sound as though you don't believe in the Lords Protector."

Kazimni's wolf face expressed aristocratic scorn. "We do not require them. It makes little difference whether we believe in them or not."

"Yet you sell your swords to the Wandsmen."

"Gold is gold, and the Wandsmen have more of it than most. We do not have to like them or follow their religion. We're free men. All the people of the Barrens are free. Not all of us are good. Some do business with the Wandsmen, some do not. Some trade with the city-states, some trade with each other, some do not trade at all but live by rapine. Some are mad. Quite mad. But free. There are no Farers here, and we can defend ourselves. The Wandsmen have found poor pickings among us. They let us alone."

"I see," said Stark, and rode for a time in silence. "Strange creatures live in a place by World-heart," he said at last. "Creatures not human, and yet—not quite animal."

Kazimni gave him a sidelong glance out of tilted yellow eyes. "How do you know that?"

"Maybe the wind whispered it to me."

"Or perhaps the wise woman."

"What are they, Kazimni?"

"We're great talkers here in the Barrens. Great tellers of tales. We fill the winter nights with talk. When our throats go dry with it we wet them with cups of *khamm* and talk more."

"What are they?"

"The Harsenyi nomads bring us tales, and so do the darkland traders. Sometimes they winter with us at Izvand, and those are good winters." He paused. "I have heard stories of Northhounds."

Stark repeated the name. "Northhounds?" It had a threatening ring to it.

"I can't tell you if the stories are true. Men lie without meaning to. They tell, as though they had been part of it, a thing that happened to someone they never knew and only heard of by sixth remove. Northhounds are a sort of demon to the Harsenyi and to some of the traders. Monsters that appear out of the snow-mist and do terrible things. It is said that the Lords Protector created them long ago to guard the Citadel. It is said these demons still guard it, and woe take any wanderer who stumbles into their domain."

Hairs prickled briefly at the back of Stark's neck, just at the memory of those shapes he had seen in the Water of Vision. He changed the subject. "So freedom is what makes your people content with life here in the Barrens—is that it?"

"Is it not enough?" Kazimni jerked his chin contemptuously toward the Irnanese. "If we lived soft, as they do, we too would be slaves, as they are."

Stark could understand that. "You must have known what brought on the trouble at Irnan."

"Yes. Good trouble. As soon as we've rested and seen our wives, we'll be back on the Border. There will be need of fighting men."

"No doubt. But how would your people feel about emigrating?"

"To another world?" Kazimni

shook his head. "The land shapes us. We are what we are because of it. If we were in another place, we would be another people. No. Old Sun will last us yet a while. And life in the Barrens is not so bad. You will see that when we reach Izvand."

THE road looped and wound among the frozen ponds. Other travelers were encountered though not as many as in the Fertile Belt. And they were of a different breed, darker and grimmer than the flotsam of the southern roads. There was a good deal of trade back and forth across the Border: drovers with herds for the markets of Izvand and Komrey, merchants with wagonloads of grain and wool, strings of pack-animals carrying manufactured goods from the southern workshops, long lines of great creaking wains hauling timber from some far place in the mountains. Coming the other way were caravans bringing furs and salt and dried fish. All traveled in bodies, well armed, each lot keeping to itself. There were inns and rest-houses along the way but Kazimni avoided them, preferring to camp in the open. "Thieves and robbers," he said of the innkeepers. And of the accommodations. "They are verminous. They stink."

The Izvandians moved rapidly, passing everything else on the road. Yet Stark sometimes felt as if their progress were only an illusion and

they were trapped forever in the unchanging landscape.

Gerrith sensed his impatience. "I share it," she told him. "For you, one man. For me, a people. Yet things must go at their own pace."

"Does your gift tell you that?"

She smiled at him. It was night. The Three Ladies shone through gaps in scudding cloud-wrack; they were in an unfamiliar quarter of the sky now, but still beautiful. Old friends. Stark had grown quite fond of them. Nearer at hand, the light of a fire flared and flickered across Gerrith's face.

"Something does tell me. Everything is in train now, and the end has already been written. We have only to meet it."

Stark grunted, unconvinced. The beasts, huddled together with their tails to the wind, munched at heaps of moss piled up for them. The Izvandians laughed and chattered round their fires. The Irnanese were wrapped bundles, suffering in silence.

Gerrith said, "Why do you love this man Ashton so deeply?"

"But you know that. He saved my life."

"And so you cross the stars to risk losing it on a world you never heard of before? To go through all this when you know that he may already be dead? It's not enough, Stark. Will you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"Who you are. What you are. A lesser gift even than mine could

sense that you're different. Inside, I mean. There's a stillness, something I can't touch. Tell me about you and Ashton."

So he told her of his childhood on a cruel planet far too close to its sun, where the heat killed by day and the frost by night. Where the sky thundered and the rocks split. Where the ground shook and mountains collapsed.

"I was born there. We were part of a mining colony. A quake and a great fall of rock killed everyone but me. I'd have died too, but the People took me in. They were the aborigines. They weren't human, not quite. They still had their hairy pelts, and they didn't talk much, a few clicks and grunts, cries for hunting and warning and calling-together. They shared all they had with me."

Heat and cold and hunger. Those were the most of it. But their hairy bodies had warmed his small nakedness in the bitter night, and their hard hands had fed him. The People had taught him love and patience, taught how to hunt the great rock-lizard, how to suffer, how to survive. He remembered their faces: wrinkled, snouted, toothed. Beautiful faces to him, beautiful and wise with the wisdom of beginnings. His people. Always his people, his only people. And yet they had named him Man-Without-a-Tribe.

"More Earthmen came, in time," Stark said. "They needed the food

and water the People were using, so they killed them. The People were considered only animals. Me they put in a cage and kept for a curiosity. They poked sticks between the bars to make me snap and snarl at them. They were going to kill me too, when the novelty wore off. Then Ashton came."

Ashton the administrator, armed with the lightnings of authority. Stark smiled wryly.

"To me he was just another flat-faced enemy, someone to be hated and killed. I'd lost all my human links, of course, and the humans I'd met had given me little cause to love them. Ashton took me in charge, all the same. I couldn't have been a very pleasant charge, but he had the patience of mountains. He tamed me. He taught me house manners, and how to speak in words. Most of all he taught me that while there are bad men, there are also good ones. Yes, he did give me much more than just my life."

"I understand now," Gerrith said. She stirred the fire. "I'm sorry I can't tell you whether your friend is still alive."

"We'll know soon enough," Stark said.

He lay down on the cold ground and slept. And dreamed.

He was following Old One up a cliff, angry because his feet did not have long clever toes, fiercely determined to make up for his deformity by climbing twice as hard and twice as high. The sun burned terribly on

his naked back. The rock scorched him. Black peaks pierced the sky on all sides.

Old One slid without sound into a crevice, making the imperative sign. The boy N'Chaka crept in beside him. Old One pointed with his throwing-stick. High above them on a ledge, its huge jaws open in sensuous languor, a rock-lizard slept half-lidded in the sun.

With infinite care, moving one muscle at a time, his belly tight with emptiness and hope, the boy began again to follow Old One up the cliff . . .

Stark did not like the dream. It saddened him even in sleep, so he started awake in order to escape it. He sat a long time by the dying fire, listening to the lonely sounds of the night. When he slept again it was without memories.

Next day, in the afternoon, the party saw the roofs of a stockaded town by the shore of a frozen sea. With pride and affection, Kazimni called, "There's Izvand."

VII

It was a sturdy town, solidly built of timber brought from the mountains. Its roofs were steep to shed the snow. Izvand was the trade center for this part of the Inner Barrens so that there was a constant coming and going of wagons and pack trains. Traffic churned the narrow streets by day and at night the mud froze into

ankle-breaking solidity. In the summer, Kazimni said, fishing was the business of many Izvandians. As soon as the ice went out of the harbor the high-prowed boats would be hauled from their winter sheds.

"Not a bad life," he said. "Plenty of food and fighting. Why not stay here with us, Stark?" The off-worlder shook his head. Kazimni shrugged. "Very well. This is the season for the darkland traders to start moving north. I'll see if I can arrange something. Meantime, I know a good inn."

The inn had a creaking sign, much weathered, depicting some large and improbable fish with horns. There were stabling and fodder for the beasts, and rooms for the people. These were small and cold, each sleeping four in two beds, and they had lacked soap and water for a long time. The common-room steamed with warmth and sweat and the not-unappetizing odor of fish soup. It was good to be warm again, to eat hot food and drink local *khamm*, which was like sweet white lightning. Stark enjoyed these simple pleasures but after a while he rose from the table.

Halk said, "Where are you going?"

"I have a mind to see the town."

"Don't you think we had better be planning what we're going to do next?" Halk had drunk quite a bit of *khamm*.

"A little more information might

help us decide," said Stark mildly. "In any case, we'll need warmer clothing and more provisions."

Without noticeable enthusiasm, the Irnaneses contingent rose and fetched their cloaks and followed him into the chilly street.

Halk. Breca, who was Halk's shieldmate. Gerrith. Atril and Wake, the brothers, two of Yarrod's picked men. Stark could not have asked for better. Yet the six were a small handful against the north. Of what help could they be now? Not for the first time Stark considered slipping away from them to finish his journey alone and unencumbered.

He was surprised to hear Gerrith say softly, "No. Me at least you must have with you. Perhaps the others as well—I don't know. But if you go alone, you will fail."

"Your gift?" asked Stark, and she nodded.

"My gift. On that score it is quite clear."

They wandered through a market roofed against snow. Smoky lamps and braziers burned. Merchants sat amid their wares, and Stark noticed that few were of Izvand. The pale-haired warriors apparently scorned such occupation.

The market was busy. The party from Irnan meandered with the crowd, buying furs and boots and sacks of the sweet fatty journey-cake they make in Izvand against the cold. After a while Stark found what he was looking for, the street

of the chart-makers.

It was a small street, lined with alcoves in which men sat hunched over their drawing tables, surrounded on three sides by honeycomb shelves stuffed with rolls of parchment. Stark strolled from shop to shop, accumulating an armload of maps.

The group returned to the inn. Stark found a relatively quiet table in a corner of the common room and spread out his purchases.

The maps were for the use of traders and in essentials agreed well enough. The roads, with inns and shelter-houses marked. Modern towns like Izvand, pegs to hold the roads together where they crossed. Vestiges, here and there, of older roads leading to older cities, and most of these marked ominously with death's heads. On other matters the maps were vaguer. Several showed Worldheart, hedged about with many warnings, but each located the fabled city in a different place. Others did not show it all, merely indicating a huge area of nothing, an area marked by the comforting legend: DEMONS.

"Somewhere in here," said Stark, setting his hand over the blank area. "If we keep going north, sooner or later we'll find someone who knows."

"So the maps don't help much," said Halk.

"You haven't looked closely," Gerrith said. "They all show one thing—that we must travel by

road." Her fingers flicked across the wrinkled parchment. "Here we are blocked by the sea, and here by a mountain wall. Here again, where the land is low, are lakes and bogs."

"All frozen now," Halk said.

"Impassable even so. The beasts would be dead or crippled and we starving before a week's end. So we must stick to the road. A road can be watched, guarded. Journeying so can be dangerous. But we have no choice."

"Besides," said Wake, who always spoke for the brothers, "there is the matter of time. Irnan may already be under attack. Even if we could make it by another route, it would take too long."

Halk looked around the table. "You're all agreed?" They were. Halk tossed back another glass of *khamm*. "Fine. Let us go by the road, and go fast."

"There is another question," Stark said. "Whether to travel alone or join some trader. A trader's company would be safer . . ."

"If you could trust the trader."

". . . but we would be held to the wagon pace."

"We didn't come this journey to be safe," said Halk.

"For once, I agree with you," Stark said. "By the road, then, and by ourselves." The others voiced assent. Stark bent over the maps again. "I'd give much to know where the Wandsmen's road runs."

"You won't find it on these maps," said Gerrith. "They must go up from Skeg to the east, across the desert. There would be post-houses and wells, everything to get them quickly on their way."

"And safeguards, doubtless, to make sure that no one can follow them." Stark began rolling up the parchments. "We'll leave at the fourth hour. Best get some sleep."

"Not yet a few moments," said Breca, and nodded toward the inn door.

Kazimni had just entered, in company with a lean brown man in a furred cloak who moved with the agile questing gait of a wolverine.

"I'll talk," said Stark quietly. "No comment, no matter what I say."

Kazimni hailed them with great cheer. "Greetings, friends. Here is one you will be glad to meet." He introduced his companion. "Amnir of Komrey." The man in the furred cloak bowed. His eyes, gleaming like brown beryls, darted from one face to another. His mouth smiled. "Amnir trades far into the darklands. He thinks he can be of help to you."

Stark invited the pair to sit and introduced his party. The merchant ordered a round of *khamm* for all.

"Kazimni tells me that you have an errand northward," he said. He glanced at the heap of parchments on the table. "I see you have bought maps."

"Yes."

"You were, perhaps, thinking of going on alone?"

"Hazardous, we know," said Stark. "But our mission is urgent."

"Better to make haste slowly than not at all," said Amnir sententiously. "There are wicked men in the Barrens. You can't know how wicked. Six of you—though all stout fighters, I'm sure—would be as nothing against those you will meet along the road."

"What would they want with us?" Stark asked. "We have nothing worth the stealing."

"You have yourselves," said Amnir. "Your bodies. Your strength." He bowed to the ladies. "Your beauty. Men and women are sold in the Barrens, for many purposes."

Halk said, "I think anyone who tried that would find us a poor bargain."

"No doubt. But why take the risk? If you're captured, or killed resisting capture, where is your errand then?" He leaned forward over the table. Sincerity shone on his face. "I trade farther into the darklands than anyone because I am able to face the dangers there not only with courage, which many others have as well, but with prudence, which many others seem to lack. I travel with fifty well-armed men. Why not share that safety?"

Stark frowned, as though pondering. Halk seemed on the point of saying something but Breca silenced him with a warning glare.

"All he tells you is true," Kazimni said. "By Old Sun, I swear it."

"The time, though," Stark shook his head. "Alone, we can move much faster."

"For a while," Amnir agreed. "And then . . ." He made a chopping gesture with the edge of his hand against his neck. "Besides, I'm no laggard—I can't afford to be."

"When do you leave?"

"In the morning, before first light."

Again Stark seemed to ponder. "What price would you want?"

"No price. You'd find your own food and mounts, of course, and if we should be attacked you'd be expected to fight. That's all."

"What could be fairer?" asked Kazimni. "And look you, if the pace proves to be too slow, you can always leave the wagons behind. Is that not so, Amnir?"

Amnir laughed. "I'd not be the one to stop them."

Stark looked across at Gerrith. "What does the wise woman say?"

"That we should do what the Dark Man thinks best."

"Well," said Stark, "if it's true that we can go our own way if we choose to later on . . ."

"Of course. Of course!"

"Then I think we ought to go with Amnir in the morning."

They struck hands on it. They drank more *khamm*. They arranged final details and the two men left. Stark gathered his maps, led

his party upstairs. They crowded into one of the small rooms.

"Now what does the wise woman say?" asked Stark.

"That Amnir of Komrey means us no good."

"It needs no wise woman to see that," said Halk. "The man smells of treachery. Yet the Dark Man has agreed to go with him."

"The Dark Man is not above telling lies when he thinks they're called for." Stark looked around at them. "We'll not wait for the fourth hour. As soon as the inn is quiet, we go. You can do your sleeping in the saddle."

In the star-blazing midnight they rode out of Izvand. The cold ribbon of road stretched north toward the darklands. They had it all to themselves and made the most of it. Halk seemed consumed with a passion for haste, and Stark was in no mood to dispute him. He, too, wanted to leave Amnir as far behind as possible.

The land had begun its long slope upward to the ice-locked ranges of the north, and from the higher places Stark could keep a watchful eye on the backtrail. He could also sniff the wind and listen to the silence, and feel the vast secret land that encircled him.

It was not a good land. The primitive in him sensed evil there like a sickness. It wanted to turn tail and go shivering and howling back to the smoky warmth of Izvand and the safety of walls. The

reasoning man in him agreed, but kept him moving forward nevertheless.

Clouds hid the Three Ladies. Snow began falling. Stark disliked the inability to see clearly; anything might come upon them out of those pale drifting clouds. The party rode more slowly, keeping close together.

They came upon an inn crouched over a crossroads. It had a tall roof like a wizard's hat, and one slitted yellow eye. Stark considered stopping there, instantly decided against it. By common consent they left the road and made a wide circle round the inn, walking the beasts carefully so as to make no sound.

Daylight was slow in coming. When Old Sun did show himself at last it was only as a smear of ginger-colored light behind a blur of snowflakes.

It was in that strange brassy glow that they came to the bridge.

THE bridge, the rocky gorge it spanned, and the village that existed solely to administer to and exhort for the bridge, were clearly marked on all the maps. There was apparently no way around that did not take at least a week of days, even without snow, and the toll seemed reasonable enough. Stark loosened his sword in its scabbard and dug some coins from the leather bag that hung about his neck underneath the bulky furs. The Irnanese checked their own weapons.

In close order all trotted themselves and their pack animals toward the toll-house, a squat blocky structure commanding the southern end of the bridge. An identical structure stood at the northern end. Each building contained a winch that raised or lowered a portion of the bridge floor, so that no one could force a way through without paying. You might take one toll-house but never both, and a part of the bridge would always be unreachably open. The drop below was unpleasant, several hundred feet down past jagged boulders rimmed with snow and frozen spray to a vicious little river that drained some glacier-slope higher up. The village was built on the southern side, against the face of a low cliff, and strongly fortified. Stark guessed that the convenience of the bridge outweighed the nuisance factor and so generations of merchants had let it survive.

Three men came out of the building. Short broad men, ugly and troll-like, wearing many furs and obviously false smiles.

"How much?" asked Stark.

"For how large a party?" Small eyes probed the snowfall behind them. "How many beasts? How many wagons? The bridge floor suffers. Lumber is costly. Planks must be replaced. This is heavy labor, and our children starve to pay for the wood."

"No wagons," said Stark. "A dozen beasts. What you see."

Three faces stared in disbelief. "Six persons traveling alone?"

Again Stark asked, "How much?"

"Ah. Um," said the chief of the three men, suddenly animated. "For so small a party, a small price." He named it. Stark leaned down and counted coins into the grimy palm. It did seem, indeed, too small a price. The men departed chattering into the toll-house. They had some way of signaling to the other side of the gorge, and presently both sections of the bridge went creaking down into position.

Stark and the Irnanese rode onto the bridge.

Before they could reach the northern section of the bridge it shot upward again, leaving a large cold gap opening on death.

"All right then," said Stark wearily, "we fight."

They turned, with the intention of bolting back off the bridge. A flight of arrows tore from slits in the toll-house wall and thumped into the planking in front of them.

"Stand where you are!" a voice shouted. "Lay down your weapons."

A whole band of trolls, furred and armed, came waddling from the village. Stark looked at the nasty little slits in the wall, saw more arrows protruding at the ready. "I think we're fairly caught," he said. "Shall we live a little longer, or die now?"

"Live," advised Gerrith.

They dropped weapons and stood where they were. The villagers swarmed onto the bridge, dragged the travelers out of the saddle, pushing, pummeling, laughing raucously. The beasts were led off and tethered to a rack by the toll-house. The bridgekeeper and his friends came out.

"Six persons traveling alone!" The bridgekeeper guffawed, and lifted his hands to the brassy glow in the south. "Old Sun, we thank you for sending such fools." He turned and pawed at Stark's garments, searching for the purse.

Stark resisted a strong impulse to tear the man's throat out with his teeth. Halk, who was being similarly handled, got his hands free and fought. He was immediately clubbed down.

"Don't damage him," said the bridgekeeper. "All that muscle is worth its weight in iron." He found the purse and slashed the thong that held it, then prodded at Stark's chest with his dirty fingers. "This one, too . . . all strong big men, the four of them. Good, good! And the women . . ." He cackled, skipping on his thick feet. "Maybe we'll keep them here for a while, eh? Until we're tired, eh? Look at them, lads, and their fine long legs . . ."

Gerrith said, "I was wrong. It would have been better to die."

And Stark answered, "Listen."

Faint sounds. In the distance.

They swept nearer and now everybody heard. Rush of hoofbeats, jingle of harness, clash of arms. Riders materialized out of the falling snow. They came in strength; they came like the wind, their lances sharp and Amnir of Komrey at their head.

The villagers turned and ran.

"Stand! cried Amnir, and the riders herded them back, jabbing them painfully so that they hopped and screamed. The bridgekeeper gaped, Stark's purse still in his hand.

"You have broken the covenant," Amnir accused. "The covenant by which we let you live. It is contracted that once a man has paid fair toll, he shall pass without let or hindrance."

"But," said the bridgekeeper, "six persons alone . . . such fools are doomed in any case. Could I spurn the gift of Old Sun?"

Amnir's hard eyes looked down upon him. Amnir's lance-tip pricked his throat. "That which is in your hand. Does it belong to you?" The man shook his head. He let the purse drop with a small heavy clink at his feet.

"What shall I do," asked Amnir, "with you and your people?"

"Lord," said the bridgekeeper, "I'm a poor man. My back is broken from the labor of the bridge. My children starve."

"Your children," said Amnir, "are as fat as hogs and twice as dirty. As for your back, it's fit

enough for thieving."

The bridgekeeper spread his hands. "Lord, I saw a chance for profit and I took it. Any man would do the same. You can slay us, of course, but then who will do our work? Think of the time it will cost you. Think of the wealth you will lose." He shuddered. "Think of the Gray Feeders. Perhaps even you, Lord, might make your end upon their hooks."

"It does not become you, at this time, to threaten me," said Amnir, and thrust a little harder with his lance. Two large tears formed and rolled down the bridgekeeper's cheeks. "Lord, I am in your hands," he said, and wilted inside his furs.

"If I spare you, will you keep the covenant?"

"Forever!"

"Which means until the next time you think you can safely break it." Amnir turned in the saddle and shouted. "Back to your sties, filthy ones. Go!"

The villagers fled. The bridgekeeper wept and tried to embrace Amnir's off-side knee.

"Free passage, lord! For you, no toll."

"I'm touched," said Amnir. "And pray remove your dirty paws." The bridgekeeper scuttled, bowing himself backward into the tollhouse. Amnir dismounted, walked over to Stark and his party. Halk, bloodied and furious, had been helped to his feet.

"I warned you," said Amnir. "Did I not warn you?"

"You did." Stark looked past him at the riders, seeing how they had moved quietly to form a half-circle of lances that pinned the unarmed Irnanese against the end of the open bridge. "You must have ridden hard to overtake us."

"Quite hard. You should have waited, Stark. You should have traveled with my wagons. What was the matter? Didn't you trust me?"

Stark said, "I trust men little."

"You are wise," said Amnir, and smiled. He motioned to his men. "Take them."

THE Three Ladies were remote, withdrawn, scarcely showing their faces. The Lamp of the North, like a burning emerald, dominated the sky. The short days of the darklands were little lighter than the nights. Old Sun's dull gleaming stained the sky rather than brightened it. The white snow turned the color of rust, and the vast plain, strewn with the wrecks of abandoned cities, tilted upward to a distant wall of mountains all daubed in the same red-ochre. The line of great wagons creaked and crawled across this unreal landscape, sixteen of them, canvas tops booming in the wind. From long before sunrise until long after dark the wagons rolled. When they halted they were deployed in a circular fort, the beasts and the people within.

Stark and the Irnanese rode their own mounts and were fed from the rations they had bought at Izvand. Amnir was delighted that transporting them was costing him nothing. Each mount was led by an armed rider. The captives had their fur-gloved hands bound and their fur-booted ankles tied together by a thong extending under the animal's belly. The bonds were arranged expertly to hold without impeding circulation so that the extremities should not freeze.

Uncomfortable as this was it was an improvement over the first days when Amnir had kept them inside the wagons, away from curious eyes. There were other parties of armed merchants on the roads, and Amnir had business at two or three centers were itinerant traders like the Harsenyi nomads brought their wares. These places were like blockhouses with crude shelters around them where travelers might find some respite from snow and wind. Amnir stayed away from the shelters. He seemed to have no friends among the darkland traders. His men did not mingle with the men of other wagon trains but remained aloof and perpetually on guard.

At the last of the centers there had been an altercation with some wild-looking nomads bringing in a string of shaggy beasts loaded with bundles. These people had called Amnir unpleasant names in a barbarous dialect. They had thrown

stones and clots of ice. Amnir's men had stood ready but no actual attack had developed and the wild ones had withdrawn once they had worked off their bad tempers.

Amnir had not been disturbed. "I've taken away much of their trade," he had said. "It was necessary to kill some of them. Let them gabble at me, if it gives them pleasure."

After that the caravan had left the marked roads, had gone off into this enormous emptiness. The wagons followed a dim and ancient track only apparent when it went through some cut or over a causeway that showed an engineering skill long lost on Skaith.

"Once, when Old Sun was young, all this land was rich and there were great cities," said Amnir. "This road served them. Men didn't ride beasts in those days or drive clumsy wagons. They had machines, bright shining things swift as the wind. Or if they wanted to they could take wing and rush through the sky like shooting stars. Now we plod, as you see, across the cold corpse of our world."

But there was a note of pride in his voice. *We are men, still, we survive, we are not defeated.*

"For what purpose," asked Stark, "do we plod?"

Amnir had refused to state what he intended doing with the captives. It was obvious from his pleased expression when he looked at them that he had large plans. Whatever

they might be, no doubt Kazimni had had a part in making them and would share in the profits. Stark cursed himself for having been so careless. Kazimni had performed his agreed-on task honorably, getting the party safely to Izvand. Stark had neglected contracting with the man to get them safely out again.

Knowing perfectly well what Stark was fishing for, Amnir smiled and evaded.

"Trade," he said. "Wealth. I told you that I trade farther into the darklands than others, and this is the way of it. Metal ingots kept appearing in the market-places of Kormrey and Izvand, ingots unlike any I had seen before. Ingots of a superior quality, stamped with a hammer mark. My greed is acute. I traced those ingots, back through a long and complicated chain of trade carried on by wild wanderers. Men died in that tracing, but I found the source."

He was riding beside Stark, as he often did, whiling away the long cold hours with talk.

"The people of the ingots love me. They look upon me as their benefactor. Formerly they were at the mercy of many vicissitudes—accident, loss, theft, stupidity, the haphazards of going through many hands. Now that I give them direct and honest trade, they have become so rich and fat that they no longer have to eat each other. Of course, because of this, their population is

growing. One day some of them will have to leave Thyra and find another city."

"Thyra," said Stark. "A city. One of those marked with a death's head?"

"Yes," said Amnir. He smiled.

"But they no longer have to eat each other?"

"No," said Amnir, and smiled the wider. "Pray that we reach it, Earthman. There is worse between." And he added fiercely, "No great profit is made without risk."

Stark kept a watchful eye on the landscape. As they traveled farther he was sure that he saw, in the rusty gloom, pale things slipping furtively behind hillocks and into ravines. They were distant. They were silent. Perhaps they were only shadows. In this light, vision became confused. In the moonless mornings and afternoons, one could be sure of nothing. Still, he watched.

During those moonless hours the stars shone clearly, their light unquenched by the ginger sun. Amnir would now and again stare up at them as though for the first time in his life he was thinking of them as suns with families of planets, other worlds characterized by other people and other ways. He seemed not entirely happy with the thought, and he blamed Stark for having brought it home to him.

"Skeg is a long way from the Barrens. Here we had heard about

the ships and the strangers but paid little attention. Indeed we never quite believed. It was too large a thought, too strange. We had enough to think about without that. Eating. Drinking. Begetting children. I have six sons, did you know that? And daughters as well. I have wives. I have family matters. I have property. Many depend on me for livelihood. I have matters of trade to consider, to judge and act upon. These things take up my days, my years, my life. They are quite sufficient."

"Are they?" Stark shifted in the saddle. "Are there no higher aspirations?"

"Like the Izvandians, we of Komrey are descended from folk who came from the high north, who did not wish to go farther south than was necessary to sustain our way of life. We remained in the Barrens by choice. We consider the people of the city-states, like the Iranianese, to be weak, corrupt." He glared at the stars as though hating them. "One is born on a world. It may not be perfect, but it's the world one knows, the only world. One adjusts, one survives. Then suddenly it appears that there is no need for such struggle—because one can emigrate to an easier world. It's confusing. It shakes the tenor of existence, undermines the adaptations we have evolved. Why do we need it?"

"It isn't a question of need," said Stark. "Other and better worlds

are available, and that's a fact."

"But it makes our struggles so pointless! Take the Thyrans. I've heard their ballads. *The Long Wandering, Destruction of the Red Hunters, The Coming of Strayer*—he's the folk-hero supposed to have taught them how to work metal, though I suspect that there were many Strayers—*The Conquest of the Mountain*, and so on. The long dark years, the courage, the dying and the pain, and finally the triumph. And now we see that such sagas, such noble feats and fortitudes, may never recur. Peoples may be able to run off to some lush planet and avoid all that." Amnir shook his head. "I don't like it. I believe in a man staying by what he knows."

Stark refused to argue this. But sometimes, while riding, Amnir's curiosity would get the best of him. He would ask how it was on other worlds, how the people ate and dressed and traded and made love, and if they really were human. Stark took a wicked pleasure in answering, unstitching Amnir's self-assurance, opening up the wide heavens to show him wonders and satisfactions that astounded him.

Amnir had a way of setting his jaw. "I don't care," he once declared stubbornly. "I am myself. I've fought my fight and made my place. I ask for nothing better."

Stark played the tempter. "But it makes you dissatisfied, doesn't it? You're a greedy man. Can you see

the great ships coming and going between the suns, bearing cargoes you don't even have a name for, each worth more in money than your entire Barrens? You could have such a ship of your own, Amnir, just for the asking."

"If I set you free, you mean. If you succeed in your mission. If, if. The odds are too long. Besides—I am greedy, yes, but of some wisdom nonetheless. I know my small horizon. It fits me. The stars do not."

As a matter of policy, Amnir kept his captives apart. That made mischief more unlikely; he knew that escape was always on their minds. Stark could see the others, hooded and wrapped in furs like himself, riding their led beasts. But he had no chance to talk to them. He wondered what Gerrith would be thinking now about the prophecy.

Halk made one desperate, ill-considered attempt to break away and after that was confined to one of the wagons. At night all were so confined. Stark was tied to the wagon frame in such a way that he could not bring his hands together or get at the tough thongs with his teeth. Each time they bound him he tested the thongs to see if his captors had grown careless. When he found they had not, he lay on the bales of goods that formed his bed and slept. His iron patience gave him a certain serenity. He had not forgotten Ashton. He had not

forgotten anything. He was simply waiting. And each day brought him closer to the destination he sought.

Repeatedly he inquired of Amnir about the Citadel.

Amnir said, "All of you have asked me the same question. I give you all the same answer. Ask the Thyrans."

He smiled. Stark was getting bored with his everlasting smiles.

"How long have you been trading this far north?"

"If I complete it, this will be my seventh journey."

"Do you feel there's a chance you may not complete it?"

"On Skaith," said Amnir, for once not smiling, "there is always that chance."

THE ruins became more extensive. In places they were no more than shapeless hummocks of ice and snow. In others there were stumps of towers still standing, and great mazes of walls and pits. Several sorts of creatures laired in the hollow places. They seemed to live by hunting each other. The more aggressive ones came howling and prowling around the wagons at night to put the beasts of burden in an uproar.

Twice the wagons were attacked in force. It seemed that the squat ferocious shapes emerged from the ground itself, rushing forward in the rusty twilight, hurling themselves at anything that lived, all teeth and talons and wild harsh

screamings. They impaled themselves on lances, spitted themselves on swords, and their fellows tore them to bits and devoured them while still they screamed. The armed men drove them off, but in each case not before some of the beasts had been pulled down in harness by swarming bodies and reduced to stripped bones in a matter of minutes. The creatures did not stop eating even long enough to die. The worst thing about it to Stark was that the overpowering stench of them was undeniably human. They sweated the sweat of man.

As they passed through a sector of particularly unappealing ruins, the shadows that slipped and slid along the edges of vision seemed to be keeping pace with the caravan. This they continued to do, Stark saw, for some miles.

It was obvious that Amnir had been aware of them, too, and that he was worried.

"You know who they are?"

"They call themselves the People of the Towers. The Thyrans say they're great magicians. The Gray Maggots, they call the tribe, and will have nothing to do with it. I've always paid them a generous tribute for passage through their city, and we've had no trouble. But they've never done this before, this spying and following of us. I don't understand it."

"How soon do we reach their city?"

"Tomorrow," said Amnir, and his hand tightened on his sword hilt.

In the dark morning-time, under the green star, they crossed a river of ice, threading the piers of a vanished bridge. On the other side a cluster of towers reared against the sky, jagged and broken in outline. They were silent except for the whistle of wind through chinks and crannies. But they showed lights.

The road ran straight to the towers. Stark looked at them with immense distaste. Ice glazed them. Snow choked their crevices, frosted their shattered edges. It was somehow indecent that there should be lights within those walls.

Amnir rode along the line of wagons. "Close up there. Close up. Smartly now! Let them see your weapons. On your guard—watch my lance-point and keep moving."

The broken towers were grouped around an open circle. In its center squatted a huge lump of broken stone that might once have been a monument to civic pride. Three figures stood beside the monument. They were gaunt, tuck-bellied, long-armed, slightly stooped. They wore tight-fitting garments of an indeterminate gray color, hoods covering narrow heads. Their faces were masked against the wind. The masks were worked in darker threads with what appeared to be symbols of rank. The three stood immobile, alone, and the ragged doorways of the buildings gaped

darkly on either hand.

Stark's nostrils twitched. A smell of living came to him from those doorways, a dry subtle taint of close-packed bodies, of smoke and penned animals, of dung and wool and unnameable foods. He was riding in his usual place beside the third wagon in line. Gerrith was behind him, beside the fourth. The other captives strung out behind her except for Halk, who was still confined. Stark tugged nervously at his bonds, and the armed man who led his beast thumped him with a lance butt and bade him be still.

The noise of the wagons assaulted the silence. Amnir rode aside, toward the three gray figures. Men came after him bearing sacks and bales and rolls of cloth.

Amnir halted and raised a hand. The hand held a lance, point upward.

"May Old Sun give you light and warmth, Hargoth."

"There is neither here," said the foremost figure. Only his eyes and his mouth showed. The eyes were pale and unreadable. Above them, on the forehead of the mask, there was the winged-disk sun-symbol Stark had found to be almost universal. On the sides of the mask, covering the cheeks, were stylized grain patterns. In Pax, Stark had read something of the sect. He supposed the man was both chief and high priest. It was strange to find a Corn King here, where no corn had grown for centuries. The

man's mouth exhibited thin lips and small sharp teeth. His voice was high and reedy but it had a carrying quality, a note of authority.

"Here there are only my lord Darkness, and his lady Cold, and their daughter Hunger."

"I have brought you gifts," said Amnir.

And the Corn King said, "This time you have brought us more."

The wind blew his words away. But Amnir's lance dipped and a movement began along the line of wagons, a bristling of weapons. The man leading Stark's beast shortened up on the rein.

In a curiously flat tone Amnir said, "I don't take your meaning."

"Why should you?" said the Corn King. "You have not the Sight. But I have seen. I have seen it in the Winter Dreaming. I have seen it in the entrails of the Spring Child that we give each year to Old Sun. I have seen it in the stars. Our guide has come, the Promised One who will lead us into the far heavens, into warmth and light. He is with you now." A long slender arm shot out and pointed straight at Stark. "Give him to us."

"I do not understand you," Amnir said. "I have only captives from the south to be sold as slaves to the Thyrans."

The lance-point dipped lower. The pace of the wagons quickened.

"You lie," said the Corn King. "You will sell them to the Citadel.

Word has come from the high north, both truth and lies, and we know the difference. There are strangers on Skaith. The star-roads are open. We have waited through the long night and now it is morning."

As though in answer, the first sullen glimmer of dawn stained the eastern sky.

"Give us our guide. Only death waits for him in the high north."

Stark shouted, "What word have you of strangers?"

The armed men clouted him hard across the head with the lance butt. Amnir voiced a shrill cry, reining his beast around, and the wagons began to move, faster and faster, the teams slipping and scrabbling on the frosty ground.

BOUND so that he could neither fight nor fall, half unconscious from the blow, Stark saw the encircling walls and dark doorways rush past him in a haze. He wanted the people behind those doors to come out and attack, to set him free, but they did not. The Corn King with his attendants remained motionless beside the tumbled monument. In a few moments the whole clattering, jouncing caravan of wagons and armed men was clear of the circle and racing along between lesser ruins, lightless and deserted. By the time the ginger sun had dragged itself above the horizon they were in open country, and unpursued.

Amnir halted the train to rest the beasts and restore order along the line. Stark managed to twist himself around far enough to see Gerrith. Her face was white, her eyes wide and strange.

The man-at-arms used his lance again, this time with less force, to straighten his prisoner in the saddle. Stark shook away the last of the haze from his vision and tried to ignore the throbbing in his head. Amnir was riding up to him.

There was something peculiar about the man's expression as he looked at Stark. It was plain that the encounter with the men of the Towers had shaken him.

"So," said Stark, "you meant us for the Citadel all along."

"Does that surprise you?"

"No. But the Corn King surprised me."

"The what?"

"The man you called Hargoth, the priest-king of the Towers. He knew me. He was waiting. That's why we were being watched."

"You will get little good from that," said Amnir, and turned to the man-at-arms. "See that he's put into the wagon. Now. And guarded well."

"Guarded against what?" asked Stark. "The people of the Towers? You cannot guard against magicians. Or the Thyrans. Maybe they would prefer to sell us to the Citadel themselves, without sharing the profits. Or the Lords Protector? Suppose they see no reason to pay

you the price you've been rolling under your tongue ever since Kazimni talked to you in Izvand. Suppose they send their Northhounds to hunt us all down." Stark laughed boldly. "Or are you, in spite of yourself, possibly beginning to think there may be something in the wise woman's prophecy? If that's it, hurry! See if you can outrun fate."

Amnir's eyelids flickered uneasily. He muttered something Stark could not hear, probably a curse. Kicking his beast with unnecessary viciousness, he rode off.

Stark was shoved into the wagon and bound with even more care than usual. He lay staring up at the rough canvas of the tilt above him, hearing again the Corn King's words. *The star-roads are open. We have waited through the long night and now it is morning.*

Old Sun's gingery gleaming had long since vanished when the wagon was wheeled into place for the night. Stark lay still, feeling a curious and probably unfounded anticipation. He listened to the sounds of Amnir's men making camp. He listened to the fretting of the wind at the canvas. He listened to the beating of his own heart. And he waited.

I have seen it in the Winter Dreaming. I have seen it in the entreaties of the Spring Child. Our guide has come . . .

The noises of the camp died away. The men had eaten and

wrapped themselves for sleep, all but the sentries. There seemed more of the latter than usual, judging by the number of pacing feet. From time to time one of the guards looked in through the flap, making sure the prisoner was still safely bound.

Time passed.

Maybe I was wrong, Stark thought. Maybe nothing at all will happen.

He had no clear idea what he was waiting for. A sudden attack, the swift rush of footsteps, shouts, cries . . . The watchers sent out by the Corn King had had no difficulty keeping up with the slow-moving wagons. Surely, then, the people of the Towers should be able to catch the train some time during the night.

And suppose they did come, suppose they did attack. Amnir's men were disciplined and well armed. They were on guard. Could the people of the Towers overcome them? What weapons did they have? How well did they fight?

If they were truly great magicians, they would have more subtle ways of gaining their ends. That thought made Stark laugh at himself.

Magicians. He was catching at straws. He, who considered himself rational.

The cold, he thought, was more penetrating than usual. It pinched his face. He worried about frostbite and tried to burrow his nose deeper

into his sleeping furs, one side at a time. The moisture of his breath froze on the furs, on his flesh and hair. His lungs hurt. He grew drowsy, and he could picture himself asleep and freezing gradually into stiffness with a shining glaze of ice over him like glass.

He was afraid, above all. This he admitted to himself. He fought his bonds. He could not break free but he generated enough heat to melt some of the frost that coated him.

The moisture quickly froze again, and now it seemed to him that he could hear the cold, actually hear it.

It sang. Each crystal of ice had a voice, tiny and thin.

It tinkled and crackled, faintly, sweetly, like distant music heard across hills when the wind blows.

It chimed, and the chiming spoke elfinly of sleep and peace. Peace, and an end of striving.

All living things must come to that at last.

Surrender to sleep and peace . . .

Stark was still fighting feebly for consciousness when the back flap of the wagon-tilt opened and a narrow person snaked in lithely over the tailgate. Moving swiftly, he slashed Stark's wrists and ankles free. He hauled him up, amazingly strong for all his narrowness, and forced a draught of some dark liquid down Stark's throat.

"Come," he whispered. "Quickly!"

Masked in plain gray without

markings, the face swam in the gloom, unreal. Stark pawed his way forward, and the draught he had swallowed took sudden fire within him. He scrambled out of the wagon. The strong arm of the gray man steadied him.

Inside the circle of vehicles the tiny hoarded fires guttered behind their windbreaks, dying. Bodies, animal and human, lay about, motionless under shining coats of frost that shone pale in the starlight. The sentries lay where they had fallen, awkward dummies with uplifted arms and stiffly contracted legs.

Stark snapped, "Gerrith!"

The gray man pointed and urged him on.

The Corn King stood on a small eminence beyond the camp. Behind him a number of lesser priests were spaced in a semicircle. It was as though they formed a drawn bow, with the Corn King at the tip of the arrow. They were all quite motionless, their masked faces bent upon the camp. Stark's guide took good care not to pass in front of that silent bow-and-arrow. He led Stark off to one side. The deadly cold relaxed its grip.

Stark said again, "Gerrith."

The gray man turned toward the camp. Two figures came stumbling from the wagons. One, narrow and masked, supported another swathed in furs. When they came closer Stark saw a thick, swinging braid of hair and knew that the fur-clad

figure had to be Gerrith.

He exhaled a breath of relief that steamed in the icy air. Then he said, "Where are the others?"

The gray man did not answer. Stark grasped him by one thin sinewy shoulder and shook him. "Where are the others?"

The Corn King's voice spoke behind him. The semicircle was broken, the work of the arrow done.

"We have no need of them," the Corn King said.—"The Sun woman—or wise woman, as some call her—I have use for. The others are worthless."

"Nevertheless," said Stark quietly, "I will have them. Now. And safe. Also, we will need arms."

Hargoth hesitated, his eyes catching a glint of starlight so the holes in his mask gleamed eerily. Then he shrugged and sent four of his people running back to the wagons.

"It will do no harm," he said, "though no good, either. Your friends will die later on, and less kindly, that is all."

Stark looked toward the camp, and the still figures on the ground. "What did you do to them?"

"I sent the Holy Breath of the Goddess upon them." He made a sign in the air. "My Lady Cold. She will give them sleep and everlasting peace."

The end of Amnir and his energetic greed. Stark found it difficult to feel much pity for him. The men-at-arms were doing a dangerous job

for their living but he felt little sympathy for them, either. His wrists and ankles bore the scars of their hospitality.

Hargoth indicated a low ridge, a fold in the plain. "My folk have made camp beyond. There is fire. We have food and drink. Come."

Stark shook his head. "Not until I see our comrades."

They waited in the biting air until Halk and Breca and the brothers had been brought, together with weapons borrowed from the dead. Then all followed the Corn King toward the ridge.

"There is food in those wagons," said Halk. He walked crookedly, having been bound for many days. Some of the strength had gone out of him, yet he was as belligerent as ever, perhaps more so because he was conscious of his weakness. "Are you going to leave it for the beasts of this wilderness?"

"We do not need it," said Hargoth. "And we are not thieves. Whatever is in the wagons belongs to the Thyrans."

"Why not us?"

"You were no part of their bargain with the trader."

Stark steadied Gerrith over a stretch of bare rock, then asked of Hargoth, "You said word had come to you from the high north. Who sent that word?"

"The Wandsmen. They told us to watch for strangers coming from the south. They offered a high price for you."

"And you do not intend to take it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"There was other news from the high north. A man not of this world has been brought to the Citadel. The Harsenyi nomads saw him with the Wandsmen in the passes of the Bitter Mountains. The Wandsmen like to hide their secrets but the Harsenyi see everything. They range over half the world, and they carry news." The Corn King glanced sidelong at Stark. "Besides, there is the Sight. I knew who you were when my people first saw you riding beside the wagons. You are not of this world. You come from the south, and it is said that there is a place in the south where starships land. The Harsenyi brought this word from Izvand."

"It is true," said Stark.

"Ah," said Hargoth. "I saw it clearly during the Winter Dreaming. The ships stand like bright towers beside the sea."

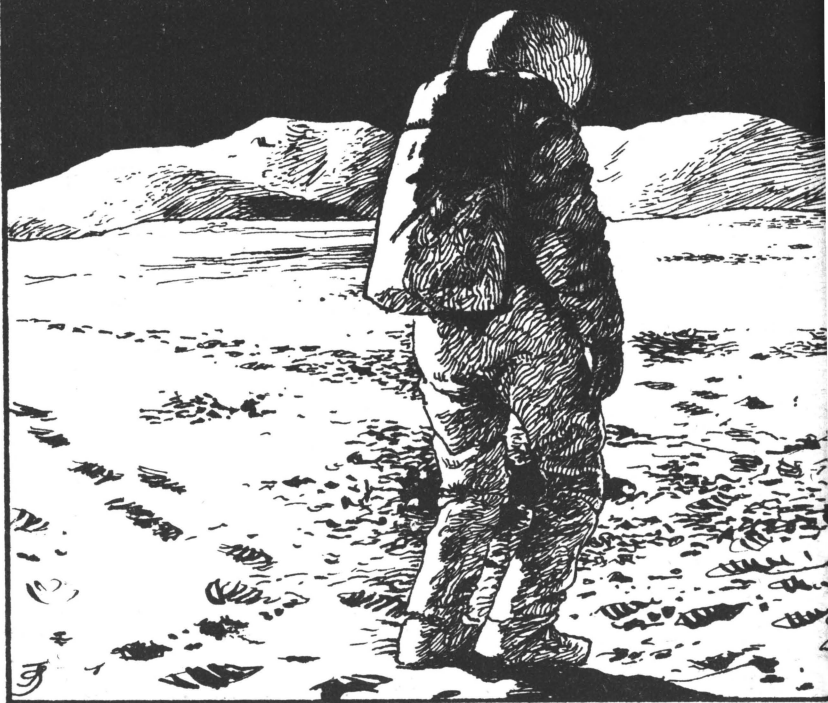
They had reached the crest of the ridge. Below, somewhat sheltered from the wind, fires burned. The humped shapes of skin tents were dusted with snow.

Hargoth spoke solemnly. "That is why we shall not sell you to the Wandsmen. You will lead us to the ships, to the stars."

He bent his head humbly before Stark. But his eyes, looking upward, were not humble.

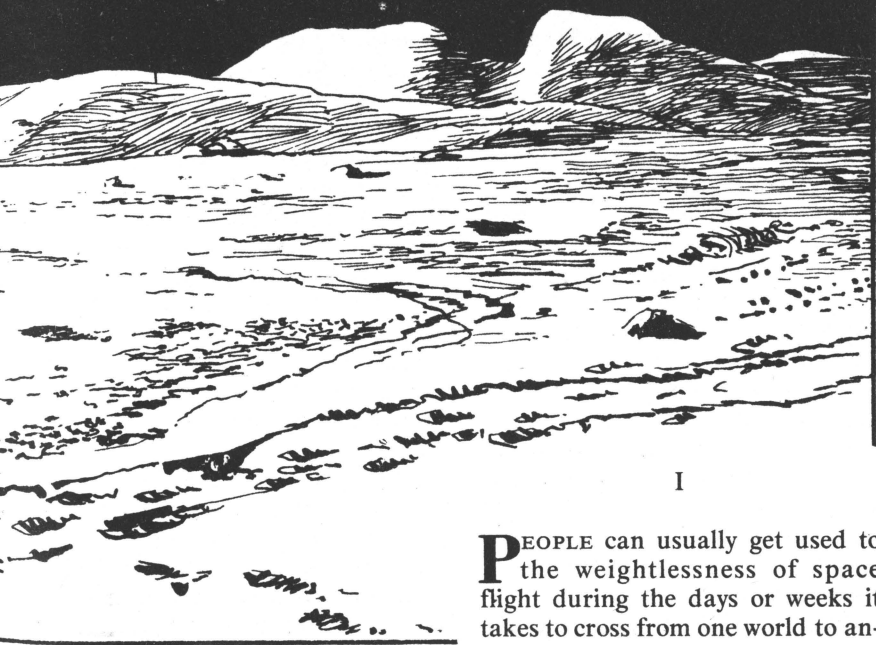
TO BE CONTINUED

MISTAKEN FOR GRANTED



*The stars said die . . .
and they only seemed to lie!*

HAL CLEMENT



I

PEOPLE can usually get used to the weightlessness of space flight during the days or weeks it takes to cross from one world to an-

other. In a long orbit it is easy to convince oneself that one's ship is not about to fall onto anything, even though the sensation of weightlessness is that of endless falling. There simply is nothing visible nearby to hit. Of course, travelers have had nervous breakdowns in spaceships too badly designed to let them see out.

To a physicist or an experienced space pilot, a bounce ride is just another orbit. Unfortunately most of the orbit is underground, like that of a baseball—though, as with a baseball, the underground part is not what is used. Traveling by bounce from, say, Ley Base in Sommering Crater to Wilsonburg under Taruntius X, the trip takes only thirty-five minutes and is never much more than two hundred miles above the moon. But during the final third of it anybody can see that most definitely he is falling toward the ground.

Rick Suspee had gladly shown off his adaptation to free fall during the long trip from Earth. He hoped, however, that no one was watching him now. In his mind he knew that the bounce-shuttle's computer was keeping track of position and velocity through its radar eyes. That the computer would light the main engines at the proper instant. That a second computer with a separate power source and independent sensors would fire a solid-fuel safety brake if the first engine failed to ignite. That a

living, highly competent pilot with his own sighting equipment and firing circuits could take over if both the automatics failed. Rick's mind knew all that but the lower parts of his nervous system were not convinced. Traveling at thousands of feet a second on a downward slant low over the moon's surface still made him tense.

Annoyed and frightened as he was, Rick felt sorry for his step-mother as he glanced back and saw the expression on her face. She was petrified. He decided it would be best to talk, and luckily he had seen enough moon charts to be able to talk sense.

"We're past the peak now, I think. That's Ariadaeus behind on the left, just into the sunlight. You can relax for a while—we're still more than two hundred miles up. Look for a white beacon flashing three times a second just to the south of our arc. That will be the Tranquility Base monument. We're out over the Mare now. Look—on the horizon ahead you can see Crisium and the mountains where Wilsonburg is."

The rocket swung slowly around so that its main engines pointed "forward." The braking blast was about due.

The mountains southwest of Mare Crisium were looming huge "ahead" and below. The Mare itself stretched beyond the horizon, which was much nearer than it had been a quarter-hour before. The

pilot's calm voice sounded.

"Thirty seconds to power. Check your safety straps and rest your heads in the pads." The two passengers obeyed. The pad allowed Rick Suspee to see the stars beyond the rocket's bow, nothing else.

The braking stage was made at two Earth gravities, the computer applying changes of one percent or so in power and a fraction of a degree in direction every tenth of a second throughout firing time—none of these adjustments could be sensed by human nerves. The only change at touchdown was from two Earth gravities to one lunar pull.

"You may unstrap," the pilot said, "but stay in your seats until we're inside the lock. I'll tell you when there's air enough for you to exit."

Rick watched the mobile rack trundle the rocket toward the side of the sixty-foot circle of smooth rock on which it had settled. The circle was the bottom of a craterlet in one of the hills over Wilsonburg. The bottom had been leveled and the side next to the upward slope of the hill cut to a vertical wall. In this wall was the lock, now yawning open to gulp the shuttle.

The craft was through the huge outer valve in moments. The black sky and sunlit rock outside were cut off from view as portals slid shut.

The pilot spoke again. "You can start for the doors now. There's a pound and a half of oxygen outside

and it will be up to three before I get our own valves open. It's been a pleasure to have you aboard."

Rick was on his feet before the speech was over. His stepmother was more careful. She did not exactly mind weighing only twenty-one pounds, but she was not yet used to it and the ceiling was low. She was about to make some remark about inadequate gravity, Rick was sure, when she was distracted by what she saw outside.

"Rick! Look! There's Jim! He hasn't changed a bit. I don't see Edna, though—"

Rick picked out the man easily enough from the dozen figures at the foot of the ladder outside. He was the heaviest and obviously the oldest. Rick gave less thought to the whereabouts of his aunt. He was noticing that none of the group were wearing space suits. Yes, the air had to be all right outside. This realization was supported by a slight pop in his ears as the shuttle's air pressure changed slightly. Evidently the pilot had opened both valves of the vehicle's air-lock. Rick headed rapidly for the exit, leaving his stepmother to follow more cautiously.

THE top of the ladder was forty-five feet from the floor of the big lock. Rick accomplished the distance in a single jump—at least, he meant it for a jump. In terms of energy, this was about the same as

an eight-foot drop on Earth; in time, it took rather more than four seconds. Which was enough to let Jim Talles step forward and catch him, the catch being embarrassingly necessary because the four seconds were also quite long enough to permit Rick to complete the best part of an unintended somersault. His moon coordination not as good as he had supposed—he had left the top step with more spin than he realized. His uncle's first words were a tactful reproof.

"Watch it, lad. Carelessness can be dangerous on the moon. I take it your mother is aboard?"

"Sure is. I—I guess you're my Uncle Jim. Uh—hello." Rick could not decide whether he was more frightened or embarrassed. It had been a weird sensation on the way down, something like that of a diver leaving the board to do a jack-knife and deciding too late to turn it into a half-twist. That was bad enough—but still worse, Rick felt, was the fact that the five young persons accompanying his uncle were all about Rick Suspee's own age. None had laughed or even smiled, but he could imagine what they were thinking. For about the five-hundredth time since his fifteenth birthday he told himself to stop showing off. Then he took a closer look at the five teen-agers.

One, on second glance, appeared almost too old for that category. He was about Rick's own height—five-and-a-half feet—but stouter, stur-

dier. His broad shirtfront was covered even more solidly than Rick's own by competence badges, many of which the Earth boy could not recognize—naturally enough.

A quick glance showed that all the others were similarly decorated. But Rick saw with relief that none exhibited nearly as much badge area as he did. Maybe they would be impressed enough by his Earth-gained skills to be able to forget, or at least discount, the slip he had just made. For one thing, none of them could possibly hold an underwater rating. Rick's scuba badge had been earned so recently that he was still gloating over it.

"Jim! It's so wonderful to meet you at last!" His stepmother's voice pulled Rick from his thoughts. She stood at the top of the ladder, Jim Talles posting himself at the foot to cover possible accidents. An unnecessary precaution. Mrs. Suspee's methods of showing off were more subtle than her son's. She descended slowly and carefully, reaching the bottom quite safely. She embraced her brother-in-law with an enthusiasm Rick suspected was due to her relief that the bounce ride was over. Then she asked about Edna's health and whereabouts, delivered messages from her husband and sundry friends, and finally allowed Talles to shepherd the party out of the lock chamber and make introductions.

"Edna couldn't get off the job,"

Jim Talles said. "But she'll be home by the time we get there. The kids here with me will be hosting Rick a lot"—Rick gulped; these would be just the ones he'd played the fool for—"and will probably show him a good deal more than I could. This is Aichi Yen, chairman by earned competence of the group known officially as the *Fresh Footprints*. Usually they call themselves by less formal names." Talles indicated the oldest member, whose badges Rick had already particularly noticed. His face, to Rick, seemed rather nondescript. His hair, cut short in the common moon style so as to give no trouble inside a space helmet, was jet black. His eyes gave just a suggestion of the ancestry implied by his name although the color of his skin suggested suntan much more than Earth's Orient.

"This is Marie D'Nombu." A girl certainly not yet sixteen nodded in greeting. She was several inches shorter than Rick and Aichi but her shirt was well covered with badges. Her lips were parted in a good-humored smile, and Rick wished he were sure she was not laughing at him. "Orm Hoffman—Peter Willett—Audie Rice." A tall, unbelievably thin boy of Rick's own age, a fourteen-year-old with a shy expression and skin almost as dark as Marie's, and a girl about twenty pounds more massive than Marie acknowledged their names in turn. All were looking more at Rick's

shirt than at his face.

"Rick will come with me for now," Talles told the young people. "It was good of you to trouble to meet him here. I'll be glad to see all of you at my place around ten P.M. and as long after as anyone can stay awake. I know you're busily scheduled now—so thanks again for coming."

Aichi Yen shook hands with Talles and, as an afterthought, with Rick, then nodded to Mrs. Suspee and disappeared into a nearby tunnel mouth. Three of the others did the same. Marie altered the pattern by speaking.

"I'm glad to meet you, Rick. I've been looking forward to it ever since Chief Jim told us you were coming. I've read a lot about Earth. I've tried to imagine what it's like to be able to go outdoors with no special preparation unless it's raining or something like that. I hope you'll tell us about wind and rainbows and glaciers and such—"

"I can try. I've never seen a glacier, though."

"Well, that makes us even. I've never seen a radical trap."

"What's that?"

"I'll tell you tonight if the Chief hasn't beaten me to it. I'm supposed to be in class now. 'Bye." She was gone on the track of the others.

"Those seem interesting youngsters," Mrs. Suspee remarked as the girl disappeared. "I'm not sure I approve of that flaunting of badges, though. It seems like

showing off. I was hoping we'd be away from that sort of thing on the moon. We get enough of it at home."

"If the badges are properly earned, why not display 'em?" responded her brother-in-law. "There are a lot worse things than letting the world know what you can do well."

"Well, Jim, I won't argue. And you'll notice I didn't forbid Rick to wear his badges here, even if I did hope they'd turn out to be out of style." She gazed off to her left. "I think those must be our bags over there. Do we take a cab, or do you live close by?"

"Our place is about eight miles away." Talles seemed amused. Smiling, he added, "We walk, and carry our baggage."

His sister-in-law looked at him, stupefied. Rick, too, was startled. The bags weren't heavy, especially on the moon, but—

"There's no public transportation here. We could probably work out some arrangement for getting the luggage delivered, but it would inconvenience a lot of people."

"I hadn't thought of that." Mrs. Suspee frowned. "I suppose this is a sort of frontier town, in a way."

Talles laughed. "Maybe it is, but that's not why we walk. You're on the moon now. You weigh about a sixth of what you did on Earth. You need exercise, plenty of it, or your muscle tone goes down, your circulation falters, your bones start

getting soft. A good rule of thumb is ten miles of fast walking every day for each hundred pounds of body mass. If your work doesn't give you time for that, you get a doctor to prescribe some specific exercises and you do 'em faithfully. All right—traveling!"

HE PICKED up his sister-in-law's luggage—a forty-pound-mass bag in each hand—and started off down the same tunnel that had swallowed the *Footprints* members. Rick took his own much lighter load, and he and his stepmother followed his uncle.

The tunnel ran about eight feet wide and ten feet high for some thirty yards. An airtight door about three yards in opened manually rather than by photocell or push-button. Talles carefully closed it behind them. A similar barrier graced the farther end of the passage. Once through this they found themselves in a much broader though not much higher passageway. Well lighted, crowded with people, it was lined on both sides with large windows filled with sales displays. Except for the ceiling it gave the impression of a street in a shopping district.

"Not so frontier after all," remarked Evelyn Suspee.

"We don't think so," replied Talles. "But remember the freight charges back to Earth before you stock up on souvenirs."

Mrs. Suspee was finding the hike less dull than she had expected. And less tiring than it would have been on her home planet. The trip was long, of course. In spite of the low gravity, one could not walk much faster than on Earth. When Rick tried, his feet spent too much time off the ground and left him with poor control or none; and after a near-collision with another pedestrian, who glared first at him and then at his uncle, the boy was more careful. Talles advised him that there were pedestrian speed limits, quite strictly enforced, in the tunnels; if he wanted to try the leaping "run" cultivated by moon-dwellers, there were caves devoted to athletics.

Part of the walk was through residential tunnels, not quite as wide as those in the business districts but interrupted more often by parklike caves where grass, flowers and even bushes grew under the artificial light. Rick noticed that each of the doors along these tunnels was marked by a small lamp; some white, the rest blue except for a very few that were red. He asked his uncle about them.

"We work around the clock here, Rick. The periods of sunlight don't match human biological rhythms, and few of us see the sun much anyway. It's more efficient for facilities to be in use all the time rather than shut down sixteen hours a day while people play and sleep, so we live in shifts. White light over a door

means the family is up for the day, though of course they may be out at work or school or what have you. Blue means they're asleep. Red means the unit isn't occupied. No matter when you walk the tunnels you'll find about as many people in them as now. All but the smallest businesses are always open, and the mines, schools and other productive facilities are always operating."

"I'd think if you overslept, you'd have a hard time finding out whether you were late for today's work or early for tomorrow's," remarked Rick. "Looking out the window would tell you nothing. I suppose you use twenty-four hours clocks, though."

"You've touched a sore subject," his uncle replied. "As a matter of fact, we don't. We still have the A.M. and P.M. distinction. I know it's silly, but every time the change is proposed in the settlement council it's defeated. People just don't like the idea of going to work at half-past seventeen. Of course, the same thing holds true on Earth. And because they want to start work earlier in summer so they can have more recreation time before dark, they make laws changing the clock settings. I admit it doesn't really matter whether you start your time measurement from local mean apparent midnight or any other moment—but changing the zero point back and forth with the seasons I insist is pretty silly. We're just as human here, so I don't

suppose we'll ever graduate to the twenty-four hour clock."

Rick's aunt was at home when they arrived. She was a taller and quieter woman than Evelyn Suspee. At least she seemed quieter to Rick but that may have been because his stepmother did not give anyone else much chance to talk. She monopolized the conversation all through the standard guest-arrival routine of settling the visitors in their rooms and feeding them dinner.

Rick would much rather have listened to his aunt and uncle talk. After all, that was what he was here for, wasn't it? To learn more about the moon and the people who dwelled on it?

He bit thoughtfully into his cutlet of fish-meal artificially flavored and imported from Earth like practically everything else eaten here. Three generations of colonization had seen the steady growth of youth organizations on the moon devoted to hiking, exploration, technical innovation and the like. Although autonomous, they were loosely joined into a confederation that set standards and established goals.

The trend had inspired a resurgence of similar youth clubs on Earth. There the emphasis was on ecology, space science and—where still available—outdoor living. The FEA—Federated Earth Adolescents—had agreed to send a representative to exchange ideas and knowledges with a typical lunar group. Largely because he had an

uncle on the moon interested in the youth movement, Rick Suspee had been chosen as the emissary. His stepmother had elected to accompany him, at her own expense. She wanted to see her sister, Edna, after a separation of many years, and to meet her sister's husband, Jim Talles.

Rick earnestly hoped he would be up to the responsibilities wished on him by the FEA. He glanced across the table at his husky, curly-haired uncle by marriage. Rick felt sure that the man would help him. Talles was the kind of person who inspires confidence. He had no children of his own, and it was perhaps in compensation for that lack that he devoted himself to the affairs of young people.

ABOUT an hour after dessert and coffee, the *Footprints* members began to arrive. Marie D'Nombu was first by perhaps five minutes, and within another half-hour ten of the group were crowded into the small Talles living cave. Since Aichi Yen was among them, Rick was still a little uneasy about speaking up. Marie quickly took care of that situation. Somehow she managed to take the conversation away from Mrs. Suspee without actually interrupting, then smoothly induced the Earth boy to talk.

Jim Talles was wearing another of his amused smiles. He knew Marie and her brains. He listened

with approval as the girl pulled Rick into the chatter by making remarks about Earth that simply had to be corrected—remarks not really silly but indicating reasonable misunderstandings. The question of going out in the rain, which she had left unsettled back at the lock, was straightened out, and incidentally gave Rick a much better idea of just what “outdoors” meant to these moon folks. They called it “outside.” He himself described scuba wet-suits as opposed to space suits, and even Aichi made a slip in physics there when he remarked that it must be harder to swim in Earth’s heavier gravity. Jim Talles wondered whether this had been done on purpose to make Rick feel better about his mistake at the rocket ladder. If so, Marie must have inspired it; Aichi would never have thought up such a thing by himself.

Marie herself helped Aichi Yen out of his confusion by getting him to describe his present outdoor work, and this interested even Mrs. Suspee for a while. A physics student, Aichi had worked out what he hoped was an original computer technique for untangling meaningful radio signals from noise. He was going to give it a test in about a week, when there was to be an eclipse. He would be picking up signals from Earth and the sun simultaneously, a mixture of complex natural and even more complex artificial waves, and would then spend several happy weeks

with his records in the school computer lab. He had set up his receiving equipment in a small crater quite some distance from town so as to avoid still a third set of interference patterns.

“We’ll get you out to Aichi’s site when the action starts, Rick,” Talles put in. “I suppose you’re in a hurry to get outside, but if you can wait a few days there’ll be more to see and something really to do. I don’t suppose you’ve ever seen an eclipse of the sun, and by waiting you can charge two batteries on one line. Besides, there are things I think you’ll want to see inside, like the mine where I work, and it will be handier for me if we take care of that first.”

“And maybe he can come to the school with some of us,” said Marie. “There are a lot of people there who don’t know as much about Earth as they think they do. Rick can straighten them out. All right, Rick?”

“Sure. I don’t mind the wait. How long a ride is it out to Aichi’s set-up?”

Talles smiled. “It’s in Picard G, isn’t it, Aichi?”

“Picard GA, to be exact.”

“Yes. That’s about thirty miles, as I remember, but you don’t ride. The *Footprints* really meant it when they picked their name, even if it was two generations ago. You can walk that far, can’t you?”

“Oh, sure. It’s just that I didn’t think I’d be allowed to hike

outside. I don't have any experience with space suits, and I figured there'd be all sorts of regulations about who could go out in them."

"There are," admitted his uncle. "You'll be competent, though, before you go out. That's my responsibility," he added hastily as he saw the worried look on the faces of two or three of his young guests. "I probably won't be free to go, and you kids will be expected to keep an eye on Rick just as you would on any newcomer short on experience. But I won't let him go unless I'm convinced he has the basic lessons thoroughly learned. So relax." Aichi Yen and the others did relax, visibly. They had known for some days that the guest from Earth would accompany them outside, but they had been quite uneasy over who would be held responsible if he managed to kill himself. Jim Talles had been letting them stew in that pan out of curiosity, to see whether they would try to duck the load. He was, after all, one of their teachers even if he didn't belong to the school department—he was the official adult adviser of the formally incorporated youth union known as the *First Footprints*.

"Great!" Rick enthused. "A badge for spacesuit competence will really mean something back on Earth. Which one is it?" For the first time he began examining in detail the pictorial and geometrical decorations of the others.

"There isn't any for suits," Aichi

said quietly. "I don't think there's anyone on the moon who isn't competent about them—at any rate, no one over five or six years old."

Marie took the edge off the remark. "I guess it's sort of like umbrellas or raincoats on Earth," she said. "Or maybe you can think of something that's an even better example—maybe swimming. I suppose everyone can do that even if they don't all have scuba ratings."

"That's not quite right." Rick followed the change of subject gratefully. "A lot of people can't swim, and there are six different water competence levels before you get to scuba, and a lot of others in watercraft management—" He held forth uninhibitedly until Marie exercised her tact once more.

All in all, it was a good evening. These moon people seemed a pretty good bunch, Rick decided before he got to sleep.

The next few days confirmed that opinion. Rick spent two of them at the Wilsonburg school, where class routine was altered to make him the center of attention. He spent a day with his uncle in the mine that was the main reason for Wilsonburg's existence. He passed a solid twelve hours with Jim Talles becoming familiar with space suits, until he could don one without hesitation or error, check it out properly, conduct emergency operations at reflex speed, and explain how electrical accumulators and Daly oxygen cartridges worked.

Talles had planned a further program to keep Rick occupied up to the time of the hike to Aichi's site. But like so many plans, this one ran into trouble. An accident occurred in the mine.

Not a catastrophe. No one was killed. No one was even seriously endangered—except Rick. And he was nowhere near the place.

His danger arose from the fact that his uncle went on full-time emergency duty, and the schedule in the Talles household collapsed. His aunt had to work as usual but Rick had never gotten her hours straight. His mother continued her irregular round of visits and shopping trips. His young friends had their own rather tight schedules to keep. So Rick was left pretty much on his own.

As a result, he got his sleeping hours out of step with the planned starting time for the hike. And his mother, in one of her rare moments of firmness, insisted that if he didn't get a good night's rest before going, he wouldn't go. She was unhappy about the trip anyway. The idea of her only child walking miles out on the moon's surface with only a few layers of fabric between him and vacuum frightened her even more than the bounce ride.

Rick was perfectly willing to sleep, but could not. He was like a six-year-old on Christmas Eve, embarrassed as he would have been to admit it. He went to bed, but had

given up all hope of actually sleeping when he did doze off. When he woke up, of course, and looked at his watch, his first thought was to dig a hole in the ground and bury himself.

He was to meet the group at North-Down Lock at eight. The watch said five minutes to eight. And the place was an hour's walk away.

II

IN THE hall outside his room Rick paused. There was no time to eat, he decided. The snack of a few hours before would have to last him. The group must be at the lock by now—maybe if he ran he would get there before they left. It might take a while to get the whole crowd into space suits. Running would have to be done carefully, he knew. It was dangerous in the tunnels under moon gravity—especially so for someone with his background—and there were stringent laws about when and under what circumstances one could run within the settlement.

His stepmother never understood why he didn't call the lock. For years afterward she would irritate him by returning to the subject and trying to make him explain. His uncle, of course, understood so well that he never even bothered to ask during the investigation later on. In fact, Rick never even thought of the phone. Moving quietly and hoping

that his aunt slept as soundly as his stepmother, he headed for the front door. For just an instant he was tempted to rouse his stepmother and ask why she had let him sleep so late; but that would have wasted time. He slipped into the corridor his moon friends called a street and hopped, leaped and skipped toward North-Down, awkwardly threading his way among the people.

He was not stopped for speeding, though several times he was the target of irritated frowns.

He would probably have made the trip in less than half an hour had he not mistaken a turn and wasted more than ten minutes getting back to the proper route. It was eight forty-five when he reached the recessed doorway that was one of the entrances to the North-Down lock area.

Sensors responded to his arrival, triggering a flashing light—green, since there was safe pressure on the other side of the door. Rick, as he had been taught, flicked the “acknowledge reading” switch located high on the door frame. Then he activated the door switch itself. Despite the need for power economy, doors on the moon that opened into areas even moderately likely to tap vacuum were motor-driven. The chamber Rick entered was not normally exhausted; it was a sort of combined garage and locker-room. However, it did have a large direct exit to the surface for getting out

unusually large pieces of equipment. When so used it became an air-lock chamber.

On every moon-dweller’s mind there was always the possibility of leakage or outright valve failure in any outer room. Rick was aware of that threat, just as the schoolkids he had met a few days before had been aware of rain and cold on Earth. It was the Big Difference everyone was told about. But awareness was not the same thing as the reflective self-protection of a native.

With the door secured behind him—by a strictly manual latch, activation of which shut off a warning bell—he made his way to the main personnel exits. His fervent hope was that the group might still be there.

The place was empty. Even the lock chamber, visible through the transparent wall, was unoccupied. The outer door was closed, and the red light on its frame backing the green one at the inner seal signaled that the chamber was carrying normal pressure. This implied that the lock had last been used by an inbound person or group, a possibility that did not occur to Rick. To him it was clear only that his friends had left without him. He did not blame them. He knew that much to be done on the trip was too tightly scheduled to allow delay. But he was bitterly disappointed.

Just which mistake he made next is still being argued. The fact that

he, or more accurately his step-mother, had fallen out of step with the Wilsonburg clocks was minor. In truth, Rick was actually eleven-and-a-quarter hours early for his meeting rather than forty-five minutes late. And for the worst mistake, still to come, it is hard to blame anyone but Rick alone. Pierre Montaux is blamed by many, including himself, for letting Rick get away with it, but . . .

PIERRE happened to be on duty at the locker-room when Rick arrived. Hearing footfalls, the boy glanced back over his shoulder and saw the middle-aged attendant. They had never met before. Rick had had his suit check at another lock, and Pierre had not been on duty the only time the boy had been to North-Down to learn the lay-out.

"What are you doing here, lad?"

"Sir, I seemed to have missed a group going out to Picard G. Could you tell me how long ago they left?"

Montaux shook his head, at the same time making the negative hand-gesture habitual to people who spent much of their time in space suits. "I've just come on—been here less than five minutes. I was a little late getting to work myself." For that, incidentally, no one ever criticized Montaux. He eyed the array of badges on Rick's shirt, estimating his general competence level by the area they covered without actually reading any of them.

After all, for anybody of Rick's age to be unqualified was rare enough, and for anybody unqualified to try to go outside was unheard of. "How long ago would they have left?" Montaux asked.

"Only a few minutes. We were meeting here at eight."

"Then they can't be far ahead. If your suit is ready you can catch them easily. I'll do your tightness checks."

TO RICK'S credit, he never tried to blame Pierre for the misadventure on the strength of those remarks. Some people would have claimed that without Pierre's suggestions, it never would have occurred to the boy to go out. But exactly that had previously occurred to Rick, and he never denied it. Probably the one biggest mistake, of course, was made when he walked silently to the numbered locker his uncle had told him would contain his suit, and pulled it out.

He donned it quickly and correctly under the attendant's eye—and who, Jim Talles, asked the world later, would have foreseen that the earlier training session thus would turn out to be a mistake?

If Rick had been slow or clumsy, if Pierre Montaux had had the slightest grounds for suspecting Rick Suspee never before had ventured into vacuum . . . But there was nothing to warn Pierre. The

suit went on smoothly. It fitted correctly. Rick attached helmet and gauntlets properly, did the proper things to seal them. He made the proper signals to request tightness check, said the right things over the radio for the communications check. He strode over to the inner lock door, deftly operated the cycling switch, and waited until the inner light flashed green before opening the portal. There was nothing to show that he had not done it all a score, even a hundred, times before.

Montaux let him through, checked the manual seal on the inside after the door closed, and gestured a "proceed" through the transparent wall. The outer door's light was now green. Rick operated its plainly labeled opening switch, went through, closed it, and disappeared from the sight of Pierre Montaux. And, for many hours, from the sight of mankind.

Rick felt uneasy, certainly. He knew that neither his mother nor his uncle would have approved. But it did not occur to him that the *Footprints* members might not approve either when he caught up with them; otherwise he might have turned back right then. It did not occur to him, either, that he was in any real danger. The crowd could not be far ahead, and the way would be plain enough. After all, he had spent hours with the maps in his uncle's study. He could have drawn from memory one showing

the way to Picard GA.

He looked around to orient himself. Wilsonburg lies mostly under the hills southeast of Taruntius X at about 51.3 degrees east and 7.6 north on the standard lunar coordinate system. The nearest point of Mare Crisium is about fifty miles to the northeast. The North-Down lock opens on the broad but irregular plain of Taruntius X; as the names imply, North-Middle and North-Up open higher on the slope bordering the same plain. From where he stood Rick could see about ten miles across the slightly rolling and heavily dimpled surface to the western hills, and even farther to the northwest and almost around to north, where the same mass of hills that contained Wilsonburg rose to block the view. His path, he knew, lay to the north past the foot of those hills to a valley that led to Picard-G and which should be visible, if map contours meant anything, from where he stood.

Maybe it was, but so were several other notches and valleys. Choice would have to be made. He made the most obvious one, but first tried his communicator.

"Marie! Aichi! Any of the *Footprints*! Are you in range? Can you hear me?"

He waited only a few seconds. He had not really expected an answer. He would pick them up—or they would pick him up—when he got around the spur of the hills.

He looked about him once more for other direction criteria. The sun was too high in the west—about fifty degrees—to be a precise guide, he judged. The same was true of Earth, which was too close to the sun to be seen easily, anyway. The stars? He moved back into the shadow of the sheet-metal roof that kept direct sunlight from the “porch” of the lock and found that he could see the brighter ones. The Big Dipper looked just as it did from home, and the Pointers guided his eye downward and leftward to Polaris just above the horizon—of course! He was much closer to the moon’s equator than Boston is to Earth’s. One of the notches in the far hills lay directly under the star, and Rick, after examining as well as he could the ground between himself and that distant valley, set out toward it.

EVELYN Suspee woke about nine-thirty with a feeling of guilt. She had meant to get Rick up in time for his trip. Finding that he had already gone, however, she put the matter out of mind. She did not mention his departure to Edna, who seemed too concerned about her husband’s absence at the mine, anyway, to worry about much else. As a result, no one missed Rick until he had been gone for eleven hours.

The *Footprints* group arrived at North-Down about a quarter to

eight. No one knew quite what to do about Rick’s failure to show up. By their own standards anyone who missed an appointment “inside” had only himself to blame—it was different, of course, outside. After discussion and some grumbling, it was decided that maybe Rick’s tardiness was not his fault entirely, and that his home should be called to find out why he had skipped the expedition. Evelyn Suspee was in when the call arrived.

It took her several seconds to grasp that Rick was unaccounted for since leaving the Talles home. The realization had the principal effects of a firecracker—much noise but little else. Emerging from the explosion of words, though, was Mrs. Suspee’s assumption that Rick was somewhere outside.

Marie D’Nombu, on the other end of the circuit, had not thought of any such possibility. She did not think it a likely one now that it had been suggested. In any case she felt sure that calming Mrs. Suspee was more important at the moment than eliciting mere truth.

“Wait, please,” Marie urged. Soothingly she continued, “Let’s say Rick did get here eleven or twelve hours early. Even so, I don’t see how he could possibly have been stupid enough to go outside by himself. Besides, they wouldn’t have let him. He must have realized his error about the time—probably then he wandered off into town. Maybe he hiked over to the mine to

see what sort of trouble Chief Jim was having. We'll call him—Rick could still be at the mine. More likely he's simply lost somewhere in town. They didn't start building tunnels on a nice regular plan here until a few of the early lodes had been followed pretty far, and a stranger can get mixed up pretty easily, I'd think."

Marie's words calmed Rick's stepmother considerably. She had had trouble more than once herself finding her way back to the Talles unit from the shopping areas.

At Marie's request, Mrs. Suspee called her sister to the screen. Edna had overheard most of the conversation and understood the situation. She assured Marie that Jim Talles was still at the mine and gave her his visiphone combination. The girl broke the connection and immediately called Talles.

It took several minutes to reach him. He was far out in one of the work tunnels, available through portable relay equipment. This had voice connection only; he could not see who was calling and did not at first recognize Marie's voice.

The girl concisely reported the state of affairs. Talles' first reaction was to worry more about Mrs. Suspee than his nephew. He agreed with Marie that the boy was probably somewhere inside Wilsonburg and was grateful for her efforts to convince the woman of that.

"I think I can get away from here shortly," he said. "Maybe in half

an hour. Meanwhile, find out who was on duty at North-Down when Rick got there, and see if the kid said anything about where he was going when he learned he was early. Then call me back."

"Orm is checking with the lock watch right now," Marie answered. "I should have word for you in a few minutes. Do you want me to call Mrs. Suspee again if I learn anything?"

Talles thought for only a moment.

"Call her if you're sure he's inside, not otherwise."

"I understand." Marie broke connection and turned to the others. "Is Orm back?"

"Here he comes," Aichi said.

"Orm, who was on when Rick got here?"

"Don't know yet," Orm replied breathlessly. "Del Petvar is on duty now. He says he was here twelve hours ago, went off just after eight, and Rick hadn't shown up by that time. Del was relieved by Pierre Montaux, but we can't get hold of him. He went off duty four hours ago and still isn't home. At least, he doesn't answer the visiphone."

"He could be home and too sound asleep to have heard the call," pointed out someone in the crowd.

"That's possible," agreed Aichi. "Who knows where he lives? Is it far from here?"

None of the group knew either answer but Petvar, whom they con-

sulted, was able to supply the information. Montaux' unit was about ten minutes' walk away. Without further discussion Marie rushed off.

Aichi cast a worried look after her and then another at the nearest clock. This Earth kid was holding things up badly. They should be well on the way out to Pic G by now if the work was to be accomplished.

But he waited. Confirmation of Rick's whereabouts was essential. There was just that chance, a slim one but still a chance, that the fellow was actually outside. If so, the problems would be such that everything else would just have to sit in vacuum for a while.

Then it occurred to him that the group might as well suit up in any case. They would be going out soon if Rick Suspee were found inside—and certainly if he were reported outside.

MARIE was back before they had finished their tightness checks. Orm Hoffman, who had not yet donned his helmet, blurted, "Montaux was home?"

She nodded grimly.

"He got there just as I did. He's been at a show. He told me Rick suited up around nine, thinking he was late instead of early. Montaux let him go outside to chase after us. Rick didn't return during Montaux' shift and we know Petvar hasn't seen him. So Rick must still be outside."

"Wow!"

Marie continued, "I called Jim Talles from Montaux' place. The Chief is on his way. To save time he's taking a crawler from NEM instead of walking. His orders are that we're to get outside as quickly as we can. Aichi, you're in charge until he gets here. We're to send two of us along the trail to the north. As soon as they're outside the trampled area, they're to check for prints Rick may have left."

All had taken off their helmets to listen. Aichi nodded.

"When the Chief arrives, you're to take the crawler and two other people and follow the same route. Pick up the first two when you get to them, and set all four to searching along the narrow part of the valley between here and Pic G. Chief Jim says Rick knows the maps well, and the most likely thing is that he headed north in an effort to catch up with us. You can go all the way to your site at GA. After you get there do your own work until Jim calls either for you or the crawler. If none of you finds Rick along the road or at your site, we'll have to set up a comprehensive search plan." Marie shook her head. She was near tears. "That fool Rick! How could he be so idiotic?"

"Simple. He's an Earth guy," said Aichi. "All right. Everyone into the lock, then, except you, Norm. You help Marie with her suit check, and the two of you

follow outside as soon as possible."

Helmets were donned and checked. Aichi and his group let themselves into the air lock. Marie quickly stuffed her pretty self into her suit. She and Norman Delvecchio were outside well within badge-qualifying time but Aichi Yen had already dispatched the first pair of searchers. They were visible half a mile away, going fast, making for the spur of hills coming in from the right. They were still within the heavily trampled area around the lock where tracking was impossible.

"If he's been gone more than eleven hours," Marie pointed out over her communicator, "he should be most of the way to Pic G. It's hard to see how he could have gotten lost if he's really familiar with the maps. I'll bet you find him out at your set-up."

Yen made the left-hand gesture equivalent to a negative head-shake—faces were hard to see through helmets, especially with sun-filters in place. "Judging by Jim's instructions, he thinks the same. But I wouldn't bet on it," his voice came back. "Up to the valley, and even through it, I wouldn't worry. It's a worn trail. Once out on G, though, tracks go every which way. Every set of footprints made since McDee found the first lode in those hills is still there. If that's not enough to mix up Rick there are crawler tracks going in all directions. He might be able to hit

GA, I suppose, since it's about three miles across, but then what? There's lots of stuff and tracks in that bowl besides mine. And has anyone told him about bubbles?"

"They were mentioned the other night at Chief Jim's place," replied Marie. "I don't know whether enough was said to give Rick much of a picture, though."

"Well, I just hope he has been going slowly. That would give us a chance to catch him before he's through the valley. Hey . . . here comes a crawler down from NEM. Must be Jim. Who wants to ride with me? You, Marie?"

The girl made the negative gesture.

"I'll stay here until we hear whether Rick has reached your site. If he hasn't, we'll have to make a wider sweep. I think maybe I can help more with that."

"Why?"

"I can't say. I just feel I could. I'm still betting he's out near GA, at or near your machinery. But I want to be ready in case he isn't."

"All right. Digger and Jem, you come with me in the crawler. We'll pick up Anna and Kort on the way. The rest of you stand by for whatever the Chief is planning."

A moment later the vehicle from the upper lock drew up beside them. Jim Talles' space-suited figure emerged. Digger and Jem climbed into the vehicle's cab, leaving its trailer empty for the time being. Aichi joined them after

reporting the situation to Talles. In a few seconds the vehicle was trundling out across Taruntius X. Talles and the others looked after it but only for a moment.

"So much for that," he said. "Now—I suppose you all agree that Rick probably struck out north toward Cyg G. Are there any guesses about what else he might have done? Or what he might be doing now?"

Silence, while the young people looked thoughtfully at each other and the lunar landscape. It was Marie who finally spoke.

"Surely that would depend on when he finally realized he had been early instead of late," she said slowly. "He must have gone quite a way before the truth struck him, or he'd have been back long ago. He got started less than an hour after he thought we'd gone, so he couldn't have figured us to be very far ahead. He must have expected to catch up fairly soon, if he hurried—"

"But we don't know how fast he expects us to travel," objected one of the others. "He was never outside before, and he'll find he can't go as fast himself as he probably expected to. So he may have decided pretty quickly that he'd be a long time catching up. Maybe he still thinks he started out late, not early."

"That's a point, Don," Talles said. "We're going to have trouble figuring just what he would do and

think. He was telling me a couple of nights ago about how different things were at the school he visited—he meant in what people took for granted. We're stuck the same way. We don't know what will seem like common sense to him. We do know—or at least, I know; some of you may not be so sure right now—that he's nobody's fool in spite of this trick he's just pulled. So if Aichi doesn't find him somewhere along the road to the instrument site, we'll have to try to guess what a reasonably smart person with a completely different background from ours would consider a sensible course."

"You should have a pretty good idea. You grew up on Earth," remarked Peter Willett.

"So I did. I haven't been there for twenty-two years, though. And the fact that I'm still alive here is pretty good evidence of how deep I've buried my Earth habits. Still, I'll do my best. Just don't you throttle your imaginations because you think I'm the only one with a chance to solve the problem."

"Don't worry," said Marie. "We'll figure him out."

Jim Talles looked at her. "Maybe," he answered.

THIRTY miles, measured along a low orbit, from North-Down, Rick Suspee went through a rather similar review of the situation, though this probably happened

some hours later. He had not yet caught on to his twelve-hour error. Nevertheless it was evident to him that something was seriously wrong.

He had walked for what he guessed was the right distance across the relatively flat surface of Taruntius X. He had reached the valley he had marked from the lock—fortunately, he had not lost track of it during the walk. He had followed it slightly upward and then down again to another open, fairly level area. The way was obviously a well-traveled one, as he had expected. Indeed it was packed so firmly that it would no longer take footprints or even tread marks, though often enough one or the other led off to right or left. It all fitted the mental picture Rick had gained from his uncle's maps and the conversations he had heard and joined, and he had no doubt that he was now on the southern edge of Picard G's floor.

However, he had seen nothing of the hikers or any other living person. He had heard not a whisper over his helmet communicator. He knew that radio on the moon was a line-of-sight proposition, and that the relay units on the hilltops around Wilsonburg were turned on only by special arrangement. If he had never got close enough to the hikers to have no chunks of moon-scape in the way, it was perfectly reasonable for him to have heard nothing. But he could not under-

stand why he had failed to get that close.

True, they might have been into the valley before he had emerged onto Taruntius X. Yet if so they had traveled much faster than he had supposed possible.

Rick himself had found that he could not walk much faster than on Earth. With far less fatigue, yes. Here he weighed less than twenty-five pounds. But faster, no. He did not have the coordination necessary to take the sort of steps that would keep both feet off the ground at once for any distance. When he tried it, landing on either foot was a matter of luck. Leaving the ground with an angular momentum close enough to zero for the result to resemble walking was still beyond his skill. Failing to land on at least one foot could be dangerous; helmets were strong but had their limits, and moon rocks are no softer than those of Earth. It would be a long time before he could acquire the "lunar lope"—that swift, leaping walk at which moon-dwellers were so adept.

Yet even if the others had the skill he lacked and could "step" a distance limited only by their muscular strength rather than their coordination, it was hard to see how a lead of one hour or less could possibly have put them ten miles ahead.

It then occurred to him that they might have stuck to the hills around the east side of Taruntius

X, rather than cutting straight across its floor. Some of the badge tests that the hikers were going to take during the trip could easily have required this.

If they had chosen the easterly course, that might account for the radio silence. They had been in a valley cutting them off from him. It also implied that he was ahead of them by now, since his path had been direct rather than circuitous. With this in mind, he settled himself down to wait. His position was a short distance from what he took to be the northeast end of the valley.

He had intended to wait for two hours at most. But the sleep that had been eluding him so effectively for the last few "nights" caught up with Rick. He never knew how long he slept, since his watch was inside the space suit where he could not reach it and his oxygen-cartridge gauge meant little in terms of time without knowledge of his personal consumption rate.

Well, he consoled himself, he had been out in the open where the others would have seen him if they had caught up. Evidently the around-the-hills hypothesis was wrong. They had been ahead of him all the time. They must certainly have reached Aichi's place in Picard GA by now.

GA, he knew, was about three miles across. It should be no more than three or four miles away. Presumably the whole crowd was below

its rim, since he was still hearing no response to his radio calls.

Unfortunately, no such feature was visible, or at least recognizable, on the slightly rolling plain before him. This might mean little; distances were hard to judge in the unfamiliar lighting. If the rim of GA were high, it might be difficult to pick it out from the background hills—hills whose feet were below the near horizon but whose upper details stood out as clearly as the valley walls a scant mile behind him. If the rim were low or nonexistent, finding it from a distance would be even harder.

Just the same, his map memory told him that if he headed northeast from his present position for three or four miles he should reach the depression. And it was probably too large to miss.

He looked around carefully, matching the shapes of the surrounding hills with his memory, and incidentally modifying the latter more than he realized. In case he would have to retreat, he made particularly sure that he could recognize the mouth of the valley leading back to Taruntius X and Wilsonburg. That was sensible although, as it turned out, superfluous.

He set out sturdily, but there was no easy way to tell when he had walked four miles. His pace was probably not its Earth length, which he knew well, but he could not guess whether it was longer be-

cause of the lower gravity or shorter because of this space suit. Expended effort—fatigue—of course meant nothing as a distance guide. Nor did the passage of time, since he could not reliably judge his speed.

Eventually so much time passed that he decided he must have started in the wrong direction. GA could not possibly lie this far from the valley mouth. Once more he stopped and looked around, less sure of himself than ever.

The gently rolling plain furnished a large supply of low elevations, any one possibly the rim of GA. Some, as he already knew, were indeed crater rims, but none had proven anywhere near large enough to be his target. There seemed nothing to do but check every elevation in sight—unless, he thought suddenly, it would be better to go back to the southern hills and get a higher viewpoint. A few hundred feet might be enough to let him spot the hole he wanted without difficulty.

It was a good idea. He would try it. First, though, he would check one rather noticeable rise to his left—roughly north, though without shade he could no longer see the stars to be sure of that. He made his way over to it and without much effort reached the top.

It was not a crater lip but a low dome, some forty feet high. It measured about a hundred and fifty yards from north to south, and

half that in the other direction.

There had been no footprints on the southern side that Rick had climbed. But near the top he encountered a well-trampled area. To his surprise, a few yards ahead of him he saw a long, low, obviously artificial wall.

He approached the structure curiously. It certainly was not an emergency oxygen cache—he knew what they looked like and how they were marked. The wall was only about two feet high and five wide, though it extended over a hundred feet from the top of the dome down its western side. Apparently the wall was made of cemented pebbles and the dome roof of glassy material covered by lunar soil.

Piercing soil and roof, near the high end, there was a long scar with a few footprints around it. At the other end, downhill, stood a piece of equipment he recognized instantly. There was no need to read the cast-metal sign that lay beside it. He knew the story.

Eighty years earlier, *Ranger VIII*—one of the first hard-landing lunar investigating robots—had plowed into the southern part of Mare Tranquillitatis at terminal-plus velocity. One of those freakish distributions of kinetic energy that sometimes occur in explosions and tornadoes had hurled an almost undamaged lens element—barrel and glassware—five hundred miles at nearly orbital speed. The fragment had expended most of its energy in

cutting the groove on this hilltop, bounced once, and come to rest a little farther downhill. The wall surrounded track and relic, protecting them from the only feature of the environment likely to prevent their lasting another million years—human beings.

Rick was impressed not by the recalled story or even by the sight of a piece of history. What struck home was that the *Ranger* relic, he knew, was not in Picard G. Somehow, in spite of his care and what he thought was a reliable memory, he had managed to come a dozen miles or more too far west.

For a moment he considered beating a retreat to town. But the notion never got a firm hold.

After all, Picard G lay only a few miles to the east—much closer than Wilsonburg. The hills in the way did not look difficult, and nothing he remembered from the maps suggested that they should be. He would find the *Footprints* gang, and safety, much more quickly if he cut straight across to his original objective. Furthermore, he had spent much time memorizing the locations of oxygen caches in G against the need for them ever arising. He was safe for a good many hours yet according to his cartridge gauge, but it would be nice to be close to a recharge should he require one.

Without further thought he headed westward toward the low hills.

III

JIM TALLEs had spent the time driving down from Northeast-Middle in thinking, since the road was both safe and familiar. He had come up with a plan of sorts. After Aichi Yen's team had left and the short consultation with the others was over, Talles wasted no time standing around.

"Back inside, all of you," he ordered. "We have some mapfiguring to do, and I'll have to get the relay units between here and Pic G turned on. Then we won't have to wait until Aichi gets back to hear his report."

"But Chief, you ordered us to suit up," Norman objected.

"I know, but I've changed plans. We'd better not waste our suit charges while waiting to hear from Aichi. We'll occupy the time deciding where to look next if the others don't find him."

No one argued further, and in a few minutes all were gathered inside. There were plenty of maps available at every lock. Talles laid out a set presenting a complete mosaic of the area. For nearly an hour discussion ensued about the possible places where someone with Rick's background might be if he had wandered from the planned route.

The trouble was that none could actually believe that anyone, under the circumstances would have been silly enough simply to go off

somewhere on his own. If he had, there was no guessing what else he might do, since his criteria of elementary common sense would have to be incomprehensible. They all realized that the term "outside" meant simply "outdoors" to an Earth person and so did not carry the same frightening implications as it would to someone brought up on the moon. But none could see why this difference should turn off one's brain completely. All the segments came to a dead end with some remark to the effect that "... If he was dumb enough to do that, he was dumb enough to do anything."

Jim Talles alone was reluctant to accept that notion, partly because he was sure his nephew was quite intelligent and partly because it implied the need for a complete, square-yard by square-yard search of the entire area around Wilsonburg. An impossible task to accomplish before Rick's oxygen would run out.

Rick had started with about thirty-six hours of the stuff in his cartridge. Of course, he might run into an emergency cache. But sensible planning would have to be based on the assumption that he would not. More than twelve of those precious hours were gone. The area that could be searched thoroughly in the remaining twenty-four by all the people who could reasonably be put on the job represented a frighteningly small

fraction of the sector in which he might possibly be. The main hope was still that one of Aichi's searchers would find the boy along the route to Picard GA. After the relay stations had been turned on, Talles spent more of his time at the lock communicator than at the maps.

Aichi kept his crawler well out in the center of the valley and was in continuous touch once contact had been made. Some of the searchers on foot were occasionally shadowed from the relay antennas. They were trying to cover the valley sides far enough from the main "road" to spot individual footprints. Any set of these that could not be accounted for somehow, especially those that left the main trail without any matching return set, had to be investigated further.

It was a slow process. The hills around Wilsonburg had been well examined by prospectors during the last few decades. Many of their trails were known to the *Footprints'* group but there were many that had to be checked out in detail.

Time passed slowly. Suspense in the lock grew unbearable.

THEN suddenly Aichi reported. He had reached his instrument site. Rick was not there. And no clue to his whereabouts had been encountered en route.

"All right," Talles answered the relayed voice. "If he's not there, he isn't. As I remember GA, he'd have

to be deliberately hiding in one of the small pits not to be visible—there aren't any bubbles at the place that I ever heard of."

"Nor I," agreed Aichi Yen. "That's one reason they let me set up here. The school is pretty careful even with its full-rated seniors."

"Right. Therefore we have to assume Rick never got there—or if he did, he left for some reason. I can't offhand imagine a reason that wouldn't have brought him straight back toward Wilsonburg. In that case, you would have met him on the way—"

"But we didn't. So he never reached this place. Something must have delayed him on the way. It couldn't have been suit troubles or we'd have found him along the road. Anyway, he knew enough to check his oxygen cartridge and heat-control pack before starting off—if he hadn't, Pierre would have spotted him for a beginner and never let him out."

"I agree, Aichi." Talles thought a moment. "Anyway, until the foot-searchers finish their coverage, you stay there and do what you can on your own project—you can accomplish plenty alone, and the last pair you dropped off can help you when they work their way out to where you are. That's Digger and Anna, isn't it?"

"Right. They're quite a way back, though. I left them with a couple of miles of the valley to

check before they got out onto Pic G. I figured I could see all that was necessary from the crawler, once I was out on the plain. It seemed best to have the others concentrate on places where Rick might have let his curiosity override his common sense."

"Good. I don't see what more you could have done. We'll leave you to your own work for now. I hope the others will rout out that young scamp without our having to bother you again."

"Thanks, sir. I'll keep the receiver on and make the standard checks with North-Down."

"All right. Out, here." Jim frowned. "Digger? Kort? Are any of you foot searchers in relay contact?"

Three were. Talles got them to report one at a time but the word was negative in every case. He had each describe as exactly as possible the sections searched. With the aid of the other group members he marked these off on the map.

The result was discouraging on two grounds. First, because so much of the probable area had been covered—and second, because so little of the possible area had been. The group looked at the shaded portions of the map in moody silence. Only a few remarks were exchanged as the minutes dragged by and negative after negative came in over the communicators. With each report, someone shaded another small bit

of the map. At last the valley's entire length was penciled in. Digger and Anna had reached Picard G, and were heading on toward Aichi's station at A. Kort and Jem had reached the middle of the valley, where the other pair started.

Kort closed his final report with a question.

"Should we go on out to GA with the others, or recheck what Anna and Dig have done here, or return to town? I'm starting to get worried about that kid. There just isn't any way to get lost along this road, that I can see. So if he isn't out at Aichi's set-up, what could have happened to him? He didn't strike me as a completely jammed valve, so I'm sure he's not hiding from us as a joke. Is there any sort of—well—attack, or something, that can hit Earthers under low gravity? Could he possibly have gone off his head?"

"I doubt it," Talles replied. "Earthers do sometimes panic because of the breathing restriction imposed by a space suit. Rick is used to underwater gear, though. That's even worse, from the breathing angle. So a space suit shouldn't bother him. Besides, even if he did panic he wouldn't run off and hide in a hole, would he? Aloneness is the last thing he'd want."

"Sure, Chief," Kort said doubtfully.

"I think you'd better start back," Talles told him. "Come as fast as you can until you reach the

plain, then spread out as before and again check each side of the main trail for prints. I'll send people out from this end to do the same. It doesn't seem likely he's on Tar X, but—wait, change that. Maybe he got the idea of climbing one of the hills there to get a better look around. Both of you follow east around the edge of Tar X, at the foot of the hills, and check for prints climbing. He was wearing Type IV boots, Pierre says. I know his suit size is 16-C-A. Any prints of that pattern and approximately matching that size, whether you think you remember them from before or not, report to me."

"Traveling," Kort said. "But I wish we'd had that boot data earlier."

"Sorry. Pierre Montaux thought of it and visiphoned us a little while ago. Carry on, Kort. Digger and Anna, have you been reading us? If you're not too far out on Pic G, how about doing the same thing? Rick might very well have been uncertain of direction when he got out of the valley. He could have decided to go uphill to try and sight GA."

Anna's voice came back. "We're a couple of miles out—nearly half-way from the valley to Aichi's spot. But you may have something. It's worth going back for. Look, Dig, if Rick decided to do something like that when he reached Pic G, there's a hill he might have used. Let's head for its foot, close to the valley side. That's where Rick would have

reached it and started to climb."

"Sounds good," Talles encouraged. "Check in at the foot of the hill, and do your best to stay line-of-sight from the nearest relay antenna—you know where they are."

"Will do," came Digger's voice.

"If you have to follow a trail out of range, try to arrange your own relay—one of you on trail, the other in sight of both the tracker and the antenna."

"Right, sir. Traveling."

Marie, like the others, had been paying close attention to the radio conversation.

"Shouldn't some of us go out there to Pic G to help Dig and Anna?" she asked. "As I remember it, there are miles of hills along the south side. Rick might have climbed any one of them."

"That's a thought, Marie. But by the time any more of you could hike out there, those two would have pretty well covered the ground, wouldn't they?"

"Not if there turned out to be a lot of Type IV, size 16-C-A tracks to follow. And for that matter, why should we hike out? Wouldn't it be faster to take a crawler?"

"Can you drive one?"

"Well—not legally."

"How about the rest of you?"

Jim glanced over the group gathered around the map table.

"Aichi took all the rated ones—Anna, Kort, Digger, and Jem—with him." Marie added, "That

wasn't very bright. But you could drive some of us out. There are plenty of crawlers at this lock."

"Sure I could drive you. Except that it would be too hard to keep in touch with the other searchers while I was driving, especially in the valley."

"You can get through it without necessarily losing touch with the relay net. It would take a lot of zig-zagging, that's all."

"I know. But I can't get through it without devoting most of my attention to driving."

"I could drive, or Orm. It would be legal as long as you were in the cab."

"You're a stubborn little wench, Marie." Talles sighed. "I suppose you do have a point about the southern side of Pic G."

THERE was a flurry of dressing and helmet-tightening. The group flowed over to where the vehicles were parked. Jim Talles went through the formalities of signing one out. He, Marie, and two of the others entered the cab, and the rest got into the trailer. He stared at Marie thoughtfully for a moment, then motioned her to the driver's seat.

Under her handling the fuel batteries came up to voltage, the individual wheel-motors were tested, and the machine rolled gently to the nearest vehicle lock. Marie established connection with the passengers in back, received their

assurance of complete suit checks. She repeated the procedure for those in the cab with her, made a final check of her own suit. Finally she signaled for the opening of the outer door.

Moments later the crawler was rolling smoothly northward at forty miles an hour—slightly better than its fuel batteries could maintain. Marie was drawing from reserve charge as well. Talles disapproved but decided to say nothing. The storage cells could be recharged while the group was searching around Picard on foot.

He turned his attention back to communication, fine-tuning the crawler's radio to the relay system. A voice check confirmed that Aichi, the four searchers, and the dispatcher at North-Down were all able to hear him.

Marie stopped the crawler, to his surprise, before any report came in from the foot-searchers. As he glanced at her, mystified, she pointed to the right. He gazed in that direction and gestured understanding.

Some ten miles north of North-Down lies a two-mile crater. It is not the only such depression on the floor of Tarantius X. But it is the sole depression even close to that size along the straight path from North-Down to Picard G. Marie knew that Aichi had not dropped his first search party until reaching the valley. So she was pretty sure that this crater had not been

searched. She also considered it a likely place to tempt a newcomer to the moon into taking a close look. Jim Talles smiled in unspoken agreement.

A two-mile circle has an area of more than three square miles, which can use up a great deal of search time. It was fortunate that a check of the circumference proved sufficient. No boots of Rick's type had crossed the rim except two that were overlaid, as a few minutes' follow-up showed, by later prints. Even so, half an hour was lost.

Marie had remained at the radio while Talles and three others had gone out. As soon as they were inside again, she started the crawler.

"Digger and Anna reported. They can't find anything at the hill she picked," the girl said. "They've moved to the west and are still looking. But—but all the reasonable possibilities seem wrong! Maybe we ought to try the unreasonable."

"Or the more reasonable," Jim Talles said.

The crawler passed no more likely-looking stopping places before reaching the valley. There were a few bubbles along the way—lava pits whose thin glass ceilings sometimes gave way under weight—but the known ones had all been checked by the searchers and no new holes had been noted.

An hour and twenty minutes after leaving North-Down, Marie brought the crawler to a halt beside

two space-suited figures. Digger and Anna were waiting at the foot of the rise that marked the southern boundary of Picard G. That feature is irregular—but much less so than Taruntius X, and its southern side in particular is much less steep than usual for the inner slope of a lunar walled plain. It seemed doubtful that Rick could have lost himself here. The climbing was safe, hardly to be considered climbing at all. There were comparatively few places where radio contact would be a problem.

Marie's attitude had changed. She had begun to feel far less sure that Rick was somewhere along the line of march between Wilsonburg and Picard G. The enthusiasm that had caused her to pressure Talles into driving from town had pretty well evaporated. She did not want to hike along a planned path looking for footprints. She wanted to try the unreasonable—or the more reasonable, as Jim Talles had said. The two need not be incompatible. Because what might appear most reasonable to an Earther might seem least reasonable to a moon denizen.

Somehow Marie felt she was coming to know what might have gone on in Rick Suspee's mind after he had walked out of the lock at North-Down. She wished she could be alone to think.

But she couldn't be. Talles was already assigning search areas.

"All right," he said, "we'll work

in pairs, as always. Digger and Anna, stay with the crawler. You've been afoot a long time, and probably want to assist Aichi anyway. I'll drive you to GA as soon as I drop the others."

"You need all the searchers you can get," Anna objected.

"You two are so weary you'll be a handicap rather than a help. As for Aichi, I don't want him to miss out on the chance of a lifetime."

Jim turned away.

"We'll take two miles for each pair," he went on. "Norm and Peter, start here. Cover the low slopes for prints. Call in if you see anything likely, then check it out before going any farther. Dan and Don, the next section. Same orders, when we drop you off. Jennie and Cass the third section, Orm and Marie the last. After I reach GA, I'll make one circuit of it. Unless I find something I'll come right back to pick you up as you finish your sections. Questions?"

IV

FIFTEEN minutes later Marie watched the crawler roll away toward the northwest. Orm Hoffman, at her side, had to call twice to get her attention.

"Let's get with it, Marie. What's best, I think—you follow this contour while I parallel it uphill a couple of hundred feet. Then anytime one of us finds a possible the other checks at his level. That

would let us catch trails actually going up or down hill."

"That seems all right." Marie's lack of enthusiasm was obvious even over the communicator. Orm Hoffman noticed and wondered. Jim in the receding crawler heard, and remembered Marie's remark about the "unreasonable." Neither Orm nor Jim commented.

The girl realized, however, that she would have to diligently devote herself to the plan, futile though she now felt it to be. She and Orm started eastward as he had suggested. They went slowly, the boy examining the ground carefully and attentively, the girl's eyes doing their duty as she tried to concentrate.

But she kept remembering details of the evening at the Talles' home—the questions Rick had asked, the ones he had answered, the ideas he had volunteered under her careful manipulation. She felt more and more that she could put herself in the shoes of Rick Suspee.

Yet the more certain she felt of that, the less could she understand his disappearance. It just did not fit. The time mistake was natural—people were always making it. Following a group he thought had gone ahead was foolish but perfectly understandable. Marie would not have done so herself, to be sure, but her upbringing had been different. *Outside* carried much the same implications to her as *underwater* did to him, she surmised. On

the other hand *outside* to him was no more special than the term *outdoors* so offhandedly used by Earthers. He would know there was a certain amount of danger involved in going through an air lock but he probably equated it with, say, the danger of crossing a street in an Earth city—a danger recognized and respected yet lived with and faced casually. Yes, she could understand his going out alone.

What had happened then? Rick knew where the group was going, knew the area as well as maps could teach it. Although he had never seen it before, he should not have had the slightest difficulty in identifying the well-packed trail from North-Down. There was no special risk along the route. The normal ones like bubbles would not have caused him to disappear—unless he had broken through a new one, and in that case the traces should have been obvious to the searchers. Even if his suit had failed and he was a fatality—Marie could grant the possibility, much as she hated to—his body should have been along the trail somewhere in plain sight. The disappearance made no sense.

"Track here, Marie!" Orm's voice scrubbed her thoughts.

Guiltily she looked back; had she passed a set of prints without noticing? No. She could see her own extending backward at least two hundred yards—her own, no others. She looked ahead again,

glimpsed what had to be the track that had caught Orm's eye. The line of prints, imbedded clearly in the moondust, intersected her path, heading uphill. The sole pattern, when she got close enough to see it clearly, she confirmed as Type IV. Maybe Rick had come this far out of the way after all.

"Start following them up, Orm. I'll backtrack for age traces." Her tone was elated. The indifference of a few minutes before had vanished.

"Traveling," he answered. "They bear a little to the right of straight uphill, sort of toward that hump half a mile back."

She goosed her communicator. "Jim Talles! We have a track here that looks good. I'm making sure it's new."

"Great!" came the voice from the crawler. "I'm just putting my passengers off at GA. I'll go around as I planned, but keep me wired—I can cut back to you any time." Talles added, "Orm, how does it look to you?"

"Whoever this is wasn't just wandering. The prints go in as near a straight line as the ground allows. There are some breaks on bare rocks but I'm having no trouble finding the trail again just by following the original direction. Does it backtrack the same way, Marie?"

"No. There's a fairly sharp bend a little way out. He was going east, just as we were—and then he seems to have suddenly got the idea of going up. Unreasonable! A waste of

energy and oxygen! This must be Rick—it's got to be."

"You keep backchecking," said Jim Talles. "Rick isn't wearing the only Type IV boots on the moon. He hasn't the only 16-C-A suit. Also, I wouldn't bet much money that no one else has climbed that hill in the last forty years."

"Traveling, sir."

THERE was radio silence for five or six minutes.

Then Orm spoke again.

"I see a dip between me and the hilltop. The trail goes down into it. If I follow directly, I think I'll lose the relays. Shall I go ahead, Jim—uh—Chief?"

"Yes. I'm proceeding toward your position now. If we don't hear from you before I arrive, I'll go after you."

"Traveling," Orm said.

Marie had paused to listen. Now she looked back up the slope. She could still see her companion but as she watched, the fluorescent orange torso that marked a Wilsonburg space suit disappeared over the rise, followed by the green-and-yellow helmet. Colors were selected for contrast against likely lunar background, not esthetic values.

The crawler, decorated in the same three colors, was visible a full two miles away. She glanced in its direction, saw that it was nose-on to her, and returned her attention to the footprints.

She wondered why Rick had not

gone farther out on the crater floor before turning eastward. He must have known that the closest part of GA lay a couple of miles from the southern foothills. Of course, his judgment of moon distances might be poor. There was no telling what someone with his background would use as a yardstick. His pace length would, she supposed, be shorter on Earth. And to help him on the moon there was none of that bluish overtone, increasing with the distance of background objects, that she had seen on pictures of Earthscapes. Perhaps he thought he had come farther north than had been the case. But if so, why had he trudged so much farther east than necessary? Marie was now seven miles from the end of the valley, actually about even with the eastern rim of GA. The tracks, if they continued in their present direction, but have gone right past . . .

Her theories grew more and more abstract as she plodded along. Her notions of what Rick must have been doing and thinking, and why, grew more and more complex and less and less solidly based on what she knew of the young Earther. Then suddenly she was jarred back to reality.

Another pattern of footprints lay before her, coming on a slant from her left—from the valley end, that is. It represented the trail of several people and joined the one she was following, completely concealing it. She looked ahead to pick up her

Type IV pattern where it emerged on the other side of the interference, and discovered with a shock that it didn't.

The implications were obvious but she resisted them. Instead of calling Talles at once, she devoted several minutes to a careful examination of the moonsoil and its impressions. When she finally made the call, discouragement was back in her voice at full strength.

"Chief, sir—and Orm if you can hear me—cancel this one. We're wrong again."

Talles smothered a tortured curse.

"Explain!"

"Our quarry came from the direction of the valley with a group of either eight or nine people. He left them at the place where I am now. He was actually with them, not a latecomer following the track of an earlier party. Some of his prints are under theirs and some on top. This trail certainly isn't Rick's."

"All right." Talles had got hold of himself. Evenly he said, "Stay where you are, Marie, and I'll pick you up. Then we'll go after Orm—or can any of you others make radio contact with him? He's out of touch with me."

For several seconds the communication spectrum was crowded as everyone called Orm. No answer came. Apparently he was still in radio shadow. Talles spoke again after a brief wait.

"Marie, I can't see you and don't

know just where you are. If you can see me, give me a flash."

The girl unclipped a pencil-sized tube from the waist of her suit, aimed it at the distant vehicle, pressed a switch. Bright as it was, the beam was, of course, invisible to her in the vacuum. She waved the tube gently in both planes. In a few seconds Jim spoke again.

"Good. I have you zeroed. Stand by—I'll be there in two minutes."

He fulfilled the promise. Marie swung up into the cab as the vehicle pulled up beside her. He had been unable to think of anything consoling to say. She would have to live with the collapse of hope, the bitter letdown. He had been getting optimistic himself about the trail that had petered out. Well, he told himself, nothing to do but keep trying.

"Where is Orm? You'd better drive, Marie, and head us as close as you can to where you think he ought to be."

She slipped into the control seat he had vacated. "Let's see—I came from over there, and he was going—yes, that way—" She swung the vehicle smoothly and let it build up speed.

"You're sure?" Jim's question was purely rhetorical. He did not expect more than a rhetorical answer. He certainly did not expect what he got.

"Well—" She gestured vaguely ahead, toward a hillock that would have seemed part of the more dis-

tant backdrop of the south rim to an eye unfamiliar with lunar scenery. "That's where we . . . Wait a minute!" To Marie's credit, the crawler did not swerve as the idea struck her. "I've just thought of something. The ground right outside North-Down is packed solid for hundreds of yards around. It hasn't taken a new print since the Mark Twenty crawler came out. Right? We knew the direction to Pic G from experience but Rick knew it only from maps. So if there were no footprints or anything to guide him, how did he know which way to start walking?"

That question, too, must have been rhetorical. Certainly the girl gave Jim Talles no time to answer it, if he had an answer available. She kept right on talking, thinking aloud. The man recognized the symptoms. Marie had fallen in love with an idea again. He tried to muster some defenses but it was difficult. The kid, as usual, was being reasonable as well as enthusiastic. She was still chattering as they reached the hillock and started up. Talles managed to get in a few words now and then but they were vague ones like ". . . you still can't be sure." Such objections did not impress Marie. She was sure enough. He got in a few more words near the top of the hill. But by the time they were over it and back in touch with Orm Hoffman, Talles had pretty much decided to go along with her.

The idea of breaking up an orderly and organized search pattern on the chance that she was right seemed unsafe. If she were not right, the error could be fatal.

On the other hand if she were right and he did not follow her lead, the result could be just as fatal.

THE TRAIL Orm had been pursuing swept on past the next hilltop and apparently over the crater's south rim. They never did find out who had made it, or when, or why. Orm had the sense not to go beyond the second hill without making another radio check, so when they did reestablish contact with him he was already coming back. This saved time, which ballooned Marie's already surging morale even more.

Twenty-five minutes after the girl had her inspiration the crawler was approaching the valley mouth with eight of the *Footprints* group aboard.

Jim Talles had been in touch with the team still at GA. Although they were in radio shadow by intent, one of them had come up to the rim to make a routine safety report. Jim had salved his conscience by telling them to stay and carry on with Aichi's project but to be ready to resume the search in Picard G if the new idea collapsed. He also called the two searchers still in Taruntius X and told them to continue their hunt back to

North-Down. Privately he decided that if this idea of Marie's did not crystallize he would declare a full emergency and get more help.

Evelyn Suspee, afterward, was to have great difficulty understanding Talles' attitude. She had been convinced that Rick was somewhere in town and was not told about his misadventure until much later. After getting over the first shock, she reacted most to what she called the cold-bloodedness of Aichi and his friends. It was a long time before she could admit that a civilized human being could have put anything at all ahead of an all-out search for her missing son. And a certain coolness toward her brother-in-law for allowing anything else persisted even longer.

Talles' insistence that there had not been a genuine emergency until the very end carried little weight with her. She was culturally conditioned to values and priorities differing from those of moon-dwellers. Their experience-dictated credo was that anything resembling panic is to be avoided at all costs, frantic efforts are to be avoided even in the most trying circumstances, and work must go on if humanly possible. Only imminent loss of life or limb could justify taking citizens from their labors by declaring an emergency.

While Jim Talles fully recognized the threat to Rick's life, neither Jim nor his young cohort considered the threat that immediate. If Rick's

suit had failed, he could not be helped. If the suit were whole, he still should have oxygen enough to last a few hours.

Talles took over the driving after the crawler reached the valley. He sent Marie back into the trailer with the others to do some map work. Half an hour took the crawler through the valley and into Taruntius X. Once out on the plain, however, Jim did not continue toward Wilsonburg. He turned to his right and followed the irregular north side of the area for some five miles. Then he turned right once more along another valley, one that led northwest to the Lick E mines. At that point the search party began to implement Marie's plan.

Instead of dropping them off in pairs, Talles had the entire group spread across the width of the valley and start toward Lick E. He eased the vehicle along in the central, heavily trodden path, keeping pace with the young hikers on either side. They were going slowly enough to make sure that they missed no print of a Style IV boot of the size appropriate for a 16-C-A space suit.

Fortunately Rick was rather small for his age. Most adults took a considerably larger suit, which meant that boot patterns of his type and size were relatively rare. They could easily be noticed when going off the main road on solo prospecting expeditions. Two such sets

were encountered during the first half-dozen miles. They were quickly identified as having been made by the members of the *Footprints* group themselves.

The valley floor narrowed then for a distance of some miles. Since there was less width of ground to be inspected, the searchers made good speed. Then the valley opened out and they had to slow down even though they paid most attention to the right side. On the theory that Rick had gone this way by mistake, he would have assumed that he was entering Picard G at the valley mouth. Hence, he would presumably have turned right—toward where he would have expected GA to be.

The widening of the valley allowed the "road" to spread, and many more individual footprints became distinguishable. This slowed things down even further. Jim Talles changed his technique, running the crawler half a mile ahead and getting out to search himself until the group caught up, then repeating the process.

Speed was down to about five miles an hour. Nearly two hours passed in this fashion. They were now well out of the valley and slowing down even more as they struggled to cover an ever-widening front—in fact, progress might better have been expressed in square miles per hour. Even Marie's bubbling mixture of enthusiasm and confidence was begin-

ning to go a little flat once more, sure as she still felt that Rick must have come this way. All of the searchers were bone-tired and hungry. Talles reached the decision that it would be best to break off, alert the authorities by radio, then drive the kids back to town. He opened his mouth to broadcast the call-in—and at that instant Peter Willett's voice came crackling over the communicator.

"Hey—here's a track! Breaking right out of the packed lane! Take a look."

ORM reached the place first, examined the evidence. Excitedly he called, "Peter's got something. Wherever it crosses other prints, it's on top. The right size and style—and it's turning off to the east. We'll have to chase this one."

"Marie, you and Orm follow it," Talles ordered. "The rest of you get into the trailer and rest for a while. If this one peters out we'll have to go back and call for an emergency rescue party. I know you all have plenty of oxygen, but you can't do a good job indefinitely without food and rest. Get aboard. Orm and Marie, lead on."

THE two space-suited figures hustled along the line of Style IV footprints. Orm was still placidly doing a job. Marie, though, was once more effervescent. She had to be right, she told herself.

This had to be Rick's trail.

It was.

The searchers reached the spot where Rick had paused for the second time—they had missed the one where he had slept. After unsuccessfully trying to locate him visually from some high ground, they followed his abrupt turn from the edge of the plain toward the hill where the Ranger lens had landed. There were, as Rick had noticed, no other tracks there. So for the moment there was no way to be sure that this one was recent except for the back-trail evidence. At any rate, it was the most recent track in the vicinity to have left the main path to Lick E.

They followed the prints up the hill to the Ranger relic. All of them knew where they were. All had seen the historical monument before, and while not completely indifferent to it they were far more concerned with the trail. This, of course, vanished on the packed area near the wall. They piled out of the crawler and gathered around the spot where the prints disappeared.

"It shouldn't be hard to find which way he went," Peter said. "Just walking around the edge of the packed ground should do it."

Talles had his doubts. "Marie, you got us this far. Which way, do you think, would he have gone from here?"

The girl's expression could not be seen inside her helmet but there

was no trace of uncertainty in her voice.

"With all that map study, Rick certainly knows where this monument is. He would have had two choices of what to do next. So when he got here, he must have realized his mistake. The sensible one would have been to go back to North-Down the way he came."

"Which he didn't," Orm said acidly.

"Correct—because what seems sensible to us may not seem sensible to him," Marie said. "The other thing he'd have thought of would be to cut over to Pic G straight across the hills. Look east, there. This landing scar would have given him the direction if he didn't have it already. And that first ridge is only four or five miles away. He must be lost on those hills somewhere. Look for his prints going east."

A straightforward enough suggestion, but a complication arose in carrying it out. No one looks directly at the sun from the moon any more than one does from Earth. The searchers had not noticed before, but the general illumination had been fading during the last hour. Everyone had known perfectly well why Aichi Yen had set up his apparatus when he did; they had all heard him remark, as they had left Picard G, that the eclipse would be full in only a few hours more. Nevertheless the dwindling light took the group by surprise.

As they started eastward along the wall to carry out Marie's suggestion, someone exclaimed that it was getting hard to see. Nine pairs of eyes lifted to look through the heavy filters on the top of as many face-plates as nine space-suited figures turned to face west.

For Jim Talles one glance was enough.

"Quick!" he roared. "Orm and Marie, carry on. Check your temperature controls. Call back if the prints are there. I don't want anyone outside but you two. The rest of you get back into the trailer. We'll have to carry on with the crawler's lights, if we can do so at all. The ground ahead is strange to most of you, and we could lose track of someone who went outside the sweep of the lights . . ."

TALLES was obeyed without question. As he climbed into the cab, Marie's voice reached him. "They're here! Come on!"

The remaining sliver of sun was narrowed rapidly now, the scarlet ring of Earth's sunlit atmosphere providing more and more of the total illumination. Jim switched on the main driving lights before he started the motors, and suddenly the ruby-lit landscape outside the illuminated swath was hard to see. He swung the vehicle toward the east. The lights picked out the two figures a few yards from the end of the wall. One was standing, beckoning to them. The smaller was al-

ready picking its way along the re-located trail. Talles thought of having the two come back into the cab and do the tracking from its vantage, but he dismissed the idea. Not all the moon's surface takes footprints. Breaks in the trail could be handled more surely, and even more quickly, by trackers on foot. It was even possible, especially if Rick had changed his direction at a bad spot, that the whole party would have to fan out once more to recover the trail.

Before they were half a mile from the Ranger relic, all sunlight was gone. The landscape beyond the headlights was just barely visible, lit by the circle of crimson fire that marked Earth's position halfway down the western sky. The awed youngsters in the trailer were silent. Jim, facing east and driving, had little chance to look at the magnificent display.

The search party crept on, across four miles of gently rolling plain, around occasional craterlets, toward the ridges separating them from Picard G and the valley route Rick should have taken. Even Talles, by now, had lost his doubt. He was convinced this was Rick's trail they were following.

As they reached the hills and the slopes grew steeper, new troubles developed. The comparatively loose material that took footprints so well began to give way to bare rock. The breaks in the trail that Talles had foreseen became more and more

numerous. The searchers had to take to their feet once more, headlights supplemented by individual flashlights. Sometimes the track would be recovered two minutes after a break, sometimes not for ten; but the author of the footprints had evidently been determined to keep going east. This conviction always, in the end, let the hunters find the prints again.

By the time they reached the top of the first ridge, the eclipse was nearly over. The bottom of the crimson circle was showing the astonishing "ruby ring" phenomenon. It was a beautiful sight. Yet Marie did not so much as glance back at it. Well ahead of the others, she reached the top of the ridge. For just a moment she stood looking down and ahead, into another valley. It led back to her right, to the Wilsonburg-Picard G road. Beyond other ridges she could glimpse Picard G itself. Taruntius X was still out of sight around the shoulder of the hill to her right. Poor as the seeing still was, it was good enough to remind Marie that getting the first ridge out of the way meant more area in line-of-sight, therefore in communicator reach. On impulse she cried out:

"Rick! Can you hear us?"

The others, still below the crest, heard her call. They did not dare speak themselves for fear of drowning out any answer Marie might be getting. They simply hurried as fast

as they could to catch up with her. The girl, therefore, was the only one to hear all of the answer.

"Marie! Where have you been? Down in GA? I've been calling off and on ever since I could see Pic G, but no one has answered."

Her laugh was like a sob. Tears of relief streamed down her cheeks.

"Oh, Rick! We're behind you. We followed you from the Ranger relic. We're just at the ridge from where we can see over to Pic G. How far ahead of it are you?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. I reached that ridge maybe half an hour before the eclipse started." It must have been longer than that, Marie thought. Otherwise he would have heard our radio talk when we first came out of the valley. Rick was saying, "I kept on as well as I could toward Picard, but you can't hold to a straight line among these hills even when you can see. With the sunlight gone it was even harder. I've gone pretty straight though, I think, and have crossed a couple more ridges, so I should be between you and Pic G about—oh, maybe halfway there."

Jim Talles was on the crest by now, like all the others, and heard the last few sentences. Happy now, his tensions wonderfully eased, he took over the conversation.

"All right, Rick, the safest thing now is for you to hold up. Don't try to find the rest of the way to Pic G. It's a wonder you got as far as you have—I can't imagine whether it's

luck that's kept you out of a bubble, or what. I wish I knew how you managed to duck them in the dark. But you stay right where you are. Even when full light comes back, just stand by until we reach you. You understand?"

But this time there was no answer.

V

TALLES followed his own advice. He made the group stay where it was until sunlight returned. Then, with everyone riding, he struck out eastward toward Picard G. The footprints were now few and far between; this side of the ridge had little soft soil even in the hollows. It was not, for now, a matter of following a trail but of interpreting a report, filling in its broad gaps with guesses at what Rick would have done in a particular situation. Jim had developed a healthy respect for Marie's judgment on this point since she had been proven right in her major theory; his respect was shared by all the others. Where there was disagreement, Marie's word carried the weight.

A couple of ridges. Did that also mean "two" to Earthers? Marie thought so, and they acted accordingly.

Straight toward Pic G. But the visible part of Picard G filled thirty degrees of horizon. Which point would Rick have decided was nearest?

Halfway. On what basis? What would have looked like halfway from the ridge? What seemed like half the necessary walking to Rick after groping around in near-darkness for more than two hours? Even Marie felt unsure about that one.

They finally stopped at what they guessed might have been the place from which they had heard Rick's voice. They were grimly aware that they were only guessing. The ground was rocky, did not readily show prints. They parked the crawler and spread out.

Even in sunlight, many parts of the moon are hard to search effectively. This was certainly one of them. Moon shadows are intensely dark, since scattered light from the landscape does little to make up for scattered light from the sky. A dark patch may prove to be the foot-wide opening of a bubble deep enough to contain a person—or a three-inch-deep crater if the lighting is low enough. It is seldom possible to be sure of anything from a distance and, even for moon dwellers, distance itself is hard to judge.

There was one easy way to hunt, though. Searchers could go to the top of each hill in the neighborhood and call Rick on the communicators. This was soon done—the only trouble being that it did not work. Either he was far enough away to be in radio shadow from all the places tried, or he was trapped in some local bit of radio shadow such as a bubble. It was the latter like-

lihood that made detailed searching necessary.

With nine people it does not take long to closely examine, say, a football field. However, a very large number of football fields can be fitted into a single square mile—many more football fields than there could possibly be half-hours left by now in Rick's oxygen cart-ridge. None of the searchers, other than Jim, had even seen a football field but they all had equally valid mental similes for the job facing them—and the time left to do it in. By reasonable criteria, Rick had about eleven hours of oxygen left. That estimate might not be too accurate, of course; they had no data on his basic consumption rate. There might be one or even two hours more; there might, if he had been particularly active, be considerably less. Nobody spent much time thinking about the latter possibility but all did force their weary selves to move as rapidly as possible . . .

One hour's work. Six fissures, about forty dark patches to make sure of, two bubbles—empty. Move the crawler.

A second hour. Two fissures, one bubble, twelve patches.

A third hour. No fissures, a dozen loose rocks at the foot of a slope, with no way of telling how long they had been there. Two bubbles near the top of the same slope. Eight hours left, more or less—emergency? Talles drove to a

hilltop to request help from town, the request going via the Picard G relay network.

A fourth hour, with fewer workers. Talles flatly ordered three of the searchers to rest in the trailer. They were dangerously close to utter exhaustion.

A fifth hour.

A sixth. Talles could not see Marie's face clearly, or he would have tried to order her to rest also in spite of his knowledge that she would refuse. Moon-dweller or not, he himself was getting panicky at this point. Somehow the air in his own suit felt stale and oppressive, not quite up to keeping him going.

The remaining searchers were reaching their absolute limit. They had had neither food nor sleep for a good eighteen hours. Yet they insisted on carrying on, even after two dozen fresh searchers arrived from the town.

That was another thing Rick's stepmother could never understand: why so few were sent out in answer to the emergency call. She could not grasp the fact that most of the jobs in a moon settlement are essential to its survival and the survival of everyone in it. There is some leeway, to be sure. People need recreation as much on the moon as on Earth, and even moon-dwellers get ill at times. Still, with a small population completely dependent on a high-level technology, it is not possible to spare many individuals at one time for an unsched-

uled activity of unpredictable duration.

The additional searchers who did arrive had no more success than the *Footprints* crew.

"He just can't be in this area!" Marie said at last. "My guess is that we lost contact because he started back to meet us before you finished talking. He must have been right on the edge of a radio shadow. Chief—everybody—these new people won't find him. You know they can't. It's up to us. We understand him. We figured out what he did, and got this close to him. We're the only ones who can get close to him again."

"You could be right," Talles admitted. He was as weary and discouraged as any of the youngsters—and as determined to keep searching. "Marie, you calculated where we should look for him—led us into radio contact. Can you do it again? Can you tell what Rick did after that one message? And what happened to prevent his answering me a few seconds later?"

"I've been trying," she said impatiently. "I've told you what I think. He must have started back toward us the second I told him we were behind him. His course took him downward, obviously, into radio shadow. We've passed places where he could have been that would have cut him off the moment he started downhill."

"Why didn't he go back up when he found himself in shadow?"

"Because he didn't know you had more to say. You told him not to go on—you didn't say until the end of your message that he was to stay put. I'm betting he didn't hear that. Actually I could see four hilltops from where we were then which were just barely sticking over nearer ridges. He could have been on any one of them. We've covered the area of two since then, including the one I still think was most likely."

"Have you figured out why he didn't meet us, if he was coming back for that purpose?"

"He could have stepped into a collapsed bubble, which I don't think he'd do—or he could have broken through a new one. We haven't found him in any bubble hole, though. Possibly he simply got led off by the ground. Personally, I think it would be best just to backtrack to those hilltops, particularly to the one where I think he was, and see where he would be most likely to go at each choice."

TALLES NODDED, remembered that his helmet was not following his head motion, and made the affirmative hand gesture.

"Right. Or at least reasonable," he agreed. "Just the same, it seems pretty likely that he's had some sort of accident. Otherwise, the chances are, he'd have come within radio range of someone hours ago. If the accident occurred at the beginning, just as he started back toward us—

well, he should still be somewhere around here. It seems to me we should keep at what we're doing right now—search this area. It's the best chance."

"Maybe," returned Marie. "But it would make sense for at least one person to follow back and try my idea. I'd be willing to go by myself—" She fell silent. She knew the dangers of traveling alone on moon territory. She was putting Jim Talles in a completely impossible position.

But Talles didn't consider it impossible. He didn't even stop to think. "Take the crawler," he said.

Marie stood motionless for perhaps a second, a startled expression behind her face plate. Then she whirled and leaped toward the vehicle.

"Just don't turn your brains off," he added as she swung into the cab. Then the machine was rolling smoothly away behind its shadow toward the hilltop where they had started searching. It stayed in sight for several minutes, finally vanished over a ridge.

A sensibly calculated risk, Talles told himself. Even if he had to worry now about two kids instead of one.

A seventh hour.

An eighth and ninth. Another small group of helpers arrived, with the cheerful news that they had seen nothing of either Marie or the crawler, much less of Rick. The news was cheerful only because

Talles was able to convince himself that it meant the girl must have found a reasonable branch-off point on the backtrail. The orderly search went on.

Peter Willett caught the first glimpse of the returning crawler. He was so nearly asleep that it took him several seconds to digest what his eyes were trying to tell him. The reaction of Jim Talles to Peter's call was almost as slow. Jim had managed to make the young people take some sort of rest in brief shifts but had had none himself. He watched the slowly approaching machine for perhaps half a minute before finding his voice.

"Marie! Have you found him? Is he all right?" Then, as he took in the astonishingly slow speed at which the machine was approaching, he croaked, "What's wrong?"

"Sorry, Uncle Jim," came Rick's voice. "Marie is asleep. She told me which way to go and explained the crawler's controls, then just could not stay awake. Say, I'm not very good at driving this thing. Maybe I'd better stop here and let you come and take over."

FOUR hours later, at North-Down, Marie was awake enough to make light of the matter.

"Once you understand how a fellow thinks, it's easy enough to guess what he'll do. The only really difficult choice after I took the crawler was my first one, between a fairly wide and level gully that led

Why Do You Have A Poor Memory?

A noted publisher in Chicago reports there is a simple technique for acquiring a powerful memory which can pay you real dividends in both business and social advancement and works like magic to give you added poise, necessary self-confidence and greater popularity.

According to this publisher, many people do not realize how much they could influence others simply by remembering accurately everything they see, hear, or read. Whether in business, at social functions or even in casual conversations with new acquaintances, there are ways in which you can dominate each situation by your ability to remember.

To acquaint the readers of this publication with the easy-to-follow rules for developing skill in remembering anything you choose to remember, the publishers have printed full details of their self-training method in a new booklet, "Adventures in Memory," which will be mailed free to anyone who requests it. No obligation. Send your name, address, and zip code to: Memory Studies, 555 E. Lange St., Dept. 755-20, Mundelein, Ill. 60060. A postcard will do.

southwest and a narrow one that went more nearly west, the way Rick would want to go. I didn't think the narrow one would go through, so I picked the other. I still don't know whether Rick wasted any time on the dead end. At the next guessing point I had a footprint to help, but it was wrong. Rick must have started one way and then changed his mind. Another blind alley. After that it was easy, until I came to a fault where you could see the sun coming through—it had to be a clear path west. Part way through it there's a thirty-foot downstep in loose soil, and I could see where the edge had broken away—"

"Bixby's Grave," remarked one of her adult listeners. "How did he get that far off course?"

"That whole area is mostly fault cracks," pointed out Marie. "Most of the time the sun can't be seen, and sunlight on rocks overhead can be very tricky. Anyway, Rick had left prints in the gully, so I knew I was right by then. It was too narrow for the crawler and I'd gone in on foot. I didn't dare follow Rick over the edge. But I flashed my light on the walls over the step, and he saw it and flashed his. So I went back to the crawler and got a rope and that was all."

"All?" asked Jim Talles. "I wouldn't say so."

"Well, except for the luck. Rick said he'd been asleep down there for a while—the other end was

blocked, and the crack the sun was shining through didn't come within forty feet of his level. If he'd been asleep when I flashed my light, he'd be there now and I'd still be looking for the other end of the crack so as to guess my way away from him. But how did you know about that? Or were you guessing, too?"

"That wasn't what I had in mind; I neither knew nor guessed. I—"

"I know what I want you to tell me," cut in Jeb McCulloch. "I know you were right, but what made you decide that Rick had gone along the road to Lick E instead of the way up to Pic G as had been planned? I imagine that's what Jim would like you to explain, though I realize he must know the answer."

"Easy enough," Marie D'Nombu smiled. "Which way is Pic G from North-Down?"

"Straight north, of course."

"Right. And Rick knew that from the maps. How did you find north, Rick?"

The boy was surprised. "North Star, of course. You can see—"

Marie shook her head, and grinned at McCulloch.

"No, Rick. It's too bad you didn't get here and start your hike a couple of hours later. Polaris would have been set by then, instead of hanging right above Lick E Pass—and when you couldn't find it you might have remembered that it isn't the North Star here." •



IF EVER I SHOULD LEAVE YOU

*He gave himself to her for all
eternity—but could she last?*

PAMELA SARGENT

WHEN Yuri walked away from the Time Station for the last time, his face was pale marble, his body hardly more than bones barely held together by skin and the few muscles he had left. I ran to him and grasped his arm, oblivious of the people passing in the street. He resisted my touch at first, embarrassed, then he gave in, leaning against me as we began the walk home.

I knew he was too weak to go to the Time Station again. His body, resting against mine, seemed almost weightless. I guided him

through the park toward our unit-house. Halfway there he tugged at my dress and we rested against one of the crystalline trees bordering a small lake.

Yuri had aged rapidly in the last six months, transforming from a young man into an aged creature hardly able to walk by himself. I had expected that, of course—one cannot hold off old age indefinitely even now. But I could not accept it. His death could be no more than days away. *You can't leave me now, not after two centuries*, I wanted to scream. Instead I helped him sit

down next to the tree, then squatted at his side.

His blue eyes, once clear and bright, now watery with age and imbedded in a network of wrinkles, watched me. He reached inside his shirt and fumbled for something. I had always teased Yuri about his shirts; sooner or later he would tear them along the shoulder seams while flexing the muscles of his broad back and sturdy arms. But now those shirts, like his skin, hung on his bones in loose folds. At last he found what he was looking for, a crumpled sheet of paper that he pressed into my hand with trembling fingers.

"Take care of this," he whispered to me. "Copy it, so you'll never lose the information. All the coordinates are there, all the places and times I visited these past months. When you're lonely, when you need me, go to the Time Station and you'll be able to join me on the other side." He was trying to comfort me. He had been at the Time Station every day for the past six months, traveling to various points in the past. Thanks to the coordinate listing he had made, I could elect to travel to any of the same points and therefore be with him at those times. It suddenly struck me to attempt such reunions was a mad idea, an insane and desperate course.

"What happens to me?" I asked, clutching the paper. "What am I like when I'm with you? You've al-

ready seen me all those times. What do I do, what happens to me?"

"I can't tell you, you know that. You have to decide of your own free will whether or not to chance it. Otherwise the process doesn't work. I must not say anything that might affect your choice."

I looked away from him and toward the lake. Two golden swans glided by. The water barely rippled in their wake. Their shapes blurred and I realized I was crying silently. Yuri's blue-veined hand rested on my shoulder.

"Please, Nanette. You make it harder for me."

At last the tears stopped. I reached over and stroked his hair, once thick and blond, now thin and white. Only a year before we had come to this same tree, our bodies shiny with lake water after a moonlight swim, and had made love in the darkness. We were as young as everyone else, confident that we would live forever, forgetting that our bodies could not be rejuvenated indefinitely.

"I'm not really leaving you," said Yuri. His arms held me firmly and for a moment I thought his strength had returned. "Whenever you need me, you'll find me on the other side of the Time Station. Think of it that way."

"All right," I said, trying to smile. "Sure." I nestled against him, my head on his chest, listening to his once-strong heart as it

thumped against my ear.

Yuri died that night, only a few hours after we returned home.

THE relationships among our friends had been an elaborate but ever-changing web, couples breaking up and combining with others in a new pattern. We were all perpetually young and time had seemed to stretch ahead of us with no end. Throughout all of this, Yuri and I stayed together, the strands of our love becoming stronger instead of more tenuous. A shy, frightened girl when I met Yuri, I had been attracted by his boldness; he had appeared at my door one day, introduced himself. He told me a friend had made him promise he would get together with me. I could not have looked particularly attractive with my slouched bony body, my curly black hair that would not stay out of my face, my long legs marked with bruises by my clumsiness. But Yuri had loved me on sight and in time I had discovered that his boldness was the protective covering of a thoughtful and sensitive person.

Our lives had become intertwined so tightly that, after a while, they were one life. It was inconceivable that anything could separate us. Our daily existence, true, may have lacked the excitement many others knew. For with almost three centuries to live at the full height of one's physical and mental powers, and the freedom to live several dif-

ferent kinds of lives, changing one's profession and pursuits every twenty or thirty years, it was unlikely that anyone would choose to couple with the same person throughout. Yet Yuri and I had clung to each other, even through our changes, falling in love over and over again. We were lucky, I had thought. Supremely lucky.

But now that Yuri was gone, I told myself that we had been fools. I could lead only half a life after his death. I was a ghost myself, wandering from friend to friend seeking consolation, then isolating myself in my house for days, unwilling to see anyone.

Still there was solace in the knowledge that in a sense I could rejoin him if I had to. I had only to walk over to the Time Station, give them the coordinates he had listed for me, and I would be with him again, at least for a little while. Yet during those first weeks alone I could not bring myself to take the step. The fact is that *he's gone*, I would remind myself angrily. The rest is illusion. *You must learn to live without him.* And when I would retort, *why? You have no life alone. Whether he is illusion or not, go to him.*

I began to wander past the Time Station, testing my resolve. I would walk almost to the door, within sight of the technicians, then retreat, racing home, my hands shaking, my mind shrieking. *Yuri!*

At last, one unhappy lonely

morning I charged through the glassy doorway of the Time Station and into the empty hall. Time portals surrounded me on all sides—silvery cubicles into which people could step, then disappear. A female technician approached me, silently offering assistance. I motioned her away and went over to one of the unoccupied cubicles. I snatched the precious paper from my pocket, stared at the first set of coordinates. I stepped inside the cubicle, reciting the coordinates aloud—time, place, duration of stay.

Suddenly I felt as though my body were being thrown through space, as though my limbs were being torn from my torso. The walls around me had vanished. The violent sensations lasted only an instant. Astounded, I looked around. I was now standing near a small, clear pool of water shadowed by palm trees.

I turned from the pool. Before me stretched a desolate waste, a rocky desert bleached almost white by the sun. I retreated further into the shade of the oasis, kneeled by the pool.

"Yuri," I whispered, dipping my hand into the coolness of the water. A pebble suddenly danced across the silvery surface. The ripples it made mingled with those my hand had created.

I lifted my head. Yuri stood only a few feet away. He had barely begun to age. His face was still

young, skin drawn tight across high cheekbones. His hair was only lightly speckled with silver.

"Yuri," I whispered again. I ran to him.

AFTER we swam we sat next to each other beneath the palms, our feet in the water. I was intoxicated with joy. Yuri smiled at me and skipped pebbles across the pool. My mind reeled drunkenly and whispered, *he's alive, he's here with you, and he'll be with you in a hundred other places at a hundred other times.*

Yuri started to whistle a tune, one I had heard from him for as long as I had known him. I pursed my lips and tried to whistle along with him but failed, as I always had.

"You'll never learn to whistle," he said. "You've had more than two hundred years and you still haven't figured it out."

"I will," I replied. "I've done everything else I ever wanted to do and I can't believe a simple thing like whistling is going to defeat me."

"You'll never learn," he teased.

"I will."

"You won't." He laughed.

I raised my feet, then lowered them forcefully, splashing us both. Yuri let out a yell and I scrambled to my feet, stumbled into my sandals and tried to run. He grabbed me around the waist. "I ought to spank you," he said. "Instead, I

think I'll kiss you."

The long kiss was delightful.

"But I still say you won't learn how," he whispered, eyes twinkling.

I pursed my lips to try again . . . and Yuri disappeared. My time was up. Once more I was thrown and torn.

I was in the cubicle once more.

I left the Time Station and walked home alone.

I BECAME a spendthrift, visiting the Time Station several times a week. Yuri and I met on the steps of a deserted Mayan pyramid; we argued about the mathematical theories of his friend Alney while jungle birds shrieked around us. I packed a few of his favorite foods and wines and met him in a Hawaii still awaiting the arrival of its first inhabitants. We sat together on a high rocky cliff in Africa. Far below us apelike creatures with bone weapons hunted for food.

In my real-time existence I became busy again, working with a group designing dwelling-places inside the enormous trees that surrounded the city. By tinkering with sequoia genes, the biologists had created these gigantic trees hundreds of years before reverse-time travel had been developed. The trunks were partially hollow, and it was possible to live inside them without harming the trees. Because of the pressing housing shortage, the work was considered important.

I would hurry to the Time Station with my sketches of various designs, anxious to ask Yuri for advice or suggestions.

But I had to watch Yuri age, as I had watched before.

Each time I saw him, he was a little older, a little weaker. The fact was that going into the past meant seeing him age all over again. After a while our visits took on a tone of desperation. He grew more cautious about our choice of times and sites, advising me to meet him on deserted island beaches or inside empty summer homes of the twentieth century. Our talks with each other became more careful as I grew afraid of arguing too vigorously with him and thus wasting the little time we had left together. Yuri noticed this and understood what it meant.

"Maybe I was wrong," Yuri said to me after I showed him the final plans for the tree dwellings. I had been overly animated, trying to be cheerful, ignoring the signs of age that reminded me of his death to come. I couldn't fool him. We had been together too long for that. "I wanted to make it easier for you to live without me, Nanette. But maybe I made things worse. If I hadn't planned these visits, possibly you would have recovered by now . . ."

"Don't," I whispered. We were on a ledge near a deserted stretch of beach in southern France, hiding ourselves behind huge boulders from the family picnicking below

us. "Don't worry about me, please."

"You've got to face it. I can't make too many more of these journeys. I'm growing weaker."

I tried to say something but my vocal cords seemed locked, frozen inside my throat. The voices of the frolicking children on the beach reached my ears with piercing clarity. I wondered idly if any of them would survive the coming war.

Yuri held my hand, opened his lips to say something else, then vanished. I clutched at the empty air in desperation. "No!" I screamed. "Not yet! Come back!"

I found myself once again at the Time Station.

I had been a spendthrift. Now I became a miser, going to the Station only once or twice a month, trying to stretch out the remaining time I could spend with Yuri. I was no longer working on the tree dwellings. We had finished our designs and now those who enjoyed working with their hands would undertake the construction.

A paralysis seized me. I would spend days alone in my house, unable even to dress myself, wandering from one room to another. I would sleep fitfully, then rise and after sitting idly for hours alone would fall asleep again.

Once I forced myself to walk to the Slumber House and asked them to put me to sleep for a month. I felt no different after awakening

but at least I had been able to pass that lonely month in unconsciousness. I went to the Time Station, visited Yuri, returned to the Slumber House, asked for another month of oblivion. When I awoke the second time two men were standing over me shaking their heads. They told me I would have to see a Counselor before they would put me to sleep again.

I had been a Counselor once myself, and I knew all their tricks and wanted none of them. Instead, I trudged home and there waited out the time between my visits.

The back-travel could not go on indefinitely. The list of remaining coordinates grew shorter. At last there was only one set left. I knew I would see Yuri once more only.

WE MET at a lovely summer home that overlooked a picturesque river. It was autumn there and Yuri began to shiver in the cool air. I managed to open the back door. We walked in, careful not to disturb anything.

Yuri lay down on one of the couches. Outside, the thickly wooded area that surrounded the house was bright with color—orange, red, yellow. A half-grown fawn with white spots on his back peered in through a window, then disappeared among the trees.

"Do you regret anything?" Yuri suddenly asked. I sat down on the couch, stroked his white hair and managed a smile.

"Nothing."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," I said, trying to keep my voice from quavering.

"I have one regret—that I didn't meet you sooner!"

"I know." We had talked about our first meeting at least a thousand times. The conversation had become a ritual, but we never tired of it. "You were so blatant, Yuri. Coming to my door like that, out of nowhere. I thought you were a little crazy."

He smiled up at me and repeated what he had said then. "Hello. I'm Yuri Malenkov. A—a friend of mine made me promise to look you up. Do you mind if I join you for a while?"

"And I was so surprised I let you in."

"And I never left."

"I know, and you're still around." Tears stung my eyes.

"You were the only person I could talk to honestly, right from the beginning."

By then tears were bathing my cheeks. "Yuri! What will I do now? You can't leave me. You can't die again."

"Why torture yourself?" he whispered. "You don't have much longer yourself. Haven't you noticed, darling?"

"What?"

"Get up, Nanette. Look in that mirror over the fireplace."

I walked over to the mirror, stared into it. The signs were un-

mistakeable. My black hair was sprinkled with silver. Tiny lines were etched into the skin around my eyes.

"I'm dying," I said hoarsely. "My body isn't rejuvenating itself any more!" I felt a sudden rush of panic. Then the fear and confusion vanished, replaced by a deep calm. I hurried back to Yuri's side.

"It won't be long," he said. "Try to do something meaningful with those last months. We'll be together again soon, if only in death. Just keep thinking of that."

"All right, Yuri," I whispered. Then I kissed him for the last time.

WHAT WAS I to do with the time left to me? I had trained as a Counselor many years before and had worked as one before choosing a new profession. I decided to draw on my old experience to help those who, like myself, faced death.

I found them for the most part unable to accept their fate. They were used to their youthfulness and their full lives, feeling invulnerable to anything except an accident. The suddenness with which old age descended on them drove some to hysteria and they would concoct wild schemes to bring back their youth. One man, a biologist, spoke to me and then decided to spend his last months in the elusive search for immortality. Another man, who had recently fallen in love with a young girl, cried on my shoulder and I didn't know whether to weep for

him or the girl he was leaving behind. A woman came to me, only seventy and already aging, deprived by fluke of throwback-gene of her normal life span. I began to forget about myself in talking with these people.

Occasionally I would walk through the city and visit old friends. My mind was aging also. On these walks I found myself lost in memories of the past, memories clearer to me now than those of more recent events.

I might have gone on that way, if I had not passed the Time Station one warm evening while sorting my thoughts. As I walked by, I saw Onel Lialla, dressed as a technician, looking much the same as when I had known him.

An idea struck me. Within seconds, it had formed itself in my mind and became an obsession. *I can do it*, I thought, *Onel will not refuse me*.

Onel had been a mathematician. He had left the city a long time before and I had heard nothing of him since. I hurried to his side.

"Onel?"

His large dark eyes turned toward me. Uncertainty was written on his classically handsome face. Then he recognized me.

He clasped my arms. He said nothing at first, perhaps embarrassed by the signs of my approaching death. "Your smile hasn't changed," he said finally.

We walked toward the park,

talking of old times. I was surprised at how little he had changed. He was still courtly, still fancied himself the young knight in shining armor. The dark eyes still paid me homage in spite of my being an old gray-haired woman. Blinded by his innate romanticism Onel saw only what he wished to see.

Twenty years before, barely more than a boy, Onel had fallen in love with me. It had not taken me long to realize that, being a romantic, he did not really wish to attain the object of his affections and had probably unconsciously settled on me because I was so deeply involved with Yuri. Onel was in love with love. He had followed me everywhere, pouring out his heart. I had tried to be kind, not wanting to make him bitter, and had spent as much time as I could in conversation with him about his problems. Onel had finally left the city—"to forget", as he had put it. I let him go, realizing that this too was part of his romantic game.

Onel not only had not forgotten; he remembered every detail. We sat in the park under one of the crystalline willows and he paid court again. "I'm still grateful for your kindness," he said to me. "I swore I would repay it someday. If there's anything I can do for you, I'm yours to command." He sighed dramatically at this point.

"There is something," I replied.

"What is it, Nanette?"

Opportunity had fallen right into

my lap. "I want you," I went on, "to come to the Time Station with me. You're one of the technicians there, aren't you? Well, send me back to this park two hundred and forty years ago. I want to see the scenes of my youth one last time."

Onel was stunned. "You know I can't do that! The portal can't send you to any time you've actually lived through. We'd have people bumping into themselves, or going back to give their earlier selves advice. Impossible!"

"The portal can be overridden," I said. "You know how. Send me through."

"I can't, Nanette. Believe me—"

"Onel, I don't want to change anything. I don't even want to talk to anybody."

"If you changed the past . . ."

"I won't. Why should I? I had a happy life. Besides, I'll go back to a day when I wasn't in the park. It would give me a little pleasure before I die to see things as they were. Is that asking too much?"

"I can't," he said. "Don't ask it of me. Please."

Finally he gave in, as I knew he would. We made our way to the Station. Hands shaking, Onel adjusted a portal and sent me through.

HE HAD given me four hours. I appeared in the park behind a large red refreshment tent. Inside the tent people sat at small round tables enjoying delicacies and oc-

asionally rising to sample the pink wine that flowed from a fountain in the center. As a girl I had cooked in that tent, removing raw foodstuffs from the transformer in the back and spending hours in the kitchen making the desserts, which were my specialty. I had almost forgotten the tents that had been replaced later on by more elaborate structures.

I walked past the red tent toward the lake. It too was as I remembered it, surrounded by oaks and a few weeping willows. Biologists had not yet developed the silvery vines and glittering crystal trees so profuse in later centuries. A peacock strutted past as I headed for a nearby bench. I wanted only to sit for a while near the lake, perhaps visit one of the tents before I returned to my own time.

I watched my feet as I walked, being careful not to stumble. The people in the park ignored me, probably annoyed by the presence of an old woman who reminded them of their eventual fate. Once I had been like them, avoiding those who so obviously would soon be dead, uncomfortable around those who were dying when I had everything ahead of me.

Suddenly a face was in front of me and I collided with a muscular young body. Unable to regain my balance, I fell.

A hand was held out to me. I grasped it and struggled upright. "I'm terribly sorry," said a voice, a

voice I had come to know well, and I looked up at the face with its wide cheekbones and clear blue eyes.

"Yuri!" I blurted.

He was startled. "Do I know you?" he asked.

"I attended one of your lectures," I said quickly, "on holographic art."

He seemed to relax a bit. "I've only given one," he said. "Last week. I'm surprised you remember my name."

"Do you think," I said, anxious now to hang on to him for a while, "you could help me over to that bench?"

"You bet." I hobbled over to it, clinging to his arm. By the time we sat down he was already expanding on points he had covered in the lecture. He was apparently unconcerned about my obvious aging and seemed happy to talk to me.

A thought struck me like a blow: Yuri had not yet met my past self. I had never attended that first lecture—I met him just before he was to do his second. Desperately I tried to remember the date I had given Onel.

I had not counted on this. I was jumpy, worried that I would indeed change something, that by meeting Yuri in the park in this fashion I might somehow prevent his meeting me in the future. I shuddered. I knew little of the circumstances that had brought him to my door. I could somehow be interfering with them.

Yuri finished what he had to say and waited for my reaction. "You have some interesting insights," I said. "I'm looking forward to your next lecture." I smiled and nodded, hoping that he would now leave and go about his business.

Instead he looked at me thoughtfully. "I don't know if I'll give any more lectures," he said.

My stomach turned over. I knew he had given ten more. "Why not?" I asked as calmly as I could.

He shrugged. "Lots of reasons," he muttered.

"Maybe," I said in desperation, "you should talk about it. That might help." Hurriedly I dredged up all the techniques I had learned as a Counselor, carefully questioning him, until at last he opened up, flooding me with his fears and worries.

He became the Yuri I remembered, with an intense and warm sensitivity he concealed under a cold, flippant exterior. He had grown tired of the superficiality of most of the city's citizens, uncomfortable because so many resented his awareness and penetration. He was unsuited to the gaiety and playfulness that surrounded him, wanting to pursue whatever he did with single-minded devotion.

He looked embarrassed after telling me all this, began once more to withdraw behind his shield. "I have some tentative plans," he said calmly, regaining control. "I may be leaving here in a couple of days

with one of the scientific expeditions to Venus. I prefer the company of dedicated people, and I've been offered a place on the ship."

My hands trembled. Neither of us had gone with an expedition until five years after our meeting.

"I'm sorry for bothering you with my problems," he went on. "I don't usually inflict them on strangers, or anyone else for that matter. I'd better be on my way."

He stood up, started to walk off. Why hadn't I thought of it before?

I knew what I had to do.

"Wait!" I cried. "Wait a minute. Do you think you could humor an old lady, maybe take some advice?"

"It depends," he said stiffly, "on the advice."

"I think you need some proper company before you go on that expedition. Do you think you could visit a girl I think might enjoy talking to you?"

His chin lifted. He had the normal reflexes, as well I knew. "A girl? Is she pretty?"

I ducked that one. "She's a lot like you. You'd find her sympathetic." I told him where I had lived then and gave him my name. "But don't let on that an old lady sent you—she might think I'm meddling. Just say it was a friend."

He smiled. "I promise." He turned to leave. "Thank you, friend." I watched him as he ambled down the pebbled path that would lead him to my door. •

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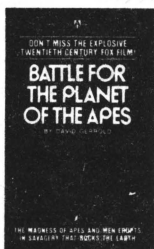
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Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

I'M ASKED a number of questions about reviewing books whenever I'm on a discussion panel or in letters I sometimes get from readers. How do I go about selecting the books for review? Why do I seem to favor certain publishers and writers? How much personal bias goes into the selection? And what makes me so sure my judgment is infallible?

My judgment, of course, isn't infallible. But I'd much rather state my opinions honestly than duck the issue and tell readers nothing at all about a book. The judgments have to be based on my own reactions, rather than on any absolute criteria—and as far as I can I try to state my reasons for feeling as I do

about any book. Naturally, personal bias affects those reactions. I'm biased in favor of science fiction that serves primarily as entertainment. I like a good story, reasonably well told—for me, no amount of message can replace that. I like stories that have satisfactory (though not necessarily happy) endings. I prefer interesting characters doing something that is important to them. And I want to see consistent and well-developed backgrounds. Above all, I want to see something in science fiction that carries me beyond the events and limits of 1974.

Far more books are submitted to me for comment and critique than I have time to read. The ones I do

read—and hence can review—are the ones that arouse my interest from dust-jacket copy, from my experience with the writer and from a hasty scan. (I probably use about the same criteria here as most readers use in buying a book.) For instance, I'll almost always read a book by Anderson, Dickson, Clarke or Simak. Certain writers have disappointed me so often that it takes quite a lot of cover and inside promise to convince me to try. Newer writers I approach with both hope and doubt. I'll read at least part of a new writer's book—but I don't comment on any work I haven't finished, of course, and many lose me before I'm through.

But my first consideration has to be to readers. I've had too many experiences of reading a glowing review of a book that has been off the stands for six months, so I try hard to review books that will be available when this column comes out. That means I favor publishers who get copies to me well ahead of publication date, or those who send me advance galley sheets. (They're harder to read, but those books *will* be on the stands when the reviews are read.) Some publishers don't send me most of their books—I buy a few of these, but don't try to look at all of them. And some who print science fiction seem to send reviewers only their occult books on the assumption that sf and occult are the same. I don't bother much with these.

I also tend to review the softcover books in preference to hardcover ones. First, such books get a lot less reviewing generally. Second, readers can afford to buy a good many more of the cheaper editions. And I usually don't review anthologies because it's impossible to do more than list stories and authors in a brief review—and such a listing means very little. When an anthology is of sufficient value, it takes up most of a monthly column.

I try to review two kinds of books. The first are those so good as entertainment that I want the readers to enjoy them. The second are the ones I find so bad that I want to warn readers not to waste money on them. I'd much rather review the first kind, even though a review of the second type may be more fun to read.

And finally, having stated my general principles, I feel free to violate any or all of them when something seems important enough to deserve special mention.

FOR instance, there's one book that won't interest 99 per cent of the readers of this column. It's in French, is a lot of trouble to obtain and is expensive. Yet it's a book of major importance for the field. This is *Encyclopedie de l'Utopie des Voyages Extraordinaires et de la Science Fiction*, by Pierre Versins (L'Age d'Homme). The only source for it which I've found in North America is: Bruce Robbins,

P.O. Box 396, Station B, Montreal 110, PQ, Canada. The price is \$71.00, postage paid!

This encyclopedia is a truly monumental work and as far as I know, the only one of its kind. In its 997 pages, Versins has included almost every fact about science fiction available to a student of the field living in France. There is no English translation, though I understand one is contemplated for some indefinite future, but if you've had even high-school French, it shouldn't be too difficult to read.

Its value is so great that I happily paid full price for my copy. Yet it has limitations. Versins had obviously read everything he could find in English, as well as other languages. But a good deal of American science fiction must not have been available. The listings of works by a number of authors have serious deficiencies and some authors who should be included are not there.

The above is not surprising. A work done here would inevitably show deficiencies in its coverage of European science fiction. But it does indicate that we need more than a translation. We need further scholarship, based on Versins' encyclopedia and going on to cover the American and British fields—the richest of all sources of science fiction—in greater detail. I hope that some ambitious fan or group of fans will turn to this project. It will require immense effort and

high scholarship, but it's a labor that badly needs doing. Until such work can be done, however, Versins has made a tremendous contribution to science fiction that should not be overlooked.

ANOTHER book that may not interest the casual reader but will fascinate anyone interested in the beginnings of science fiction is *The Crystal Man*, by Edward Page Marshall (Doubleday, \$7.95). This was "collected . . . with a biographical perspective by Sam Moskowitz." The stories in the collection appeared about a hundred years ago, most in the columns of the *New York Sun*. Many of them use ideas that later won such authors as H. G. Wells fame as a writer of science fiction. There is time-travel by machine, invisibility—strangely anticipating Wells' *Invisible Man*—and a host of other fictional inventions.

Surprisingly I found a number of them to be quite good stories. And all of them were fascinating. The treatment of racial prejudice in one story, dealing with freezing for suspended animation, was almost modern—except that it dealt with prejudice against Chinese instead of blacks. In fact, the book offers a provocative perspective on our current world of science fiction that should delight any student of the field.

There is also a lengthy introduction by Moskowitz which traces the

history of Mitchell, of the *Sun*, and of the development of science fiction in the nineteenth century. Considerable evidence is offered that Wells and other writers *might* have been influenced by Mitchell's work. Certainly the parallels are amazing. But I'm not fully convinced—read it yourself for the evidence.

My only quarrel with the book derives from what Moskowitz did not tell—a strangeness indeed when dealing with his work. He says that most readers wouldn't be interested in how he came to discover these buried and neglected stories. But in talking to him, I learned a little of that account and found it totally fascinating. I wish he'd spent much more time on how the discoveries were made!

NORMALLY, as I stated, I prefer not to review anthologies. But occasionally one is too good to miss. *Jupiter*, by Frederik and Carol Pohl (Ballantine, \$1.25), is such a one. This is also a "theme" anthology—something I usually dislike. The approaching Jupiter flyby is the inspiration behind the idea of getting together a book of major stories centered about the big planet. But the curious fact is that stories dealing with Jupiter are rather rare in fiction—but most of them have been extraordinarily good. Here we have *Call Me Joe* by Poul Anderson, *Desertion* by Clifford D. Simak, *Bridge* by James

Blish, *Medusa* by Arthur C. Clarke. Weinbaum, Gallun, Asimov and others are also represented. Almost all of the stories are excellent.

In fact, the only really bad story is one by me. It's one of my earliest ones, deals with rocket racing and depends on a trick. Unfortunately, when I mentioned it to the Pohls, I hadn't read it over for more than thirty years, or I'd have kept my mouth shut. Part of it isn't my fault—somehow in getting the story set into type, several lines were omitted, which makes it seem that Jupiter has no atmosphere—a fact I knew to be false when I wrote the story, since Jupiter has an incredibly thick atmosphere. Still, in those days I took too much for granted. I figured out the course of my rocket to Jupiter correctly—but then neglected to figure just how fast a rocket would have to be moving to be swung into a circular orbit close around the big planet. When I did figure it—recently—I was shocked at how ridiculous my original assumption had been. Oh, well, it's a small flaw in a splendid collection. Generally Jupiter seems to have inspired the very best work and thinking from writers.

I TRY to avoid reviewing books that are essentially fantasy, but sometimes I can't resist. Anyhow, the borderline is sometimes hard to establish. Is a story based on psi-powers fantasy or science fiction? I personally consider it fan-

tasy, but it has been the substructure of a great deal of science fiction. And how about alternate universes? Normally these are considered science fiction. But a fair amount of modern fantasy has made use of both devices.

Katherine Kurtz has been writing a series of books about the Deryni, a group of people using psi-power in an alternate Wales of sometime around the tenth century, where history has branched off completely from the one we know. They're published as fantasy—and I guess they are—but they've been fascinating enough for me to have already reviewed the series in these columns. *Deryni Checkmate* was an excellent novel, the second in the series, with tremendous promise for the future. A mysterious background figure, St. Camber, seemed to be behind all the factors acting upon the psi-gifted and persecuted Deryni. There was a fanatic figure crusading for the death of all Deryni—Warin, probably himself an unknown Deryni. There was warfare within the Church, coming to a head as the reactionary elements threatened to excommunicate Morgan (the hero of sorts) and to place all the lands under the Interdict. And to make matters worse, we had an invading ruler, a full Deryni with developed powers, planning conquest of the whole region.

Lovely background for rich development. Unfortunately, Volume

III of the Deryni Chronicles—*High Deryni* (Ballantine, \$1.25)—takes all these problems and reduces them to piffle, rather than working them out. It is, I'm afraid, a classic example of a new writer working out all the first steps and then copping out at the end. The menace of the Church seems quietly to become of less and less importance as the sympathetic sections gain power to help Morgan. Warin, this devoted, totally stubborn fanatic, has a meeting with Morgan and is quickly convinced that Morgan is a good guy—so he joins forces with Morgan. Then we have a hubbub background in the castle of the invader where we meet a mysterious (?) figure who later turns up to solve everything. We are finally treated to a duel of magic, which is fine; but it's all settled when the mysterious background figure turns out to be St. Camber, whose death somehow seems to solve everything. The menaces have all turned out to be paper dragons—fierce-looking but actually harmless—and the solution is by *deus* (or *sanctus*) *ex machina*.

This is a great pity. In one novel the author has ruined everything that was built up in the previous two. And while she is supposed to be working on later novels in the series, I don't see how she can overcome the wreckage left by this third volume. Her only hope would be to go back and completely redo this

novel—and that's something almost never done after a work has already been published.

Not recommended. If you've already read the first two books, don't read this one. You're better off with unsolved mysteries and unresolved conflicts than with what you're now offered.

ON THE cover of *Hunters of the Red Moon*, by Marion Zimmer Bradley, (DAW, 95¢) is a statement about the author by Theodore Sturgeon: "A writer of absolute competence . . . who should be more widely read." I am in total agreement with that sentiment. Bradley has been moving ahead steadily, writing better and better with experience. She has always chosen to write action-adventure stories of pure entertainment, and her novels are fine stories of that type. She can be relied on for good backgrounds, characters and cultures that are colorful, and well-resolved plots.

This is a good example of her craftsmanship. The initial idea isn't new—a man captured by an alien ship as a slave—but what she does with it is more than adequately refreshing. Her central character and a group of well-chosen aliens are sold to a mysterious culture that intends to use them as intelligent prey in a ritualistic hunt. They can win freedom and honor by surviving—but few survive. And there remains a constant mystery about

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RANDOM HOUSE



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DON WOLLHEIM at DAW is currently experimenting with an idea that has been tried before in science fiction, but has never been done properly. This is the idea of a series of books about a single character (and usually, others surrounding him.) The only fully successful example of this so far is the Perry Rhodan series—but these are on what I consider a very primitive level of science fiction. The Captain Future series did fairly well in the magazines, years ago, but died—perhaps of too heavy a load of formula.

This time we have "Cap Kennedy" in #1 of the series: *Galaxy of the Lost*, by Gregory Kern (DAW, 75¢). Gregory Kern is what's called a "house name"—that is, a pen name owned by the publisher, rather than the writer. Wollheim claims Kern is an established science fiction writer, but isn't revealing the true name. And the back cover sets forth the intentions for the series, as opposed to previous series attempts.

Well, I suppose it's unfair to judge a project by only one example—but that's the only way it can be judged so far.

On the whole the novel does

avoid the primitiveness and the formula that has plagued so much "great hero" series writing, both in and out of science fiction. Kennedy is a grown-up hero and the group around him is not made up of the usual smart-aleck type-cast characters we've met too often. They consist of a strong man from a heavy planet, an older scientist and an alien with chameleon talents. They take their work seriously and sensibly, as does Kennedy.

The problem is held within sensible bounds, also. It does offer some menace to all humanity, but only because ships are being sucked out of space (into an interesting alternate universe), with the heart of the problem Kennedy's own personal danger in this alien universe. Almost all of the typical errors of a series seem to be avoided.

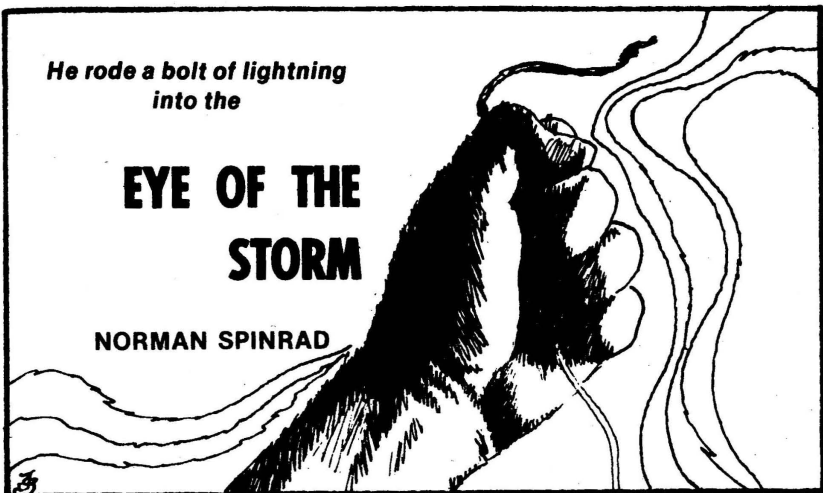
But somehow, some of the virtues seem to have been missed, too. It's probably too early to develop Kennedy and his friends fully, but I'd like to feel more involved with him. I seem to watch him, rather than to share with him. And while the problem is completely workable, it never reaches me emotionally. I can't find much wrong with the novel—but I can't find much enthusiasm for it, either.

I think we'll have to wait and see on this series. In the meantime it's probably a good idea to try this first example. There's no reason why it shouldn't work out well, so let's hope it will. •

*He rode a bolt of lightning
into the*

EYE OF THE STORM

NORMAN SPINRAD



DOUG ALLARD had changed the points and plugs, boiled out the carb and tuned his scooter to a razor edge. That had been back in Denver. By all the rules of God and man, the engine should have been running as smooth as the black lacquer on the tank and frame.

But every time the lightning flashed over the hulking backbone of the Rockies the engine broke up for a few beats. It sounded like loose crud in the fuel lines—which there damn well was not. Or maybe dirt in the jets or one of those electrical glitches that could take you a week to run down. Though the slope grew steep as it wound up toward the high passes, the road was almost empty and the bends were still gentle. Doug was able to try various engine speeds in every gear but could detect no relation between engine speed and the weird

coughing in the Harley's guts. She broke up at thirty, at forty-five, at sixty, at eighty—every time the lightning flashed.

Doug did not like it at all. First, because he had never heard of an electrical storm's causing an engine to break up—and second, because of the thing he had about electricity.

Doug felt no fear in the face of things that would turn the knees of the average citizen to lime jello. Courage came with the colors of the Avengers. But he believed that electricity was out to get him in ways large and small. Once he and his old partner Ted had been tooling along through a light drizzle in Florida. Out of nowhere a power line along the road suddenly snapped, whizzed past Doug's cheek like a cobra spitting sparks, caught Ted across the chest and fried him where he sat. And almost every

time Doug's chopper was laid up with something he could not handle himself, it was some electrical gremlin. Doug and electricity just did not get along. To him, electricity in any and all of its manifestations was a cold-eyed snake—like the power line that had killed Ted—out to sink its sparky teeth in his hide.

So the idea that those lightning bolts flashing across the darkening sky were somehow subverting their little brothers in the ignition system not only scared him. It enraged him.

"Lay off my scooter, mother!" he muttered at the approaching electrical storm, feeling foolish for threatening thin air but better for having done it.

Doug was headed west across the Rockies to join up with the Avengers in Los Angeles. He was coming from St. Louis after selling off a crummy grocery store his Uncle Bill had left him. The damned electrical storm seemed to be headed east after god-knows-what, so it was not long before the fireworks were directly overhead.

Lightning danced through a slate-gray sky, slamming and cracking like an artillery barrage as Doug leaned through the turns. He was taking them as fast as he could, trying to make as much time as possible before the deluge.

The sky grew darker, wilder. Yet still no rain fell. Sheets of blinding light ripped the heavens every thirty

seconds or so, illuminating the forested mountains like enormous flashbulbs; and the Harley's engine was coughing more often than not. Doug's head rang from the crack and rumble of the thunder as the throttle hesitations were making the bike harder and harder to control.

One weird mother of a storm!

Up ahead the road took a gentle left and climbed around a tree-covered hill. As he started to put the bike over, Doug smelled electricity in the air so thick he almost choked on it. Looking up at the crest, he saw a searing white bolt of lightning kiss the concrete not twenty yards in front of him and actually walk toward him before it disappeared in a clap of thunder.

THEN he was cresting the hill, leaning into the left turn at fifty-five—and the world suddenly turned blinding, crazy yellow. Everything seemed to happen at once and in slow motion. Through the handlebars he felt a tremendous jar. The whole frame was vibrating as if someone had bonked it with a sledgehammer. His body tingled, he choked on ozone, and the engine quit entirely. The chop started to fall but some sixth sense told him that if he went down in that instant or even allowed his foot to touch the road he would have had it. Standing up on the pegs, still blinded, he threw his body to

the right as hard as he could against the bank of the turn, compensating for the sudden drop in speed. The Harley wobbled insanely. Thunder walloped his eardrums but his vision began to clear.

He saw dimly that he was careening across the road, thumping and bounding toward a steep drop into the thickly wooded gully to the right. He downshifted, slammed on the brakes. The wheels kicked up dirt and screamed. Forward momentum was killed and the scooter gently slid out from under him. As he rolled away from the bike, losing a certain amount of skin, he shouted in triumph.

How many riders had been hit by lightning and lived? *Whoo-eee!*

Picking himself off the ground and making sure nothing major was broken, he thought next of the Harley. The chop was lying on its side in tall grass, about three yards short of having rolled into the rugged-looking little canyon. Grunting, Doug erected it on its still functional stand and inspected the damage. The right front peg was bent at a crazy angle. There was a small rip in the black leather of the seat. A lot of little dings and scratches marred the right side of the bike where it had skidded along the ground. A strange jagged strip of paint had peeled off the tank and the metal beneath was etched a dark blue as if the storm had branded the chop with its own mark.

So all things considered, his scooter had come through in fine shape—all it seemed to need was having the peg hammered back into position. Some paint, chrome polish and new leather, and the Harley would be as slick as before it was hit. But he would try to retain that lightning brand on the tank—maybe try some clear lacquer over it. It was unique. It gave the chop character that no amount of planning, design or hard work could have matched.

Only when he had finished inspecting the bike did he notice the peculiar changes in his surroundings. For one thing, the sky was already clear of storm clouds. For another, the sun was about two hours lower than it had been when he was hit only minutes before. And the surface of the road was cracked, pitted, torn by holes as far as he could see. The fir trees were wrong, too—taller and thinner than they should have been, the needles sparse on the branches but almost four inches long and colored a nauseating grayish green. The air had a chemical aftertaste. Also it seemed to have a faint greenish-brown tint to it as if the worst Los Angeles smog he could remember and then some had managed to penetrate the high Rockies. He had the feeling that every breath was doing awful things to his lungs. Everything seemed old and sick and generally cruddy.

Muttering to himself and repeat-

edly glancing back over his shoulder for reasons he could not figure, Doug hammered the bad peg back into position with his heaviest wrench. He checked out his carb and fuel lines, then tromped on the starter.

Nothing happened. Not even a cough. He stomped on the starter another time. Ten times. Without raising a peep. He swung off the bike, took a deep breath, looked around at the grayish sickly forest and ruined road, shuddered, and tried to dope it out. He just knew it had to be something electrical. Hell—of course!

Sure enough, the fuse was blown. When he dug out his little cardboard box of spares he found they were blown, too. Electricity had done him in again.

But Doug Allard was damned if he was going to sit in that crummy-looking place just because he had no fuses for his chop. Swearing, he fished out a half-empty cigarette pack, dumped out the smokes. He stripped off the tinfoil, wadded it up and jammed it into the gap in the fuseholder. It might not provide the protection of a proper fuse but he would have to risk it. Either that, or sit here in this wilderness until something came along. From the looks of the road, that might be never.

When he kicked the starter this time, the engine caught right away. But it burbled and chugged as if the mixture were too rich, although

he knew damned well he had tuned it to perfection back in Denver. He sniffed the brown air and remembered an old joke about Los Angeles smog. On a really bad day, they used to say, you could just take the cap off your tank and run your engine on the freaked air. Could this air here be so rank that it was making his mixture too rich?

Sure enough, when he leaned it out a bit, the engine ran smooth as melted butter. Whoo-ee! This air made L.A. atmosphere seem like pure oxygen.

He cautiously started up what was left of the road, skirting huge potholes and jagged breaks every few yards of the way, creeping along at thirty-five and wishing his scooter were set up for scrambles. And wondering where the hell he was.

ACCORDING to the map there was a dinky little town about forty miles up the road. No doubt it would have a gas station and a place to get a hamburger and suds. Doug had taken off his peanut tank for this run, had fitted on a fat-bob still about three-quarters full. The same could not be said for his gut, which had a food-sized hole in it.

After a half-hour of dodging potholes, cracks and craters along the ruined road, Doug's arms were stiff with tension and his nerves definitely in need of a few cold beers.

The countryside still seemed all

wrong. The fir trees were like nothing he had ever seen, like crude cartoons of the real thing. The ground beneath them crawled with giant purplish toadstools and raw-looking mushrooms the color of dried blood. As the sun sank toward the high ridgeline of the mountains, the clear sky took on an ugly steel-blue cast. Doug could hear the droning whine of insects even over the sound of the Harley's exhaust. In a half-hour of riding through this unnatural landscape he had not spotted a single car or truck or bike. He did not like that one little bit. Only one thing kept him from brooding on the ominous strangeness of the world in which he found himself and on how the hell he had got there, and that was the total concentration needed to keep the scoot upright on this wreckage of a road.

Finally, as the sun was starting to slide down behind the mountains, he crested a ridge and saw a huddle of buildings off to the right in the next valley. He caught a glimpse before the road curled down the slope of the hill. Trees screened the place from his sight until he reached the valley floor. There he found himself on the outskirts of the little burg.

Or what was left of it.

It could not have been much more than a wide spot in the road to begin with—a gas station next to a cafe, a few cinderblock stores, a couple of dozen wooden houses.

But now it was a burned-out shell, a ruin.

The houses were charred skeletons. The store windows were shattered and it looked as if anything of value had long since been carried away. The front of the cafe had been ripped apart, apparently by an explosion; and the concrete was pitted with craters of the kind left by large-caliber ammunition. A few cars were scattered along the main drag—old rusted-out hulks, tires rotted away, glass smashed, body metal so thoroughly corroded that the colors of their paint jobs were unrecognizable.

Doug pulled up beside one of the old wrecks and felt a sinking sensation in his gut. It took him a moment more to realize what it was about the hulk that shook him up.

The car body had holes rusted right through it and when Doug punched the front door, the rotten metal crumbled. The whole body was a brittle shell of rust. Yet it was unmistakably the body of a Chevrolet Vega. Doug shuddered. GM had started building Vegas in 1971. And this wreck had to be at least ten years old.

He had been asking the wrong question: not where the hell am I, but *when*?

Doug could think of only one answer.

Electricity, that son of a bitch, had really done him in this time! Somehow that lightning had kicked his tail into the future and, from

the look of this place, it was a future whose best days were past.

Well, no point whining and sniveling about it. First order of business was to survive long enough to find people. He would play it by ear after that.

In order to keep going he had to have food and gas. Three-quarters of a tank might or might not get him to more fuel, but it would be stupid to pass up the chance to drain the pumps of the ruined gas station. There must be some jerry cans around somewhere.

He chugged over to the gas station and pulled up by the pumps. The station building was riddled with bulletholes and the whole place looked as if it had been stripped clean. Not a tool or a tire or a can of oil around, and nothing he could use to hold extra gas.

Well, he had a quarter-empty tank and two one-quart canteens. Water figured to be a lot easier to come by than gas in the Rockies. He unscrewed his gas cap, plugged the nozzle of the nearest hoze into the hole and squeezed the grip.

Nothing. The pump was bone dry.

He tried every pump in the station with the same results. It figured. Gas would be a mighty precious commodity in an emergency and looters would not leave it sitting in pumps. And from the looks of this burg, it had been worked over by some mighty efficient looters. All right, so he would

have to search and scramble pretty hard for gas, maybe appropriate some from citizens, if he could find any. Better start to look. He still had enough juice in his tank to take him well over a hundred miles.

He remounted, started the engine, slipped into gear and began to roll. That was when he noticed the heap of bones just beyond the pumps. When he got a real close look, he broke into a cold sweat.

THE bones were scattered around a burned-out fire. Some had been cracked open for the marrow and all were picked pretty clean. But swarms of ants were crawling all over them—including the two human skulls lying close to the fire. Their tops had been smashed in.

Doug slammed the Harley up-gear and cranked on the throttle, shooting gravel as if the hounds of hell were after him. And from the looks of that bone pile, something even worse might show up at any moment. The sun was just about setting and this sure was no place to spend the night!

He roared out of the gas station, really moving considering the condition of the surface. He zipped past a couple of gutted stores and a few gutted houses, and ghostville was behind him.

The road bent to the right around a hillface. When Doug came out of the curve he saw his

way blocked by three of the shankiest dudes on three of the most ridiculous-looking bikes he had ever even heard of.

Those scoots looked as though they had started as little 125cc Hondas or something similar. They were not chopped at all but every scrap of non-essential metal had been removed from the frames, making them look almost like bicycles. They mounted knobby tires front and rear and outrageously oversized gas tanks. But the craziest things about them were the outriggers that sprouted on both sides behind the single bicycle-type seats. Lengths of pipe about three feet long were pivot-mounted on frame-members, the play restricted both up and down by sets of springs that might have been scavenged from the forks of mopeds. At the ends of these lengths of pipe, mounted on bicycle forks, each outrigger had a fat-tired little wheel off a kid's trail bike. When the scoots were moving in an upright position, the outrigger wheels would ride about a foot off the ground. Now, at rest, the left outrigger wheels were on the ground, doubling as instant stands. The bikes were the second ugliest and the second weirdest things Doug Allard had ever seen.

The ugliest and weirdest things he had ever seen were the three creeps riding them.

They looked like a cross between basketball centers who had not

eaten for a month and giant grasshoppers—about seven feet tall, thin as skeletons. They had long awkward arms and legs that made them seem to be perching on their spindly little scoots like praying mantises. They wore greasy leather pants, black sleeveless vests and long scabbards at their belts. In the deep shadows of the setting sun their hairless skin seemed to glisten a pale waxy green.

But it was their faces that made Doug reach behind him and uncoil the length of chain he kept wrapped around a frame-member. He brought up the Harley to about ten feet from the things. They were as bald as green apples and they had weak little chins under practically lipless mouths that hung open stupidly, showing rows of long yellow teeth. Their eyes were lunatic and bloodshot, sunk deep in sockets under apelike hairless brows. They did not much look like folks you could trust.

Doug let the three-foot length of chain dangle from his left hand, clanging loudly against the frame of the Harley as it snaked to the ground. "I'd appreciate it if you boys would clear the road," he said. "You'd appreciate it too."

The creep in the middle sniffed the air. "Gas!" he hissed. "I smell much gas in the strange machine!"

"And much meat on the bones of this white one!"

"We were right to come up into the thin air of the mountains. Here

there are still many of the fat, juicy white ones. It's this strange pale air. They choke in the lowlands, but here they become rich morsels of succulent meat!"

"Let us feast!"

They laughed shrilly and drew long sharp swords.

"You named it, mothers!" Doug shouted as the three spindly bikes came wobbling toward him like awkward insects, their gawky riders having some trouble steering and trying to hold onto their swords at the same time. He shifted into first, gave her a little throttle and veered off to the right, so that the green creep on the left closed with him about two feet from his chain hand, thrusting clumsily with his sword.

Doug whipped the chain through the air and caught him squarely across the back of the skull as the outrigger buzzed by. The thing's head burst like a rotten watermelon, spewing thin splinters of bone and gray-green slime. The out-of-control bike slammed into the scoot next to it—the big geek riding it moved in quick spastic jerks as he tried in vain to avoid the collision and was knocked sprawling to the ground.

Doug was past them now and his hog could surely outrun their silly machines, but his blood was boiling and he figured the proper thing to do was finish the job. These creeps were lame pushovers—finishing off the two remaining should not even raise a decent sweat.

HE whipped his chop around, came back at the one on the ground, who seemed to be having trouble getting to his feet. As Doug passed, bringing the chain down across the creature's back, the other managed—with a mantis-like twitch—to slash Doug harmlessly on his boot. By the time Doug had turned his bike again for another pass the greenie was scrambling shakily to his feet. Eyes rolling, teeth bared, mouth drooling, he stood woozily slashing his sword through the air as Doug bore down on him.

At the last moment Doug veered slightly to the right, ducked under the whistling sword and caught him across the kneecaps with the chain. The greenie screamed, buckled and fell on his face.

Doug saw that the last outrigger bike was hightailing it up the road away from him. The cowardly bastard was running out on his partners!

"That won't do you any good, you son of a bitch!" he shouted as he cranked throttle in pursuit. Boy, that crud had to be really stupid to think he could outrun a Harley on a runty little bike like that!

It was getting dark, so Doug turned on his headlight as he chased the greenie over the tortuous road. About thirty yards ahead, the spindly little outrigger bike with its skeletonlike rider wobbled and bounced crazily in Doug's high beam like a lurching spider.

The geek on the outrigger seemed a piss-poor rider, hitting half the potholes and rocks in the road, as if he had the reflexes of somebody's grandfather. Doug saw what those outrigger wheels were for as now the left, now the right touched ground for a moment as the bike hit a pothole or a rock and heeled over suddenly. They were like the training wheels on a little kid's first bicycle; without them, the incompetent slob on the machine would have gone down every couple of minutes on a killer road like this one.

In fact it took all of Doug's skill, reflexes and arm-strength to keep from going down himself on the so-called road.

He had been chasing the outrigger for maybe five minutes, he realized, without gaining any ground. Imagine, a 125cc mouse of a bike holding its own against a high-balling chopper! But forty or at the most forty-five was as fast as Doug could go on this torture-track roadway without creaming himself out. At that speed, the outrigger bike was probably going flat out while he still had more than half his throttle left. A lot of good that did him!

He conceded now that, crazy as it looked, the outrigger bike design made some sense. Road condition imposed forty-five as top speed anyway, so all his big engine did for him was use up more gas per mile. That son of a bitch up there could

pace him all night, and guess who would run out of gas first!

It really burned Doug to think of that creep outrunning his big scoot on that little bug of his! Man, what would the Avengers say if he ever got to see their beautiful ugly faces again? The jaw-action would be murder . . .

Up ahead, the outrigger bike disappeared for a moment around a righthand curve.

Suddenly Doug heard a high-pitched roar, shouts from more or less human throats, a long shrill scream. Then the outrigger bike reappeared, weaving drunkenly all over the road in his general direction. The rider was missing his left arm, and quarts of green goo were gushing out of the stump. The outrigger slid off the road entirely and shattered against a tree, sending the dying rider flying off into the underbrush.

And then, rushing straight at him, Doug saw the headlights of perhaps a dozen motorcycles. An instant later, he made them out sharp and clear. Outrigger bikes, each ridden by one of the tall green skeletons, eyes glowing and swords flashing in the gleam of the headlights.

Doug had no time to do heavy thinking. He cranked on all the throttle he had, hunched his body as low over the tank as he could, prayed he would not hit a hole or a rock in the next thirty feet, and tried to steer for the empty spaces

in the crowd of devil-bikes bearing down on him.

Still accelerating, he zipped between two bikes, taking an outrigger wheel on his left thigh as sharp steel passed over his head. His front wheel caught in a crack in the road. He felt his rear wheel going out as he fought for control. He skidded sideways a foot or two, glancing off the front tire of an outrigger bike, but regained control as the outrigger bounced into the bike next to it. Doug ducked another sword stroke that was way off the mark, and then he was through, hauling ass up the dark winding road while all was confusion and shouting behind him.

Doug felt as if he had been riding for days. Yet it could not have been more than an hour or two since his escape from the freaks. Ahead of him everything was inky black except for the cone his headlamp cut out of the darkness. The road, as full of cracks and potholes as ever, climbed higher into the Rockies. It was all Doug could do to keep his scooter upright at 40. Both arms ached from the prolonged effort and tension, and his left leg hurt like hell where the outrigger wheel had caught it. He was starting to see things that weren't there and not see things that were. A couple of times he started to lean into left turns that were really rights, as the trees and the bouncing beam of the headlight played

tricks on his eyes. He longed to stop, if only to take five.

But all he had to do was glance back over his shoulder and see those massed headlights about two hundred yards behind to know that a five-minute rest would be his last. Two hundred yards. He had opened up the gap in the confusion of his dash through them, and he had not been able to gain on them since. Well, at least they had not been able to close on him.

It was the damnedest bike race in history, Doug was sure. A couple of miles of straight road, or even a few miles of decently paved bends, and his big chop would leave the mothers in the dust. But on this cow-track it did not matter that he had three times the bike they did, that he was three times the rider they were. With all his power and skill, all he could average was about forty, and those little mickey mouse machines just buzzed along flat out, flopping around on their outriggers, matching his speed on half the gas consumption.

And that was what really scared him.

With those king-sized tanks and pint-sized engines, the freaks had at least twice his range. Unless they had started the chase more than half empty, he would run out of gas first. Then what? It would be his chain against eleven or twelve swords. Four or five of the mothers would not have scared him, but eleven? They would stick him. They

would suck the marrow from his bones and eat the brains out of his skull.

Doug took another glance behind. As he did, a bolt of lightning lit up the scene like a strobe.

Down in the hollow behind him, he saw the outrigger bikes hopping and jouncing in pursuit like army ants, the flesh of their mantis-like riders gleaming with a sickly green wetness.

Darkness and a roll of thunder, then another flash of lightning.

Oh, no! Not another electrical storm. And as he thought it, three quick sheets of lightning ripped across the sky one after the other, as if electricity, his old enemy, had shown up to gloat over his predicament. A long, slow rumble of thunder shook his guts.

"Not yet, you mother, not yet!" he shouted at the sky.

Feeling fury surge through him, he cranked on more throttle. Thereupon he hit a little rock, slid askew, and had to use his painful left leg to keep from going down. He winced, cursed, and saw that the slip had cost him a few yards of his lead. Lightning touched a ridge off to his right.

And his engine broke up for a few beats.

Another bolt of lightning hit off to his left, closer. Again his engine coughed and hesitated. Man, all he had to do was stall out now! He saw that he had lost another yard or two.

Slam! Bang! He was bracketed on both sides by lightning, deafened by the thunder. The chop's engine coughed, sputtered.

And died.

He could hear the scream of those flat-out little engines coming up behind him like a swarm of giant wasps. Howling wordlessly, he craned his neck around to see the green demons on their outriggers outlined—ten yards behind—by another flash of lightning. Frantically he tromped down on the starter with all his might. The engine caught. He slammed the chopper into gear and cranked it on.

He opened up the gap to twenty yards before a crack in the road threw him into a skid. Slide slippage lost back the distance he had gained.

He crested a hill, went roaring down into a narrow valley. He leaned into a mild left curve with the devil bikes still thirty feet behind him and lightning cracking through the air all around him. His engine broke up again, coughed, almost died, but recaptured. The green creeps gained another few feet during the hesitation. They were so close that he could hear the blood-curdling cries coming from their throats as they sensed the kill.

Another bolt of lightning, another cough from his engine.

A sword whistled over Doug's head, burying its point three inches deep in a tree beside the road. A

second sword glanced off his sissy-bar, looped high in the air, just missed his back on the way down. A third sword sent a thin sting through his left shoulder as it sliced through his colors.

Doug Allard knew he had had it. He was beyond fear, beyond despair, beyond knowing what the hell he was doing except on an instinctual level. He was all rage—rage at the monstrosities that would be eating his flesh in a few more minutes, rage at the sparky dragon in the sky that had thrown him into this hell-world in the first place.

Lightning blinded him as one more sword whistled past his head. In one final, defiant gesture, he ripped the headlight wire loose, and held the naked end aloft shouting at the sky: "Come and get me, you yellow mother! I dare you! I d--"

The world turned that blinding, crazy yellow. Everything seemed to happen at once and in slow motion. His body tingled, he choked on ozone, and the engine quit entirely. The chop started to fall but he knew that if he went down in that instant or even allowed his foot to touch the road he would have had it. Standing up on the pegs, still blinded, he threw his body to the right as hard as he could against the bank of the turn, compensating for the sudden drop in speed. The Harley wobbled insanely. Thunder walloped his eardrums but his vision began to clear.

He saw dimly that he was careening across the road, thumping and bouncing toward a steep drop into a thickly wooded gully to the right. He downshifted, slammed on the brakes. Forward momentum was killed and the scoot gently slid out from under him. He rolled away from the bike, losing a certain amount of skin in the process.

KICKING himself off the ground, he saw that the Harley was lying on its side in the tall grass by the side of the road about three yards from having rolled into a rugged-looking little canyon. It was daylight, the trees were ordinary fir trees, the road was in good repair, there were no green demons on outrigger bikes coming up it, and the electrical storm was retreating across the sky to the east.

Slowly, it got through to him. He was at the very place where he had been hit by lightning the first time, and at about the same hour of day too, by the look of the sky. None of that crazy stuff had really happened. The lightning must have knocked him out of his head for a few minutes and into an electricity nightmare.

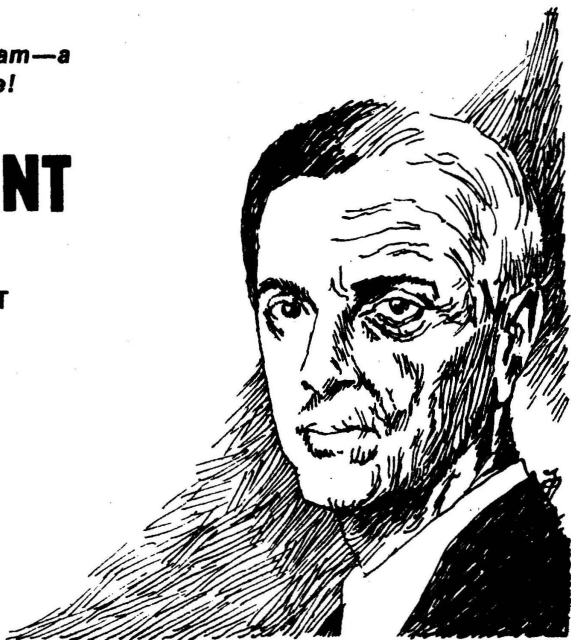
Only then did he note the thin pain in his left shoulder, the slash in his colors, the blood underneath.

When he checked out the bike, he found the headlight wire hanging loose and a wad of tinfoil in the fuse-clip. •

*Life had become a dream—a
strangely heartless one!*

TRANSPLANT

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST



THE street was long and straight. Glancing down it quickly, a disinterested observer would see two lines of terraced houses, dirty cars parked on each side of the roadway and would experience an overwhelming sense of gray decay. The street was like many others on this side of the city: drab, barren, imparting a feeling of timelessness. A battle might be fought a hundred yards away and still the street would reflect no change.

Trees had been planted on each side of the street a century before. Now they were nearly all dead, spreading up from the sidewalk to lift stiff, leafless branches toward the gray sky.

Only in one place did the trees still show greenery and that was where two of them grew close together on one side of the street. Each bore a full complement of leaves, a discordancy of natural color untinged by city dirt. In contrast with the others, these two still waved supple branches in the breeze.

Beneath the two green trees were parked three cars. Each one was in showroom condition, its paint unscratched, its windows clean, and its tires still black and with mold marks on the tread. Other cars in the street were not in such finely preserved state. Even those next to the three were covered in the

humus of the leaves of last year's autumn. Farther down the street others squatted half on and half off the sidewalk, fenders broken, wheelcovers missing, bodies rusted and glassless remnants. Finely shattered windshield fragments made walking treacherous.

The houses in the street were empty and dilapidated, looking like an abandoned movie set. Only the house by the new cars and the two green trees showed any signs of habitation. It was the house of Arthur Knowland and he stood now at the open door, looking out at the cars. He was a tall man in his late fifties, stooping slightly and wearing old, shapeless clothes.

The net curtaining at the windows of his house was clean and freshly pressed. On one of the sills stood a row of six porcelain pots containing cacti. In another window a hyacinth bulb sat on top of a conical glass bottle, tiny tendrils of white root just starting to reach down to the surface of the water an inch below. Next to it a dark-green vase was fashioned in the shape of a grotesque fish, bent in the middle so its tail touched its open mouth. The architecture of the house was very old and the light trickling in through the window panes behind Knowland was scant.

KNOWLAND put his hand in his trousers pocket to check that he had his front-door key. He

looked at the sky to make sure it wouldn't rain, saw that the clouds were a featureless gray and were covering the entire sky, then closed the door behind him with slow, precise movements.

He walked down the tiny pathway to the gate.

In his garden, nothing grew. Arthur Knowland favored it with less than a glance as he passed through.

He opened the gate and walked out into the street, glancing up at the trees and admiring their greenery. Such trees! It was comforting to him that they should continue to grow here. It was a part of his daily routine to make the observation.

After a moment's pause he walked on, past the line of cars and down the street toward the intersection. As he walked his interest in his surroundings dwindled sharply and he slipped back into the reverie which of late had occupied virtually the whole of his waking moments. But as he approached the intersection a man came around the corner from the right and walked up to him.

Knowland said, "Ah, Mr. Ridgway. Good afternoon to you."

Ridgway opened his mouth and started to speak. For an instant no sound could be heard.

Then: "Good afternoon, Mr. Knowland. Fine day, is it not?"

Knowland stared. The man's speech was out of synchronization with the movements of his mouth.

The last three words were still being spoken as he closed his mouth and smiled.

"Er—I beg your pardon?" Knowland said, a trifle confused. He shook his head and concentrated harder.

"I said I thought it was a fine day," Ridgway repeated, his voice now firmly synchronized with his lips, but too loud. Far too loud.

"Yes. Yes, of course," Knowland said. "I'm sorry. I thought I misheard."

He glanced at the sky, noted that it was still its oppressive gray and wondered what was fine about the weather. Although the day was far from cold or otherwise unpleasant, this was not his conception of fine weather. Not that he cared unduly. For a moment he thought he caught a glimpse of the sun breaking through the grayness but nothing happened.

Ridgway smiled again.

"Ah, well," he said. "On my way. See you tomorrow, Mr. Knowland."

His voice was at normal volume again and everything was as it should be.

Knowland nodded and walked on.

Had he made a mistake about the man's lips? Where, he suddenly wondered, did Ridgway live? He stopped short again. This was the first time, Knowland realized, that he had ever thought to ask himself that. The man had to live some-

where around here—Knowland always seemed to meet him at the same intersection.

He looked around at the houses and knew that Ridgway could not live here. Every place was derelict. Doors were hanging from hinges. Windows were smashed or frameless. Chimney stacks had fallen into the tileless roofs. Yet everywhere was like this. The man must live somewhere.

Perhaps in one of the less decayed buildings . . .

Knowland looked around again until he saw a house which, although uninhabitable by normal standards, at least had its roof intact.

As he studied it he wondered why he had not noticed it before. Although the brickwork was as dirty as on all the houses, the front door was still whole and none of the windows was broken. He took half a step toward the place, then paused. Something was wrong.

He could not remember having ever before studied each house individually, but he had been certain that all of them here were in the same state of abandonment. He hadn't given this street more than a sideways glance for days but nothing had ever changed here.

Undeniably, however, this one house was now intact.

He stepped off the curb, walked across the narrow street and looked closely. Now he could see that the glass in the windows was not only

whole, but clean, too. And inside—curtains!

Drab curtains, crumpled maybe. But a sign that this house now was occupied or recently had been. He glanced at the door and saw that the brass handle was smooth, as if it had been often used.

A mild kind of excitement mounting in him, Knowland grasped the metal fence and stood on tiptoe, trying to see into the front rooms.

Could this be Ridgway's house?

Sharp doubt struck him. The man always came from the opposite direction, from the road down which Knowland would walk to Veronica's old house. He'd never seen Ridgway at any other time or in any other place. If he did live in this house, it was strange that Knowland had not seen him walking past his window. Knowland spent most of his time in the front room, looking out at the two trees and three cars that stood outside his house. If people passed—particularly Ridgway whom he knew by sight and name—he would see them.

Even as he looked at the house, more of it came to his attention. The paint seemed brighter than when he'd first looked at it, the rubble in the tiny front garden less untidily scattered among the weeds. The railings he gripped felt no longer brittle and rusty, but as if they had been regularly painted to preserve them from the ravages of the atmosphere.

But no one lived here . . . no one. Not Ridgway, or anyone else. Knowland was totally alone. It was self-indulgent fantasy even to imagine anyone lived in this house.

His fingers loosened from around the rail and he walked away from the place. He was only a few yards from the intersection and he crossed back to the other side.

He glanced at his watch. Already he was beginning to feel a little tired. If he walked around the block, past Veronica's old house and back to his own, he would have enough time to make himself some tea before going to bed. Was it already growing dark? He looked at the sky and saw as he'd suspected that the clouds were lowering.

He stepped out a little faster, striding down the side street toward Veronica's.

Behind him the house he had been looking at began to settle. First the paint darkened, taking on its customary coat of atmospheric grime. Then the weeds grew thicker in the tiny front garden and the rubble of bricks, old bottles and pieces of peeled-off stucco heaped together untidily. The front door swung on its upper hinge so that the base of the door fell into the hallway, revealing a dark corridor lined with brown, peeling wall-paper. A crack appeared at the bottom of the main window, crept upward across the glass, then down again sharply. The window fell inward and smashed. One tile skidded

down the angled roof and crashed into the overgrown garden, quickly followed by several more.

Two hundred yards away Knowland heard the sound of breaking tile and glass as a whisper on the breeze.

And ignored it.

DR. WILLIAM SAMUELSON sat in his swivel chair at the window of his office, looking down at the crowded hospital parking lot twelve stories below. He was deep in thought.

Nurse Donalds knocked at the door and stepped in. She stood by the open door and waited patiently for the doctor to turn. He did at last, a concerned frown across his forehead.

"I have a Mr. Wylatt to see you," the nurse said. "He says he has an appointment, though I have no record of it in—"

"No. That's all right. Show him in. He telephoned this morning."

"Yes, Doctor."

She backed out and Samuelson heard her say: "The Doctor will see you now." A few seconds later Wylatt came in and closed the door behind him. He walked over to the doctor and extended his right hand.

"Good morning, Doctor. It's good of you to see me—"

"Not at all." Samuelson waved the man into a seat.

Wylatt continued speaking as if Samuelson had not responded to his first utterance: "—the TDPS is

anxious to remain on pleasant relations with the medical profession and you must consider my visit today as most informal. I'm sure you will understand. Now I wonder—"

Samuelson said, "Cigarette, Mr. Wylatt?" Normally he discouraged smoking, but he pushed an open box toward the man, effectively cutting off the flow. Wylatt took a cigarette and lit it.

"Now what is it The Donors' Protection Society wants from me?" Samuelson asked carefully.

Wylatt took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

"Is it about our latest patient?" Samuelson said quickly.

"Yes, Doctor."

"I thought it might be. Well, go ahead."

Wylatt said, "The TDPS is representing the next of kin of Michael Arnson, as I expect you had anticipated."

Samuelson nodded gravely.

"That's the first part of my mission today," Wylatt went on. "But I have also been approached by a Mrs. Knowland who, having no one to turn to—in her own words, Doctor—has come to us. Mrs. Knowland was in a state of near-desperation when I saw her this morning, which you can imagine was—"

"I saw her last week. She was quite upset."

"Ah—yes. Well, Mrs. Knowland is herself a member of the TDPS, and she thought we could help her in some way."

Samuelson watched the other man steadily. This was not his first encounter with the TDPS—a charitable organization that had the aim of protecting its members from irresponsible and unnecessary donation of their organs in the event of severe accident—but this could easily be his most potentially hazardous. The society had no backing in law, which now stated firmly that once clinical death had been established, organ transplantation could legally take place. Nevertheless, the organization was gaining great support, and could not be ignored.

This case, involving the pathetically ill Arthur Knowland, could develop into a trial by press, with the whole future of medical organ transplants at stake.

"Did you conduct the operation yourself, Doctor Samuelson?"

"No. But the case had my personal written sanction, and I observed the operation from the gallery. The surgeon was Doctor Jennser—the ablest heart specialist in the country. There is no question that the operation should have taken place."

"No, of course not," Wylatt interjected quickly, as if afraid he had offered an impertinence. "I'm sure the condition of the sick man, or the skill of the medical staff involved, were never in doubt."

"Well, please state your case, Mr. Wylatt. I'm confident of your sincerity, but I am exceptionally busy at the moment."

WYLATT had a flat black valise on his knee. He opened it.

"My case, as you put it, is more or less what you have doubtless anticipated. Michael Arnson, a member of ours, had a vital organ, to wit his heart, removed from his body against his own wishes as clearly stated in the testamentary document he lodged with the society. I have a photostat of it here."

He passed it across to Samuelson.

"Under the charter of the society this constitutes a trespass of person and a breach of private rights. Another member of our group, Mrs. Veronica Knowland, has also complained to the society regarding the medical treatment given to her late husband at the time of his operation."

Dr. Samuelson looked quite carefully at the photostated document in front of him, though he had seen its like before. It was a signed—by Michael Arnson—and witnessed declaration regarding the disposal of bodily remains. Specific organs were listed as being the private property of the undersigned: heart, kidneys, lungs, liver, eye-corneas, stomach, certain glands and other minor functional organs of the body. These were to be disposed of, together with the whole corpse, by cremation upon death.

"You appreciate, Mr. Wylatt, that the medical profession does not recognize this?"

"So we gather. But we have

grounds to believe that were it to be tested in a court of law it would be upheld. We understand that it is legal as a testamentary document. We took counsel several years ago."

"I'm sure you did," Samuelson said. "And yet it hasn't been tested to date?"

"No. But—"

"How well acquainted are you, Mr. Wylatt, with the facts of this case?"

The other man shrugged. "I know what was reported in the newspapers. And I have spoken with Arnson's mother and Mrs. Knowland."

"So you know the full outcome of the operation?"

"Yes."

SAMUELSON swiveled around in this chair so that he faced the window.

"But I'm afraid you don't. More is involved than superficial factors. And I think before we proceed with the claims of your society I should explain them to you."

He turned back to his desk and opened a slim manila file.

"Michael Arnson was admitted to this hospital fourteen days ago, after having been involved in a motor accident. I won't detail the specific injuries he suffered, but there was extensive breakage of his ribs, his shoulders and his skull. We suspected massive brain damage on first inspection and under surgery this was confirmed. When

he first arrived at the hospital Arnson was still breathing and his heart was beating.

"It took several hours to contact his mother—whose address, incidentally, we got from the card issued to Arnson by your society—and he died before we could get in touch with her."

Wylatt opened his mouth to say something, but the doctor waved him to silence.

"I know you contest our definition of death, but I think we have no need to discuss that here and now. Suffice it to say that by our standard clinical procedure, when we could detect no measurable activity from the brain—and the patient stopped breathing—we considered him to be dead.

"During this time a patient in our coronary ward, Arthur Knowland, was in the last stages of a long and painful heart disease. Arnson's blood group was acceptably close to Knowland's and we decided to effect an immediate transplant. If it were successful we knew we could promise Knowland a return to normal life."

Wylatt said, "But he didn't receive Arnson's heart. Knowland never recovered."

Samuelson stared at him. "So this outcome, by your code of ethics, denies our right to attempt it?"

"Yes."

"Maybe. But in this instance there was more involved. Forget the

ethics for a moment—one man's life was certainly over, another's was equally certainly doomed without an efficient heart. We went ahead anyway and removed Knowland's old heart. As is standard procedure, during the interim a heart-lung machine controlled his blood circulation while the donor's heart was prepared. This time—"

Wylatt's eyebrows rose. "The operation failed?"

"No. It was successfully removed. And the transplant would, we are certain, have been a successful one. But we were unable to place it in Knowland's body for the reason that Arnson's heart was equally diseased. We discovered a malignant tumor on the upper ventricle wall.

"Arnson had cancer. There was nothing we could do."

KNOWLAND walked on down the side street, aware that this was neutral territory. He carried in his mind a clear concept of the arrangement of the streets and knew, almost to the last foot, the precise distance he had to walk to the next intersection.

His own street ran roughly east-west, with the main shopping street at the eastern end. The intersection where he normally met Ridgway was about a mile from the shops and his house was about three-quarters of that distance along it. The street he was walking now paralleled the main street and was

less than a quarter mile in length.

On each side of the street ran a dark brick wall of medium height. Although it was just above the level of his head, Knowland knew that if he could somehow raise himself to peer over it, he would see the overgrown gardens at the backs of the derelict houses. But he had no interest in these and always kept his head hunched down into his shoulders along this stretch of his daily walk.

The encounter with Ridgway had disturbed him in a way he did not care to consider. Did he control in some fashion his experience?

There had been that earlier puzzle of his heart.

Awakening one morning, he had found himself panting for breath, as often happened. But before he could reach for his pills he had felt an overriding compulsion to believe the pain was habitual rather than actual. He had winced at the agony in his chest, but had known in the same instant that it *could* be psychosomatic. The doctors had once even treated him for that kind of disorder. The memory had helped—and he had concentrated on banishing the pain.

In seconds his breathing had steadied. In minutes his heart was an almost imperceptible movement in his chest.

And in days he had virtually forgotten what it was like to live in constant pain and fear.

He reached the second intersec-

tion and turned to the right again. This street, like his own, led down to the shopping street a mile or so away. He walked on, hardly seeing the houses around him. Houses like those he lived among, with gaping doors and windows, crumbling staircases and vacant, tileless roofs. The whole environment of this place was a depressant to him. He wondered sometimes why he continued his walks, but the long habit of years was difficult to break.

After about ten minutes he came to Veronica's house—or at least the house that Veronica had lived in with her parents years ago, before he'd married her. He stared at it for several minutes, seeing the old-fashioned wallpaper and curtains. The door was painted a drab, dirty maroon, as he had always known it.

And the house was empty as he had known it would be and it would stay that way. He walked on.

He came to the main street and braced himself against its impact as he turned the corner. Here the sidewalks were crowded with people, milling slowly from store to store. Each window was brightly lit, its wares a garish blend of colored packaging and lighting. The street traffic roared by endlessly in both directions. It seemed darker now and the sidewalk was wet. The light from the shop windows was reflected in the street and the lights on the passing cars and trucks dazzled him. This was the part of his walk that he liked the least and he

hurried now, his head bent down as if in defense against the onslaught of the noise and movement. Voices echoed around him, seeming to be without source or direction. Wordless sounds that made little sense, they added no comfort to his feelings. He collided several times with people—drab women loaded down with heavy baskets, tall men who hurried past without apology.

He reached the corner of his own street and turned into it gratefully. Silence fell abruptly.

The sky was darkening steadily and he maintained his hurried pace. His street had no lamps and in the night became a black canyon of fear. His walk had tired him and the thought of sleep was a pleasant one. An early night, he thought. I get tired so easily. If Veronica were here she would understand.

He reached his house and went inside. He warmed some milk, drank it, got undressed and went to bed. He slept lightly, often waking to lie trembling in the black silence of the night and think of his wife.

When he awoke in the morning Veronica lay next to him and she was laughing.

DR. WILLIAM SAMUELSON and his visitor from the TDPS stood together in silence, as the lift descended slowly. Finally it stopped on the second floor and the hydraulic doors opened. Samuelson led the way down a long corridor.

"It's best for you to see Know-

land yourself," he said. "I think you'll appreciate our problem when you have seen him."

Wylatt said, "But the fact of Arnson's other illness doesn't alter the moral position, Doctor. His body was violated against his will."

Samuelson gestured impatiently. "Under normal circumstances, Mr. Wylatt, I would have difficulty in maintaining the position of the profession in this kind of dispute. We all have our personal feelings and I tend to the liberal view myself. But in spite of this, I think you'll agree that in this instance there is a lack of precedent."

"Maybe, maybe. But one must always consider principles. I refuse to abandon mine and those of my society."

"Of course."

They walked on in silence.

The hospital was quiet. They passed several boards pointing toward various surgical units and wards, all of which appeared to be in other parts of the hospital.

By way of explanation, Samuelson said, "This is our convalescent and therapeutic wing. Knowland was brought here after the operation because of the fatal ease with which a delicate process can be disrupted in a busy hospital. We have had to set aside a whole suite to maintain the sterile conditions we need."

Wylatt nodded.

They came eventually to a pair of swing doors and Samuelson walked

through holding the door open for the other man. A nurse on the other side stood up when she saw the doctor. She led them into a room adjacent to her tiny office.

Samuelson said, "Thank you, Amy."

She went out again, leaving the two men alone.

The room was fairly small and contained three rows of wooden seats. In the wall opposite these was a large window, looking into the next room. Samuelson sat down in one of the seats and motioned Wylatt to sit next to him. He pointed toward the window.

"That's Knowland there," he said.

The next room was brightly lit. Its walls were white and in the ceiling a battery of lamps poured down a startling brilliance. In the center of the room stood a high, padded table, on which lay the body of a man. He was dressed in a featureless smock that covered his legs, chest and arms. On his head was a white cloth that lay over his forehead. His face was bare and his eyes were closed.

By the side of the table an array of complicated machinery made a confusion of shining brass, black rubber and gleaming strands of copper wire. Two white-coated, white-masked men stood by the bed. One held a board in his hand and transferred to it readings from a row of dials on the machine. The other stood back, carefully watch-

ing the registrations on a slowly moving electroencephalograph.

Wylatt took in the scene for several seconds.

"But I thought Knowland was dead."

"He is," Samuelson replied. "Knowland is what we call 'discorporeally dead.'"

Wylatt said, "I don't see that there is any subtlety about the definition of death."

"Don't you? I thought your society was keen on a proper definition of death."

"It is," Wylatt said. "Death occurs when the heart no longer beats."

"In which case, Knowland is well and truly dead. He has no heart at all. But . . . his brain is still conscious, so we must consider him as maintaining an identity."

"He is conscious?"

"As far as we can tell, yes. We have his brain constantly monitored by EEG. From the time of his operation his mind has shown entirely normal activity."

"But what is keeping it alive?"

"That machine," the doctor said, pointing, "is called a heart-lung machine. It's highly complex and very expensive. But its effect is more or less as its name implies. It artificially supplants the work of a human heart and lungs, in that it maintains blood at normal bodily temperature, reoxygenates it and circulates it through the body."

"And Knowland has been using

the machine for how long?"

"Fourteen days. Ever since the operation, in fact."

WYLATT got up from his seat and walked to the window. He pressed his face against the thick glass and peered in at the man lying on the table.

"But how can he be dead and conscious at the same time?"

The doctor got up and stood beside him.

"His body and nervous system have stopped functioning—that is all we know. There was short delay in supplying a glucose nutrient to the brain and we suspect the motor-functions of the main nervous system may have been damaged. The higher activity of the brain, though, is unimpaired. Of this we are absolutely certain. The electrical emission from the man's brain is normal. You can see there—" the doctor pointed to the EEG—"that there is nothing abnormal. He even sleeps and, as far as we can tell, dreams."

Wylatt looked at the long roll of graph paper slowly emerging from the machine, but could glean no sense from it.

Finally he asked. "So what is to be done?"

Samuelson shrugged. "What can we do? We provide a steady supply of blood to the brain and we feed it with glucose. We monitor the brain's activity and keep careful note of anything that happens. We

anticipate that if the brain survives it will provide us with immense knowledge about its workings, but it's still too early to tell."

"You mean you are using this man as a guinea pig?"

"If you like."

"But that's inhuman!"

The doctor shrugged again. "What should we do? Switch off the machines and let the brain die? That would be murder."

Wylatt stared at the man inside the sterile room.

"He's dead already—"

"—and his widow has a death certificate," Samuelson finished for him. "I signed it myself."

"Then the brain should be disconnected."

"But we think that would be unethical." The doctor went back and sat in his seat. "Which brings us to the purpose of your visit today. On a point of ethics, you say, the removal of a healthy organ from an otherwise dead body is a moral wrong—and yet by the same token to give continuing life to a human consciousness is equally wrong and should be stopped."

Wylatt said nothing.

"Do you see the dilemma we are in, Mr. Wylatt?"

"Yes," he said. "I think so."

"And furthermore, do you now see why it would be wrong to make a moral test case of this unfortunate man? Think what an effect it would have on his widow. A loved one's death is a tragedy from which

we can all eventually recover—but will she recover from the sure knowledge that although the body has ceased to function the mind goes simmering on, unreachable? Because while Knowland's mind still lives and is sane—we say he has a right to life.

"If you want to question the right of surgeons to transplant vital organs from one human to another, then find another case to champion. You'll find enough of them in this hospital alone. But with Arthur Knowland, while the fact that he lives is a miracle, attention of the public at large should not be drawn to what is happening."

Wylatt nodded. "Yes, I agree." He bent down and picked up his black valise from the floor. "I don't think any purpose would be served by my staying any longer."

He moved toward the door.

"Mr. Wylatt."

"Yes?"

"You'll be tactful with Knowland's widow, I trust."

"Of course. Though I don't know what I can tell her. Just offer sympathy, I suppose."

Samuelson nodded.

Wylatt said, "What do you suppose he's thinking about, Doctor Samuelson? I mean, as he lies there all day?"

"I don't think we'll ever know. He can't see anything, hear anything or touch anything. He cannot react to any thoughts he might have and cannot express himself in any

way. Every desire he has must lead to wish-fulfillment and, for all we know, he can imagine anything. His mind is liberated, you see. Anything he imagines, wishes or expects would be entirely real to him. He could build a whole world, I suppose, and it would be totally real and have substance and existence. In some ways it's man's oldest dream. But in others it could be a hell we cannot conceive of. I suppose. Still, why should a brain imagine a hell for itself? Except temporarily. While it is recovering from injury, say, or the shock of disembodiment."

Wylatt stared at him for several seconds. His face, which had been jaunty and alert when he arrived, was now somber and thoughtful.

"Yes," he said and extended his hand to the doctor. "Thank you for your time—and for showing me."

Samuelson waited until the man had been ushered out by the nurse in the outer office, then stood up and walked to the glass window. He stared in at the remains of Arthur Knowland and watched the expressionless movements of the dials and needles. In that embalmed human body lay an active brain; conscious, sane, and with an existence unique and precious. What dreams of a liberated brain? What hopes or visions? What life?

HHE OPENED his eyes again and she was still there.

"Veronica!"

She laughed. "You weren't expecting to find anyone else here, were you?"

And then he was laughing, too.

Much later he got out of bed and walked to the window. Down below was the street, looking as he had always known it was supposed to look. Cars, new ones and old ones, lined the sidewalks—and the leaves were dropping with autumnal imprecision from trees the length of the street. In the houses opposite his lights shone and people moved behind clean, unbroken window panes.

It was as it should be, as he had always remembered it to be.

Momentarily his hand lifted to the left side of his chest and his fingers explored between his ribs for the feel of that erratic flutter that had crippled him for much of his life. But that had cured itself. His heart was bold and healthy.

He turned back to the bed. Veronica was as beautiful as the day he had married her. He stepped toward her and caught a sight of himself in the tall mirror on the wardrobe door. He too, had lost thirty years and stood upright in the cool light of the morning.

He placed his hands on the edge of the mattress, leaned over and kissed her. She smiled and reached up joyfully and pulled him down on top of her.

Outside, the world created by Arthur Knowland went on as he knew it should. •



CONTINUOUS PERFORMANCE

*He thought he had found the
only woman on Earth—but
could he ever be sure?*

GORDON EKLUND

THE last man on Earth came driving down the hard-packed dirt road that wound among green peaks. Turning left, he drove along the shore of a wide blue lake; then followed the decaying pavement of the old highway until it cut through a countryside of flat green pastures. At last he reached the line of swaying wooden buildings that marked the informal boundary between country and town.

Here, finally, the last man brought his vehicle—a battered station wagon whose mechanical components he had scrounged in a thousand towns and villages. He stared at a tiny filth-encrusted hovel. Stuck in the ground in front of it, a torn sign said: GAS. Since the car's horn had long ago uttered its last mournful wail, he forced down the side window, leaned out.

"Anybody here?"

It was a hot day—sweltered, the still air clogged with swimming particles of dry dust. Beyond this settlement lay the hard edge of the continental forest yet hardly a flower grew here, barely a blade of parched grass. It was just like these creatures, he thought, to choose such a forsaken wilderness in which to build their town.

A door slammed. A figure appeared. Tall, handsome, dark, ageless—practically indistinguishable from any of them. And they had the nerve to call themselves men! This one came forward and stopped, bracing himself against the side of the car, and thrust his head forward through the open window so that his face nearly touched that of the last man.

"I know you. You're the magician!"

"I am Phobias. Yes," the last man said.

"You plan to do your show here?" The tall, dark man did not wait for an answer. Immediately he added, "I can remember when you came through here last time. I was just a boy. You had a wagon and a team of big gray horses—"

"The horses died," Phobias said.

The man nodded, backing away from the car. Between his spindly splayed legs, a small whirlwind of dust suddenly rose. "I guess you want some gas."

"I would appreciate that."

"And in return you'll put on your

show. Is that what you'll promise?"

"Correct."

"Then how about you do the show first? Afterward I'll give you the gas. Tonight, say, after the sun has set."

Phobias smiled. "So you've heard."

The man nodded. "I've got two kids. Ever since they could understand words, they've been hearing about you—about Phobias. I'm not about to see them cheated."

"Well—" Phobias shrugged. He was not embarrassed although the man had hit the nail on the head. Phobias had intended to obtain gasoline in return for a promise of magical delights and then go sprinting away. There was another big lake out there and two smaller villages and finally the vast green forest. The truth was that after more years than he could remember, Phobias no longer derived the faintest pleasure from his act. He would rather cheat than perform, rather lie than conjure. He could always order this man to do his bidding but that would be magic too, and the magic was reserved for the act. "Where shall I put on the show?" he asked.

"How about right there?" The man pointed to a bare and dusty field across the road.

"No. It may rain."

"So? Rain hardly gets one wet."

"Not you maybe. It gets me wet."

"All right," said the man, and

quickly—as though memorized especially for the occasion—he supplied Phobias with a set of careful directions. “Talk to a man named Ernest when you get there. He’ll see that you’re fixed up with a place,” he finished, stepping backward. He disappeared into the grimy house, where two pale faces hung like frozen white shadows in the sagging rectangle of a window.

Phobias drove on, reaching the dilapidated streets of the town. He chose to ignore the curious stares of pedestrians trudging along the high wooden sidewalks, merchants peering through dust-coated panes. He ignored too the wound always with him—the knowledge that he was the last man, the only man, on this whole big dead world.

NOT until he had stopped the car—hearing the engine gasping over the final few drops of gasoline—did Phobias recognize the place. Yes, he had performed in this town before. He got out, placing his shoeless feet firmly in the warm dust. Stepping forward, turning his head slightly first left and then right, he was able to remember the last time he had passed through. She had still been living then. In fact, as far as he could recall, it was near here—either in the next village or the one just after that—that the jagged lightning had fallen from the heavens to claim her life. If he came upon the spot, he

would not choose to pause and visit her grave. For he held her—even in death—strictly accountable for the absurdity of her own end. He preferred not to face the past; there was far too much of it. And now, tramping across the wooden walk, he recalled something else—when he had buried her. It had not been the last time he had been in this town. No. Nor even the time before that. It had been a thousand years ago. At least.

“Ernest?” he queried.

“Who wants him?” asked the man behind the counter.

“Phobias.”

“I’m Ernest.”

Arrangements were quickly and smoothly settled. Phobias gave his word when requested. So did Ernest.

“Then I’ll see you at eight,” he said.

Phobias nodded. “I think I’ll go over there now.”

“Want anything to eat first?”

“No, thank you. I have to set up my things.”

He found the ancient car surrounded by a flock of milling children. One girl separated herself from the others and stepped boldly forward. “You’re the magician!” Identical with her myriad brothers and sisters, she was dark-haired, yellow-eyed.

“I am.” He trudged to the rear of the car, let down the gate, began to remove various implements needed for the act. The auditorium was a

mere block away; he could walk it easily from here.

"Any of you like to lend a hand?"

The girl who had already spoken rushed to his side. In addition to the children, a cluster of adults stood upon the wooden sidewalk, carefully observing the proceedings.

"Is this something magic?" The girl took the heavy black cloth from Phobias' hands.

It was only his cape, but he answered, "You'll see tonight."

"You change people into animals, don't you?"

"Sometimes. But I always change them back." The girl waited for him to give her more to carry. But he was determined to be scrupulously fair. "Take the cape to the auditorium."

"But this isn't heavy."

"That's all for you," he insisted. He gave the next article—a briefcase containing variously colored powders—to a small boy. Rebuffed, the girl went off. The boy followed. As if from a distance, Phobias could hear the adults speaking above him on the sidewalk.

"When I was a boy . . ." one began.

"I remember him, too."

"He made my brother disappear. You couldn't see the poor guy."

". . . Or floating in the air—flying like a bird."

"Here—you take this." Phobias handed a girl a small basket con-

taining his dirty laundry; but she would never have to know.

The adults chattered on.

"I can hardly wait to see him."

"He's the best magician ever!"

Phobias was closing the car-gate preparatory to dismissing the children when he happened to glance up. It was then that he saw her.

He stared.

She could not have been more than sixteen or seventeen. Her hair, soft and smooth as silk, fell to her bare shoulders. And it was yellow!

Unlike the others, she was not completely nude. A narrow belt of brown animal-skin darted between her thighs then circled her waist. Her skin was exceedingly pale—nearly as white as polished ivory. Adorning her chest were twin mounds—bare adolescent breasts tipped by bright pink nipples. Phobias knew he was staring. But she was staring too and her eyes, like his, were blue and plaintively clear.

"Give me something else to carry."

At the sound of the sharp voice, Phobias wheeled as though struck. A dark girl gazed at him, her hands empty and waiting.

He snapped, "No!" More gently he added, "That's all I have." He turned back, looking desperately for the blond girl. She had gone.

He whispered. "Who?"

"Huh?" said the dark girl.

"Who was—?" He made himself stop. There existed no means by

which he could force these creatures to understand what he had just seen. Staring along the length of the walk, he thought he glimpsed the girl again as she rounded the corner of a decrepit building. Two men marched behind her, almost as though they served as an escort. Who? Her father? Brothers?

He could not know.

"Never mind," he said.

HIS own hair was white. Theirs was black. For so many hundred years had this been the case that he had long since come to believe it the natural order of things. His eyes were blue and theirs were yellow. They had never seemed to notice that he was different, and he had rarely bothered to notice much about them either, for they were a million while he was only one.

Phobias was sitting on the edge of the improvised stage, legs dangling into empty darkness. He shut his eyes, seeing her—the yellow hair, blue eyes, tender young breasts. Unbelievable! He was the last man, yes—but not the last of mankind, as he had thought. She had to be human. Or was there a catch to it? Some trick or masquerade? Tonight she would come to the performance—everyone did—and he would find out for certain.

The children had gone home. It was the dinner hour. Although the sun still clung to the edge of the sky, the clouds had risen to conceal

its red disk. Rain fell harshly. Phobias left the stage and crossed the darkened auditorium of what once had been a schoolhouse, threading his way between benches. The place would hold a couple of hundred spectators, including standees, all looking like so many mirror images of each other. But if the girl were among them, he did not doubt that he would recognize her instantly. She would stand out as clearly as a cut diamond among pebbles.

He stopped in a doorway and looked out, watching the rain converting the street dust to mud, listening to the drops pound the crude sidewalks.

A "man" passed, undismayed by the downpour, his naked body exuding slick oils impervious to the plummeting wetness. Sometimes—when he stopped to think of it—Phobias was amazed by how casually he referred to these creatures as men. For they were not. They were born of men as surely as mankind had once been spawned by the gods, but they were not men any more than Phobias was a god. Once—before the time of the great plague of madness that had cleansed Earth of its masters—they had been called androids, and had been scattered and few. Now they were many and man was only one.

But wait, thought Phobias. His heart pounded. What of her?

When the rain fell, did she feel as he did—threatened by dampness

and chill? Where was she now? At home, he guessed, gazing through a steamy windowpane, watching the wetness that cascaded beyond. And what did the girl see out there? Did she see his face in the rain as he was seeing hers? Would she know that he was a human being, of genuine blood and ancient genes and true flesh, as he was convinced she was?

As suddenly as it had come, the storm fled. The sky briefly turned silver, then faded into night. The muddied street was empty now, silent. Phobias turned away and shuffled back to his props.

HE SAT alone upon the floodlighted stage, gazing at the massed audience patiently waiting. He could make out the dark polished faces of the throng standing along the dull walls and filling the seats. The identical heads loomed as though from some horribly repetitious nightmare. After the passage of centuries, Phobias was quite accustomed to the phenomenon and did not let it disturb him. He sat upon a stool, his legs crossed. A thin cigar—one of the few remaining in his private stock—glowed between the fingers of his right hand. He wore his black cape, his white leather gloves and his tall glimmering top hat. Behind him, neatly spread upon a wooden bench, were the tools of his trade: a polished wand, two glasses full of water, a red bandanna and a pair

of long scissors. Nothing else.

But he would not be needing these things tonight, he told himself. For she had come at last, arriving after he had nearly surrendered hope. Now he could see her face clearly rising from the darkness of the last row, like a single star amid the blankness of an otherwise empty sky. He tried to smile at her to communicate his knowledge of her predicament, that of a human being among androids, just as he was. But when she failed to meet his gaze, he understood. It was not yet time for that. First the proof would have to be presented; that was only proper and fair. The smiles would naturally follow.

The audience waited stolidly. Take two hundred true human beings—the flesh-and-blood kind—and pack them into a school auditorium with promises of a magic show. Let the performer merely sit upon the bright stage, gazing ahead into their massed ranks. Feet would soon be shuffling, throats coughing, hands twitching and wringing. Such was not the case with these creatures. Phobias whispered contemptuously, “Androids!” Their communal capacity for patience was infinite, for man—true man—had made them that way.

At last Phobias decided to get on with it.

“Good evening,” he said. “Ladies and gentlemen. Children.” He tapped the ash from his

smoldering cigar, took a lingering puff, blew thick, curling smoke. "Behind me on the bench you may observe the few articles with which I normally commence my performance." He smiled sympathetically. "But on this occasion I choose to treat the intelligence of my audience with the utmost respect. Here—"

Standing up carefully, smoking, he moved to the bench. He lifted the red bandanna and waved it.

"Do you really need to see me cut this old cloth into pieces, then watch while I recreate the whole before your astonished eyes?" He dropped the bandanna contemptuously, letting it flutter to the stage. "Or these glasses of water?" He tapped one with a fingernail. "Do you wish to observe as I suspend the contents above the floor of this stage, thus defying the laws of nature? And this magic wand?" Laughing, he tossed it over his shoulder. "I really don't think we have any need of it tonight. I feel none of you have come here tonight to see silly tricks. Let us dispense with these props. Forget them."

He stepped forward, striding to the lip of the stage. There he gazed ahead, balanced upon tensed knees like a sea captain staring into the entrails of an approaching storm.

"We shall move immediately to the crux—the red meat—of my act. I will need a volunteer." His eyes scanned the last row, passing back and forth across the place where the girl sat. "You, sir," he said

randomly, then pointed at the dark figure of a man. "Step up here, please."

The man marched to the stage. Phobias awaited his arrival, standing calmly, trying not to look at the girl. The man approaching could have been any of those he had met already—the gas-station attendant or the storekeeper, Ernest—or any other one of them, seen or unseen, known or unknown, in this or any other town.

"I hope," said Phobias, "you do not object to assisting me for a brief moment." He flung away his cigar, letting the stump smolder on the wooden floor.

"Glad to help. What shall I—?"

Phobias cut off his words with a slashing hand. Then he proceeded to pace the length of the stage, glancing out at the huddled mass of the audience. Suddenly, like a dancer, he whirled. then he spoke in a low, measured voice. He hardly comprehended his own words. How many thousand thousand times previously had he been thus impelled to state his rôle and purpose?

"I shall make you see what you have never seen before. I shall make you unable to see what you have always seen before. Why? How? That much I cannot freely reveal. But if, during the next few moments, you come to doubt the evidence of your own senses, then I say you must elect to doubt your sanity as well. And I guarantee you this: madness is not my trade. I am

a magician and that alone. I toy with the unknown as an infant plays with a rattle. I allow you to glimpse—but only to glimpse—the mysteries of my personal detour into darkness.”

He whirled again, swirling his cape.

“Now, sir,” he said to the open-mouthed man from the audience, “would you mind stepping forward into the light so that everyone may get a good look at you?” Lightly he touched the man’s hip. “Turn, if you don’t mind. Show them that you’re all here—let them know you’re real.

PHOBIAS could feel them out there, becoming excited. As excited as it was possible for them to become, that is. The older ones, having seen the magic before, communicated their sense of anticipation to their ignorant daughters and sons.

“Fine,” Phobias said, placing his hands over his eyes. “Please—I must ask for silence.” When he could not hear them breathing, he began to count aloud. “One . . . two . . . three . . .” Reaching twenty, he lowered his hands, opened his eyes. Then, raising a clenched fist, he cut a swath through the air.

“Now!” he cried. He took a half-step forward.

And stopped.

“You are a dog,” he told the dark person on the stage. “When

you hear my fingers snap once.”

“Yes.”

“Then be a dog.” And he snapped his fingers.

The man dropped instantly to his hands and knees. Without so much as glancing at him, Phobias went to the stool and sat down. Deliberately, as the man’s shrill yips and yowls resounded, he placed a fresh cigar between his teeth. The man came trotting over, sniffing suspiciously.

“Roll over,” Phobias commanded.

The man fell on his back, hands and feet pointing at the roof. Phobias walked to the edge of the stage, leaned down.

“Anyone have a match?”

Somebody did; Phobias lit up and puffed.

“Stop,” he told the subject on the stage. “You may stand. On two feet.” His fingers snapped. “You are yourself, again.”

The man nodded. “I am.”

Phobias faced his audience. As always, there was no applause, no laughter, nothing. A gentle hissing sound erupted briefly, but that was all. His eyes came to rest on the blond girl. She was gazing straight back at him. Blue eyes. Pale skin. For a moment he could not look away.

“Soon,” he murmured.

“What?” queried the man.

Phobias wrenched himself back to business. “You remember nothing?”

"No," the man admitted.

Phobias realized he was rushing his act, forcing the end that ought not to come for several hours. Often in the past he had performed until dawn, lusting in the excitement of his own performance, refusing to relinquish the stage until he had given up all hope of extracting some response. Not that response ever came. These people—*androids*, he thought—did not enjoy what he did, for they could enjoy nothing—not love for fear, not magic. They could pay attention, yes. And they could become excited. Curiosity and excitement had been built into them as survival tools, but that was about it.

"He is a bird," Phobias told the audience. The man's face, when Phobias looked at it, was blank. "You are a bird."

"I am."

"Then, for us, fly." And snapped his fingers.

The man flapped his arms, straining at the flat and dusty air.

Phobias whispered to the audience, "He flies."

Then he sat on his stool again, smoking. The audience watched the flight of the captive bird. What was it to them? Hawk? Eagle? Sparrow? Once, in a distant village in the southern continent, Phobias had said, "He is a bird." But the villagers had never seen an actual bird. Phobias remembered that rocky mocking land, treeless, where the sun rarely came. "He flies."

But they had not known. They had asked for explanations . . .

This man cawed and twisted on the stage, arms helplessly flapping. The audience watched silently.

Phobias rose from the stool, waved his cigar. "You are yourself," he said.

The man ceased his charade, regained awareness. But still no applause, no laughter. Silence.

Phobias bowed stiffly.

"And now," he announced, "the heart of my act. A descent into the great chasm of the unknown." He waved the first volunteer away. "Another?" he asked, but there was none. Phobias searched the audience, pointed. "You, sir." A man sitting beside the blond girl. "I ask that you join me, please."

Phobias watched the girl, seeing surprise and wonder on her face. And more? Was it fear he saw? Pleasure? It had been so long since he had witnessed true emotion in another that interpretation of her expression came hard to him.

THE man stood beside him. Phobias could not stop himself: "That girl—" His eyes indicated whom he meant. "Is she your daughter?"

"She is."

"Where did you get her?"

"From . . . from . . ." The man struggled to speak the ugly forbidden term.

"Not from there. Tell me the truth."

"Well, from . . . from . . ."

It was the girl who made Phobias stop. He was gazing at her again. Her lips folded downward, the pale skin above her eyes creased and strained—her whole cast of countenance begged him not to proceed.

He hesitated, then addressed the audience, using well-memorized phrases to conceal his confusion. "I must ask for complete silence. Even the slightest sound might destroy the mental equilibrium necessary for what shall ensue. This man—" gesturing behind "—will soon die. It is my intention to return him then to full and natural life."

Murmurs of curiosity from the audience. Hisses of excitement.

Phobias said, "Lie down. Yes. That's right. Now extend your arms straight out from your sides. And your feet—separate the heels. Yes, that's fine." Normally this would be the climax of his act—his grandest achievement. "No, don't close your eyes. You must keep them open."

He threw away the cigar, faced his audience.

"Another volunteer." He selected a woman from the front row. "Come up here, would you?"

When everything was ready—the man lying upon the stage, the woman standing at his side—Phobias kneeled. He moved his hands over the man—first down and then up—covering every square inch of the body but never actually touching it.

"Death calls to you," Phobias said. "He shall bestow upon you peace and tranquility. You hear the call. Life ebbs from your physical self. Although you can feel life leaving, you are not afraid. You are lonely but prepared. Tell me."

"I am lonely," the man echoed softly. "I am prepared."

"Not afraid?"

"No, I am not afraid."

"Death has come to claim you. Life flows gently away. You feel it abandon your lungs, your heart. From them, your life flows like clean water into the veins of your arms. Into your skin. Into the air—" Phobias snapped his fingers. "Now life is gone!"

The man upon the floor neither moved nor spoke.

"He is dead," Phobias said. Regaining his feet, with his hands he swept the dust from his knees. He eyed the woman crouched beside the supine man. "Is he breathing?"

"No," she said woodenly.

"Check his heart."

She placed her ear upon the man's breast.

"Tell them that he's dead," Phobias said.

Softly the woman intoned: "He is dead."

"Louder."

Distinctly: "He is dead."

Phobias nodded. "Thank you." He allowed the woman to leave the stage.

He could not resist a look at the girl. Yes—that was fear on her

face. He was sure of it. Emotion!

Phobias pointed a finger at her.

"Come here," he said. "Come up here."

She hesitated, then walked slowly to the stage and mounted it. Now it was his turn to feel fear. He reached into a pocket and felt for a cigar.

"Is he really dead?"

Phobias stared at her adolescent beauty. A bare yard separated them. "He is."

She crouched. Raising the subject's wrist in her hand, she gazed up at Phobias.

"Tell them," he said.

She released the wrist. The hand dropped soundly to the floor. "Tell them what?"

"Tell them he's dead."

"But he's not."

"He's not dead?"

"No."

"But tell them that he is."

The girl lowered her head, placing her ear upon her father's heart.

Then she stood up. "No, he's not dead."

"You won't tell them that he is."

"Of course not. He isn't."

"You are a dog," Phobias said. She shook her head.

"Fly."

"I can't fly."

"Fly!" he shouted.

"No!" She rushed toward him, pounded his chest with little fists. "You make him stand up—I want him to be conscious again."

Phobias nodded. He told the dead man: "You are living." But the magician did not mean it. No, it was she who was alive—not the cold dead creature now rising from the floor. Even in life, that thing would always be dead. But she—she lived.

At last he had elicited the response sought so long. Denial. Emotional opposition.

His eyes were stinging with the torment of his joy.

PHOBIAS forced them to give him the gasoline. At first they had refused, saying that he had failed to fulfill the agreement. The children had been sorely disappointed.

Phobias said, "Do what I ask. I am ordering you. Bring gasoline. Prepare my car."

And then they had acceded. For the first time in centuries he had used his magical powers outside the confines of his act—for personal and private gain. But he felt that he possessed the right—for was he not a man?

The girl lived outside the town. He made them tell him exactly where. He drove there quickly, careless of the ruts and pits of the decayed highway. The house was set back from the road. A single window—a rectangle of yellow amid the black—gleamed brightly.

Asleep? He approached and pressed his face to the glass. No, her eyes were open. She lay upon her back in a narrow bed. Pink sheets. The walls of the bedroom—

plain and undecorated—were also pink.

He broke the window-glass with a rock, reached inside, raised the lower frame. She did not stir as he crawled through the opening. Then he paused, listening to the silence of the house.

The girl opened her eyes then. She showed no alarm.

"What do you want?"

"I've come—" Phobias stopped. He thought he had heard a footfall. "I'll tell you later. Get up. We're going."

"Where?"

He waved an arm. "Away."

"They'll stop us."

He laughed, striving to calm her immature misgivings. Then he heard it again: feet striking the floor. Coming closer. He grasped at the noise, saying, "If you don't come with me, I'll have to make him dead. You saw what I can do!"

Frowning, she swung out of bed, started for the closet.

Phobias stopped her. "You don't have to take anything. Hurry!"

He exited by way of the window. When his feet touched the grass, she stood at his side.

"This way."

"They'll follow and catch us," she insisted.

"No," he said.

"The other ones—I know they will."

Phobias laughed easily, placing an arm around her shoulders. "It's just us, now."

But as they reached the road he looked over his shoulder, saw a line of fire approaching from town. Dozens of flaming torches swam in the night.

"Them?" he cried.

"Yes. I told you." She drew closer. They clung to each other. "Let me return to the house," she begged.

"No." He forced her into the car. "This machine can smash them, outrun them." He started the engine. "Watch."

They were coming from every direction now. Phobias did not hesitate. He ran the car straight at their torches. A gleam of fire singed his eyes. Then a vision of incredible stunning whiteness.

They were through.

He exulted, shouting, slapping the steering wheel: "See, see!"

The girl perched behind through the rear window. "They're still there," she said.

"But we're here." He slowed the car to prove that everything was all right.

"Oh, no." She glared at him, shaking her head. "Don't you know they can drive, too?"

"Not like us," he said.

As they neared the dark vastness of the forest, the first scattered trees heaved up beside the road like towering signs of warning. Phobias stopped the car. He opened the rear gate and removed the tools of his trade and threw them into the

underbrush. As he did, he giggled. The girl seemed half asleep. But she smiled when he told her, "I won't need them now."

They could live in the forest, he thought. Survival lay easily at their fingertips. The car zoomed forward. Were they ready yet for sons and daughters? For the new race to be born from the remnants of the old. For man returning to again rule his own domain. He reached out a hand and caressed her slender wrist. Her eyes, open but unaware, barely flickered. On and on they drove.

Soon they were in the thickest part of the forest. The ancient road wound among huge twisted trees. The girl had slumped into a deep silence punctuated by frantic glances over her shoulder. They passed through a clearing and then a dark huddled village, a lamp suddenly flashing from one window as their headlight-beams stroked the tumbledown homes.

"I wasn't always the last man," he said. He tried to explain to her. Before the plague of madness, more than four billion human beings had teemed the Earth. Afterward, barely a few thousand remained. He told her everything he knew of those forgotten times. He had been an astronaut, he said proudly.

"A what?" she asked.

He pointed through the windshield. Here the trees were thinned. Moonlight gleamed silver from a

roadside pond whose silent dark waters reinforced his bitter recollections of yesterday. "See those lights." He meant the stars. "Know what they are?"

She knew.

"Well, I went up there."

"To the stars?"

"No, but to planets. Jupiter. Mars. Also the moon."

"You traveled to the moon?"

"I did."

"How? By magic?"

A kind of magic, he said, and promised to explain someday. Then he told her that he had been one of a dozen men and women selected to make the first journey to a star—not a planet or a moon, but a real star. The voyage was to last four hundred years. The crew had been injected with a complex of new drugs designed to increase longevity. "So we could live to see our world again." All of that had happened thousands of years ago. "But the plague of madness came, and because of it none of us ever left. We stayed here on Earth and I, at least, have lived almost forever. Those drugs—"

He remembered well. A year before the scheduled departure, the starship crew had gone into training. They had been placed inside a model of the ship that would carry them to the stars, and this model had been lowered to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Suitably shielded from the pressure at ocean depths, of course. There they had

stayed for seven months, constantly monitored from above but without the security of reciprocal contact or any knowledge of exterior time or events. They were left alone—a dozen men and women—forced to live wholly isolated from the world.

“And we survived,” he said. “But when our training time was over and we were raised to the surface, we were greeted only by androids. Androids and corpses and a handful of madmen.”

The plague of madness had first broken out within the Ganymede settlement on one of the moons of Jupiter. In less than a month, every man in the colony had been dead.

“The androids told us,” said Phobias, “that the disease progressed in three distinct stages. The first, lasting approximately a week, was classic schizophrenia. For many years it had been theorized that the underlying causes of that mental disorder were physical—viral, bacteriological, something like that. And now it was proved. The plague victim immediately lost all touch with reality. In the second stage, he became catatonic. In the third, he died. There were no survivors once the disease began.”

The girl said wearily, “My name is Eva.”

“Eva! How beautiful. Listen to me, Eva. That plague spread faster than any other in history. It leaped from Ganymede to Mars and then to Earth. In less than six months, everyone susceptible was either

dead or dying. We asked the androids whether any men at all had survived.

“‘Only those like yourselves,’ they told us. ‘Those inoculated with the longevity medicine. Too late it was realized that the stuff is a preventative. Oh, some others—past sufferers from schizophrenia, both the cured and uncured; they are immune and they have survived. And us—androids. We were not affected.’”

Phobias paused, negotiating the old car over a jagged hole in the road. He glanced at the girl. Was she listening?

“So we set off in search of the survivors, finding most of them—a few thousand—and the years passed and they died too but we did not. It was a lonely life for us. But a simple one, for the androids were always there to tend to our desires. But gradually the crew began to die off. Accidents occurred. A woman was murdered by a man who had loved her for more than three hundred years. I left, taking one of the other women with me. We took an automobile and started to wander the world.”

And the androids had forgotten. They had reproduced themselves by virtue of the knowledge man had granted them, maintaining the automated factories. When the old ones of the first generation—those who had lived through the plague—wore out and were discarded, their grandsons and granddaughters had

continued on, ignorant of what they truly were. Indeed, they had come to call themselves "men." And their numbers had rapidly multiplied and in time they had peopled the world in the same great numbers as their original creators. "And my race—our race—the human race—toppled to the very edge of extinction."

Phobias had slowed the car, was peering intently through the windshield.

"She died near here. The woman. Oh, I can't remember exactly when. A bolt of lightning came from the sky and killed her instantly—killed her and our horses and set the wagon afire. I nearly died, too. Later I tried to find the others but all were gone. Some had died. The rest were lost. Since then, I have continued to wander alone—a magician—Phobias—moving quietly through the android towns and villages. Searching for a human being. But now I have found one. I am not alone any more."

SHE had fallen asleep, slumped back in the seat, face buried in the dark..

He pulled over to the side of the road, killed the engine and climbed out. The silence woke her. An instant later she was standing beside him, gazing up at dark tree-tops and the stars.

"I don't want to drive any more," he said. "We can stay here till morning."

"All right."

He pointed into the trees. "Let's take a look." He lighted a match to show the way. Then another. The forest around them whispered in the wind.

"Here." He drew her down beneath a massive balsam. "Let's rest here. The air is sweet and the needles make the ground soft."

He wanted to take her in his arms. He placed his dead cigar between his teeth and relit it. No . . . too soon. She had curled up at his feet, as if asleep, but the glare of the match revealed her eyes open and alert.

"That smells awful," she said.

He smiled, exhaling smoke. "Not to me." He stretched out comfortably. "Did you hear what I told you?"

"Most of it, I guess."

"Then you must understand why I ran off with you, Eva. You don't belong there with those—those things. You belong here with me. We're the only two human beings left—and we can people the earth!"

He sensed her hesitation, her reluctance to reply. She was burdened with unspoken words.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"I can't tell you, magician."

"Why?"

"They said I shouldn't. That there was no need. You weren't supposed to see me. You weren't supposed to do this—take me away. I want to go home."

"No!" He grabbed her. In his

fingers, her wrist seemed fragile as a twig. "What have you to tell me? Out with it!"

"All right, then. We're not the same."

A long silence.

"We are!" he cried piteously. "We must be."

"No," she said. "I'm not like you. And there are more of us, many more, more each day. We're not like you or like the androids either. We're different."

"Impossible! Are you saying that you are neither human nor android?"

Instead of answering she remarked softly, without surprise, "Here they come."

He stared, seeing nothing at first. Then their torches burst into life, painting the forest with crude light. Phobias leaped to his feet, holding the girl.

Relentlessly they closed in. Fair-haired. Ghostly pale. Was it possible that all of them were human? Phobias tried desperately to think.

"Let her go," said their spokesman, a blond woman whose face was young, whose unclad body shown pallid in the torchlight.

"No!" shouted Phobias. "She's a human being—like me. She's not yours. Unless . . ." He gulped. He could not bring himself to ask the question.

But the woman answered it, shaking her head. "We are not human, nor is she. She is one of us."

"The commandments," he said desperately. "She does not obey." He knew the commandments perfectly; they had served him long and well. Born within all androids: *Obey the directions of man. Cause no harm to befall his form.*

The woman stepped closer. She stopped inches in front of Phobias and raised her hand. Sharply, coldly, she slapped his face. He tasted blood upon his lips.

"Give her to me," the woman said, reaching out. "Or do you want us to beat you?"

He glanced past the woman's bare shoulders. There were so many of them—dozens—men, women, children—blond and pale, blue-eyed. Angry. Resentful. They were able to feel and show emotion. Like Eva.

"How many are there?" he asked.

"More each day. All over the world. Didn't you realize it had to happen? We have read the old records. We know how it began. And this was the way it had to end. Man created androids to serve him. But man perished. And now androids have become men themselves."

"A lie," Phobias said. "Except in name only, you can't be men. You come from factories—like machines. Men are born."

The woman reached out and snatched the girl, drew her close. The two hugged each other. "This girl," the woman said, "is my daughter. She was born to me. Her

father, whom you hypnotized, is grandson of Kanakoe, who developed the process. Or maybe evolution developed it, and revealed it first in Kanokoe. But we don't need the factories. We are the new humanity. But you, Phobias, are the old."

A great loneliness engulfed him. He felt more alone than ever before. He was Phobias, the magician, unique, the last man. When he commanded all were required to obey. But now the blood ran down his face and he was humbled.

"You hid yourselves from me," he said. "You disguised yourselves to look like the others. You wouldn't let me know."

"We saw no purpose in hurting you. If it hadn't been for your race, ours would never have existed. We owed you something—the comfort of ignorance, at least. And you could not damage us, because you are the last."

"I am the last," he whispered. He watched the woman and her daughter join the others. Illuminated by torchlight they disappeared into the forest, leaving thick darkness behind. He slumped down upon the dry needles and held his head in his trembling hands. "I am the last man," he said. "The only man."

PHOBAS, the magician, standing upon the stage, calmly stared out at his audience. Behind him,

neatly arranged upon a bench, lay his reclaimed props. Where was he? He was not certain, but it made no difference. One village was like another. He traveled the world in endless circles, determined to prove what he knew so well: that he was the last man, the only man.

The audience regarded him with pity. He nearly laughed in their faces. Their assumed compassion mocked their brutal honesty. They lied to him no longer. They rubbed his nose in the truth they had kept concealed so long. But he would prove to them somehow that he alone was a proper human. They would obey him—he would enforce the commandments—he would show them the deepest truths and force them to see.

Their faces were mostly pale. Blond hair. Blue eyes that shone and glimmered. Raising an arm, he pointed at a tall man in the first row.

"Step forward," he said. "Come here."

The man came obediently. For a moment, Phobias experienced hope. Could he be winning at last? Had they finally chosen to acknowledge his superiority? They were androids. Whether born from factory or womb, they were not men. When he told them to die, they must cease living. When he said, "You are a bird," they must fly. What he told them to hear, they must hear. What he told them to see, they must see.

The man stood beside him on the stage. Phobias raised his wand and drew a rapid cross in the air. "I am a man," he told the audience, "and you are androids. When I command, you must obey."

Turning, he faced his subject. The man met his gaze with cold blue eyes. Softly, Phobias said, "You are a bird—now fly."

The man stood frozen, motionless.

Phobias shouted: "Fly!"

The man looked at his feet.

"You must! I command you! Fly!"

"No," the man said softly.

Phobias turned away. Would it ever come? Would they ever acknowledge his rightful station? Or would he be forced to wander alone for centuries more until that fateful day when some accident would finally strike him down and he would die, leaving the Earth to be ruled by them alone?

He waved his hand meekly at the man: "You may go back and sit down—please."

There was nothing else for him. He had to go on. Eternity was his, and there was nothing else for him to do.

He pointed blindly into the audience. "You," he said. As the girl came forward, blond hair as long as her spine, he prepared himself to try again. He would command—she would obey.

What choice did he have? Phobias was the last man. Wasn't he? •

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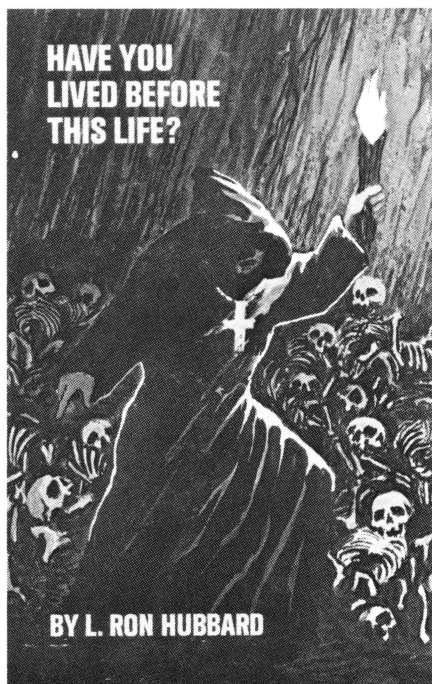
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