

STARTLING STORIES

A woman with red hair, wearing a yellow dress, is depicted from the waist up, looking back over her shoulder. She is surrounded by a large, intense fire that fills the background. In the foreground, there are dark, mechanical elements, possibly parts of a control panel or machinery, including a large circular dial on the left and a complex assembly of pipes and wires on the right.

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FEATURING
**THE CYBERNETIC
BRAINS**
*A Novel of
Men and Machines*
By **RAYMOND F. JONES**

**THE HARPERS OF
TITAN**
A Captain Future Novel
By **EDMOND
HAMILTON**

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

Duo Worlds

and other short stories

Henry Kuttner

Android

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Bradley looked at the Director's head. His stomach tried to crawl up into his throat. He felt suddenly dizzy. He knew that he was betraying himself, and that would be absolutely fatal.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a few coins, and let the coins drop, as though by accident, to the airfoam carpet.

"Oh-oh," he said, and immediately crouched down to recover the money. It's a basic principle of first aid, in cases of shock or faintness, to lower the head, and Bradley was doing just that. The giddiness began to pass as his circulation picked up. In a moment, he knew, he'd have to stand up and face the Director, and by that time he was determined to have his feelings under control. But how the devil could the Director's head be where it was--after last night?

And then sanity came back. He remembered that, last night, the Director couldn't possibly have recognized him through the rubber-plastic false-face he had worn. On the other hand, after last night, the Director of New Products, Inc., should have been incapable of living or breathing, not to speak of using his memory-centers. Bradley had left the man's body in one corner of the room and his head in another.

Man?

With a violent effort he controlled himself. He recaptured the last coin and stood up, his face flushed. "Sorry," he said. "I came in to deliver that report on the induced mutation project, not to act like a horn of plenty." His fascinated stare moved down to the Director's neck and flicked away. The high collar concealed any--any mark. Any mark, such as might have been left by razor-sharp steel shearing through flesh and bone.... Was there a reason for the high collar? Bradley couldn't be sure. In the fall of 2060, men's fashions had changed considerably from the uncomfortable styles of a few years before, and the Director's flaring half-cape, with its gilt-braided, close-fitting collar, was far from extreme. Bradley owned one like that himself.

Lord, he thought in white panic--can't the--the things even be killed?

Arthur Court, the Director, turned a bland smile on his Chief of Organization. "Hangover?" he asked. "Take an irradiation treatment. Medical's always happy to use their gadgets. Our staff's too healthy to suit them, I think." He talked!

A mad thought whirled into Bradley's brain: a ringer? Was this really Court sitting behind the desk? But instantly he knew that couldn't be the explanation. It was Court, the same Arthur Court whom Bradley had killed not many hours ago. If you could call it killing, when Court hadn't actually been alive... at least, not with the same sort of life that activated human beings.

He forced his mind from the danger-level and became the efficient Chief of Organization of the company. "You can't argue with a hangover," he said. "Here're the latest figures--"

"What about that variant factor? I gathered there was something that upset the calculations."

"There was," Bradley said. "But it's a theoretical variable. It doesn't matter a bit in practice, because we're not trying to mutate people. And the sterility rate doesn't vary abnormally with fruit-flies or--or strawberries."

"But it does with people--eh?" Court glanced rapidly through the papers Bradley had given him.

"Uh-huh. We could follow it up, but it would cost money and wouldn't have any immediately practical results. That's up to you to decide, sir."

"We can predict non-human reactions with reasonable accuracy, though?"

Bradley nodded. "Two per cent factor of error. Close enough for us to mutate potatoes twenty feet long and tasting like roast beef, without any danger of getting them half an inch long instead, and tasting like cyanide."

"Does the curve of variance rise with animals?"

"No. Only people. We can hatch chickens which are all white meat and built cube-shaped for easy carving. And, really, we could mutate people too, if it weren't illegal--but the uncertainty factor steps in there, as I said. Too many people become sterilized instead of having mutated children."

"Um," Court said, and pondered. "Well, forget about the people, then. There's no profit in it. Drop that part of the investigation. Go ahead with the rest. All right?"

"Fine," Bradley agreed. He had expected to be stopped at this point of the inquiry, though, since last night, not by Court. He found he was

still holding an unlighted cigarette. He put it in his mouth and went to the side door and opened it. Then he turned.

"That's all?"

He watched Court twist his neck around, and had an insane fear that the man's head might fall off. But it didn't.

"Yes, that's all for now," Court said pleasantly.

Bradley went out, trying to forget the narrow red line he had just seen circling the Director's throat, revealed when the man had turned his head.

The things couldn't be killed by decapitation, then. But they could be destroyed. They could be dissolved with acid, smashed with a hammer, dismantled, burned....

The trouble was, there was as yet no sure way to recognize the creatures. The sterility curve after exposure to mild radioactivity meant something, but ordinary humans could have become sterilized too--though not usually by such slight dosages of gamma rays. And even then, some people were sterile anyway.

All Bradley had was a general method of screening. After that, he had to depend on psychology to weed out the monsters. He knew that they could usually be found in positions of power and influence, though not necessarily in the public eye. Like Arthur Court, who, as Director of New Products, Inc., wielded tremendous influence on the culture--since civilization is moulded by the technological tools placed in its hands.

Bradley shivered.

Last night he had cut off Arthur Court's head.

Arthur Court was an android.

"And what are you going to do about it?" Bradley asked himself in the hall outside Court's door. He looked down with a certain academic interest at his own hand shaking until the papers he held fluttered. What could he do about it? He or any other man?

You couldn't fight them on equal terms. Probably their i.q. was far higher than mankind's. On terms of pure intellect Bradley would have no chance at all. Super-comptometers could solve abstruse problems no limited human mind could tackle. Last night Bradley had worn a distorting rubber mask--but if Court's cold metallic brain set itself the problem of reasoning out his identity, wouldn't Court arrive at the right answer sooner or later?

Had he already arrived at an answer?

Bradley suppressed a panicky impulse to run. There was such dead silence behind the door at his elbow. For all he knew they had vision that could slip between the buzzing atoms of the door and see Bradley here as if he stood beyond glass--see through him and into the patterns of his brain, and read all his thoughts as they took form.

"They're only androids," he reminded himself with great firmness, forcing his gait to a walk as he turned away down the hall. "If they had that much power I wouldn't be here now."

Still, he wondered with a corroding urgency just what had happened last night after he left Court's apartment. He would not think of how Court had looked, lying there motionless beside the heavy steel blade dimmed by that stickiness that looked like blood and was not human blood.

Had he repaired himself, after Bradley left? Repaired was the word.

of course--not cured. Only a human could be cured. It probably depended on just where the brain of the android was located. Not necessarily in the head. The head is really too vulnerable a place for such an important mechanism. You could improve on the structure of the human in so many ways. Perhaps the androids had. Perhaps Court's brain was sheltered somewhere in the mysterious chambers of his synthetic body, and its cold, clicking thoughts had gone on their steely processes all the while Bradley stood there looking down in incredulous shock at the body of his--his victim?

Which was the victim and which the victor?

All functional processes had certainly stopped in the robot after decapitation. Bradley had made sure of that. No respiration, no heartbeat. But somewhere inside, perhaps the metallic brain had been clicking quietly on its cold way. So cold, Bradley thought irrationally, that not all the synthetic warmth of the synthetic blood could raise it a fraction of a degree toward human temperature.

Either Court's body had risen after Bradley left, then, and welded on the head again, or else others had come to--repair--the sabotage. Did each robot, in operation, send out the equivalent of a steady beam of energy which, when it ceased, brought a repair crew to the spot? If that had happened, it was lucky Bradley had not lingered too long in that room where no murder had been done, though Court's head lay so far from his motionless body....

Of course I could be just as crazy as a bedbug, Bradley reminded himself sardonically. Certainly he would have a hard time convincing anyone he wasn't. And he would have to convince someone. He couldn't go on alone any farther. He had gone too far now to keep this knowledge to himself. By his very act of proof, by the cutting off of an android head, he had given himself away. Sooner or later they would track down the identity of the man behind that rubber mask.

Before it happened, he would have to pass this information on.

And there he ran his second terrible risk. The androids would show him no mercy when they caught him. But how much could he expect from his own kind, when he told his fantastic tale? It'll end in a padded cell, he thought, while they go on multiplying outside until--

Until what? Until they outnumber the humans and take over control? Perhaps they already had. Perhaps they had let him go free after that harmless murder because only he was human now in the whole civilized world.... Perhaps he was quite harmless, really. Perhaps--

"Oh, shut up," Bradley urged himself impatiently.

"Then at least you don't suspect me of being a--an android?" Dr. Wallinger asked dourly. He was slightly nervous, as the result of having sat for ten minutes now with a gun-muzzle pointed unwaveringly at his stomach. It was, of course, ridiculous that a mysterious rubber-masked figure in a gold-braided cape whose flare concealed most of its wearer's body should be sitting here in his library forcing him to listen to psychotic nonsense.

"You have children," Bradley said, his voice a little muffled behind the mask. "That was how I could feel sure about you."

"Look," Wallinger said earnestly, "I'm a nuclear physicist. I think a psychologist could probably give you more help than--"

"A psychiatrist, you mean?"

"Not at all. Of course not. But--"

"But all the same, you think I'm crazy. All right. I expected you would. I suppose I wouldn't have trusted you very far if you hadn't. That reaction's normal. But--blast you, man, open your mind! Look at the

thing fairly. Isn't it conceivable that this could have happened?"

Wallinger, with a glance at the gun, put his fingertips together and pursed his lips. "Um, conceivable.... Well, there's no threshold, naturally. Though 1/100 roentgen per day is considered safe unless both parents are subject to gamma bombardment. You've borne in mind the normal recovery time? Even under bombardment, you know, the changed genes have less tendency to divide and are gradually supplanted by normal genes."

"You aren't telling me anything new," Bradley said with forced patience. "My point is that gamma radiations that would produce mutation in humans have no effect on robots, which are sterile to begin with. If only androids were sterile it would be simple, but gamma rays induce sterility in humans too. You have children. You're all right. But--"

"Hold on," Wallinger said. "Couldn't there be android children? If they can make adults, couldn't they put together synthetic children too?"

"No. I've thought that out carefully. Children grow too fast. They'd have to reorganize the whole android child every couple of weeks, change all its inward and outward dimensions, work over everything about it. I think that would call for too much time and effort. They can't afford it yet, if my calculations are right. There aren't enough of them. And later, when they could afford the job, it wouldn't be necessary. You see? By the time they were able to go to all that trouble, they wouldn't need to. They'd be in the majority. They wouldn't have to deceive us. They--"

Bradley paused. His voice had been getting out of control. Above all, he would have to remain cool and calm about this.

"There's one other angle," he said. "I don't think an android child

could deceive other children. Real children. They see things too directly. The android brain is coordinated to synthetic human adult thinking. They've done a good job of it, but even now, if you know the truth, you can catch them by their psychological failures of adjustment. For one thing, they aren't exhibitionists. They never try to bully or assert themselves over others. Why should they? They're perfectly functioning and efficient gadgets. They don't need to compensate. They're too well adjusted to be really human."

"Then why couldn't they adjust to a child mentality?"

"For the same reason they couldn't create a growing child physically. A child's mind is too different from an adult's, and it changes too fast. It grows. Anyhow, why should they? They don't need to. They've fooled us all up to now, and even when one man knows the truth, what can he do about it? You won't listen to me. You won't--"

"I'm listening," Wallinger said mildly. "It makes an interesting tale, anyhow. I wish you'd tell me what gave you the idea to start with."

Bradley caught himself on the verge of saying, "It was my work. I had a chance to correlate a lot of material and everything added up to an unknown factor." But he didn't say it. He meant to remain anonymous until he felt sure it was safe to reveal himself. A clue like that could be tracked down too easily.

"I--figured it out," he said. "--I have friends in various jobs who kept mentioning little discrepancies they'd noticed. I got interested. It began to add up. There were accidents in which the patients should have died, sometimes did die, and then came back to life. Oh, they always covered it by talk about adrenalin shots and so forth, but it's happened too often. And always in cases involving people in influential positions. I don't know just how they work it--maybe a real person dies and his android double takes his place. They've got the

recuperative powers of a machine, but a machine's handicaps, too. Cut one and it bleeds, but--"

Bradley paused, measuring Wallinger's receptiveness with a wary glance.

"All right," he said suddenly, "I'll tell you what really happened. Please try to listen without prejudice if you can. It was six months ago. I was alone in a--a laboratory--with one of my friends." It had been Arthur Court, the Director. This had been the first proof Bradley actually saw.

"He fumbled a retort and it shattered and cut his wrist to the bone. He didn't know I saw it happen. And even though I did see, for a long time I tried to argue myself out of believing it. On the surface of his wrist there was flesh, and it bled. But underneath were wires and metal. I tell you, I saw them! It wasn't an artificial arm, it was the real thing. An artificial arm wouldn't be part flesh and blood."

"What did he do?"

"That's the real give-away. He put his hand in his pocket and made some excuse to get out of the room. He didn't want me to know, because he'd have to call a doctor, and I suppose there weren't any of their men within reach. He couldn't let a human even go through the motions of bandaging him. Oh, they're vulnerable in lots of ways. But now is the time to strike, before they cut down too far on their vulnerabilities. Now--" Bradley paused again, forcing his voice under control.

"What do you suggest, then?" Wallinger asked in his mild voice. It was impossible to guess whether Bradley had succeeded in touching the man's mind with conviction, or even the beginnings of it.

"I don't know." Under the flared cape Bradley's shoulders sagged. "That's why I came to you. I thought--well, look. Here's one possibility. I need an infallible way of locating them. Psychology's all right up to a point, but it's too slow. I've got to know so much about the subject's life and habit patterns. If the factor of mechanical logic and efficiency's too accurate, that's a double check. But--"

"But there's the mechanical factor itself," Wallinger offered unexpectedly. "Have you thought of that? It might--" He paused and grinned a little sheepishly. "Go on," he said.,

Behind the rubber mask Bradley's face creased in a broad, exultant smile. That was the opening wedge. He had succeeded in presenting the physicist with a hypothetical problem that had struck a spark of momentary interest. It was still in the realm of theory, but Wallinger had responded. That was all that mattered now. He went on with increased enthusiasm.

"That's it exactly. A machine has to be operated. There must be a power source somewhere. Maybe it's in them, or maybe they pick it up from some broadcasting source. But it should be possible to detect it. Something like a thyratron recorder hidden in places they frequent, or a Geiger counter, or--"

"You think they could be trapped because of ionizing radiations?"

"Oh, I don't know what I think. It could be nuclear fission that works the things. It could be anything. That's why I need help from someone like you. Someone who could make closer guesses than I can."

Wallinger regarded his fingertips. "I couldn't, you know," he said. "Not without much more information than you can give me. You've asked me to hear you with an open mind. Now you listen to me. If our positions were reversed, wouldn't you demand more proof than a

stranger's say-so? It would take almost unlimited time and experiment to make a theoretical gadget to detect these theoretical androids of yours, especially since you can't even guess yet what their functional principle is. Have you thought of trying it from some more practical angle--x-rays, for instance? The human organism is a tremendously complicated structure. I doubt if it could be perfectly duplicated."

Bradley shrugged beneath the flaring cape. "All an x-ray shows is light and shadow. The--things--are constructed internally to register normally on a fluoroscope. The only way to be certain would be by using surgery--and how could you do that? They never get sick. If you'd seen what I have--"

He paused. He couldn't say, "If you'd cut off Arthur Court's head and knew what I know about the wires and the plastic tubes, the vertebrae that aren't bone--" But if he admitted how far he had gone to get his certain proof, it would sound to Wallinger like proof of his own madness.

"They're part flesh and blood, and part machine," he said carefully. "Maybe the mechanical parts are necessary to keep the living tissues functioning normally. But we'll never prove it except by force. They're all adults, in high positions. You'd need their consent to perform an operation, and they naturally won't give it. Unless--" He paused. The idea that had flashed through his mind blotted out Wallinger's face for a moment. Perhaps there was a way, after all. Perhaps--

"Now listen to me," Wallinger was saying patiently, his eyes on the gun. "I'm not unreasonable. You've got an interesting idea here, but you aren't ready yet to prove anything. Why. don't you go back to your job, whatever it is, and gather some more data? Then when you--"

"I'm afraid to go back," Bradley said in a thin voice.

A knock, low down on the closed door, interrupted Wallinger's reply. Before he could turn, the door opened a small crack and through it bounded a half-grown cat closely followed by a small girl and a much smaller boy. The cat hurtled across the carpet in the stiff-legged, high-tailed gallop which is a cat's idea of humor. The girl paused when she saw Bradley, but the boy was too intent on the animal to notice anything.

Wallinger said in a voice that did not sound at all like his own, "Children, go back upstairs! Now!" His face was suddenly grey. He did not glance at Bradley.

The cat had fallen over heavily and lay lashing its tail and making clawless boxing motions at the small boy. Its rough, imperfect purring filled the sudden silence in the room.

"Jerry," Wallinger said, "take the kitten and go back upstairs. Do you hear me? Sue, you know you mustn't come into my study without knocking. Go on upstairs."

"We knocked," the girl said, her eyes on Bradley, who had slipped the gun under a fold of his cloak. He was trying to analyze a thought that had flashed through his mind as soon as he saw the children. There was something here he could use, but it would take time to work the idea out.

He stood up, seeing Wallinger's tense start as he moved. The man was terrified. Bradley knew why, suddenly.

The girl watched the stranger with round, interested eyes. The boy and the cat had simultaneously noticed him now and both were stricken with shyness. The cat scrambled to its feet and prepared to

sell its life dearly, and the boy looked around for something to hide behind. The little girl, however, exhibited unmistakable signs of intending to show off. She was around seven, Bradley guessed. He glanced from face to face of the Wallinger family, and then grinned.

"It's all right," he said. "I won't keep you any longer, Doctor. You'll hear from me."

"By all means," Wallinger said, too heartily. He was only interested now in getting his children away from the dangerous proximity of his guest. He followed Bradley into the hall, pushing the children behind him and closing the door.

"I--" He started to stammer a little.

"Forget it," Bradley said. "What do you think I am? They're nice kids."

Wallinger sighed. "Where can I get in touch with you?"

"You can't. I'm going to bring you proof of what I've told you. Those things are half machines under their skins, and I'll find some way to make you believe it. I suppose you'll call the police as soon as I'm gone. I can't help that."

"No, no, of course I won't," Wallinger lied soothingly.

"All right. One more thing, though. I said I was afraid to go back. I meant it. I've done--well, some things that may have given me away. Things I had to do, to make sure.... It's a toss-up now whether they or I find the proof we're after first. Dr. Wallinger, I'm going to write down names and facts on this case--things I don't dare tell you now. If you receive that information, you'll know the androids got their proof first. And that in itself ought to be your proof all this is true. I won't be around any more, if that happens. It will all depend on you then."

"Don't worry about that," Wallinger said. "I'm sure--"

"All right, all right," Bradley cut him off. "Wait and see. Good-by, Doctor. You'll hear from me."

He watched the house over his shoulder as he went down the street. No one came out. When he reached the corner he turned it, entered a drugstore and made his way back through the crowded aisles to the telephone booths beside a window. Through the window he could see far away the corner of the Wallinger house, and the library window where Wallinger's desk was. At the desk a distant man sat telephoning, making quick, excited gestures as he talked.

Bradley sighed. At least, Wallinger didn't know his face or name. He could give the police only a circumstantial tale almost too wild for belief. Bradley would have to walk a knife-edged path now, balancing like a tight-rope walker. Both sides were against him.

He drew a deep breath, squared his shoulders and turned back toward the office where Arthur Court would be waiting for him.

Two of them stood at Court's desk, their backs to him. Bradley paused in the door. Something was wrong. Instinct warned him--a feeling in the air, the poise of the two before him--intangibles that still seemed to shriek an alarm to nerves tense enough to catch their message.

Of the two at the desk, one was not human. The other went by the name of Johnson, and he might not be human either. It was hard to tell.

Bradley had to try twice before his voice would come normally from a suddenly dry throat. "You want me, sir?"

Court turned, smiling. His high collar hid the line where head and neck had been welded back in place. His smile was perfectly normal, but Bradley imagined now he could hear the tiny, soundless clicking of infinitesimal gears as the android's jaw moved and its inhuman muscles drew up.

"Look here, Bradley," Court said. "Ever see this before?"

Bradley looked. Then for an instant the blood drained from his head and the room went grey with his sudden giddiness. But this time he did not dare to drop anything or even to pause while he got control of himself again. They were both watching. He made a tremendous effort and forced the greyiness back, forced the quiver out of his voice, forced his hands to stop shaking.

"See what?" he asked in a perfectly normal voice. But he knew well enough.

Court held up the razor-edged blade that had struck his head from his neck forty-eight hours ago. It was unmistakably the same heavy weapon Bradley had bought at a second-hand shop two days before he used it on the Director. He knew it by the carving on the handle, by the nick in the blade where some inhumanly durable metal in Arthur Court's neck had bitten into the honed edge of the steel. When Bradley saw it last, it lay beside the headless android body, red with unreal android blood.

"Ever see it before?" Court asked again.

"I--don't think so," Bradley heard himself saying, with just the right amount of impersonal interest. "Not to remember, anyhow. Why?"

They looked thoughtfully at him. And by that single look, identical in both faces, he was suddenly quite sure that neither was human. It

was something about the quality of the stare. He realized after a moment that it was the same look he had seen in the Wallinger kitten's eyes--remote, wild, speculative, not inimical but wary. One species looking at another species, measuring possible danger. The kitten had seen him from quite another angle, from low down, in sharp perspective, and probably not in colors, but in tones of grey. It was extraordinary, suddenly, to think how strange he might have looked to the small, wild, wary creature. If he could see himself as it saw him, he might not recognize that looming figure as himself at all. And it occurred to him now that to the androids he must look equally strange and alien. In what colors beyond spectrum-range did they see him? And what a soft, vulnerable structure of flesh and bone he must look to these creatures of steel and synthetics.

They let him wait a long moment before either spoke or moved. Then that cold-lensed stare dropped from his face, both androids acting as simultaneously as if they moved on a single shaft. It was a mistake, Bradley thought--they shouldn't let me realize how mechanically they operate. And the second thought, close behind the first, warned him that perhaps now they didn't care. They knew what he knew. They had nothing more to hide....

Deliberately Court turned and made a note on his desk-pad.

"All right, Bradley, thanks. Oh--wait a minute. Be in your office for the next half-hour, will you? I want to talk to you again."

Bradley nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak. He was suddenly filled with a deep and bitter humiliation that he must accept the orders of this--this machine.

It was the reversal of all normal things, for a man to say "sir" to a thing of gears and wiring.

He looked down at his own hands lying clenched before him on his desk. Ten minutes had ticked by. Before the next twenty were gone he would have to act. They knew. It had been no accident that they called him in to see the nicked steel blade. How they had traced it to him he could not imagine, but their cold, concise brains worked on theories of logic he could not even guess at. They had outwitted him, apparently, without effort. For all his precautions, his careful hiding of everything that might lead back to his identity, they knew. Or if they did not, they were too definitely suspicious to ignore. In the next five minutes, ten at most, he would have to make up his mind. He would have to act.

He couldn't. All that filled his mind was the bitterness of premature defeat. How could he combat them, when even his own kind dismissed him as psychotic? It was doubtful, he told himself, if the whole human race, rousing at this moment to realization and activity, could defeat them now. How far had their preparations gone? How many of them were there? Too many for one man to fight.

He thought of the whole long history of the race of man, struggling up through countless milleniums of unrecorded time, through five thousand years of slowly increasing knowledge and maturity--to this hour. To the laying in iron android hands, gloved with synthetic flesh, of that priceless heritage. What would they do with the gift? Why were they taking over this culture mankind had been so painfully long in building? Would it mean anything at all to them, or would they cast aside the heritage of all those milleniums and build up their own soulless civilization on a foundation that did not even spare a glance for all man's wasted centuries?

"How did it start?" he asked himself. "Why? Why?" And out of the human logic of his own mind came the glimmer of an answer. "When the first man made the first successful android, the human race was doomed."

For a successful android meant one indistinguishable from man, one capable of creating others in its own image, one capable of independent motion and reasoning. And what purpose moved in the brain of that first of its metal kind? Had its human creator implanted there some command which led--knowingly or unknowingly--to all that followed? Had the order been one which the android could achieve only by duplicating itself until the human race was infected through and through with the robot cells of the androids?

It was quite possible. Perhaps the original creator still lived, perhaps he was dead--of age, of accident, or murder at the hands of his own Frankensteinian creations. And paradoxically, perhaps the android race moved on and on along the outward fanning lines of that first command, following toward infinity, toward the last decimal place, some impossible goal which no human being would now ever know....

"They'll finish me," Bradley told himself, almost without emotion. "If they don't suspect me yet, they will. And there's nothing I can do to stop them. Wallinger didn't believe me. No one else will. And the androids will follow me until they catch me no matter how far I run. When they finish me off, they'll probably set to work to make their disguise so perfect not even I could have penetrated it, knowing what I know. They could do that. They could reason out every point where I suspected them, and stop every gap with humanoid behavior. They're machines. That's part of their problem. They can work it out if they set themselves the job. Maybe they're working on it now. By the time they finish me, maybe...."

He slammed both fists hard upon the desk. "No!" he told himself fiercely, and rose.

There were fifteen minutes left.

The telephone on Arthur Court's desk buzzed. The android put out a metallic hand and machine spoke into machine. Out of the mouthpiece Bradley's voice sounded small and clear.

"Hello. Hello, sir. This is Bradley. Look, are you busy? Something very odd has just turned up and I thought you ought to be the first to know. I--I'm not sure what to do."

"What is it? What are you talking about?"

"I'd rather not say on the phone."

"Where are you?"

"Across the street. You know the Green Door Grille?"

"I thought I told you to wait in your office, Bradley."

"When you hear what I've got to tell you--" Bradley paused for an instant to swallow his own cold anger at the arrogance in the voice of the machine "--you'll understand. Can you come?"

"Sit tight. I'll be there in five minutes."

Bradley sat at the wheel of his car, feeling the faint throb of the motor running softly. His eyes were on the door of the office building across the street. His fingers were clenched on the plastic of the wheel and the rhythmic beat of the car seemed an echo of the heavy beating in his chest as he waited.

Arthur Court came out of the revolving door. He looked up and down the street. He turned left and with long strides hurried down the block toward the little side-street upon which the Green Door opened. Bradley waited, watching Court, watching the traffic, biding his time.

It worked with miraculous precision. There were only three pedestrians on the side-street and all were walking the other way. Heavy trucks parked along the narrow curbing shut out all vision except the most direct. It was as if Arthur Court were dodging through a series of little private rooms between the trucks--and in the last little room he had a rendezvous with Bradley that he did not yet know about....

The car purred like a tiger under Bradley's hands as he rolled into the quiet street where Court moved ahead of him. This would have to be gauged exactly right, Bradley reminded himself tensely. Not too little, not too much. Not before Court was in a corner where he could not escape even by the exercise of instant reflexes, impulses electron-fast moving a body that was literally steel wire and springs. Not until he was in a trap of no escape.

The car seemed to gather its haunches beneath it and spring. It roared in the quiet street and Court turned wildly around. His face was pure machine, Bradley thought, in that unguarded moment when the cold-lensed eyes met his. Bradley was part of the automobile, the two welded into one so that the car was his weapon, obedient to his hand as the steel blade had been obedient that severed Court's head from his neck. But this time there would be no mistake.

He crouched over the wheel, sighting the car like a gun, pinning Court between fender and fender, centered beyond the radiator cap, with the blank wall of a truck behind him. Man and man-made machine were one juggernaut weapon that crashed down upon machine-made machine and flattened it against a wall of steel....

Bradley saw Court's face go blank beyond the radiator cap. He saw the machine-body crumple slowly down out of sight. He waited for an instant, ready to urge the car on if he had to....

"It's all right," Bradley said soothingly. Court stirred and mumbled on the seat beside him. "No, it's all right, Court. Just relax. You had a little accident, but don't worry, I'm not taking you to a doctor...."

Court said, "No--" almost clearly. Bradley sighed and pulled over to the curb. He had hoped he wouldn't need to use the hypodermic, but it was ready against the moment when he must.

This was guesswork, of course. He couldn't be sure the android mechanisms would respond to drugs meant for the human blood stream. But the chances were they would, at least temporarily. The android was keyed to as close a likeness to humanity as possible. Its reflexes were patterned upon the human. Cut it and it bled. Decapitate it and respiration ceased, circulation stopped. Very well, then, drug it and for a while it should sleep....

Court slept.

Only a body made of metal under the flesh could have stumbled in the semblance of a walk, half carried, half conscious, with that heavy a shot of sedative in its synthetic veins. Bradley guided the creature up the steps to the Wallinger house. He was not wearing his mask now. Everything must stand or fall by this single trial. If he failed now, hiding his identity would be of no use to him.

The small girl answered the door.

"Daddy's next door," she said, looking at the drugged and stumbling Court with interest and no alarm. "He'll be back in a minute. Won't you come in?" She issued the invitation with all the aplomb of one newly learned in the social graces, but it was clear that curiosity and not hospitality had prompted the words. It was clear, too, that she was so unacquainted with danger that a situation like this roused no fear in her mind.

Bradley guided his burden down the hall and into the library. On the sofa against the wall the kitten lay bonelessly asleep. Bradley eased the drugged android down onto the cushions, gently tipping the cat off to the floor. Such is the complexity of the mind that even in this intent moment it occurred to him that in a machine world the cat and the cushion would probably be indistinguishable, one from another. Only a human, and a truly mature human, would be incapable of handling any small living thing roughly. The cat yawned, woke, found itself on the floor and in the presence of two strangers, and instantly streaked for the door. Its interested ears presently reappeared around the corner.

Above them, after a moment, was seen the shy but curious face of the smallest Wallinger. Bradley made an effort and remembered his name.

"Hello, Jerry," he called, settling Court on the sofa. "Is your father back yet?"

There was no reply from the child, but the little girl came in an instant later, soon enough to answer the question. She was pushing her reluctant brother before her.

"I called Daddy," she volunteered. "He'll be right over. What's the matter with--him?"

"He had a--a little accident. He'll be all right."

She considered Court with unself-conscious intentness. Court was emerging from the drug. He turned his head restlessly on the cushions, murmuring thickly. The boy, the girl and the kitten regarded him from the door, an almost terrifying remoteness in their gaze. It was obvious that to none of the three did real sympathy mean a thing yet. They could not identify themselves with adults or with suffering.

All three had the cold curiosity of young animals in their eyes.

And why should they identify themselves with an android? Bradley felt the question click into place in his mind and a flash of memory illumined the thought. Children. Children, who see too clearly to be deceived by an android race. Children, without perspective and therefore without the preconceived prejudices that had blinded adults to this terrifying intrusion upon the world of humans.

Children should know the truth.

"Sue--isn't your name Sue? Listen. I want you to tell me something very important. I--I want your opinion." Bradley groped desperately among his memories of the seven-year-old mentality. Self-centered, scatterbrained, eager for praise, interested only in their own activities except for the briefest of excursions into the outer world. If he could only flatter her enough to hold her interest....

"Sue, this is something nobody but you could tell me. I want to see how much you know about--about--" He paused again. "Well, now, look. You know there are--" How could he put it? How could he ask her if she had noticed the androids among the adults whom she knew?

Had she, indeed, ever seen one before? On her answer very much would depend, then, for if she did know the truth, then there must be many more of them than Bradley had guessed. If even a sheltered child knew....

"Sue, you know about people like--him?" He gestured toward the restless android. "You know there are--two kinds of men in the world?" He held his breath, waiting for her answer.

Wariness came into her eyes. You could never tell when an adult was

making fun of you, her look said.

"No, I'm serious. I don't suppose--I just want to know if you know. Not all children can tell the difference, and I--"

"Oh, all the kids know that." Contempt was in her voice.

"Know--what?"

"About them."

Bradley drew a deep breath. All the kids know about them....

"Does your father know?" His voice sounded thin in his own ears.

She gave him another of those wary glances that watched to see if he were deriding her. Evidently reassured, she laughed shortly.

"Well, I guess he does. Doesn't everybody?"

The room swam a little before Bradley's eyes. So many of them, so many more than he had ever dreamed....

"But the other kind," he heard himself saying almost pleadingly. "The other kind of men! How many--"

There were voices in the hall. Wallinger's, and another's, deep and heavy.

"In here, Officer," Wallinger was saying. "Right in here! Hurry!"

"How many in the world?" Sue finished Bradley's question for him. And she laughed. "We learned it in school, but I don't remember. I can tell you how many of the real kind of men in this room, though. One! One!"

"Will you tell your father that?" Bradley demanded in an agony of haste. "When he comes in, will you tell him there's only one of the real kind of man in here? Sue, will you--"

"Susan, get back!" Wallinger was in the doorway. That grey look made his face old as he scanned the children for signs of visible harm. Behind him a uniformed man loomed, red-faced, looking into the room with grim alertness, ready for anything.

There was a little silence.

Then Court, on the sofa, groaned softly and struggled to sit up. Wallinger hurried across the room to help.

"What have you done to him?" he demanded of Bradley. "You crazy fool, how far have you gone?"

"He's all right," Bradley stammered. "He's--you can't hurt them!"

Wallinger regarded him above Court's head.

"So that's what you look like," he said. "I knew you from across the street, even without your mask, but your face, of course-- Will you tell us your name?"

"Bradley." He said it defiantly. "James Philips Bradley." The time for anonymity had passed. He hadn't expected the policeman to be here--it would be harder to explain in that large, disbelieving presence--but if Sue repeated what she had just told him, maybe he could convince them yet.

"Ask your daughter about them," he said urgently. "She knows. Wallinger, I tell you, she knows! Remember, I warned you about the children? I said they couldn't hope to deceive children? Sue says all

of them know--"

"I'd better warn you, Bradley, Sue's got a wild imagination. I don't know what fables she's been telling you, but-- Officer, hadn't you better--"

"Wait!" This wasn't going as he had planned at all. He threw all the persuasion he could summon up into his voice. "You promised to give me a hearing, Wallinger. Don't you remember, you promised? I know I had a gun then, but please--give me just a minute to tell you what I know. This man's one of them." He paused, running his tongue across dry lips. Wallinger looked so disbelieving.... "He isn't hurt. I told you I'd bring proof, and there it is. This man. I had to get him here the only way I could. I tell you, you can't hurt them! Under the skin he's nothing but wires and metal. I can prove it! I--"

He broke off, feeling the policeman's hands laid on his arms lightly, holding them down. Wallinger's face showed pity and horror. It was no use. He should have managed to make some incision in Court's synthetic skin before they came. Of course they wouldn't let him do it now. To them he was a madman, raving, eager to slash an innocent victim in proof of a madman's dream.

"Now, you just calm down, young man," the policeman rumbled soothingly behind him. "We'll take a little walk in the fresh air, and--"

"No! Wait!" Bradley's voice sounded wild even to himself. He choked back the protest, gathering himself for one tremendous last effort at the proof he had come so near to reaching.

Court watched him, lens-eyed, under lowered brows. Somewhere in that cold, inhuman body the cold inhuman brain ticked on remorselessly, not even amused at his defeat, for how could a machine know what it was like to laugh?

A machine--and so near, so near! Only a few feet of space separated them, and a fraction of an inch of synthetic skin hiding the mechanisms of the android body.

"Wait!" he said again, and he twisted around to Wallinger, trying with every ounce of energy that remained in him to project his own conviction past the barrier of prejudice that blinded the adults in this room. "Wallinger, listen! After I've gone, will you talk to your little girl? Will you give me that much chance to prove myself? She knows! It isn't imagination! All the children know. Do you think you're safe, once Court gets out of here? They won't trust you. They can't. They'll be afraid you might wake in the night and suddenly realize the truth. Think of your daughter, Wallinger! Court's listening. He knows she recognized him. Can you take the chance with her life, Wallinger? Risk your own if you want to, but think of Sue!"

A flicker of the first uneasiness Bradley had seen moved across Wallinger's face. The policeman's hands were a little slack on Bradley's arms. He shrugged impatiently, and the momentary doubt on the physicist's face must have conveyed something to the officer, or perhaps it was the desperate conviction in Bradley's voice. He made the most of his moment.

"Think of Sue!" he went on. "Court won't dare make a move--but you don't know how many others there are. You don't know! You can't even guess! Maybe the ones like Court are the real failures--the ones so imperfect they give themselves away. I think they've made others, so nearly human you'd never guess. Those are the dangerous ones, Wallinger! If there's even one of them, it will know it can't be safe until you're dead. I've told you too much to--"

"All right, Officer," Wallinger said, with a little sigh. "I'm sorry, Bradley, but you see how it is."

Bradley's eyes weat back to Court. The android sat motionless on the sofa, a thing of wheels and wiring as safe behind its make-believe flesh as if it wore a coat of mail. All human laws safeguarded human flesh. They held it so sacrosanct that now they were betraying it into the iron fingers of the enemy. If only these men would let him slash once with a knife at that soft, deceptive covering which was not flesh at all.... Suddenly Bradley laughed.

Even the robot started a little at the sound, and the policeman made a growling noise in his throat, clearly thinking this the first ravings of a maniacal fit. But Bradley had his answer. He knew at last how he could convince even Wallinger.

"That automobile accident!" The car had been like a bludgeon in his hands. He knew--he remembered. A man can tell whether his blow has grazed the enemy or gone home. Until now it hadn't mattered. There had been too much else to deal with. But Court, pinned between car and truck wall, had not escaped unscathed. He fell as a man would fall, but he sat now as no man could possibly sit, upright, breathing easily....

Bradley remembered very clearly the feel of rib-structure giving, the sound of metal bending harshly where there should have been no metal. No man could sit like that, once a car had ground him against the wall as Bradley's car had ground Arthur Court.

He moved so suddenly the policeman's hands slipped from his arms. He was across the room in one leap, and tearing at Court's jacket before even the android had guessed what he intended.

The officer groaned and was upon him in a ponderous bound so fast that the heavy blue-coated body hurled Bradley aside with scarcely a half-second to spare. But Bradley had won his second. His hands were clenched in coat and shirt when the policeman's weight carried

them both sidewise, and the cloth ripped in his grasp.

Court's short cape flared wide with the sudden defensive motion he made. The jacket and the shirt beneath opened and for one timeless moment there was no sound in the room, not even the drawing of breath. It seemed to Bradley that his heart itself paused with his breathing, for until this instant of the final test, he could not have been sure....

There was the tanned chest, smooth with android skin. But the mark of the car-grille was upon it, smashing in the android ribs. Bradley had heard the metal scream as it gave before his blow. Now he saw it. Now he saw the gleaming framework of steel where no human chest ever bore steel, and within it a jumble of interlacing wires, and small, transparent tubes through which red fluid coursed....

He saw the android brain.

Deep inside, behind walls of bent steel ribbing, a small, bright, pulsing thing lay. A continuous twinkling beat outward from it, uncannily illuminating the chest-cavern of the robot from within, so that the bright steel ribs caught points of light from that illumination, and wherever the transparent veins crossed before it the light turned glowing crimson as it shone through the blood. The fluid ran faster where the brilliance touched it, bubbles racing through the tubes. The thing might be heart and brain alike, an inward lamp burning in the broken shelter of the android chest.

Bradley did not even pause to reason. What he did was pure reflex. The incredible sight paralyzed the policeman for that one crucial second, but it galvanized Bradley to action.

He lunged forward, hands outstretched, and with one circling smash of his fist he struck the shining thing from its cradle.

There was an unbelievable instant when he saw his own hand deep in the hollow chest of the machine, saw the reflections of his blow moving in miniature in the polished ribs, saw his knuckles bathed in the tiny crimson glow of that inner light shining through transparent veins.

And then the light went out.

There was a crackle like crystal shattering. There was a sound more felt along the nerves than heard, of high, rapid humming that droned and ceased. And Arthur Court was no longer either man or android. He was not even machine.

The man-shaped thing in man's clothing pitched forward all in one piece, like metal moving, and fell solidly to the carpet, an effigy that could never conceivably have breathed or lived or spoken....

Bradley got shakily to his feet. The policeman still sprawled on the floor, staring, making no move to rise. The face that had been so ruddy was grey-white, and the colorless mouth opened and closed soundlessly, trying in vain to put the incredible into words. Bradley wanted insanely to laugh. Not even the pure human organism, he thought, functioned very efficiently in the face of shock like this.

It was Wallinger who moved first. Bradley had one glimpse of the physicist's face, drained of all color, lined and rigid with horror. But the man was moving capably enough. At least, his limbs obeyed him. He circled Bradley with scarcely a glance, skirted the collapsed metal thing on the floor, and bent above the policeman....

He lifted one arm sharply, bent at the elbow, and struck the officer a hard, expert blow with the edge of his palm. The man collapsed without a sound.

Above him, Wallinger stared into Bradley's eyes.

"You're--on their side?" Bradley forced the words out painfully, wondering why they came in a whisper. He did not dare take his eyes from Wallinger's, but his mind had stopped functioning altogether and he scarcely knew why he stared, or why this thundering of sudden terror in his chest made breathing so hard. "You're working with--them?"

Wallinger straightened slowly, letting the blue-coated body slide to the floor. His gaze broke from Bradley's and he looked across the room toward the hall door. With a great effort Bradley followed the look.

The children still watched. Without alarm, interested, not comprehending, they watched as they might have watched a film at the neighborhood movie.

"Sue--Jerry--upstairs!" Wallinger's voice was firm, almost normal. "Move! And shut the door behind you."

The sound of its closing seemed to release some of the tension in the man, for he let his breath out a little and his shoulders sagged. He met Bradley's eyes, grimaced, started to speak, and then thought better of it.

"Tell me!" Bradley's voice was stronger, insistence growing in it now. "Which side are you on?"

Wallinger did not want to answer. When he spoke, it was indirectly.

"It's not on record, Bradley," he said, almost with diffidence, "but I think you ought to know--the children aren't mine."

"Not--"

"I adopted them."

"But--but then--" There was no need to finish the protest. Bradley had chosen this man for his confidences from the first, chiefly because he could be sure that here was one influential person of proved humanity--the father of other humans. No sterile machine.

Wallinger shrugged gently. He glanced down at the heavily breathing man at his feet.

"I had to do that," he said. "Now I'll have to think of some way to make him believe he dreamed all this. I hate to do it, but I can't think of any other way right now except--" He glanced at his desk. "Maybe this."

There was a bottle of whiskey in the top drawer. Moving with deliberate haste, he opened it, poured two generous portions into little metal cups from the same drawer, and then deliberately upended the bottle above the groaning policeman's chest.

Bradley reached for a cup, holding it in both hands to steady his shaking. The strong, burning liquid stuck in his throat for a moment, then spread downward with a grateful, soothing warmth.

"The story mustn't get out, you know," Wallinger said above his own cup.

"But I don't--you mean you knew, all along? Wallinger, what are you?"

"The story mustn't get out," Wallinger went on calmly, ignoring the question. "Of course I knew. But we've got to keep it quiet."

"Are you on their side or ours?" Bradley's throat felt raw with the harshness of his voice. "Are you a man or --or--"

"If they find out how much we know about them, don't you suppose they'll act? Somehow we've got to dispose of the Court mechanism, in a way they won't be able to trace. I'm sorry for this officer here, but he'll have to think he was drunk and dreamed what we all saw. I tell you, Bradley, we don't dare let them suspect we know!" Bradley let his emptied cup fall to the carpet. He walked forward six deliberate steps and put his hands heavily on Wallinger's shoulders. The flesh felt like flesh; the bone beneath was firm and hard. It could be bone--or steel. You couldn't tell by looking at them. But surely you could tell by the way they behaved, by their reactions, by their thinking. By the things they put first in value--

"The children!" Bradley said urgently. "No--machine--would think first of children the way you do. Would it, Wallinger? Even though they aren't yours, you put them first. Why did you tell me they weren't yours? Did you mean--what did you mean, Wallinger? How do you really feel about those children?"

Wallinger smiled. His voice was mild and amused.

" 'Hath not an android eyes?'" he paraphrased with gentle irony. " 'Hath not an android hands--senses--affections? If you prick us, do we not bleed?'"

Bradley let his grip fall. He stepped back, staring as if he could pierce the too-perfect illusion of flesh and see whether bone or steel lay behind that gently smiling face.

"There was one android made," Wallinger said, "in the perfect replica of the human. Everything that went into its mental and physical make-up was as close as their finest arts could come to human thinking." He paused, grimaced. "Well," he said, "they came too close. They succeeded. I--I'm rather afraid they made--a man."

"You?"

Wallinger smiled.

"I don't believe it," Bradley told him wildly. "It isn't possible."

Wallinger gave him a speculative look. Then he opened another drawer, fumbled in it and pulled out a penknife. He flicked the blade open and with almost the same gesture drew its edge across the back of his hand.

Bradley caught his breath. He didn't want to look, but he could not stop himself.

Wallinger, still smiling, held out his arm.

"I can stop the bleeding, you see," he said. "That's how Court kept from giving his injury away, at first. We can always control that, if necessary."

There was no blood. The edges of the synthetic skin were clean and smooth as pale rubber, and beneath them steel tendons moved, transparent tubes as fine as hairs pulsed with bubbling red liquid. It was a hand of living metal. It was an android's hand.

"Satisfied?" Wallinger withdrew his arm. With the other hand he smoothed the cut flesh together. It sealed like wax and was whole again as Bradley still gasped his incredulous protest.

"Here, you'd better have another drink," Wallinger's amused voice seemed to be saying from a long way off, above the ringing in his ears.

"But--why didn't you tell me? Are you sure they don't suspect? Can we really get away with this--with destroying Court? I don't

understand, Wallinger! If you're really an android, and working against androids--what are we going to do? There must be ways they have to check up on what happens to every separate one. What about Court? Wallinger, if this is all true, why didn't you help me against Court? You could have--"

"Hold on! One question at a time!" Wallinger's voice broke into the almost hysterical babble of Bradley's released tension. "First, about Court. I couldn't work against him, Bradley. I'm a very imperfect mechanism myself, considering what I was made for, and they'll destroy me if they find out what I'm about to do--but there are rules even I have to follow. They're built in. I can't injure another android. I can't. That's the way we're made. I couldn't any more than you could stop your blood from flowing if you were cut. I may be an imperfect machine, but I'm not that imperfect."

"Then what shall we do? Why not call the police--the newspapers--"

"No! Don't talk like a fool. Once the androids know their secret's out, don't you think they'll strike hard and fast? They've got their plans all laid. Don't make any mistake about that. Our only hope's to work in the dark until we have plans too."

"You could have told me sooner," Bradley said with reproach. "When I first came--"

"How could I have told you? I didn't know who you were, in that mask. You could have been from them, for all I knew. And today--I didn't dare speak in front of Court. I had to act like a normal man--call the police--show the right reactions. It wasn't until you attacked Court that I was sure about you."

"Okay. We're wasting time, then. They'll know Court's--smashed. They'll look for him. What are we going to do?"

"I wish I knew." Wallinger got up abruptly and began to pace up and down the room with quick, nervous steps. It was incredible that wires, not nerves, steel springs instead of muscles, activated that perfect replica of a human. Even in his mind, the likeness was so uncannily perfect...

"Full circle," Bradley thought, with confused triumph. "If this is true, they've overreached themselves. They've made such a perfect android--if this is true--that it'll mean the finish of their whole kind. They can't let him live. Once they suspect him, they'll have to destroy him. It works both ways. When the first successful android was made, the human race was doomed--until the first successful humanoid was produced by the robots. He's as dangerous to them as they are to us." He looked at Wallinger thoughtfully.

"How do you feel about them--about the androids?" he asked.

"Confused." Wallinger's smile was wry. "This has been coming on for a long while, of course, but I've never had to take definite sides until now. I don't know how I feel. Lost. Not really belonging to either side. I suppose I feel exactly as you do about the human race--part of it. I am part of it. They made me too well. But how many humans would accept me if they knew the truth? And I could never go back to the androids once I've failed them. I don't belong on either side. I only know that I--" He paused, grinned suddenly and said with deliberation, "I speak as a man, I think as a man, I have put away android things. You see? When I try to tell you how a humanoid feels I put it automatically into Shakespeare's words, or St. Paul's. Men's words, telling how men feel. But I still see through a glass--" He touched his eyes, which Bradley knew were lenses, not flesh. "I see through glass, darkly...."

There was a long silence between them after that.

"Well," Wallinger said heavily, "it's up to me. I know them. You don't."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Go home. Leave me your number, and stay there until I call you. Okay? I have an idea about getting rid of--this--" He gestured at the man-shaped heap of wires and steel and flesh on the floor. "I've got to do that alone. Afterward, tomorrow, I'll phone you. But whatever you do, Bradley, don't leave your place until you hear from me. Don't even open the door! And above everything, don't go spreading the word about what's happened. If you do--"

"If I do, I'll wind up in a padded cell," Bradley said. "I know. Nobody would believe me except the androids, and they'd be only too glad to get me committed. Don't worry, I'll keep my mouth shut. But don't make me wait too long, will you?"

"I'll do my best," Wallinger promised.

Bradley glanced up as he descended the steps toward the street. In the hall the two children stood watching him. The girl was smiling. She pointed to her brother and then waved at Bradley, nodding. He had a curious feeling that she was trying to convey something. But it was a child's knowledge behind her smile, esoteric, not communicable to the adult mind.

Bradley waved in answer and went on down the path.

When he woke it was still dark. He lay quiet, wondering for a confused instant where he was and why he should be awake. He could not see his watch, but there was a pre-dawn stillness in the air.

Then he saw the light beneath the door and heard the voices talking quietly beyond it. He lay in his own bed, and that was his own living room, but why the light burned and whose the voices were he could

not guess.

He got up and went barefooted across the floor. He opened the door a narrow crack. There were five men in the room beyond. They sat comfortably there, talking softly, like men waiting for something--or someone.

The first face he saw was Arthur Court's.

"All right, Bradley," the Director's familiar voice said in the very instant of recognition. "All right, it's time now. Come in."

Bradley never knew whether the android could actually see through the spinning atoms of the door, or whether some sound had given his own presence away. It didn't matter. He was beyond help now. He and the race of man....

He crossed the threshold quietly and closed the door behind him. He stood there looking at the five men in his living room. They sat perfectly motionless, their eyes on his. None of them had been smoking. None of them moved. None of them lived by the tight-strung nerves of imperfect humans, so they had no need for aimless motions. None of them was a man.

When the silence had reached a pitch just this side of being unbearable, Bradley spoke.

"What happened to Wallinger?" he asked.

"Nothing." Court smiled at him.

"Nothing? But--"

"We needed a little extra time. Wallinger got it for us. That's all."

A sudden upward flood of bitterness made Bradley's vision swim for an instant. How easily Wallinger had deceived him, then! How pitifully gullible was the illogical human brain before the resourceful logic of the machine! Wallinger had known exactly what lines of reasoning would most certainly soothe Bradley's fears to rest. And the quiet machine mind had not even lied when it spoke, for how can a machine deal in falsehood or in truth?

They needed time--for what? To repair the shattered Court, to assemble their forces, to close in. Most of all, they had needed to keep Bradley silent while they went about the business of destroying him. How? What would they do? Was there any way at all, even in this last moment, for him to outwit them? He thought there was not, but a desperate cunning made him say,

"All right, I can't stop you. Do what you like. But please, Court--please! We've worked together--you can't blame me for doing what I had to do, but we've worked together a long while. Do me one favor. Please don't let them put me in an insane asylum! It would be better if you shot me--safer for you! Anything's better than the asylum!"

He almost choked when he had to say it. No man should plead with a machine. But if it were for man's final salvation--yes, he could bring himself even to beg favors of this thing made of steel and wire. And this was his last weapon against them, this peculiarly inverted human logic which was part of folk-lore. The logic that saved Br'er Rabbit from his foes. Don't throw me into the briar-patch! If they committed him to an asylum, at least he would still be alive, at least he could still work against them. And the children knew. In time, someone would listen, if he could only stay alive.

"Please, Court, anything but the asylum!"

The android smiled. It was curious to think of the intricate little

springs and wiring that drew up his face when it moved. It was appalling to realize that when Arthur Court spoke, the mind which dictated the words lay in the gleaming hollow of his chest where something made up of lights that twinkled was the essence and the soul of the machine.

"Forget it, Bradley," the android said. "It won't be the asylum."

Bradley braced himself against the door. There was one thing left to do, then. He had tried cunning, and cunning failed. He had tried everything a man could try, and everywhere he had failed.

But they should not kill him. That final choice still lay in his own hands, and he would not submit to this last indignity. If he must die, let it be of his own will, freely.

He measured the distance to the window, gathering his muscles for this final leap. There was so much he would never know, he thought despairingly. The fate of the race of man itself, for which he had fought so vainly, was beyond his knowledge now. He thought of Wallinger, so nearly human in his reactions, so convincingly human in his speech, despite this final betrayal. Perhaps, after all, Wallinger had spoken more truthfully than he knew. Perhaps they had made an android too nearly human....

But it was too late. Wallinger's voice came back to his mind briefly, and the magnificent words of St. Paul's that begin, "Though I speak with the tongues of men...." Wallinger had spoken with the tongue of man, but for man's destruction. There was something terrifying in the aptness of that chapter from Corinthians.

"Whether there be tongues, they shall cease, whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away--"

Blindly he thrust himself away from the door in a last desperate leap. The nearest android moved too late to intercept him. He swept the curtains aside, drew back his fist and shattered the glass that was all that parted them from the humming street twenty stories down. Man's streets, which would so soon be man's no longer....

He lunged through the glass. He hung vertiginously over the spinning depths below. He could see the wall of the building straight downward beneath his own knees, its lines swooping dizzily inward as he swayed.

It was Arthur Court's voice that halted him.

"Wait, Bradley, wait! Not until you hear the truth!"

It stopped him on the brink, and beyond the brink, of the window. He would have thought no power on earth could reverse the terrible suction of gravity that had already laid hands on him and was swinging him out and down with the very swing of the earth's rotation. But he found he was stronger than he knew....

Court's face was stern. Bradley stood braced against the shattered window, "his knees strengthless, his head still spinning with the pull of the street below. Blank-eyed, he stared at the android across the room.

"You fool!" Arthur Court said. "Are you trying to ruin us all?"

"But I--"

"You still don't understand? You still don't know Wallinger told you the truth?"

"Wallinger--told the truth?"

"Yes--in part. Think, Bradley, think!"

He could not think. His mind had suffered too many stunning shocks for reasoning now. But he did not need to think. He had had the clue many hours ago, and until this moment he had not known. The memory came back and he heard Sue Wallinger's small voice speaking again in the quiet library. He saw her at the door as he went down the path. He remembered her gesture and her smile.

"I can tell you how many of the real kind of men in this room--one, one!"

And she had smiled at him and touched her brother's shoulder.

She had not meant anyone in that room except the human male child. He had asked about men--she touched her brother's shoulder. All the children knew--all the androids knew. Only the humans were blind--and James Bradley.

"Look down," Court's voice said, almost gently.

Bradley looked. There was blood on the floor. He felt a stinging in his hand, and dully lifted his arm to see why. He had put his fist through the window. It had not mattered, then, whether he slashed his own flesh or not. It didn't matter now....

He saw, without surprise, without shock, only with a numbness of the mind, how the edges of his skin had parted cleanly. The slow blood welled into his cupped palm. He looked down with utter silence at the uncovered tendons of his hand, gleaming mirror-bright from every steel surface. He saw the fine, tiny, tight-curved springs draw up in perfect response when he clenched his fingers.

"We made you too well," Arthur Court was saying. "We made you so well you're imperfect. You must be changed. Bradley. No android

must be able to attack his own kind. Our survival depends on that law. Do you see now what Wallinger was trying to tell you? The danger of a perfect humanoid is too great. And you're perfect. Answer me, Bradley--do you understand what I'm saying?"

He could not answer. He knew the truth now, but he felt exactly as he had felt before. He was a man still. His whole loyalty lay with the human kind of which he was so merciless a duplicate. Until they made that change that would alter his imperfection, he must continue this fight he had taken up for man against machine. Until they changed him from imperfect android to the perfection of the race of the machine....

When that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away. St. Paul had put it all with such terrifying clarity. Though I speak with the tongues of men... I am become as sounding brass....

"We don't want to waste you, Bradley," Court said. "You're a fine machine. We need you badly. There's so much work to be done, and we need your help."

"No," Bradley said. "No." And this time they could not stop him. He didn't pause to brush the curtain aside, and the glass was already shattered. He saw again the inward-leaning wall that dropped straight for twenty stories toward the street. His knee was on the sill.

Down there would be men to see. Down there in the street they must see and they might perhaps understand the meaning of this paradox that was the android body, the steel ribs and the intricate wiring by which this flesh-clad body once had moved....

Somewhere deep in his chest the little sparkling thing that at this moment thought as a man thinks knew an instant's wonder. "Is this the way a man feels who gives up his life for his own kind?" Bradley

asked himself the futile question. "Or am I moving only as a machine moves, in blind obedience to the orders that were given me when I was made? They must have set me the problem of behaving like a human. And this is a thing men do... not machines. Never machines."

He leaned out. The mighty drag of the earth's swing pulled him across the sill. It was not much he could do for the race in whose image he had been made, but it was all he could give them. Perhaps it might help. Perhaps it would not. That was something he would never know. The robots crowded to the sill to watch him fall.

Hellsgarde

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Jirel of Joiry drew rein at the edge of the hill and sat awhile in silence, looking out and down. So this was Hellsgarde. She had seen it many times in her mind's eye as she saw it now from the high hill in the yellow light of sunset that turned every pool of the marshes to shining glass. The long causeway to the castle stretched out narrowly between swamps and reeds up to the gate of that grim and eery fortress set alone among the quicksands. This same castle in the marshes, seen at evening from the high hilltop, had haunted her dreams for many nights now.

"You'll find it by sunset only, my lady," Guy of Garlot had told her with a sidelong grin marring his comely dark face. "Mists and wilderness ring it round, and there's magic in the swamps about Hellsgarde. Magic--and worse, if legends speak truth. You'll never come upon it save at evening."

Sitting her horse now on the hilltop, she remembered the grin in his black eyes and cursed him in a whisper. There was such a silence over the whole evening world that by instinct she dared not speak aloud. Dared not? It was no normal silence. Bird-song did not break it, and no leaves rustled. She huddled her shoulders together a little under the tunic of link-mail she wore and prodded her horse forward down the hill.

Guy of Garlot--Guy of Garlot! The hoofbeats thumped out the refrain all the way downhill. Black Guy with his thinly smiling lips and his slanted dark eyes and his unnatural comeliness--unnatural because Guy, within, was ugly as sin itself. It seemed no design of the good God that such sinfulness should wear Guy's dark beauty for a fleshly

garment.

The horse hesitated at the head of the causeway which stretched between the marsh pools toward Hellsgarde. Jirel shook the reins impatiently and smiled a one-sided smile downward at his twitching ears.

"I go as loath as you," she told him. "I go wincing under spurs too, my pretty. But go I must, and you too." And she cursed Guy again in a lingering whisper as the slow hoofbeats reverberated upon the stone arches of the causeway.

Beyond it loomed Hellsgarde, tall and dark against the sunset. All around her lay the yellow light of evening, above her in the sky, below her in the marshy pools beneath which quicksands quivered. She wondered who last had ridden this deserted causeway in the yellow glow of sunset, under what dreadful compulsion.

For no one sought Hellsgarde for pleasure. It was Guy of Garlot's slanting grin that drove Jirel across the marshes this evening--Guy and the knowledge that a score of her best men-at-arms lay shivering tonight in his dripping dungeons with no hope of life save the hope that she might buy their safety. And no riches could tempt Black Guy, not even Jirel's smoothly curving beauty and the promise of her full-lipped smile. And Garlot Castle, high on its rocky mountain peak, was impregnable against even Jirel's masterfully planned attacks. Only one thing could tempt the dark lord of Garlot, and that a thing without a name.

"It lies in Hellsgarde, my lady," he had told her with that hateful smooth civility which his sleek grin so belied. "And it is indeed Hell-guarded. Andred of Hellsgarde died defending it two hundred years ago, and I have coveted it all my life. But I love living, my lady! I would not venture into Hellsgarde for all the wealth in Christendom. If you

want your men back alive, bring me the treasure that Andred died to save."

"But what is it, coward?"

Guy had shrugged. "Who knows? Whence it came and what it was no man can say now. You know the tale as well as I, my lady. He carried it in a leather casket locked with an iron key. It must have been small—but very precious. Precious enough to die for, in the end—as I do not propose to die, my lady! You fetch it to me and buy twenty lives in the bargain."

She had sworn at him for a coward, but in the end she had gone. For after all, she was Joiry. Her men were hers to bully and threaten and command, but they were hers to die for too, if need be. She was afraid, but she remembered her men in Garlot's dungeons with the rack and the boot awaiting them, and she rode on.

The causeway was so long. Sunset had begun to tarnish a little in the bright pools of the marsh, and she could look up at the castle now without being blinded by the dazzle beyond. A mist had begun to rise in level layers from the water, and the smell of it was not good in her nostrils.

Hellsgarde—Hellsgarde and Andred. She did not want to remember the hideous old story, but she could not keep her mind off it this evening. Andred had been a big, violent man, passionate and willful and very cruel. Men hated him, but when the tale of his dying spread abroad even his enemies pitied Andred of Hellsgarde.

For the rumor of his treasure had drawn at last besiegers whom he could not overcome. Hellsgarde gate had fallen and the robber nobles who captured the castle searched in vain for the precious casket which Andred guarded. Torture could not loosen his lips,

though they tried very terribly to make him speak. He was a powerful man, stubborn and brave. He lived a long while under torment, but he would not betray the hiding-place of his treasure.

They tore him limb from limb at last and cast his dismembered body into the quicksands, and came away empty-handed. No one ever found Andred's treasure.

Since then for two hundred years Hellsgarde had lain empty. It was a dismal place, full of mists and fevers from the marsh, and Andred did not lie easy in the quicksands where his murderers had cast him. Dismembered and scattered broadcast over the marshes, yet he would not lie quiet. He had treasured his mysterious wealth with a love stronger than death itself, and legend said he walked Hellsgarde as jealously in death as in life.

In the two hundred years searchers had gone fearfully to ransack the empty halls of Hellsgarde for that casket--gone, and vanished. There was magic in the marshes, and a man could come upon the castle only by sunset, and after sunset Andred's violent ghost rose out of the quicksands to guard the thing he died for. For generations now no one had been so foolhardy as to venture upon the way Jirel rode tonight.

She was drawing near the gateway. There was a broad platform before it, just beyond the place where Andred's draw-bridge had once barred the approach to Hellsgarde. Long ago the gap in the causeway had been filled in with rubble by searchers who would reach the castle on horseback, and Jirel had thought of passing the night upon that platform under the gate arch, so that dawn might find her ready to begin her search.

But--the mists between her and the castle had thickened, and her eyes might be playing her false--but were not those the shapes of

men drawn up in a double row before the doorway of Hellsgarde? Hellsgarde, that had stood empty and haunted these two hundred years? Blinking through the dazzle of sun on water and the thickening of the mists, she rode on toward the gateway. She could feel the horse trembling between her knees, and with every step she grew more and more reluctant to go on. She set her teeth and forced him ahead resolutely, swallowing her own terror.

They were the figures of men, two rows of them, waiting motionless before the gate. But even through the mist and the sun-dazzle she could see that something was wrong. They were so still--so unearthly still as they faced her. And the horse was shying and trembling until she could scarcely force him forward.

She was quite near before she saw what was wrong, though she knew that at every forward step the obscure frightfulness about these guardsmen grew greater. But she was almost upon them before she realized why. They were all dead.

The captain at their front stood slumped down upon the great spear that propped him on his feet, driven through his throat so that the point stood out above his neck as he sagged there, his head dragging forward until his cheek lay against the shaft which transfixed him.

And so stood all the rest, behind him in a double row, reeling drunkenly upon the spears driven through throat or chest or shoulder to prop them on their feet in the hideous semblance of life.

So the company of dead men kept guard before the gateway of Hellsgarde. It was not unfitting--dead men guarding a dead castle in the barren deadlands of the swamp.

Jirel sat her horse before them for a long moment in silence, feeling

the sweat gather on her forehead, clenching her hands on the pommel of the saddle. So far as she knew, no other living person in decades had ridden the long causeway to Hellsgarde; certainly no living man had dwelt in these haunted towers in generations. Yet--here stood the dead men reeling against the spears which had slain them but would not let them fall. Why?--how?--when?...

Death was no new thing to Jirel. She had slain too many men herself to fear it. But the ghastly unexpectedness of this dead guard! It was one thing to steel oneself to enter an empty ruin, quite another to face a double row of standing dead men whose blood still ran in dark rivulets, wetly across the stones at their feet. Still wet--they had died today, then. Today while she struggled cursing through the wilderness something had slain them here, something had made a jest of death as it propped them on their dead feet with their dead faces toward the causeway along which she must come riding. Had that something expected her? Could the dead Andred have known?...

She caught herself with a little shudder and shrugged beneath the mail, clenching her fingers on the pommel, swallowing hard. (Remember your men--remember Guy of Garlot--remember that you are Joiry!) The memory of Guy's comely face, bright with mockery, put steel into her and she snapped her chin up with a murmured oath. These men were dead--they could not hinder her....

Was that motion among the ghastly guard? Her heart leaped to her throat and she gripped the saddle between nervous knees with a reflex action that made the horse shudder. For one of the men in the row before her was slipping silently toward the flagstones. Had the spear-butt slid on the bloody tiles? Had a breeze dislodged his precarious balance? There was no breeze. But with a curious little sigh from collapsing lungs he folded gently downward to his knees, to his side, to a flattened proneness on the stones. And a dark

stream of blood trickled from his mouth to snake across the pavement as he lay there.

Jirel sat frozen. It was a nightmare. Only in nightmares could such things happen. This unbearable silence in the dying sunset, no breeze, no motion, no sound. Not even a ripple upon the mirroring waters lying so widely around her below the causeway, light draining from their surfaces. Sky and water were paling as if all life receded from about her, leaving only Jirel on her trembling horse facing the dead men and the dead castle. She scarcely dared move lest the thump of her mount's feet on the stones dislodge the balance of another man. And she thought she could not bear to see motion again among those motionless ranks. She could not bear it, and yet--and yet if something did not break the spell soon the screams gathering in her throat would burst past her lips and she knew she would never stop screaming.

A harsh scraping sounded beyond the dead guardsmen. Her heart squeezed itself to a stop. And then the blood began to thunder through her veins and her heart leaped and fell and leaped again in a frenzied pounding against the mail of her tunic.

For beyond the men the great door of Hellsgarde was swinging open. She gripped her knees against the saddle until her thighs ached, and her knuckles were bone-white upon the pommel. She made no move toward the great sword at her side. What use is a sword against dead men?

But it was no dead man who looked out under the arch of the doorway, stooped beneath his purple tunic with the heartening glow of firelight from beyond reddening his bowed shoulders. There was something odd about his pale, pinched face upturned to hers across the double line of dead defenders between them. After a moment she recognized what it was--he had the face of a hunchback, but

there was no deformity upon his shoulders. He stooped a little as if with weariness, but he carried no hump. Yet it was the face of a cripple if she had ever seen one. His back was straight, but could his soul be? Would the good God have put the sign of deformity upon a human creature without cause? But he was human--he was real. Jirel sighed from the bottom of her lungs.

"Good evening to you, my lady," said the hunchback (but he was not humped) in the flat, ingratiating voice of a cripple.

"These--did not find it good," said Jirel shortly, gesturing. And the man grinned.

"My master's jest," he said.

Jirel looked back to the rows of standing dead, her heart quieting a little. Yes, a man might find a grim sort of humor in setting such a guard before his door. If a living man had done it, for an understanding reason, then the terror of the unknown was gone. But the man--

"Your master?" she echoed:

"My lord Alaric of Hellsgarde--you did not know?"

"Know what?" demanded Jirel flatly. She was beginning to dislike the fellow's sidelong unctuousness.

"Why, that my lord's family has taken residence here after many generations away."

"Sir Alaric is of Andred's kin?"

"He is."

Jirel shrugged mentally. It was God's blessing to feel the weight of terror lift from her, but this would complicate matters. She had not known that Andred left descendants, though it might well be so. And if they lived here, then be sure they would already have ransacked the castle from keep to dungeon for that nameless treasure which Andred had died to save and had not yet forsaken, were rumor true. Had they found it? There was only one way to learn that."

"I am nighted in the marshes," she said as courteously as she could manage. "Will your master give me shelter until morning?"

The hunchback's eyes--(but he was no hunchback, she must stop thinking of him so!)--his eyes slid very quickly, yet very comprehensively, from her tanned and red-lipped face downward over the lifting curves of her under the molding chain-mail, over her bare brown knees and slim, steel-greaved legs. There was a deeper unctuousness in his voice as he said:

"My master will make you very welcome, lady. Ride in."

Jirel kicked her horse's flank and guided him, snorting and trembling, through the gap in the ranks of dead men which the falling soldier had left. He was a battle-charger, he was used to dead men; yet he shuddered as he minced through these lines.

The courtyard within was warm with the light of the great fire in its center. Around it a cluster of loutish men in leather jerkins looked up as she passed.

"Wat, Piers--up, men!" snapped the man with the hunchback's face. "Take my lady's horse."

Jirel hesitated a moment before she swung from the saddle, her eyes dubious upon the faces around her. She thought she had never

seen such brutish men before, and she wondered at the lord who dared employ them. Her own followers were tough enough, reckless, hard fellows without fear or scruple. But at least they were men. These louts around the fire seemed scarcely more than beasts; let greed or anger stir them and no man alive could control their wildness. She wondered with what threats of punishment the lord Alaric held sway here, what sort of man he must be to draw his guard from the very dregs of humanity.

The two who took her horse stared at her under shaggy beetle-brows. She flashed them a poison glance as she turned to follow the purple cloak of her guide. Her eyes were busy. Hellsgarde had been a strong fortress in Andred's day; under Alaric it was well manned, but she thought she sensed a queer, hovering sullenness in the very air as she followed her guide across the courtyard, down a passageway, under an arch into the great hall.

The shadows of two hundred haunted years hovered under the lofty roof-beams. It was cold here, damp with the breath of the swamps outside, dark with two centuries of ugly legend and the terrible tradition of murder. But Alaric before the fire in his scarlet tunic seemed pleasantly at home. The great blaze, roaring up the chimney from six-foot logs drove back the chill and the dark and the damp a little in a semicircle about the fireplace, and in that semicircle a little company of brightly clad people sat silent, watching Jirel and her guide cross the echoing flags of the great hall toward them.

It was a pleasant scene, warm and firelit and bright with color, but even at a distance, something was wrong--something in the posture of the people crouching before the blaze, something in their faces. Jirel knew a moment of wild wonder if all this were real. Did she really walk a haunted ruin empty two hundred years? Were the people flesh and blood, or only the bright shadows of her own imagination that had so desperately longed for companionship in the

haunted marsh?

But no, there was nothing illusive about Alaric in his high-backed chair, his face a pale oval watching her progress. A humped dwarf leaned above his shoulder, fingers suspended over his lute-strings as he stared. On cushions and low benches by the fire a handful of women and girls, two young boys in bright blue, a pair of greyhounds with the firelight scarlet in their eyes--these made up the rest of the company.

Jirel's narrow yellow gaze summed them up as she crossed the hall. Striding smoothly in her thigh-length hauberk, she knew she was a figure on which a man's eyes must linger. Her supple height, the pleasant smooth curves of her under mail, the long, shapely legs bare beneath the linked metal of her hauberk, the swinging of the long sword whose weight upon its belt pulled in her waist to tigerish slimness--Alaric's eyes missed nothing of all these. Deliberately she tossed the dark cloak back over her shoulders, letting the firelight take the sleek mailed curves of her in a bright glimmer, flash from the shining greaves that clasped her calves. It was not her way to postpone the inevitable. Let Alaric learn in his first long stare how splendid a creature was Joiry's lady. And as for those women at his feet--well, let them know too.

She swaggered to a halt before Alaric, resting a hand on her sword-hilt, tossing back the cloak that had swirled about her as she swung to a stop. His face, half in the shadow of the chair, tilted up to her leanly. Here was no burly brute of a man such as she had half expected on the evidence of the men-at-arms he kept. He was of middle years, his face deeply grooved with living, his nose a hawk-beak, his mouth a sword-gash.

And there was something oddly wrong with his features, a queer cast upon them that made him seem akin to the purple-clad courtier

hovering at Jirel's elbow, to the grinning jester who peered across the chair-back. With a little twist of the heart she saw what it was. There was no physical likeness between master and men in any feature, but the shadow of deformity lay upon all three faces, though only the hunchback wore it honestly. Looking at those faces, one would have sworn that each of the trio went limping through life under the burden of a crooked spine. Perhaps, Jirel thought involuntarily, with a small shudder, the master and the courtier as well as the fool did indeed carry a burden, and if they did she thought she would prefer the jester's to theirs. His at least was honest and of the flesh. But theirs must be of the spirit, for surely, she thought again, God in His wisdom does not for nothing mark a whole and healthy man with a cripple's face. It was a deformity of the soul that looked out of the eyes meeting hers.

And because the thought frightened her she swung her shoulders until the cape swirled wide, and flashed her white teeth in a smile more boldly reckless than the girl behind it felt.

"You must not crave the company of strangers, sir--you keep a discouraging guard before your gate!"

Alaric did not smile. "Honest travelers are welcome here," he said very smoothly. "But the next robbers who ride our causeway will think twice before they storm the gates. We have no gallows here where thieves may swing in chains, but I think the guard before my castle will be warning enough to the next raiders who come."

"A grisly sort of warning," said Jirel. And then, with belated courtesy, "I am Jirel of Joiry. I missed my way in the marsh tonight--I shall be grateful for your hospitality."

"And we for your presence, Lady Jirel."

Alaric's voice was oily, but his eyes raked her openly. She felt other eyes upon her back too, and her red hair stiffened a little at the roots with a prickling uneasiness. "We keep a small court here at Hellsgarde," went on Alaric's voice. "Damara, Ettard, Isoud, Morgaine--all of you, make our guest welcome!"

Jirel swung round with a swirl of her long cloak to face the women, wondering at the subtle slight to their dignity, for Alaric made no effort to introduce them separately.

She thought they crouched a little on their low seats by the fire, looking up with the queer effect of women peering fearfully from under lowered brows, though she could not have said why they seemed so, for they met her eyes squarely. And upon these faces too lay that strange shadow of deformity, not so definitely as upon the men's, but visible in the firelight. All of them were thin creatures with big eyes showing a rather shocking space of whiteness around the staring irises. Their cheek-bones were sharp in the firelight, so that shadows stood hollowly beneath.

The woman who had risen when Alaric said "Damara" was as tall as Jirel, strongly made under her close green gown, but her face too had that queer hollow look and her eyes stared too whitely under wide-open lids. She said in a tight voice:

"Sit down by the fire and warm yourself, lady. We dine in a few minutes."

Jirel sank to the low cushioned stool she dragged forward, one leg doubled under her for instant rising, her sword-hilt and sword-hand free. There was something wrong here. She could feel it in the air.

The two dogs growled a little and shifted away from her on the floor, and even that was--wrong. Dogs had fawned on her always--until

now. And the firelight was so red in their eyes....

Looking away uneasily from those unnaturally red eyes, she saw the boys' features clearly for the first time, and her heart contracted a little. For naked evil was upon these two young faces. The others wore their shadow of deformity elusively, a thing more sensed than seen. It might be only a trick of her legend-fed imagination that put evil there. But the two young lads had the faces of devils, long faces with high cheekbones and slitted, lusterless eyes. Jirel shuddered a little inwardly. What sort of company had she stumbled into, where the very children and dogs wore evil like a garment?

She drew a deep breath and glanced around the circle of still faces that watched her wordlessly, with an intentness like that of--beasts of prey? Her pride rebelled at that. Joiry was ever the predator, not the prey! She squared her cleft chin and said with determined casualness:

"You have dwelt here long?"

She could have sworn a look went round the semicircle before the fire, a swift, amused glance from face to face as if they shared a secret. Yet not an eye wavered from hers. Only the two boys leaned together a little, and the look of evil brightened upon their wicked young faces. Alaric answered after the briefest possible pause:

"Not long. Nor will we stay long--now." There was a subtle menace in it, though Jirel could not have said why. And again that feeling of knowledge shared ran like a strong current around the circle, a little quiver as if a dreadful amusement were almost stirring in the air. But not a face changed or turned. The eyes were still eager--almost avid--upon the bright, strong face of Jirel with the firelight warming her golden tan and touching her red curls to flame and trembling upon the soft curve of her under-lip. For all the bright clothes of the

company around her, she had the sudden feeling that dark robes and dark eyes and dark faces hemmed her in--like shadows around a fire.

The conversation had come to a full stop; the eyes never wavered from her. She could not fathom this strange interest, for it was queer Alaric had not asked anything at all about her coming. A woman alone in this wilderness at night was sufficiently unusual to arouse interest, yet no one seemed concerned to ask how she had come there. Why, then, this concerted and deep interest in the sight of her?

To conquer the little tremor she could not quite ignore she said boldly:

"Hellsgarde of the Marshes has an ugly reputation, my lord. I wonder you dare dwell here--or do you know the old tale?"

Unmistakably this time that quiver of amusement flashed around the circle, though not an eye left hers. Alaric's voice was dry as he answered:

"Yes--yes, we know the tale. We are--not afraid."

And suddenly Jirel was quite sure of a strange thing. Something in his voice and his words told her very surely that they had not come in spite of the terrible old legend, but because of it.

No normal people would deliberately seek out a haunted and blood-stained ruin for a dwelling-place, yet there could be no mistaking the implication in Alaric's voice, in the unspoken mirth at her words that ran like a whisper around the circle. She remembered those dead men at the door. What normal person could make a joke so grisly? No, no--this company was as definitely abnormal as a company of dwarfs or monsters. One could not sit with them long even in silence

without sensing that. The look of abnormality upon their faces did not lie--it was a sure sign of a deformity of the soul.

The conversation had stopped again. To break the nerve-racking silence Jirel said:

"We hear many strange tales of Hellsgarde"--and knew she was talking too much, but could not stop--anything was better than that staring silence--"tales of treasure and--and--is it true that one can come upon Hellsgarde Castle only in the sunset--as I did?"

Alaric paused deliberately for a moment before he answered with as deliberate evasiveness, "There are stranger tales than that of Hellsgarde--and who can say how much of truth is in them? Treasure? There may well be treasure here. Many have come seeking it--and remained, for ever."

Jirel remembered the dead men at the door, and she shot Alaric a yellow glare that would have clanged like the meeting of blades with his stare--had he met it. He was looking up into the shadows of the ceiling, and he was smiling a little. Did he suspect her errand? He had asked no questions.... Jirel remembered Guy of Garlot's smile as he sent her on this quest, and a murderous wonder began to take shape in her mind. If Guy had known--if he had deliberately sent her into this peril--she let herself sink for a moment into a luxury of picturing that comely smile smashed in by the handle of her sword....

They were watching her. She came back with a jerk and said at random:

"How cold the marshes are after sunset!" And she shivered a little, not until that moment realizing the chill of the great hall.

"We find it--pleasant," murmured Alaric, watching her.

The others were watching too, and again she sensed that ripple of subtle amusement running around the circle that closed her out of a secret shared. They were here for a purpose. She knew it suddenly: a strange, unfathomable purpose that bound them together with almost one mind, so that thoughts seemed to flow soundlessly from brain to brain; a purpose that included her now, and in no pleasant way. Danger was in the air, and she alone here by night in the deserted marshes, among these queer, abnormal people who watched her with an avid and unwavering eagerness. Well, she had been in peril before, and hewed her way out again.

A slovenly wench in a ragged smock tiptoed clumsily out of the shadows to murmur in Damara's ear, and Jirel felt with conscious relief the removal of at least one pair of staring eyes as the woman turned to nod. Jirel's gaze was scornful on the girl. A queer household they kept here--the bestial retainers, the sluttish wench in her soiled gown.

Not even Joiry's kitchen maids went so slovenly clad.

Damara turned back to the fire. "Shall we dine now?" she asked.

Every face around the fire brightened magically, and Jirel was conscious of a little loosening of the tension in her own mind. The very fact that the thought of food pleased them made the whole group seem more normal. And yet--she saw it in a moment--this was not even a normal eagerness. There was something a little horrid about the gleam in every eye, the avid hunger on every face. For a little while the thought of food supplanted herself in their interest, and that terrible battery of watchfulness forsook her. It was like an actual weight lifted. She breathed deeper.

Frowsy kitchen scullions and a pair of unwashed girls were carrying in the planks and trestles for the table, setting it up by the fire.

"We dine alone," Alaric was explaining as the group around the fire reshifted itself to make way. It seemed a witless sort of fastidiousness to Jirel, particularly since they let themselves be served by such shamefully unkempt lackeys. Other households dined all together, from lord to stable hands, at the long t-shaped tables where the salt divided noblesse from peasantry. But perhaps Alaric dared not allow those beast-wild men of his even that familiarity. And she was conscious of a tiny disappointment that the company of these staring, strange-faced people was not to be leavened even by the brutish earthiness of their retainers. The men-at-arms seemed scarcely human, but at least it was a normal, open sort of brutality, something she could understand.

When the table was ready Alaric seated her at his right hand, beside the two evil-faced youngsters who sat preternaturally quiet. Young lads of that age were scufflers and squirmers at table in the company she knew. It was another count of eeriness against them that they scarcely moved save to reach for food.

Who were they? she wondered. Alaric's sons? Pages or squires from some noble family? She glanced around the table in deepening bewilderment, looking for signs of kinship on the shadowed faces, finding nothing but that twist of deformity to link the company together. Alaric had made no attempt to introduce any of them, and she could not guess what relationship bound them all together in this close, unspoken communion. She met the eyes of the dwarf at Alaric's elbow and looked quickly away again, angry at his little comprehending grin. He had been watching her.

There was no conversation after the meat was brought in. The whole company fell upon it with such a starved eagerness that one might think they had not dined in weeks before now. And not even their food tasted right or normal.

It looked well enough, but there was a subtle seasoning about it that made Jirel gag and lay down her knife after the first taste--a flavor almost of decay, and a sort of burning bitterness she could not put a name to, that lingered on the tongue long after the food itself was swallowed. Everything stank of it, the roast, the bread, the few vegetables, even the bitter wine.

After a brave effort, for she was hungry, Jirel gave up and made not even the pretense of eating. She sat with her arms folded on the table edge, right hand hanging near her sword, watching the ravenous company devour their tainted food. It was no wonder, she realized suddenly, that they ate alone. Surely not even the dull palates of their retainers could accept this revoltingly seasoned meat.

Alaric sat back at last in his high-backed chair, wiping his dagger on a morsel of bread.

"You do not hunger, Lady Jirel?" he asked, tilting a brow at her still-heaped trencher. She could not help her little grimace as she glanced down.

"Not now," she said, with wry humor.

Alaric did not smile. He leaned forward to pick up upon his dagger the thick slab of roast before her, and tossed it to the hearth. The two greyhounds streaked from beneath the table to growl over it hungrily, and Alaric glanced obliquely at Jirel, with a hint of a one-sided smile, as he wiped the knife again and sheathed it.

If he meant her to understand that the dogs were included in this queer closed circle of his, she caught it. Obviously there had been a message in that act and smile.

When the table had been cleared away and the last glimmer of sunset had faded from the high, narrow slits of the windows, a sullen fellow in frieze went around the hall with a long pole-torch, lighting the cressets.

"Have you visited Hellsgarde before, my lady?" inquired Alaric. And as Jirel shook her head, "Let me show you the hall then, and my forefathers' arms and shields, Who knows?--you may find quarterings of your own among our escutcheons."

Jirel shuddered at the thought of discovering even a remote kinship with Hellsgarde's dwellers, but she laid her hand reluctantly on the arm he offered and let him lead her away from the fire out under the echoing vaults of the hall where cressets brought the shadows to life.

The hall was as Andred's murderers must have left it two centuries ago. What shields and armor had not fallen from the walls were thick with rust in the damp air of the marshes, and the tatters of pennons and tapestries had long ago taken on a uniform color of decay. But Alaric seemed to savor the damp and the desolation as a normal man might savor luxury. Slowly he led her around the hall, and she could feel the eyes of the company, who had resumed their seats by the fire, follow her all the way with one unwinking stare.

The dwarf had taken up his lute again and struck occasional chords in the echoing silence of the hall, but except for that there was no sound but the fall of their feet on the rushless flagstones and the murmur of Alaric's voice pointing out the vanished glories of Hellsgarde Castle.

They paused at the side of the big room farthest from the fire, and Alaric said in an unctuous voice, his eyes seeking Jirel's with curious insistence:

"Here on this spot where we stand, lady, died Andred of Hellsgarde two hundred years ago."

Jirel looked down involuntarily. Her feet were planted on the great blotch of a spreading stain that had the rough outline of a beast with questing head and paws out-sprawled. It was a broad stain, black and splattered upon the stone. Andred must have been a big man. He had bled terribly on that day two centuries past.

Jirel felt her host's eyes on her face full of a queer anticipation, and she caught her breath a little to speak, but before she could utter a sound, quite suddenly there was a riot of wind all about them, shrieking out of nowhere in a whirlwind gust that came ravening with such fury that the cressets went out all together in one breath and darkness like a blow fell upon the hall.

In the instant of that blackness, while the whole great hall was black and vocal and bewildering with storm-wind, as if he had been waiting avidly for this moment all evening, a man's arm seized Jirel in a grip like death and a mouth came down upon hers in a more savagely violent and intimate kiss than she had ever known before. It all burst upon her so quickly that her impressions confused and ran together into one gust of terrible anger against Alaric as she struggled helplessly against that iron arm and ravenous mouth, while the storm-wind shrieked in the darkness. She was conscious of nothing but the arm, the mouth, the insolent hand. She was not pressed against a man's body, but the strength of the arm was like steel about her.

And in the same moment of the seizure the arm was dragging her violently across the floor with irresistible force, never slackening its crushing grip, the kiss in all its revolting intimacy still ravaging her muted mouth. It was as if the kiss, the crush of the arm, the violence of the hand, the howl of the wind and the drag across the room were all but manifestations of a single vortex of violence.

It could not have lasted more than seconds. She had an impression of big, square, wide-spaced teeth against her lips and the queer violence behind them manifest not primarily in the savageness of the kiss or the embrace, or the wild drag across the room, but more as if all these were mere incidents to a burning vehemence behind them that beat like heat all around her.

Choking with impotent fury, she tried to struggle, tried to scream. But there was no chest to push for leverage and no body to arch away from, and she could not resist. She could only make dumb animal sounds in her throat, sealed in behind the storming violation of that mouth.

She had scarcely time to think, it happened so quickly. She was too stunned by the violence and suddenness of the attack even to wonder at the absence of anything but the mouth, the arm, the hand. But she did have the distinct impression of walls closing in around her, as if she were being dragged out of the great open hall into a narrow closet. It was somehow as if that violence beating all about her were confined and made more violent by the presence of close walls very near.

It was all over so quickly that even as that feeling of closing walls dawned upon her she heard the little amazed cries of the others as the cressets were blown out all together. It was as if time had moved faster for her than for them. In another instant someone must have thrown brush on the fire, for the great blaze in the cavern of the chimney roared up with a gush of light and sound, for a moment beating back the darkness in the hall.

And Jirel was staggering alone in the center of the big room. No one was near her, though she could have sworn upon the cross-hilt of her sword that a split second before the heavy mouth had crushed her

muted lips. It was gone now as if it had never been. Walls did not enclose her; there was no wind, there was no sound in the great hall.

Alaric stood over the black blotch of Andred's blood at the other side of the hall. She thought she must have known subconsciously after the first moment that it was not he whose lips ravaged her bruised mouth. That flaming vehemence was not in him. No, though he had been the only man near her when the dark closed down, he was not the man whose outrageous kiss still throbbed on her mouth.

She lifted an unsteady hand to those bruised lips and stared around her wildly, gasping for lost breath, half sobbing with fury.

The others were still around the fire, half the width of the room away. And as the light from the replenished blaze leaped up, she saw the blankness of their momentary surprise vanish before one leaping flame of avid hope that for an instant lit every face alike. With long running strides Alaric reached her side. In her dazed confusion she felt his hands on her arms shaking her eagerly, heard him gabbling in a tongue she did not know:

"G'hasta-est? Tai g'hasta? Tai g'hasta?"

Angrily, she shook him off as the others closed round her in an eagerly excited group, babbling all together, "G'hasta tai? Est g'hasta?"

Alaric recovered his poise first. In a voice shaking with the first emotion she had heard from him he demanded with almost desperate eagerness.

"What was it? What happened? Was it--was it--?"

But he seemed scarcely to dare name the thing his whole soul longed for, though the tremble of hope was in his voice.

Jirel caught herself on the verge of answering. Deliberately she paused to fight down the dizzy weakness that still swam in her brain, drooping her lids to hide the calculation that came up like a flame behind her yellow eyes. For the first time she had a leverage over these mysterious people. She knew something they frantically desired to know, and she must make full use of the knowledge she scarcely knew she had.

"H-happened?" The stammer was not entirely feigned. "There was a-a wind, and darkness--I don't know--it was all over so quickly." And she glanced up into the gloom with not wholly assumed terror. Whatever that thing had been--it was no human agency. She could have sworn that the instant before the light flared up, walls were closing around her as tightly as a tomb's walls; yet they had vanished more lightly than mist in the glow of the fire. But that mouth upon hers, those big, squarely spaced teeth against her lips, the crush of the brutal arm--nothing could have been more tangible. Yet there had been only the arm, the mouth, the hand. No body.... With a sudden shudder that made the goose-flesh ripple along her limbs she remembered that Andred had been dismembered before they flung him into the quicksands.... Andred....

She did not know she had said it aloud, but Alaric pounced like a cat on the one word that left her lips.

"Andred? Was it Andred?"

Jirel recovered herself with a real effort, clenching her teeth to stop their chattering.

"Andred? He died two hundred years ago!"

"He will never die until--" One of the young boys with the evil faces

said that much before Alaric whirled on him angrily, yet with curious deference.

"Silence! Wait!... Lady Jirel, you asked me if the legends of Hellsgarde are true. Now I tell you that the tale of Andred is. We believe he still walks the halls where his treasure lies hid, and we--we--" He hesitated, and Jirel saw a strong look of calculation dawn upon his face. He went on smoothly, "We believe there is but one way to find that treasure. Only the ghost of Andred can lead us there. And Andred's ghost has been--elusive, until now."

She could have sworn that he had not meant to say just that when he began to speak. She was surer of it when she saw the little flicker of communication ripple around the circle of faces closing her in. Amusement at a subtle jest in which she did not share... it was on every face around her, the hollow-cheeked women's white-rimmed staring eyes brightened, the men's faces twitched a little with concealed mirth. Suddenly she felt smothered by abnormality and mystery and that subtle, perilous amusement without reason.

She was more shaken by her terrifying experience than she would have cared to admit. She had little need to feign weakness as she turned away from them toward the fire, eager to escape their terrible company even though it meant solitude in this haunted dark. She said:

"Let me--rest by the fire. Perhaps it--it--he won't return."

"But he must return!" She thought that nearly every voice around her spoke simultaneously, and eager agreement was bright upon every face. Even the two dogs had thrust themselves forward among the legs of the little crowd around Jirel, and their shadowed eyes, still faintly aglow as if with borrowed firelight, followed the conversation from face to face as if they too understood. Their gaze turned redly

up to Alaric now as he said:

"For many nights we have waited in vain for the force that was Andred to make itself known to us. Not until you come does he create that vortex which--which is necessary if we are to find the treasure." Again, at that word, Jirel thought she felt a little current of amusement ripple from listener to listener. Alaric went on in his smooth voice, "We are fortunate to find one who has the gift of summoning Andred's spirit to Hellsgarde. I think there must be in you a kindred fierceness which Andred senses and seeks. We must call him out of the dark again--and we must use your power to do it."

Jirel stared around her incredulously. "You would call--that--up again?"

Eyes gleamed at her with a glow that was not of the firelight. "We would indeed," murmured the evil-faced boy at her elbow. "And we will not wait much longer...."

"But-- God's Mercy!" said Jirel, "--are all the legends wrong? They say Andred's spirit swoops down with sudden death on all who trespass in Hellsgarde. Why do you talk as if only I could evoke it? Do you want to die so terribly? I do not! I won't endure that again if you kill me for it. I'll have no more of Andred's kisses!"

There was a pulse of silence around the circle for a moment. Eyes met and looked away again. Then Alaric said:

"Andred resents only outsiders in Hellsgarde, not his own kinsmen and their retainers. Moreover, those legends you speak of are old ones, telling tales of long-ago trespassers in this castle.

"With the passage of years the spirits of the violent dead draw farther and farther away from their death-scenes. Andred is long

dead, and he revisits Hellsgarde Castle less often and less vindictively as the years go by. We have striven a long while to draw him back--but you alone succeeded. No, lady, you must endure Andred's violence once again, or--"

"Or what?" demanded Jirel coldly, dropping her hand to her sword.

"There is no alternative." Alaric's voice was inflexible. "We are many to your one. We will hold you here until Andred comes again."

Jirel laughed. "You think Joiry's men will let her vanish without a trace? You'll have such a storming about Hellsgarde walls as--"

"I think not, lady. What soldiers will dare follow when a braver one than any of them was vanished in Hellsgarde? No, Joiry, your men will not seek you here. You--"

Jirel's sword flamed in the firelight as she sprang backward, dragging it clear. The blade flashed once--and then arms like iron pinioned her from behind. For a dreadful moment she thought they were Andred's, and her heart turned over. But Alaric smiled, and she knew. It was the dwarf who had slipped behind her at an unspoken message from his master, and if his back was weak his arms were not. He had a bear's grip upon her and she could not wrench herself free.

Struggling, sobbing curses, kicking hard with her steel-spurred heels, she could not break his hold. There was a murmurous babble all around her of that strange, haunting tongue again, "L'vraista! Tai g'hasta vrai! El vraist'tai lau!" And the two devil-faced boys dived for her ankles. They clung like ghoulishly grinning apes, pinning her feet to the floor. And Alaric stepped forward to wrench the sword from her hand. He murmured something in their queer speech, and the crowd scattered purposefully.

Fighting hard, Jirel was scarcely aware of their intention before it was accomplished. But she heard the sudden splash of water on blazing logs and the tremendous hissing of steam as the fire went out and darkness fell like a blanket upon the shadowy hall. The crowd had melted away from her into the dark, and now the grip on her ankles suddenly ceased and the great arms that held her so hard heaved in a mighty swing.

Choking with fury, she reeled into the darkness. There was nothing to stop her, and those mighty arms had thrown her hard. She fell and slid helplessly across bare flagstones in black dark, her greaves and empty scabbard clanging upon stone. When she came to a halt, bruised and scratched and breathless, it was a moment before she could collect her senses enough to scramble up, too stunned even for curses.

"Stay where you are, Jirel of Joiry," Alaric's voice said calmly out of the blackness. "You cannot escape this hall—we guard every exit with drawn swords. Stand still—and wait."

Jirel got her breath and launched into a blasphemous survey of his ancestry and possible progeny with such vehemence that the dark for several minutes throbbed with her fury. Then she recalled Alaric's suggestion that violence in herself might attract a kindred violence in that strange force called Andred, and she ceased so abruptly that the silence was like a blow upon the ears.

It was a silence full of tense waiting. She could almost feel the patience and the anticipation that beat out upon her from the circle of invisible jailers, and at the thought of what they awaited her blood ran chilly. She looked up blindly into the darkness overhead, certain for a long and dreadful moment that the familiar blast of storm-wind was gathering there to churn the night into chaos out of which Andred's arm would reach....

After a while she said in a voice that sounded unexpectedly small in the darkness:

"Y-you might throw me a pillow. I'm tired of standing and this floor's cold."

To her surprise footsteps moved softly and quite surely across stone, and after a moment a pillow hurtled out of the darkness to thump softly at her feet. Jirel sank upon it thankfully, only to stiffen an instant later and glare about her in the dark, the hair prickling on her neck. So--they could see in the darkness! There had been too much certainty in those footsteps and the accurate toss of the pillow to doubt it. She huddled her shoulders together a little and tried not to think.

The darkness was enormous above her. Age upon age went by, with no sound except her own soft breathing to break that quiet pulsing with waiting and anticipation. Her terror grew. Suppose that dreadful storm-wind should come whooping through the hall again; suppose the bodiless arm should seize her and the mouth come ravening down upon her lips once more.... Coldness crept down her spine.

Yes, and suppose it did come again. What use, for her? These slinking abnormalities who were her jailers would never share the treasure with her which they were so avid to find--so avid that they dared evoke this terror by night and brave a death which legend whispered fearfully of, simply that they might possess it. It--did they know, then, what lay in Andred's terribly guarded box? What conceivable thing could be so precious that men would dare this to have it?

And what hope at all for her? If the monstrous thing called Andred did not come tonight--then he would come again some other night,

sooner or later, and all nights would find her isolated here as bait for the monster that haunted Hellsgarde. She had boasted without hope when she said her men would follow. They were brave men and they loved her—but they loved living more. No, there was not a man in Joiry who would dare follow where she had failed. She remembered Guy of Garlot's face, and let violence come flooding up in her for a moment. That handsome coward, goading her into this that he might possess the nameless thing he coveted.... Well, she would ruin his comely face for him with the cross-hilt of her sword—if she lived. If she lived! She was forgetting....

Slowly the stars wheeled by the arrow-slit windows high up in the darkness of the walls. Jirel sat hugging her knees and watching them. The darkness sighed above her with vagrant drafts, any one of which might be Andred roaring down out of the night....

Well, her captors had made one mistake. How much it might avail her she did not know, but they thought they had disarmed her, and Jirel hugged her greave-sheathed legs in the darkness and smiled a wicked smile, knowing they had not.

It must have been after midnight, and Jirel dozing uneasily with her head on her knees, when a long sigh from the darkness made her start awake. Alaric's voice, heavy with weariness and disappointment, spoke in his nameless language. It occurred to Jirel to wonder briefly that though this seemed to be their mother tongue (for they spoke it under stress and among themselves), yet their speech with her had no taint of accent. It was strange—but she was beyond wondering long about the monstrous folk among whom she had fallen.

Footsteps approached her, walking unerringly. Jirel shook herself awake and stood up, stretching cramped limbs. Hands seized her arms from both sides—at the first grasp, with no groping, though even

her dark-accustomed eyes could see nothing. No one bothered to translate Alaric's speech to her, but she realized that they had given up their vigil for the night. She was too drugged with sleep to care. Even her terror had dulled as the endless night hours dragged by. She stumbled along between her captors, making no effort to resist. This was not the time to betray her hidden weapon, not to these people who walked the dark like cats. She would wait until the odds were evener.

No one troubled to strike a light. They went swiftly and unhesitatingly through the blackness, and when stairs rose unexpectedly underfoot Jirel was the only one who stumbled. Up steps, along a cold and echoing hall--and then a sudden thrust that sent her staggering. A stone wall caught her and a door slammed at her back. She whirled, a hot Norman oath smoking on her lips, and knew that she was alone.

Groping, she made out the narrow confines of her prison. There was a cot, a jug of water, a rough door through whose chinks light began to glimmer even as she ran questing hands across its surface. Voices spoke briefly outside, and in a moment she understood. Alaric had summoned one of his apish men to watch her while he and his people slept. She knew it must be a man-at-arms and not one of Alaric's company, for the fellow had brought a lantern with him. She wondered if the guardsmen knew how unerringly their masters walked the darkness--or if they cared. But it no longer seemed strange to her that Alaric dared employ such brutish men. She knew well enough now with what ease he could control them--he and his night-sight and his terrible fearlessness.

Silence fell outside. Jirel smiled a thin smile and leaned into the nearest corner, drawing up one knee. The long, thin-bladed knife she carried between greave and leg slid noiselessly from its sheath. She waited with feline patience, her eyes upon the lighted chinks

between the door's planks.

It seemed a long while before the guard ceased his muffled pacing, yawned loudly, tested the bar that fastened the door from without. Jirel's thin smile widened. The man grunted and—she had prayed he would—settled down at last on the floor with his back against the panels of her door. She knew he meant to sleep awhile in the certainty that the door could not be opened without waking him. She had caught her own guards at that trick too often not to expect it now.

Still she waited. Presently the even breath of slumber reached her ears, and she licked her lips and murmured, "Gentle Jesu, let him not wear mail!" and leaned to the door. Her knife was thin enough to slide easily between the panels.... He was not wearing mail—and the blade was razor-keen. He must scarcely have felt it, or known when he died. She felt the knife grate against bone and gave it an expert twist to clear the rib it had grazed, and heard the man give a sudden, startled grunt in his sleep, and then a long sigh.... He must never have awakened. In a moment blood began to gush through the panels of the door in heavy spurts, and Jirel smiled and withdrew her knife.

It was simple enough to lift the bar with that narrow blade. The difficulty was in opening the door against the dead weight of the man outside, but she accomplished that too, without too much noise—and then the lantern sat waiting for her and the hall was long and empty in the half-dark. She could see the arch of the stairway and knew the way she had come. And she did not hesitate on the way down. She had thought it all out carefully in the darkness of the hall downstairs while she crouched on the cushion and waited for Andred's ravenous storm-blast to come shrieking down above her bent shoulders.

There was no way out. She knew that. Other castles had posterns and windows from which a fugitive might escape, but quicksands

surrounded Hellsgarde and the only path to freedom lay along the causeway where Alaric's guard would be watching tonight. And only in minstrels' romances does a lone adventurer escape through a guarded courtyard and a guarded gate.

And too--she had come here for a purpose. It was her duty to find that small treasured box which alone would buy the twenty lives depending on her. She would do that, or die. And perhaps, after all, it was fortunate that the castle had not been empty when she came. Without Alaric, it might never have occurred to her to dare the power of Andred's ghost in order to reach her goal. She realized now that it might well be the only way she would ever succeed. Too many searchers in the past had ransacked Hellsgarde Castle to leave her much hope unless great luck attended her. But Alaric had said it: there was a way--a terrible and deadly perilous way, but the only hope.

And after all, what chance did she have? To sit supinely waiting, a helpless decoy, until the night when Andred's power swooped down to claim her again--or to seek him out deliberately and challenge him to the duel. The end would be the same--she must suffer his presence again, either way. But tonight there was a bare chance for her to escape with the treasure-casket, or at least to find it alone and if she lived to hide it and bargain with Alaric for freedom.

It was a forlorn and futile hope, she knew well. But it was not in her to sit waiting for death, and this way there was at least a bare hope for success. She gripped her bloody knife in one hand and her lantern in the other and went on down the stairs, cat-footed and quick.

Her little circle of light moving with her across the cold flags was so tenuous a defense against the dark. One gust of Andred's storm-wind would puff it out and the darkness would smash in upon her like a blow. And there were other ghosts here than Andred's--small, cold

things in the dark just beyond her lantern light. She could feel their presence as she picked her way across the great hall, past the quenched logs of the fireplace, past the crumbling ruins of armor and tapestry, toward the one spot where she thought she might be surest of summoning up the dreadful thing she sought.

It was not easy to find. She ranged back and forth for many minutes with her little circle of light before a corner of that great black splotch she hunted moved into the light; beast-shaped, dark as murder itself upon the flagstones--Andred's life-blood spilled two hundred years ago.

Here once before that ravaging ghost had taken her; here if anywhere, surely he would come again. She had her underlip firmly between her teeth as she stepped upon that stain, and she was holding her breath without realizing it. She must have stood there for a full minute, feeling the goose-flesh shudder along her limbs, before she could nerve herself for the thing she must do next. But she had come too far to fail herself now. She drew a deep breath and blew out the lifted lantern.

Darkness crashed upon her with the impact of a physical blow, almost squeezing the breath from her body. And now suddenly fright was past and the familiar winy exultation of tension before battle rushed along her limbs and she looked up into the darkness defiantly and shouted to the great vaults of the ceiling, "Come out of Hell, dead Andred! Come if you dare, Andred the Damned!"

Wind--wind and storm and violence! It snatched the words from her lips and the breath from her throat in one tremendous whirling gust that came rushing out of nowhere. And in the instant of its coming, while the wild challenge still echoed on her lips, a ravenous mouth came storming down to silence hers and a great arm smacked down around her shoulders in a blow that sent her reeling as iron fingers

dug agonizingly into her arm--a blow that sent her reeling but would not let her fall, for that terrible drag again was sweeping her across the floor with a speed that ran faster than time itself.

She had ducked her head instinctively when she felt the arm seize her, but not soon enough. The heavy mouth had hers, and again the square, wide-set teeth were bruising her lips and the violence of the monstrous kiss made fury bubble up in her sealed throat as she fought in vain against it.

This time the thing was not such a stunning surprise, and she could sense more clearly what was happening to her. As before, the whole violent fury of the attack burst upon her at once--the mouth seized hers and the arm swept her almost off her feet in the same instant. In that instant the unslackening grip around her shoulders rushed her across the dark floor, blinded in the blackness, deafened by the raving wind, muted and dazed by the terrible vehemence of the mouth and the pain of her iron-clawed arm.

But she could sense dimly again that walls were closing around her, closer and closer, like a tomb's walls. And as before she was aware of a tremendous force beating about her, a greater violence than any one manifestation of it upon her body; for the mouth, the gripping hand, the arm, the sweeping drag itself were all but parts of that vortex.

And it was indeed a vortex--it was somehow spinning and narrowing as if the whole force that was Andred were concentrating into one tornado-whirl of savage power. Perhaps it was that feeling of narrowing and vortexing rotation which made walls seem to draw close about her. It was all too dimly sensed a thing to put clearly into words, and yet it was terribly real. Jirel, breathless and bruised and stunned with pain and violence, still knew clearly that here in the midst of the great open hall walls were drawing prison-tight about

her.

Savagely she slashed at the arm around her shoulders, at the steel-fingered hand digging her arm to the bone. But the angle was an awkward one and she was too dazed to know if she cut flesh or simply stabbed at disembodied force. And the grip did not slacken; the storming mouth still held hers in a kiss so wild and infuriating that she could have sobbed with pure rage.

Those walls were very near... her stumbling knees touched stone. She groped dizzily with her free hand and felt walls dripping-damp, close around her. The forward motion had ceased, and the power which was Andred whirled in one concentrated cone of violence that stopped her breath and sent the darkness reeling around her.

Through the haze of her confusion she knew that this, then, must be his own place to which he had dragged her, a place of stone and damp and darkness somewhere outside--for they had reached it too quickly for it to be a real place--and yet it was tangible.... Stone walls cold against her hands, and what were these round and slipping things underfoot?--things that rattled a little as she stumbled among them--bones? Dear God, the bones of other seekers after treasure, who had found what they sought? For she thought the treasure-box must be here, surely, if it were anywhere at all--here in this darkness unreachable save through the very heart of the whirlwind....

Her senses were failing and the whirl that was like the whirl in a tornado's heart seemed to create a vacuum which drew her out of her body in one thin, protesting wisp of self that had no strength to fight....

Somewhere a long way off was her body, hanging limp in the clutch of the iron arm, gasping for breath under a kiss that made reality faint about her, still struggling feebly in some tomb-smelling, narrow place

where stone walls dripped and bones turned underfoot--the bones of those who had come before her....

But she was not there. She was a wispy wraith rooted only tenuously in that fainting body, a wraith that reeled out and out in a thin skein to spin on the whirls of tornado-violence pulling her farther and farther and farther away.... The darkness was slipping sidewise--the stone walls were a prison no longer, for she was moving up along the great expanding whirl that sucked her out of her body, up and out around widening circles into night-time distances where space and time were not....

Somewhere infinitely far away a foot that was not hers stumbled over something small and square, and a body that was not hers slid to its knees among wet, rattling bones, and a bosom that was not hers bruised itself on the corner of that square something as the tenantless body fell forward among bones upon a wet stone floor. But upon the widening whorls of the vortex the wisp that was Jirel rebelled in its spinning. She must go back--she must remember--there was something--something....

For one fleeting instant she was in her body again, crumpled down upon the stones, arms sprawled about a small square thing that was slimy to the touch. A box--a wet leather box thick with fungus, bound with iron. Andred's box, that for two hundred years searchers had hunted in vain. The box that Andred had died for and that she would die for too--was dying for now in the darkness and the damp among the bones, with violence ravening down to seize her again....

Dimly, as her senses left her for the second time, she heard a dog bark, high and hysterically, from far above. And another dog answered, and then she heard a man's voice shouting in a tongue she did not know, a wild, exultant shout, choking with triumph. But after that the dizziness of the whirlwind which snatched her out of her

body made everything blur, until--until--

Queerly, it was music that brought her back. A lute's strings singing as if madness itself swept wild chords across them. The dwarfed jester's lute, shrieking with music that wakened her out of nowhere into her own fallen body in the dampness and the dark where that hard box-corner bruised her bosom.

And the whirlwind was--uncoiling--from about her. The walls widened until she was no longer aware of their prison closeness and the smell of damp and decay faded from her nostrils. In a dizzy flash of realization she clasped the wet casket to her breast just as the walls faded altogether and she sat up unsteadily, blinking into the dark.

The whirlwind still raved around her, but somehow, strangely, it did not touch her now. No, there was something outside it--some strange force against which it battled--a force that--that--

She was in the dark hall again. Somehow she knew it. And the wild lute-music shrilled and sang, and in some queer way--she saw. It was dark still--but she saw. For a luminous glow was generating itself in a ring around her and by its ghostlight she was aware--scarcely through sight--of familiar faces spinning past her in a wide, whirling ring. A witch dance, round and round.... Alaric's lined face flashed by, blazing with exultation; Damara's white-ringed eyes glared blindly into the dark. She saw the two boys whirl past, the light of hell itself luminous on their faces. There was a wild bark, and one of the greyhounds loped by her and away, firelight from no earthly flame glaring in its eyes, its tongue lolling in a canine grin of ecstasy. Round and round her through that luminous glow which was scarcely light the mad circle spun. And ever the lute-strings wailed and sang with a wilder music than strings can ever have sung before, and the terrible joy on every face--yes, even upon the dogs'--was more frightening than even Andred's menace had been.

Andred--Andred.... The power of his volcano-force spun above her now, with a strength that stirred the red hair against her cheeks and a raving of wind through which the lute music screamed high. But it was not the full force that had overwhelmed her. For this maniac dance that spun round and round through the dark was building up a climax of cumulative strength that she could feel as she knelt there, hugging the slimy box. She thought the very air sang with tension and stress. That circle was reeling counterwise to the spin of Andred's vortexing force, and Andred was weakening. She could feel him slackening above her in the dark. The music shrieked louder above the failing storm-wind and the fearful joy upon those faces whirling past told her why. Somehow they were overpowering him. Something in the dwarf's mad lute-strings, something in the spinning of their dance was breaking down the strength of Andred's centuries-old violence. She could feel it weakening as she crouched there with the casket hugged bruisingly to her bosom.

And yet--was it this precious casket that they fought for? No one had a glance to spare for the crouching girl or the burden she hugged. Every face was lifted raptly, every eye stared blindly and exultantly into the upper dark as if the thing that was Andred were visible and--and infinitely desirable. It was a lust for that thing upon their faces that made joy so vivid there. Jirel's brain had almost ceased recording sensation in the bewilderment of what she watched.

When the dance ended she scarcely knew it. Lulled into a dizzy trance by the mad spinning of the dancers, she was almost nodding on her knees in their center, feeling her brain whirl with their whirling--feeling the motion slow about her so imperceptibly that nothing but the whirl itself registered on her mind. But the dancers were slackening--and with them, the whirl above. The wind no longer raved through the dark; it was a slow sigh now, growing softer and gentler as the circle of dancers ceased to spin....

And then there was a great, soft, puffing sigh from the darkness above her that blew out her awareness like a candle-flame....

Daylight fingering through the arrow-slits touched Jirel's closed lids. She awoke painfully, blinking in the light. Every muscle and bone of her supple body ached from the buffeting of last night's storm and violence, and the cold stones were hard beneath her. She sat up, groping by instinct for her knife. It lay a little distance off, rusting with last night's blood. And the casket--the casket!...

Panic swelling in her throat quieted in an instant as she saw that precious, molding thing lying on its side at her elbow. A little thing, its iron hinges rusty, its leather whitened and eaten with rot from two centuries in a nameless, dripping place; but safe, unopened. She picked it up, shaking it experimentally. And she heard the softest shifting within, a sound and weight like finest flour moving gently.

A rustle and a sigh from beyond brought her head up, and she stared around her in the shadows of the halls. In a broad, uneven circle the bodies of last night's dancers lay sprawled. Dead? No, slow breathing stirred them as they lay, and upon the face of the nearest--it was Damara--was a look of such gluttoned satiety that Jirel glanced away in disgust. But they all shared it. She had seen revelers asleep after a night of drunken feasting with not half such surfeit, such almost obscene satisfaction upon their faces as Alaric's drugged company wore now. Remembering that obscure lusting she had seen in their eyes last night, she wondered what nameless satiety they had achieved in the dark after her own consciousness went out....

A footfall sounded upon stone behind her and she spun half-way round, rising on one knee and shifting the knife-hilt firmer in her fist. It was Alaric, a little unsteady on his feet, looking down upon her with a sort of half-seeing abstraction. His scarlet tunic was dusty and

rumpled as if he had slept in it all night upon the floor and had only just risen. He ran a hand through his ruffled hair and yawned, and looked down at her with a visible effort at focusing his attention.

"I'll have your horse brought up," he said, his eyes sliding indifferently away from her even as he spoke. "You may go now."

Jirel gaped up at him, her lips parting in amazement over white teeth. He was not watching her. His eyes had shifted focus and he was staring blindly into some delightful memory that had blotted out Jirel's very existence. And upon his face that look of almost obscene satiety relaxed every feature until even his sword-gash mouth hung loose.

"B-but--" Jirel blinked and clutched at the mildewed box she had risked her life for. He came back into focus for an impatient instant to say carelessly:

"Oh--that! Take the thing."

"You--you know what it is? I thought you wanted--"

He shrugged. "I could not have explained to you last night what it was I wanted of--Andred. So I said it was the treasure we sought--you could understand that. But as for that rotting little box--I don't know or care what lies inside. I've had--a better thing...." And his remembering eyes shifted again to escape hers and stare blissfully into the past.

"Then why did you--save me?"

"Save you?" He laughed. "We had no thought of you or your treasure in what we--did--last night. You have served your purpose--you may go free."

"Served--what purpose?"

Impatiently for an instant he brought himself wholly back out of his remembering dream to say:

"You did what we were holding you for--called up Andred into our power. Lucky for you that the dogs sensed what happened after you had slipped off to dare the ghost alone. And lucky for us, too. I think Andred might not have come even to take you, had he sensed our presence. Make no doubt of it--he feared us, and with good reason."

Jirel looked up at him for a long instant, a little chill creeping down her spine, before she said in a shaken whisper:

"What--are you?" And for a moment she almost hoped he would not answer. But he smiled, and the look of deformity deepened upon his face.

"A hunter of undeath," he said softly. "A drinker of undeath, when I can find it.... My people and I lust after that dark force which the ghosts of the violent dead engender, and we travel far sometimes between--feastings." His eyes escaped hers for an instant to stare gloatingly into the past. Still looking with that unfocused gaze, in a voice she had not heard before from him, he murmured, "I wonder if any man who has not tasted it could guess the utter ecstasy of drinking up the undeath of a strong ghost... a ghost as strong as Andred's... feeling that black power pouring into you in deep drafts as you suck it down--a thirst that strengthens as you drink--feel--darkness--spreading through every vein more sweetly than wine, more intoxicating.... To be drunk on undeath--a joy almost unbearable."

Watching him, Jirel was aware of a strong shudder that rose in the pit of her stomach and ran strongly and shakily along her limbs. With an effort she tore her gaze away. The obscene ecstasy that

Alaric's inward-looking eyes dwelt upon was a thing she would not see even in retrospect, through another's words and eyes. She scrambled to her feet, cradling the leather box in her arm, averting her eyes from his.

"Let me go, then," she said in a lowered voice, obscurely embarrassed as if she had looked inadvertently upon something indescribable. Alaric glanced up at her and smiled.

"You are free to go," he said, "but waste no time returning with your men for vengeance against the force we imposed on you." His smile deepened at her little twitch of acknowledgment, for that thought had been in her mind. "Nothing holds us now at Hellsgarde. We will leave today on--another search. One thing before you go--we owe you a debt for luring Andred into our power, for I think he would not have come without you. Take a warning away with you, lady."

"What is it?" Jirel's gaze flicked the man's briefly and fell again. She would not look into his eyes if she could help it. "What warning?"

"Do not open that box you carry."

And before she could get her breath to speak he had smiled at her and turned away, whistling for his men. Around her on the floor Jirel heard a rustling and a sigh as the sleepers began to stir. She stood quiet for an instant longer, staring down in bewilderment at the small box under her arm, before she turned to follow Alaric into the outer air.

Last night was a memory and a nightmare to forget. Not even the dead men still on their ghastly guard before the door could mar her triumph now.

Jirel rode back across the causeway in the strong light of morning,

moving like a rider in a mirage between blue skies and blue reflecting waters. Behind her Hellsgarde Castle was a vision swimming among the mirroring pools of the marsh. And as she rode, she remembered.

The vortex of violence out of which she had snatched this box last night--the power and terror of the thing that had treasured it so long... what lay within? Something akin to--Andred? Alaric might not know, but he had guessed.... His warning still sounded in her ears.

She rode awhile with bent brows, but presently a wicked little smile began to thin the red lips of Joiry's sovereign lady. Well... she had suffered much for Guy of Garlot, but she thought now that she would not smash in his handsome, grinning face with her sword-hilt as she had dreamed so luxuriously of doing. No... she would have a better vengeance....

She would hand him a little iron-bound leather box.

Fruit of Knowledge

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It was the first Sabbath. Down the open glades of Eden a breeze stirred softly. Nothing else in sight moved except a small winged head that fluttered, yawning, across the glade and vanished among leaves that drew back to receive it. The air quivered behind it like a wake left in water of incomparable clarity. From far away and far above a faint drift of singing echoed, "Hosannah... hosannah... hosannah--" The seraphim were singing about the Throne.

A pool at the edge of the glade gave back light and color like a great, dim jewel. It gave back reflections, too. The woman who bent over it had just discovered that. She was leaning above the water until her cloudy dark hair almost dipped into the surface. There was a curious shadow all about her, like a thin garment which did not quite conceal how lovely she was, and though no breeze stirred just now, that shadow garment moved uneasily upon her and her hair lifted a little as if upon a breeze that did not blow.

She was so quiet that a passing cherub-head paused above the water to look, too, hanging like a hummingbird motionless over its own reflection in the pool.

"Pretty!" approved the cherub in a small, piping voice. "New here, aren't you?"

The woman looked up with a slow smile, putting back the veil of her hair.

"Yes, I am," she answered softly. Her voice did not sound quite sure of itself. She had never spoken aloud before until this moment.

"You'll like the Garden," said the cherub in a slightly patronizing tone, giving his rainbow wings a shake. "Anything I can do for you? I'm not busy just now. Be glad to show you around."

"Thank you," smiled the woman, her voice sounding a little more confident. "I'll find my way."

The cherub shrugged his colored wings. "Just as you say. By the way, I suppose they warned you about the Tree?"

The woman glanced up at him rather quickly, her shadowy eyes narrowing.

"The Tree? Is there danger?"

"Oh, no. You mustn't touch it, that's all. It's the one in the middle of the Garden, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil--you can't miss it. I saw the Man looking at it yesterday for quite a while. That reminds me, have you met the Man?"

The woman bent her head so that the hair swung forward to veil her face. From behind it, in a voice that sounded as if she might be smiling, she said:

"He's waiting for me now."

"Oh?" said the cherub, impressed. "Well, you'll find him over by the orange grove east of the Tree. He's resting. It's the Day of Rest, you know." The cherub tilted an intimate eyebrow heavenward and added: "He's resting, too. Hear the singing? He made the Man only yesterday, right out of this very earth you're standing on. We were all

watching. It was wonderful-- Afterward, He called the man Adam, and then Adam named the animals-- By the way, what's your name?"

The woman smiled down at her own veiled reflection in the water. After a moment-- "Lilith," she said.

The cherub stared, his eyes widening into two blue circles of surprise. He was speechless for an instant. Then he pursed his pink mouth to whistle softly.

"Why," he stammered, "you... you're the Queen of Air and Darkness!"

Smiling up at him from the corners of her eyes, the woman nodded. The cherub stared at her big-eyed for a moment longer, too overcome for speech. Then, suddenly, he beat his rainbow pinions together and darted off through the trees without another word, the translucent air rippling in a lazy, half-visible wake behind him. Lilith looked after him with a shadowy smile on her face. He was going to warn Adam. The smile deepened. Let him.

Lilith turned for one last glance into the mirror of the pool at the strange new shape she had just put on. It was the newest thing in creation--not even God knew about it. And rather surprisingly, she thought she was going to like it. She did not feel nearly as stifled and heavy as she had expected to feel, and there was something distinctly pleasant in the softness of the breeze pouring caressingly about her body, the fragrance of springtime sweet in her nostrils, the grass under her bare feet. The Garden was beautiful with a beauty she had not realized until she saw it through human eyes. Everything she saw through them, indeed, was curiously different now. Here in this flesh all her faculties seemed refocused, as if she, who had always seen with such crystal clarity, now looked through rainbows at everything she saw. But it was a pleasant refocusing. She wished

she had longer to enjoy her tenancy in this five-sensed flesh she shared with Adam.

But she had very little time. She glanced up toward the bright, unchanging glory above the trees as if she could pierce the floor of heaven and see God resting on the unimaginable splendor of the Throne while the seraphim chanted in long, shining rows about him. At any moment he might stir and lean forward over Eden, looking down. Lilith instinctively shrugged her shadowy garment closer about her. If he did not look too closely, he might not pierce that shadow. But if he did-- A little thrill of excitement, like forked lightning, went through the strange new flesh she wore. She liked danger.

She bent over the pool for one last look at herself, and the pool was a great, dim eye looking back at her, almost sentient, almost aware of her. This was a living Garden. The translucent air quivered with a rhythmic pulsing through the trees; the ground was resilient under her feet; vines drew back to let her pass beneath them. Lilith, turning away through the swimming air after the cherub, puzzled a little as she walked through the parting trees. The relation was very close between flesh and earth--perhaps her body was so responsive to the beauty of the Garden because it aped so closely flesh that had been a part of the Garden yesterday. And if even she felt that kinship, what must Adam feel, who was himself earth only yesterday?

The Garden was like a vast, half-sentient entity all around her, pulsing subtly with the pulse of the lucent air. Had God drawn from this immense and throbbing fecundity all the life which peopled Eden? Was Adam merely an extension of it, a focus and intensification of the same life which pulsed through the Garden? Creation was too new; she could only guess.

She thought, too, of the Tree of Knowledge as she walked smoothly through the trees. That Tree, tempting and forbidden. Why? Was

God testing Man somehow? Was Man then, not quite finished, after all? Was there any flaw in Eden? Suddenly she knew that there must be. Her very presence here was proof of it, for she, above all others, had no right to intrude into this magical closed sphere which was God's greatest work. Yet here she walked through the heart of it, and not even God knew, yet-- Liliith slanted a smile up through the leaves toward the choruses of the seraphim whose singing swelled and sank and swelled again, unutterably sweet high above the trees. The animals watched her pass with wide, bewildered eyes, somehow not quite at ease, although no such thing as fear had yet stirred through the Garden. Liliith glanced at them curiously as she passed. They were pretty things. She liked Eden.

Presently a swooning fragrance came drifting to her through the trees, almost too sweet to enjoy, and she heard a small voice piping excitedly: "Liliith... Air and Darkness-- He won't like it! Michael ought to know--"

Liith smiled and stepped clear of the trees into the full, soft glow of Eden's sun. It did not touch the shadow that dimly veiled the pale contours of this newest shape in Eden. Once or twice that intangible breeze lifted her hair in a great, dim cloud about her, though no leaves moved. She stood quiet, staring across the glade, and as she stared she felt the first small tremor of distrust in this new flesh she wore.

For on a grassy bank in the sunlight, under the blossoming orange trees, lay Adam. And the trees and the flowers of Eden had seemed beautiful to the eyes of this body Liliith wore, and the breezes and the perfumes had delighted it--but here was flawless perfection newly shaped out of the warm red earth of Eden into the image of its Maker, and the sight of him frightened Liliith because it pleased her so. She did not trust a beauty that brought her to a standstill under the trees, not quite certain why she had stopped.

He sprawled in long-limbed magnificence on the grass, laughing up at the cherub with his curly yellow head thrown back. Every line of him and every motion had a splendid male beauty as perfect as Omnipotence could make it. Though he wore no clothing he was no more naked than she, for there was a curious glow all about him, a garment of subtle glory that clothed him as if with an all-enveloping halo.

The cherub danced excitedly up and down in the air above him, shrilling:

"She shouldn't be here! You know she shouldn't! She's evil, that's what she is! God won't like it! She--" Then above Adam's head he caught Lilith's eye, gulped a time or two, piped one last admonishing, "Better watch out!" and fluttered away among the leaves, looking back over one wing as he flew.

Adam's gaze followed the cherub's. The laughter faded from his face and he got up slowly, the long, smooth muscles sliding beautifully under his garment of subtle glory as he moved. He was utter perfection in everything he did, flawless, new-made at the hands of God. He came toward her slowly, a shining wonder on his face.

Lilith stared at him distrustfully. The other glories of the Garden had pleased her abstractly, in a way that left her mistress of herself. But here was something she did not understand at all. The eternal Lilith looked out, bewildered, through the eyes of a body that found something strange and wonderful in Adam. She laid a hand on the upper part of that body which rose and fell with her breathing, and felt something beating strongly beneath the smooth, curved surface of the stuff called flesh.

Adam came toward her slowly. They met in the middle of the glade,

and for a long moment neither spoke. Then Adam said in a marveling voice, resonant and deep:

"You... you're just as I knew you'd be-- I knew you'd be somewhere, if I could only find you. Where were you hiding?"

With an effort Lilith mastered this odd, swimming warmth in her which she did not understand. After all, he was nothing but a certain limited awareness housed in newly shaped flesh, and it made no real difference at all what shape that flesh wore. Her business was too dangerous for her to linger here admiring him because by some accident he was pleasing to the eyes of her newly acquired body. She made her voice like honey in her throat and looked up at him under her lashes, crooning:

"I wasn't here at all, until you thought of me."

"Until I--" Adam's golden brows met.

"God made you in His image," said Lilith, fluttering the lashes. "There's so much of God in you still--didn't you know you could create, too, if you desired strongly enough?"

She remembered that deep need of his pulsing out and out in great, demanding waves from the Garden, and how it had seemed a call addressed to her alone. She had delighted as she yielded to it, deliberately subordinating her will to the will of the unseen caller in the Garden. She had let it draw her down out of the swimming void, let it mold flesh around her in the shape it chose, until all her being was incased in the strange, soft, yielding substance which was proving so treacherously responsive to the things she was encountering in Eden.

Adam shook his curly head uncomprehendingly. "You weren't here. I

couldn't find you," he repeated, as if he had not heard her. "I watched all day among the animals, and they were all in twos but Man. I knew you must be somewhere. I knew just how you'd look. I thought I'd call you Eve when I found you--Eve, the Mother of All Living. Do you like it?"

"It's a good name," murmured Lilith, coming nearer to him, "but not for me. I'm Lilith, who came out of the dark because you needed me." She smiled a heady smile at him, and the shadowy garment drew thin across her shoulders as she lifted her arms. Adam seemed a little uncertain about what to do with his own arms as she clasped her hands behind his neck and tiptoed a little, lifting her face.

"Lilith?" he echoed in a bemused voice. "I like the sound. What does it mean?"

"Never mind," she crooned in her sweetest voice. "I came because you wanted me." And then, in a murmur: "Bend your head, Adam. I want to show you something--"

It was the first kiss in Eden. When it was over, Lilith opened her eyes and looked up at Adam aghast, so deeply moved by the pleasantness of that kiss that she could scarcely remember the purpose that had prompted it. Adam blinked dizzily down at her. He had found what to do with his arms. He stammered, still in that bemused voice:

"Thank God, you did come! I wish He could have sent you sooner. We--"

Lilith recovered herself enough to murmur gently: "Don't you understand, dear? God didn't send me. It was you, yourself, waiting and wanting me, that let me take shape out of... never mind... and

come to you in the body you pictured for me, because I knew what wonderful things we could accomplish here in Eden, together. You're God's own image, and you have greater powers than you know, Adam." The tremendous idea that had come to her in the ether when she first heard his soundless call glowed in her voice. "There's no limit to what we could do here, together! Greater things than even God ever dreamed--"

"You're so pretty," interrupted Adam, smiling down at her with his disarming, empty smile. "I'm so glad you came--"

Lilith let the rest of her eagerness run out in a long sigh. It was no use trying to talk to him now. He was too new. Powerful with a godlike power, yes, but unaware of it--unaware even of himself as an individual being. He had not tasted the Fruit of Knowledge and his innocence was as flawless as his beauty. Nothing was in his mind, or could be, that God had not put there at his shaping from the warm earth of Eden.

And perhaps it was best, after all. Adam was too close to godhood to see eye to eye with her in all she might want to do. If he never tasted knowledge, then he would ask no questions--and so he must never touch the Tree.

The Tree-- It reminded her that Eden was still a testing ground, not a finished creation. She thought she knew now what the flaw in man had been which made it possible for Lilith, of all the creatures of ether, to stand here at the very focus of all the power and beauty and innocence in Eden. Lilith, who was evil incarnate and knew it very well. God had made Adam incomplete, and not, perhaps, realized the flaw. And out of Adam's need Adam himself had created woman--who was not complete either. Lilith realized it suddenly, and began to understand the depth of her reaction to this magnificent creature who still held her in his arms.

There was an idea somewhere back of all this which was immensely important, but her mind would not pursue it. Her mind kept sliding off the question to dwell cloudily on the Man upon whose shoulder she was leaning. What curious stuff this flesh was! While she wore it, not even the absorbing question of God's purpose, not even her own peril here, could quite obliterate the knowledge of Adam's presence, his arm about her. Values had changed in a frightening way, and the most frightening thing of all was that she did not care. She laid her head back on his shoulder and inhaled the honeyed perfume of the orange blossoms, futilely reminding herself that she was dangerously wasting time. At any moment God might look down and see her, and there was so much to be done before that happened. She must master this delicious fogging of the senses whenever Adam's arm tightened about her. The Garden must be fortified, and she must begin now.

Sighing, she laced her fingers through Adam's and crooned in the softest voice:

"I want to see the Garden. Won't you show it to me?"

His voice was warm as he answered:

"I want to! I hoped you'd ask me that. It's such a wonderful place."

A cherub fluttered across the valley as they strolled eastward, and paused on beating wings to frown down at them.

"Wait till He looks down," he piped. "Just wait, that's all!" Adam laughed, and the cherub clucked disapprovingly and fluttered off, shaking his head.

Lilith, leaning on Adam's shoulder, laughed, too. She was glad that he could not understand the cherub's warnings, deaf in the perfection

of his innocence. So long as she could prevent it he would never taste that Fruit. The knowledge of evil was not in him and it must never be. For she was herself, as she realized well, the essence of abstract evil as opposed to abstract good--balancing it, making it possible. Her part was as necessary as God's in the scheme of creation, for light cannot exist without dark, nor positive without negative, nor good without evil.

Yet she did not feel in the least evil just now. There was no antagonism at all between her negation and the strong positive innocence of the man beside her.

"Look," said Adam, sweeping a long-armed gesture. A low hillside lay before them, starry with flowers except for a scar in its side where the raw, bare earth of Eden showed through. The scar was already healing over with a faint mist of green. "That's where I was made," said Adam softly. "Right out of that hillside. Does it seem rather... rather wonderful to you, Lilith?"

"If it does to you," she crooned, and meant it. "Why?"

"The animals don't seem to understand. I hoped you would. It's as if the... the whole Garden were part of me. If there are other men, do you suppose they'll love the earth like this, Lilith, for its own sake? Do you think they'll have this same feeling about the place where they were born? Will one certain hill or valley be almost one flesh with theirs, so that they'd sicken away from it and fight and die if they had to, to keep it--as I think I would? Do you feel it, too?"

The air went pulsing past them, sweet with the music of the seraphim, while Lilith looked out over the valley that had brought Adam to birth. She was trying hard, but she could not quite grasp that passionate identification with the earth of Eden which beat like blood through Adam's veins.

"Eden is you," she murmured. "I can understand that. You mustn't ever leave it."

"Leave it?" laughed Adam. "Where else is there? Eden belongs to us forever--and you belong to me."

Lilith let herself relax delightfully against his shoulder, knowing suddenly that she loved this irresponsible, dangerous flesh even while she distrusted it. And-- Something was wrong. The sudden awareness of it chilled her and she glanced uneasily about, but it was several minutes before her flesh-bound senses located the wrongness. Then she put her head back and stared up through the trees with puckered brows.

"What is it?" Adam smiled down at her. "Angels? They go over quite often, you know."

Lilith did not answer. She was listening hard. Until now all Eden had echoed faintly and sweetly with the chanting of seraphim about the Throne. But now the sounds that sifted down through the bright, translucent air were not carols of praise. There was trouble in heaven. She could hear faraway shouts in great, ringing, golden voices from infinitely high above, the clash and hiss of flaming swords, and now and again a crash as if part of the very walls of heaven had crumbled inward under some unimaginable onslaught.

It was hard to believe--but there was war in heaven.

A wave of relief went delightfully through Lilith. Good--let them fight. She smiled to herself and snuggled closer to Adam's side. The trouble, whatever it might be, would keep God's attention distracted a while longer from what went on in Eden, and she was devoutly grateful for that. She needed this respite. She had awhile longer, then, to accustom herself to the vagaries of this strange body, and to

the strange reaction Adam was causing, before the war was over in heaven and war began in Eden between Lilith and God.

A shudder of terror and anticipation went over her again as she thought of that. She was not sure God could destroy her if He would, for she was a creature of the darkness beyond His light and her existence was necessary to the structure he was rearing in heaven and upon earth. Without the existence of such as Lilith, the balance of creation might tip over. No, God would not--perhaps could not--destroy her, but He could punish very terribly.

This flesh, for instance. It was so soft, so perishable. She was aware of a definite cleavage between the mind and the body that housed it. Perhaps God had been wise in choosing this fragile container instead of some imperishable substance into which to pour all the innocence, the power that was Adam. It was dangerous to trust such power in an independent body--as Lilith meant to prove to God if her plan went well. But it was no part of that plan--now--to have an angered God destroy His fleshly image.

She must think of some way to prevent it. Presently she would waken out of this warm, delightful fog that persisted so long as Adam's arm was about her, but there was no hurry yet. Not while war raged in heaven. She had never known a mood like this before, when cloudy emotions moved like smoke through her mind and nothing in creation had real significance except this magnificent male upon whose shoulder she leaned.

Then Adam looked down at her and smiled, and all the noises of war above blanked out as if they had never been. The Garden, half sentient, stirred uneasily from grass roots to treetops in response to those ringing battle shouts from above; but the Man and the woman did not even hear.

Time was nothing. Imperceptibly it passed, and presently a soft green twilight deepened over Eden. Adam and Lilith paused after a while on a mossy bank above a stream that tinkled over stones. Sitting with her head on Adam's shoulder and listening to the sound of the water, Lilith remembered how lightly life was rooted in this flesh of theirs.

"Adam," she murmured, "awhile ago you mentioned dying. Do you know about death?"

"Death?" said Adam comfortably. "I don't remember. I think I never heard of it."

"I hope," she said, "that you never will. It would mean leaving, Eden, you know."

His arm went rigid around her. "I couldn't! I wouldn't!"

"You're not immortal, dear. It could happen, unless--"

"Unless what? Tell me!"

"If there were a Tree of Life," she said slowly, measuring her words, "a Tree whose fruit would give you immortality as the fruit of that other Tree would give you knowledge, then I think not even God could drive you out of Eden."

"A Tree of Life--" he echoed softly. "What would it be like?"

Lilith closed her eyes. "A dark Tree, I think," she answered, almost in a whisper. "Dark limbs, dark leaves--pale, shining fruit hanging among them like lanterns. Can't you see it?"

Adam was silent. She glanced up at him. His eyes were shut and a look of intense longing was on his face in the twilight. There was

silence about them for a long while. Presently she felt the tenseness of his body slacken beside her. He breathed out in a long sigh.

"I think there is a Tree of Life," he said. "I think it's in the center of the Garden near the other Tree. I'm sure it's there. The fruit are pale, just as you thought. They send out a light like moonlight in the dark. Tomorrow we'll taste them."

And Lilith relaxed against his shoulder with a sigh of her own. Tomorrow he would be immortal, like herself. She listened anxiously, and still heard the faraway battle cries of the seraphim echoing through the sky. War in heaven and peace on earth-- Through the deepening twilight of Eden no sound came except the music of the water and, somewhere off through the trees, a crooning lullaby in a tiny, piping voice as some cherub sang himself to sleep. Somewhere nearer other small voices squabbled drowsily a while, then fell silent. The most delightful lassitude was stealing over Lilith's body. She turned her cheek against Adam's shoulder and felt that cloudy fogging of the senses which she was coming to know so well--close like water above her head.

And the evening and the morning were the eighth day.

Lilith woke first. Birds were singing gloriously, and as she lay there on Adam's shoulder a cherub flashed across the stream on dazzling wings, caroling at the top of his piping voice. He did not see them. The pleasant delirium of a spring morning filled the whole waking Garden, and Lilith sat up with a smile. Adam scarcely stirred. Lilith looked down at him with a glow of tenderness that alarmed her. She was coming to identify herself with Adam, as Adam was one with the Garden--this flesh was a treacherous thing.

Suddenly, blindingly, she knew that. Terror of what it was doing to the entity which was Lilith rolled over her in a great wave, and without

thinking, almost without realizing what she did, she sprang up and out of the flesh that was betraying her. Up, up through the crystal morning she sprang, impalpable as the air around her. Up and up until the Adam that flesh had valued too highly was invisible, and the very treetops that hid him were a feathery green blur and she could see the walls that closed the Garden in, the rivers running out of it like four great blades of silver in the morning sun.

Beside the sleeping Adam nothing was left but the faintest blur of a woman shape, wrapped in shadow that made it almost invisible against the moss. The eye could scarcely have made it out there under the trees.

Lilith swam delightfully through the bright, still emptiness of the early morning. From here she could hear quite clearly the strong hosannahs of the seraphim pouring out in mighty golden choruses over the jasper walls. Whatever trouble had raged in heaven yesterday, today it was resolved. She scarcely troubled her mind about it.

She was free--free of the flesh and the terrifying weakness that had gone with it. She could see clearly now, no longer deluded by the distortions of value that had made life in that flesh so confusing. Her thoughts were not colored by it any more. Adam was nothing but a superb vessel now, brimmed with the power of God. Her perspective had been too warped down there in Eden to realize how little that magnificent body of his mattered in comparison to the power inherent in it.

She let the cold, clear ether bathe her of illusions while the timeless time of the void swam motionless around her. She had been in greater danger than she knew; it had taken this morning dip in the luminous heights to cleanse her mind of Adam. Refreshed, fortified against that perilous weakness, she could return now and take up

her mission again. And she must do it quickly, before God noticed her. Or was he watching already?

She swooped luxuriantly in a long, airy curve and plummeted toward Eden.

Adam still slept timelessly upon the moss. Lilith dropped closer, shrugging herself together in anticipation of entering and filling out into life the body she had thrown off. And then--then a shock like the shock of lightning jolted her in midair until the Garden reeled beneath her. For where she had left only the faint, ephemeral husk of a woman beside Adam, a woman of firm, pale flesh lay now, asleep on the Man's shoulder. Golden hair spilled in a long skein across the moss, and the woman's head moved a little to the rhythm of Adam's breathing.

Lilith recovered herself and hovered nearer, incandescent with such jealousy and rage as she had never dreamed could touch her. The woman was clothed in a softly glowing halo as Adam was clothed. But it was Lilith's own shape she wore beneath that halo.

A sick dismay shook Lilith bodilessly in the air. God had been watching, then--waiting, perhaps, to strike. He had been here--it might have been no longer than a moment ago. She knew it by the very silence of the place. Everything was still hushed and awed by the recent Presence. God had passed by, and God had seen that tenant-less garment of flesh she had cast off to swim in the ether, and God had known her whole scheme in one flash of His all-seeing eye.

He had taken the flesh she had worn, then, and used it for His own purposes--her precious, responsive flesh that had glowed at the touch of Adam's hand belonged now to another woman, slept in her place on Adam's shoulder. Lilith shook with intolerable emotion at

the thought of it. She would not-- Adam was waking. Lilith hovered closer, watching jealously as he yawned, blinked, smiled, turned his curly head to look down at the woman beside him. Then he sat up so abruptly that the golden creature at his side cried out in a sweet, high voice and opened eyes bluer than a cherub's to stare at him reproachfully. Lilith, hating her, still saw that she had beauty of a sort comparable to Adam's, exquisite, brimming with the glorious emptiness of utter innocence. There was a roundness and an appealing softness to her that was new in Eden, but the shape she wore was Lilith's and none other.

Adam stared down at her in amazement.

"L-Lilith--" he stammered. "Who are you? Where's Lilith? I--"

"Who is Lilith?" demanded the golden girl in a soft, hurt voice, sitting up and pushing the glowing hair back with both hands in a lovely, smooth gesture. "I don't know. I can't remember--" She let the words die and stared about the Garden with a blue gaze luminous with wonder. Then the eyes came back to Adam and she smiled very sweetly.

Adam had put a hand to his side, a pucker of the first pain in Eden drawing his golden brows together. For no reason at all he was remembering the scarred bank from which the earth that shaped him had been taken. He opened his mouth to speak.

And then out of the glow of the morning a vast, bodiless Voice spoke quietly.

"I have taken a rib from your side, Man," said the Voice. The whole glade trembled at the sound; the brook ceased its tinkling, the leaves stood still upon the trees. Not a bird sang. Filling the whole morning, the whole Garden, the Voice went on: "Out of the flesh of your flesh I

have made a helpmate and a wife for you. Forsaking all others, cleave unto her. Forsaking all others--"

The Voice ceased not suddenly, but by echoing degrees that made the leaves shiver upon the trees in rhythm to its fading syllables, "Forsaking all others... all others... all others--"

And then it was as if a light ceased to glow in the Garden which, until it went out, no one had perceived. The air dimmed a little, and thickened and dulled, so that one blinked in the aftermath when the presence of God was withdrawn.

The woman drew closer to Adam's side, putting out uncertain hands to him, frightened by the quiet, tremendous Voice and the silence of the Garden. Adam dropped an arm automatically about her, stilling her fright against his shoulder. He bent his head as the Voice ceased to echo through the shaken air.

"Yes, Lord," he said obediently. There was an instant more of silence everywhere. Then timidly the brook sent a tentative ripple of sound into the air, a bird piped once, a breeze began to blow. God had withdrawn.

Bodiless, trembling with emotions she had no name for, Liliti watched the Man and the woman alone on the moss bank she had shared last night with Adam. He looked down at the frightened girl huddling against him.

"I suppose you're Eve," he said, a certain gentleness in his voice that made Liliti writhe.

"If you say so," murmured the girl, glancing up at him under a flutter of lashes. Liliti hated him. Over her fair head Adam looked out across the quiet glade.

"Lilith?" he said. "Lilith--"

A warm rush of answer focused all Lilith's being into one responding cry.

"Yes, Adam... yes! I'm here!"

He might have heard her bodiless reply, it was so passionate an answer to his call, but at that instant Eve said with childish petulance:

"Who is this Lilith, Adam? Why do you keep calling her? Won't I do?"

Adam looked down uncertainly. While he hesitated, Eve deliberately snuggled against him with a warm little wriggle that was Lilith's alone. By that, if by no other sign, Lilith knew it was her very flesh God had taken to mold this pale girl from Adam's rib, using the same pattern which Adam had designed for Lilith. Eve wore it now, and in that shape knew, without learning them, all the subtle tricks that Lilith's age-old wisdom had evolved during the brief while she dwelt in the body. Lilith's lost flesh, Lilith's delightful use of it, Lilith's Adam--all were Eve's now.

Fury and wild despair and an intolerable ache that made the world turn black around her blinded Lilith to the two beneath the tree. She could not bear to watch them any longer. With a soundless wail of despair she turned and flung herself up again into the limitless heights above Eden.

But this time the ether was no anodyne for her grief. It had been no true anodyne before, she knew now. For a disease was upon her that had its seed, perhaps, in the flesh she wore briefly--but too long. God had made Adam incomplete, and Adam to assuage his need had flung out a net to trap some unwary creature for his own. Shame burned in her. The Queen of Air and Darkness, like some mindless

elemental, had fallen into his trap; he had used her as she had meant to use him. She was a part of him, trapped in the flesh that was incomplete without him, and her need for him was so deep that she could not escape, even though that body was no longer hers. The roots of her disease had been in the flesh, but the virulence had spread into the very essence of the being which was Lilith and no bath in the deeps of space could cleanse her now. In the flesh or out of it, on earth or in ether, an insatiable need was upon her that could never be slaked. And a dreadful suspicion was taking shape in her mind. Adam in his innocence could never have planned this. Had God known, all along? Had it been no error, after all, that Adam was created incomplete? And was this a punishment designed by God for tampering with his plan? Suddenly she thought that it must be. There would be no awe-inspiring struggle between light and dark such as she had half expected when God recognized her presence. There would be no struggle at all. She was vanquished, judged and punished all at a blow. No glory was in it, only this unbearable longing, a spiritual hunger more insatiable than any hunger the flesh could feel for the man she would never have again. She clove the airy heights above Eden for what might have been a thousand years, or a moment, had time existed in the void, knowing only that Adam was lost to her forever.

Forever? She writhed around in mid-ether, checking the wild, aimless upward flight. Forever? Adam still looked out across the Garden and called her name, even while he held that pale usurper in his arms. Perhaps God had not realized the strength of the strange unity between the man and the first woman in Eden. Perhaps God had not thought that she would fight. Perhaps there was a chance left, after all-- Downward through the luminous gulfs she plunged, down and down until Eden expanded like a bubble beneath her and the strong choruses of the seraphim were sweet again above the Garden. Adam and Eve were still beside the brook where she had

left them. Eve on a rock was splashing her small feet and flashing blue-eyed glances over her shoulder that made Adam smile when he met them. Lilith hated her.

"Adam!" squealed Eve as the plunging Lilith came into hearing. "Look out--I'm slipping! Catch me! Quick!" It was the same croon Lilith had put into the throat of the body she had lost. Remembering how roundly and softly it had come swelling up in her throat, she writhed with a vitriolic helplessness that made the Garden dance in waves like heat around her.

"Catch me!" cried Eve again in the most appealing voice in the world. Adam sprang to clasp her as she slid. She threw both pale arms about his neck and crowed with laughter so infectious that two passing cherubs paused in midair to rock with answering mirth and beat each other over the shoulders with their wings.

"Adam... Adam... Adam--" wailed Lilith voicelessly. It was a silent wail, but all her heartbreak and despair and intolerable longing went into it, and above Eve's golden head Adam looked up, the laughter dying on his face. "Adam!" cried Lilith again. And this time he heard.

But he did not answer directly. Association with women was beginning to teach him tact. Instead he beckoned to the reeling cherubs. Rosy with mirth, they fluttered nearer. Eve looked up in big-eyed surprise as the plump little heads balanced on rainbow wings swooped laughing toward her and poised to await Adam's pleasure.

"These are a couple of our cherubs," said Adam. "Dan and Bethuel, from over toward the Tree. They have a nest there. Tell her about the Tree, will you, boys? Eve dear, I'll be getting you some fruit for breakfast. Wait for me here."

She obeyed with only a wistful glance after him as the cherubs burst

into eager chatter, squabbling a little as they spoke.

"Well, there's this Tree in the middle of the Garden--"

"Tell her about the Fruit, Dan. You mustn't--"

"Yes, you mustn't touch--"

"No, that's not right, Dan. Michael says you can touch it, you just can't eat--"

"Don't interrupt me! Now it's like this. You see, there's a Tree--"

Adam went slowly off down to the brook. A lie had never yet been spoken in Eden. He was hunting fruit. But Lilith saw him searching the dappled spaces between the trees, too, a certain wistfulness on his face, and she came down with a rustle of invisibility through the leaves.

"Adam... Adam!"

"Lilith! Where are you?"

With a tremendous effort Lilith focused her whole being into an intensity so strong that although she remained bodiless, voiceless, intangible, yet the strength of her desire was enough to make Adam hear her dimly, see her remotely in a wavering outline against the leaves, in the shape he had created for her. She held it with difficulty, shimmering before his eyes.

"Lilith!" he cried, and reached her in two long strides, putting out his arms. She leaned into them. But the muscular, light-sheathed arms closed about her and through her and met in empty air.

She called his name miserably, quivering against him through all her

bodiless body. But she could feel him no more than he could touch her, and the old ache she had known in mid-ether, came back with a rush. Even here in his arms, then, she was forbidden to touch the Man. She could never be more than a wraith of the air to him, while Eve--while Eve, in her stolen body-- "Adam!" cried Lilith again. "You were mine first! Can you hear me? Adam, you could bring me back if you tried! You did it once--you could again. Try, try!"

He stared down at her dim face, the flowers on the hillside beyond visible through it.

"What's wrong, Lilith? I can hardly see you!"

"You wanted me once badly enough to bring me out of nowhere into the flesh," she cried desperately. "Adam, Adam--want me again!"

He stared down at her. "I do," he said, his voice unexpectedly shaken. And then, more strongly, "Come back, Lilith! What's happened to you? Come back!"

Lilith closed her eyes, feeling reality pour marvelously along her bodiless limbs. Faintly now she could feel grass underfoot, Adam's chest against her anxious hands; his arms were around her and in his embrace she was taking shape out of nothingness, summoned into flesh again by the godhood in this image of God. And then-- "Adam... Adam!" Eve's sweet, clear voice rang lightly among the leaves. "Adam, where are you? I want to go look at the Tree, Adam. Where are you, dear?"

"Hurry!" urged Lilith desperately, beating her half-tangible hands against his chest.

Adam's arms loosed a little about her. He glanced across his shoulder, his handsome, empty face clouded. He was remembering.

"Forsaking all others--" he murmured, in a voice not entirely his own. Lilith shuddered a little against him, recognizing the timbre of that Voice which had spoken in the silence. "Forsaking all others--" God had said that. "Forsaking all others but Eve--"

His arms dropped from about Lilith. "I.. I'll... will you wait for me?" he said hesitantly, stepping back from her half-real shape, lovely and shadow-veiled under the shadow of the trees. "I'll be back--"

"Adam!" called Eve again, nearer and very sweetly. "Adam, I'm lost! Adam! Adam, where are you?"

"Coming," said Adam. He looked once more at Lilith, a long look. Then he turned and ran lightly off through trees that parted to receive him, the glow of his half-divinity shining upon the leaves as he passed. Lilith watched the beautiful, light-glowing figure as far as she could see it.

Then she put her half-real hands to her face and her knees loosened beneath her and she doubled down in a heap upon the grass, her shadowy hair billowing out around her on a breeze that blew from nowhere, not touching the leaves. She was half-flesh now. She had tears. She found a certain relief in the discovery that she could weep.

The next sound she heard--it seemed a long while after--was a faint hiss. Cloaked in the tented shadow of her hair, she considered it a while, hiccupping now and then with receding sobs. Presently she looked up. Then she gasped and got to her feet with the effortless ease of the half-material.

The serpent looked at her sidewise out of slanted eyes, grinning. In the green gloom under the trees he was so handsome that even she, who had seen Adam, was aware of a little thrill of admiration. In those days the serpent went upright like a man, nor was he exactly

non-human in shape, but his beauty was as different from man's as day is from night. He was lithe and gorgeously scaled and by any standards a supremely handsome, supremely male creature.

All about him in shadowy outline a radiance stood out that was vaguely an angel shape, winged, tremendous. It invested the serpent body with a glow that was not its own. Out of that celestial radiance the serpent said in a cool voice:

"The Queen of Air and Darkness! I didn't expect you here. What are you doing in that body?"

Lilith collected herself, hiccupped once more and stood up, the cloudy hair moving uneasily about her. She said with a grim composure:

"The same thing I suspect you're doing in that one, only you'll have to do better if you want to deceive anybody. What brings you to Eden--Lucifer?"

The serpent glanced down at himself and sent one or two long, sliding ripples gliding along his iridescent body. The angel shape that hung in the air about him gradually faded, and the beauty deepened as it focused itself more strongly in the flesh he wore. After a moment he glanced up.

"How's that--better? Oh, I came down for a purpose. I have--business with Adam." His cool voice took on a note of grimness. "You may have heard a little trouble in heaven yesterday. That was me."

"Trouble?" echoed Lilith. She had almost forgotten the sounds of combat and the great battle cries of the seraphim in the depths of her own grief.

"It was a fine fight while it lasted," Lucifer grinned. "Blood running like water down the golden streets! I tell you, it was a relief to hear something beside 'hosannah'in heaven for a change! Well"--he shrugged--"they won. Too many of them were fools and stood by Jehovah. But we gave them a good fight, and we took part of the jasper walls with us when they hurled us over." He gave her a satisfied nod. "God won, but he'll think twice before He insults me again."

"Insults you?" echoed Lilith. "How?"

Lucifer drew himself up to a magnificent height. Radiance glowed along his scaled and gleaming body. "God made me of fire! Shall I bow down before this... this lump of clay they call Adam? He may be good enough for the other angels to worship when God points a finger, but he isn't good enough for me!"

"Is that why you're here?"

"Isn't it reason enough? I have a quarrel with this Adam!"

"You couldn't touch him," said Lilith desperately. "He's God's image, and remember, you were no match for God."

Lucifer stretched his magnificent, gleaming height and glared down at her.

"The creature's made of clay. He must have a flaw somewhere. What is it? You know him."

Lilith looked up at him speechless, a great excitement beginning to swell so tremendously in her that her half-formed body could hardly contain it. There was a chance! God himself had put a weapon straight into her hands!

"Yes, there is a flaw," she said. "I'll tell you... if you'll give me a promise."

"All right, I give it," said Lucifer carelessly. "Tell me."

She hesitated, choosing her words. "Your feud isn't with Adam. He never asked you to worship him. God did that. Your quarrel is with God, not Adam. The Man himself you can't touch, but God had given him a... a wife," she choked when she said it. "I think there's a weakness in her, and through her you could spoil God's plan. But you must spare the Man--for me."

Lucifer whistled soundlessly, lifting his brows. "Oh--?"

"I saw him first," said Lilith defensively. "I want him."

The serpent looked at her narrowly. "Why? No... never mind. I won't quarrel with you. I may have an idea to suggest to you later, if a plan of mine works out. You and I together could make quite a thing of hell."

Lilith winced a little. She and Adam together had had great prospects, once, too. Perhaps they still had--if God were not listening.

"You promise not to touch him, then?"

"Yes, I won't hurt your precious clod. You're right--my quarrel's with God, not that animated lump of clay named Adam. What's the secret?"

"Eden," said Lilith slowly, "is a testing ground. There are flaws in it, there must be, or neither of us would be here. God planted a Tree in the middle of the Garden and forbade anyone to touch it. That's the test... I think I see it now. It's a test of obedience. God doesn't trust

man—he made him too strong. The Tree is the knowledge of Good and Evil, and God doesn't dare let that knowledge exist in the Garden, because he controls Man only by Man's ignorance of his own power. If either of them eats, then God will have to destroy that one quickly. You tempt the woman to eat, Lucifer, and leave Adam and Eden to me!"

The serpent eyed her sidelong. He laughed.

"If either of them fails in this test you're talking about, then God will know neither can be trusted, won't he? He'll know their present form's imperfect, and he'll destroy them both and work out some other plan for the world."

Lilith drew a deep breath. Excitement was rising like a tide in her, and the wind from nowhere swirled the dark hair in a cloud about her shoulders.

"Let him try!" she cried exultantly. "I can save Adam. God made a mistake when he put such power in the Garden. He shouldn't have left it living, half-conscious of itself. He shouldn't have let Adam know how close he is to the earth he was taken from. Adam and the Garden are one flesh, and the power of God is in them both. God can't destroy one without the other, and together they are very strong—
- If they defied God together, and I helped them—"

Lucifer looked at her, a trace of compassion on his handsome, reptilian face.

"God defeated me," he reminded her. "Do you think He couldn't you?"

She gave him a proud glance. "I am the Queen of Air and Darkness. I have secrets of my own, and powers not even God can control. If I

join them with Adam's, and the Gardens.... God made the Garden alive and powerful, and Adam is one flesh with it, each incomplete without the other as Man is without woman. Adam has Eve now--but when Eve's gone he'll remember Lilith. I'll see that he remembers! And I'll see that he understands his danger. With my help, perhaps he can avert it."

"If God destroys Eve," said Lucifer, "he'll destroy Adam, too. They're one pattern."

"But he may not destroy them at the same time. I'll gamble on that. I'd kill her myself if I could, but I can't touch anything in the Garden without its own consent.... No, I'll have to wait until Eve proves to God her unfitness to wear flesh, and while he punishes her I must seize that moment to rouse the Garden. It's almost aware of itself already. I think I could awaken it--through Adam, perhaps. Adam and Eden are almost one, as Adam and I will be again if we can get rid of Eve. None of us separately has the power to defy God, but Eden and Adam and I together might do it!" She tossed back her head and the wild dark hair swirled like a fog about her. "Eden is an entity of its own--I think I could close a shell of space around us, and there are places in my Darkness where we could hide even from God!"

Lucifer narrowed his eyes at her. "It might work," he nodded slowly. "You're mad--but it might work, with my help. The woman is beautiful, in her way--" He laughed. "And what a revenge on God!"

"The woman," mused Lilith, "is in my body, and I am evil.... I think enough evil remains there that Eve will find you--interesting. Good luck, Lucifer!"

In a hollow, velvety cup in the Garden's very center the two Trees stood. One at the edge of the clearing was a dark Tree, the leaves folded like a cloak about a pale glow from within where the Fruit of

Life hung hidden. But in the center of the hollow the Tree of Knowledge flaunted its scarlet fruit that burned with a flame almost of their own among the green and glossy leaves. Here was the heart of the Garden. Out of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil the beat went pulsing that shook the air of Eden.

Eve set one small, bare foot upon the downward slope and looked back timidly over her shoulder. The serpent flicked a forked red tongue at her. His voice was cool and clear, and sweet as honey.

"Eva," he said softly. "Eva--"

She smiled and went on, he rippling after her with an unearthly beauty to his gait that is lost forever now. No one knows today how the serpent walked before the Fall. Of all human creatures only Eve knows that, and there were things Eve never told Adam.

They paused under the shadow of the tree. In long, slow rhythms the air went pulsing past them. Eve's fair hair stirred a little, so strong was the rhythm here. All the Fruit of the Tree pushed out among the leaves to see her, and the nearer branches bent caressingly toward this woman who was of the flesh of Adam.

The nearest branch stooped down enticingly. Eve reached for a scarlet apple that dipped into her hand. Almost of itself it snapped free of the twig that held it. Eve stared at the apple in her palm, and her hand began to shake. She drew back against the serpent, a little whimper of terror rising in her throat.

The serpent dropped a coiled embrace about the lovely, light-clothed pallor of her body and bent his handsome, slanted head to hers, whispering at her ear in a voice so cool and sweet that the terror faded from her face. She smiled a little, and her hand steadied.

She lifted the Fruit of Knowledge to her lips. There was a hush, all through the Garden as she hesitated for a long moment, the red fruit at her red mouth, her teeth denting the scarlet cheek of Knowledge. The last few timeless moments stood still while innocence yet reigned over Eden.

Then the serpent whispered again, urgently: "Eva--" he said.

Lilith stood shivering in Adam's arms.

"You were mine first," she was whispering fiercely. "You and I and the Garden--don't you remember? I was your wife before her, and you belong to me!"

Adam could see his own arms through the ephemeral stuff of Lilith's body. He was shaken by the violence in her voice, but his mind was too fogged with the unthinking blank of innocence to understand very clearly. He tried hard.

The rhythm that pulsed through Eden was curiously uneven now. Lilith knew what it meant, and excitement choked her. She cried more desperately:

"Adam... Adam! Don't let anything separate us, you and the Garden and I! You can hold us together if you try! I know you can! You--"

One great, annihilating throb shook through the air like thunder. The whole Garden reeled with it and every tree in Eden bowed as if before a tremendous wind. Adam looked up, aghast. But Lilith laughed a wild, excited laugh and cried, "This is it! Oh, hurry, Adam, hurry!"

She slipped through his arms that were still clasped about her and went fluttering effortlessly off through branches that did not impede her passage. Adam following half stunned with the stunned Garden.

All Eden was still reeling from the violence of what had just happened beneath the Tree.

Lilith watched the sky as she ran. Would a great bolt of lightning come ravaging down out of heaven to blast the woman out of being before they reached the Tree? "Wait, wait!" she panted voicelessly to God. "Give me a moment longer--" Would a bolt strike Adam, too, as he slipped through the parting trees beside her? "Hurry!" she gasped again.

Breathless, they paused at the edge of the hollow where the Tree stood. Looking down, they could see Eve just clear of the shadow of it, the fruit in her hand with one white bite flawing its scarlet cheek. She was staring about the Garden as if she had never seen it before. Where was God? Why had He not blasted her as she stood there?

Lilith in her first wild glance could not see the serpent except for a glitter of iridescence back in the shadow of the Tree. Even in her terrible excitement she smiled wryly. Lucifer was taking no chances with God.

But she had no time to waste now on Lucifer or on Eve. For some inexplicable reason God was staying His hand, and she must make the most of the respite. For when God was finished with Eve He would turn to Adam, and before that much had to be done. Adam was her business now, and the living Eden, and all eternity waited on what the next few moments held.

She stood out on the lip of the hollow and a great dark wind from nowhere swelled monstrosly about her, tossing out her hair until it was a cloud that shut her from sight. Out of the cloud her voice came rolling in tremendous rhythms paced to the rhythm at which Eden breathed--and Adam.

"Garden!" she called. "Eden--hear me! I am Lilith, the wife of Adam--"

She could feel a vast, dim awareness stirring around her. All through Eden the waking motion ran, drawing closer, welling up deeply from the earth underfoot, monstrously, wonderfully, a world coming alive at her call.

"Adam!" she cried. "Adam do you hear me? You and Eden are one flesh, and Eve has destroyed you both. She has just brought knowledge into Eden, where God dares not let it exist. God will destroy you all, because of Eve... unless you listen to me--"

She felt Adam's attention torn away from Eve and focusing upon herself in fear and wonder. She felt the Garden's waking awareness draw around him with growing intensity, until it was as if the earth of Eden and the flesh of Man quickened into one, married by the same need for one another as the thought of parting and destruction shuddered through each.

Was this what God had planned as an ending for His divine scheme, as it was the beginning of Lilith's? She had no time to wonder, but the thought crossed her mind awesomely even as she wooed the Garden in a voice as sweet and coaxing as the voice she used to Adam.

And the whole great Garden shuddered ponderously around her, awareness thrilling down every tendril and branch and blade, pulsing up out of the very hill on which she stood. And all of it was Adam. The Garden heard and hung upon her words, and Adam heard, and they three together were all that existed. Success was in her hands. She could feel it. And then-- "Adam... Adam!" screamed Eve beneath the Tree.

Lilith's sonorous voice paused in its invocation; the Garden hesitated around her.

"Adam!" cried Eve again, terror flattening all the sweetness out of her voice.

And behind Lilith, in a drugged voice, Adam said: "Eve--?"

"God... God, destroy her now!" prayed Lilith soundlessly. And aloud, "Eve has no part in Eden! Don't listen to her, Adam! She'll destroy you and the Garden together!"

"Adam, Adam! Where are you?"

"Coming--" said Adam, still in that thick, drugged voice.

Lilith whirled in the mist of her cloudy hair. Where was God! Why had He stayed His hand? Now was the time to strike, if her hope were not to fail. Now, now! Surely the lightning would come ravaging down from heaven if she could hold Adam a moment longer-- "Adam, wait!" she cried desperately. "Adam, you know you love me! If you leave--"

Her voice faltered as he peered at her as blindly as if he had never seen her before. The haloed light was like fire all around him, and her words had been a drug to him as they had been to the Garden, until the earth that loved and listened to her had been one with his own earth-formed flesh; a moment ago there had been nothing in creation for Adam or for Eden but this one woman speaking out of the dark. But now-- "Adam!" screamed Eve again in that flat, frightened voice.

"Don't listen!" cried Lilith frantically. "She doesn't belong here! You can't save her flow! God will destroy her, and He'll destroy you, too, if you leave me! Stay here and let her die! You and I will be alone again, in the Garden... Adam, don't listen!"

"I... I have to listen," he stammered almost stupidly. "Get out of my way, Lilith. Don't you understand? She's my own flesh--I have to go."

Lilith stared at him dumbly. His own flesh! She had forgotten that. She had leaned too heavily on his oneness with the Garden--she had forgotten he was one with Eve, too. The prospect of defeat was suddenly like lead in her. If God would only strike now-- She swayed forward in one last desperate effort to hold him back from Eve while the Garden stirred uneasily around them, frightened with Lilith's terror, torn with Adam's distress. She wavered between Adam and the valley as if her ephemeral body could hold him, but he went through her as if through a cloud and stumbled blindly downhill toward the terrified Eve beneath the Tree with the fruit in her hand and a dreadful knowledge on her face.

From here Lilith could see what Adam had not yet. She laughed suddenly, wildly, and cried:

"Look at her, Adam! Look!" And Adam blinked and looked.

Eve stood naked beneath the Tree. That burning beauty which had clothed her like a garment was gone with her divine innocence and she was no longer the flawless goddess who had wakened on Adam's shoulder that morning. She stood shivering a little, looking forlorn and somehow pinched and thin, almost a caricature of the perfect beauty that had gone down the hill with the serpent an hour ago. But she did not know that. She looked up at Adam as he hesitated above her, and smiled uncertainly with a sort of leer in her smile.

"Oh, there you are," she said, and even her voice was harsher now. "Everything looked so... so queer, for a minute. Look." She held up the fruit. "It's good. Better than anything you ever gave me. Try it."

Lilith stared at her from the hilltop with a horror that for a moment blanked out her growing terror because of God's delay. Was knowledge, then, as ugly as this? Why had it destroyed Eve's beauty as if it were some evil thing? Perfect knowledge should have increased her strength and loveliness in the instant before God struck her down, if-- Suddenly Lilith understood. Perfect knowledge! But Eve had only tasted the fruit, and she had only a warped half-knowledge from that single taste. The beauty of her innocence was lost, but she had not yet gained the beauty of perfect knowledge. Was this why God delayed? So long as her knowledge was imperfect perhaps she was no menace to God's power in Eden. And yet she had disobeyed, she had proved herself unworthy of the trust of God-- Then why did He hesitate? Why had He not blasted her as she stood there with the apple at her lips? A panic was rising in Lilith's throat. Could it be that He was laughing, even now? Was He giving her the respite she had prayed for, and watching her fail in spite of it?

"Taste the apple," said Eve again, holding it out.

"Adam!" cried Lilith despairingly from the edge of the hill. "Adam, look at me! You loved me first--don't you remember? Look at me, Adam!"

And Adam turned to look. The wind, which had clouded her from sight in the darkness of her hair, had calmed. She stood now, luminous on the hilltop, the darkness parted like a river by the whiteness of her shoulders. And she was beautiful with a beauty that no mortal woman will ever wear again.

"I was first!" cried Lilith. "You loved me before her--come back to me now, before God strikes you both! Come back, Adam!"

He stared up at her miserably. He looked back at the flawed,

shivering creature at his side, knowledge curiously horrible in her eyes. He stared at Eve, too, a long stare. And then he reached for the apple.

"Adam--no!" shrieked Lilith. "See what knowledge did to Eve! You'll be ugly and naked, like her! Don't taste it, Adam! You don't know what you're doing!"

Over the poised red fruit he looked up at her. The light quivered gloriously all around him. He stood like a god beneath the Tree, radiant, perfect.

"Yes, I know," he said, in a clearer voice than she had ever heard him use before.

"God will destroy you!" wailed Lilith, and rolled her eyes up to look for the falling thunderbolt that might be hurtling downward even now.

"I know," said Adam again. And then, after a pause, "You don't understand, Lilith. Eve is my own flesh, closer than Eden--closer than you. Don't you remember what God said? Forsaking all others--"

"Eve!" screamed Lilith hopelessly. "Stop him! Your punishment's certain--are you going to drag him down, too?"

Eve looked up, knowledge dark in her blue eyes. She laughed a thin laugh and the last vestige of her beauty went with it.

"Leave him to you?" she sneered. "Oh no! He and I are one flesh--we'll go together. Taste the apple, Adam!"

He turned it obediently in his hand: his teeth crunched through scarlet skin into the sweet white flesh inside. There was a tremendous silence all through the Garden; nothing stirred in Eden while Adam chewed and swallowed the Fruit of Knowledge. And then turned to

stare down into Eve's lifted eyes while awareness of himself as an individual, free-willed being dawned gradually across his awakening mind.

And then the burning glory that clothed him paled, shimmered, went out along his limbs. He, too, was naked. The queer, pinched look of humanity shivered over that magnificent body, and he was no longer magnificent, no longer Adam.

Lilith had forgotten to look for God. Sickness of the heart was swelling terribly in her, and for a moment she no longer cared about God, or Eden, or the future. This was not Adam any more-- It would never be Adam again-- "Listen," said Eve in a small, intimate voice to Adam. "How quiet it is! Why, it's the music. The seraphim aren't singing any more around the Throne!"

Lilith glanced up apathetically. That meant, then, that God was coming-- But even as she looked up a great golden chorus resounded serenely from high over Eden. Adam tipped his tarnished head to listen.

"You're right," he agreed. "They've stopped their song."

Lilith did not hear him. That dreadful sickness in her was swelling and changing, and she knew now what it was--hatred. Hatred of Adam and Eve and the thing they had done to her. Hatred of these naked caricatures, who had been the magnificent half-god she had loved and the shape she had put on to delight him. True, they might finish the eating of knowledge and grow perfect again, but it would be a perfection that shut her out. They were one flesh together, and even God had failed her now. Looking down, she loathed them both. Eve's very existence was an insult to the unflawed perfection which Lilith still wore, and Adam--Adam shivering beneath the Tree with a warped, imperfect knowledge leering in his eyes-- A sob swelled in

her throat. He had been flawless once--she would never forget that. Almost she loved the memory still as it lingered about this shivering human creature beneath the Tree. So long as he was alive she knew now she would never be free of it; this weakness would torment her still for the flesh that had once been Adam. The prospect of an eternity of longing for him, who would never exist again, was suddenly unbearable to her.

She tipped her head back and looked up through the glory above Eden where golden voices chanted that neither Adam nor Eve would ever hear again.

"Jehovah!" she sobbed. "Jehovah! Come down and destroy us all! You were right--they are both too flawed to bring anything but misery to all who know them. God, come down and give us peace!"

Eve squealed in terror at Adam's side. "Listen!" she cried. "Adam, listen to her!"

Answering human terror dawned across the pinched features that had once been Adam's handsome, immortal face. "The Tree of Life!" he shouted. "No one can touch us if we eat that fruit!"

He whirled to scramble up the slope toward the dark Tree, and Lilith's heart ached to watch how heavily he moved. Yesterday's wonderful, easy ligheness was gone with his beauty, and his body was a burden to him now.

But he was not to reach the Tree of Life. For suddenly glory brightened unbearably over the Garden. A silence was in the sky, and the breeze ceased to blow through Eden.

"Adam," said a Voice in the great silence of the Garden, "hast thou eaten of the Tree?"

Adam glanced up the slope at Lilith, standing despairingly against the sky. He looked at Eve beside him, a clumsy caricature of the loveliness he had dreamed of. There was bitterness in his voice.

"The woman thou gavest me--" he began reproachful'y, and then hesitated, meeting Eve's eyes. The old godlike goodness was lost to him now, but he had not fallen low enough yet to let Eve know what he was thinking. He could not say, "The woman Thou gavest me has ruined us both--but I had a woman of my own before her and she never did me any harm." No, he could not hurt this flesh of his flesh so deeply, but he was human now and he could not let her go unrebuked. He went on sulkily, "--she gave me the apple, and I ate."

The Voice said awfully, "Eve--?"

Perhaps Eve was remembering that other voice, cool and sweet, murmuring, "Eva--" in the cool, green dimness of the Garden, the voice that had whispered secrets she would never share with Adam. Perhaps if he had been beside her now--but he was not, and her resentment bubbled to her lips in speech.

"The serpent beguiled me," she told God sullenly, "and I ate."

There was silence for a moment in the Garden. Then the Voice said, "Lucifer--" with a sorrow in the sound that had not stirred for the man's plight, or the woman's. "Lucifer, my enemy, come forth from the Tree." There was a divine compassion in the Voice even as It pronounced sentence. "Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life--"

Out from beneath the shadow of the Tree a flat and shining length came pouring through the grass. This was the hour for the shedding of beauty: the serpent had lost the fire-bright splendor that had been his while Lucifer dwelt in his flesh, but traces lingered yet in the

unearthly fluidness of his motion, in his shining iridescence. He lifted a wedged head toward Eve, flickered his tongue at her once and then dropped back into the grass. Its ripple above him marked his course away. Eve drew one long, sobbing breath for that green twilight hour in the Garden, that Adam would never guess, as she watched him ripple away.

"Adam, Eve," went on the Voice quietly, "the Garden is not for you." There was a passionless pity in It as the Garden stood still to listen. "I made your flesh too weak, because your godhood was too strong to trust. You are not to blame for that--the fault was Mine. But Adam... Eve... what power did I put in you, that the very elements of fire and darkness find kinship with you? What flaw is in you, that though you are the only two human things alive, yet you cannot keep faith with one another?"

Adam glanced miserably up toward Lilith standing motionless on the hill's edge, clothed in the flawless beauty he had dreamed for her and would never see again. Eve's eyes followed the serpent through the grass that was blurred for her because of the first tears of Eden. Neither of them answered.

"You are not fit yet to put forth your hand to the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever," went on the Voice after a moment.

"Man... woman... you are not yet fit for perfect knowledge or immortality. You are not yet fit for trust. But for Lilith the tale would have spun itself out here in the walls of Eden, but now you must go beyond temptation and work your own salvation out in the sweat of your brow, in the lands beyond the Garden. Adam, I dare not trust you any longer in your kinship with the earth I shaped you from. Cursed is the ground for your sake. Adam--it shall be one with you no longer. But I promise this... in the end you shall return to it--" The Voice fell silent, and there was far from above the flash of a flaming sword over

the gate of Eden.

In the silence Lilith laughed. It was a clear, ringing sound from the hill's edge: "Deal with me now," she said in an empty voice. "I have no desire to exist any longer in a world that has no Adam--destroy me, Jehovah."

The Voice said emotionlessly, "You are punished already, by the fruit of what you did."

"Punished enough!" wailed Lilith in sudden despair. "Make an end of it, Jehovah!"

"With man's end," said God quietly. "No sooner. You four among you have shattered a plan in Eden that you must shape anew before your travail ends. Let the four of you build a new plan with the elements of your being--Adam is Earth, Lucifer is Fire, Lilith is Air and Darkness, Eve the Mother of All Living, the fertile seas from which all living springs. Earth, Air, Fire and Water--you thought your plan was better than Mine. Work it out for yourselves!"

"What is our part to be, Lord?" asked Adam in a small, humbled voice.

"Earth and water," said the Voice. "The kingdom of earth for you and the woman and your children after you."

"I was Adam's wife before her," wailed Lilith jealously. "What of me... and mine?"

The Voice fell silent for a while. Then it said quietly: "Make your own choice, Queen of Air and Darkness."

"Let my children and Adam's haunt hers to their graves, then!" decided Lilith instantly. "Mine are the disinherited--let them take

vengeance! Let her and hers beware of my children who wail in the night, and know she deserves their wrath. Let them remind her always that Adam was mine before her!"

"So be it," said the Voice. And for an instant there was silence in Eden while the shadow of times to come brooded inscrutably in the mind of God. Liliith caught flashes of it in the glory so bright over Eden that every grass blade had a splendor which hurt the eyes. She saw man loving his birthplace upon earth with a deep-rooted love that made it as dear as his very flesh to him, so that dimly he might remember the hour when all earth was as close to him as his newly created body. She saw man cleaving to one woman as dear as the flesh of his flesh, yet remembering the unattainable and the lost--Liliith, perfect in Eden. She looked down from the hilltop and met Adam's eyes, and voicelessly between them a long farewell went flashing.

No one was watching Eve. She was blinking through tears, remembering a twilight hour and a fire-bright beauty that the dust had quenched a moment ago at God's command. And then... then there was the faintest rustling in the air around her, and a cool, clear voice was murmuring:

"Eva--" against her cheek.

She stared. There was nothing. But--

"Eva," said the voice again. "Give me my vengeance too--upon the Man. Pretty Eva, do you hear me? Call your first child Kayn... Eva, will you do as I say? Call him Kayn the Spear of my vengeance, for he shall set murder loose among Adam's sons. Remember, Eva--"

And Eve echoed in a small, obedient whisper, "Cain... Cain."

Jirel Meets Magic

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Over Guischar'd's fallen drawbridge thundered Joiry's warrior lady, sword swinging, voice shouting hoarsely inside her helmet. The scarlet plume of her crest rippled in the wind. Straight into the massed defenders at the gate she plunged, careering through them by the very impetuosity of the charge, the weight of her mighty warhorse opening up a gap for the men at her heels to widen. For a while there was tumult unspeakable there under the archway, the yells of fighters and the clang of mail on mail and the screams of stricken men. Jirel of Joiry was a shouting battle-machine from which Guischar'd's men reeled in bloody confusion as she whirled and slashed and slew in the narrow confines of the gateway, her great stallion's iron hoofs weapons as potent as her own whistling blade.

In her full armor she was impregnable to the men on foot, and the horse's armor protected him from their vengeful blades, so that alone, almost, she might have won the gateway. By sheer weight and impetuosity she carried the battle through the defenders under the arch. They gave way before the mighty warhorse and his screaming rider.

Jirel's swinging sword and the stallion's trampling feet cleared a path for Joiry's men to follow, and at last into Guischar'd's court poured the steel-clad hordes of Guischar'd's conquerors.

Jirel's eyes were yellow with blood-lust behind the helmet bars, and her voice echoed savagely from the steel cage that confined it, "Giraud! Bring me Giraud! A gold piece to the man who brings me the wizard Giraud!"

She waited impatiently in the courtyard, reining her excited charger in mincing circles over the flags, unable to dismount alone in her heavy armor and disdainful of the threats of possible arbalesters in the arrow-slits that looked down upon her from Guischard's frowning gray walls. A crossbow shaft was the only thing she had to fear in her impregnable mail.

She waited in mounting impatience, a formidable figure in her bloody armor, the great sword lying across her saddlebow and her eager, angry voice echoing hoarsely from the helmet, "Giraud! Make haste, you varlets! Bring me Giraud!"

There was such blood-thirsty impatience in that hollowly booming voice that the men who were returning from searching the castle hung back as they crossed the court toward their lady in reluctant twos and threes, failure eloquent upon their faces.

"What!" screamed Jirel furiously. "You; Giles! Have you brought me Giraud? Watkin! Where is that wizard Giraud? Answer me, I say!"

"We've scoured the castle, my lady," said one of the men fearfully as the angry voice paused. "The wizard is gone."

"Now God defend me!" groaned Joiry's lady. "God help a poor woman served by fools! Did you search among the slain?"

"We searched everywhere, Lady Jirel. Giraud has escaped us."

Jirel called again upon her Maker in a voice that was blasphemy in itself.

"Help me down, then, you hell-spawned knaves," she grated. "I'll find him myself. He must be here!"

With difficulty they got her off the sidling horse. It took two men to

handle her, and a third to steady the charger. All the while they straggled with straps and buckles she cursed them hollowly, emerging limb by limb from the casing of steel and swearing with a soldier's fluency as the armor came away. Presently she stood free on the bloody flagstones, a slim, straight lady, keen as a blade, her red hair a flame to match the flame of her yellow eyes. Under the armor she wore a tunic of link-mail from the Holy Land, supple as silk and almost as light, and a doeskin shirt to protect the milky whiteness of her skin.

She was a creature of the wildest paradox, this warrior lady of Joiry, hot as a red coal, chill as steel, satiny of body and iron of soul. The set of her chin was firm, but her mouth betrayed a tenderness she would have died, before admitting. But she was raging now.

"Follow me, then, fools!" she shouted. "I'll find that God-cursed wizard and split his head with this sword if it takes me until the day I die. I swear it. I'll teach him what it costs to ambush Joiry men. By heaven, he'll pay with his life for my ten who fell at Massy Ford last week. The foul spell-brewer! He'll learn what it means to defy Joiry!"

Breathing threats and curses, she strode across the court, her men following reluctantly at her heels and casting nervous glances upward at the gray towers of Guischart. It had always borne a bad name, this ominous castle of the wizard Giraud, a place where queer things happened, which no man entered uninvited and whence no prisoner had ever escaped, though the screams of torture echoed often from its walls. Jirel's men would have followed her straight through the gates of hell, but they stormed Guischart at her heels with terror in their hearts and no hope of conquest.

She alone seemed not to know fear of the dark sorcerer. Perhaps it was because she had known things so dreadful that mortal perils held no terror for her—there were whispers at Joiry of their lady, and

of things that had happened there which no man dared think on. But when Guischarde fell, and the wizard's defenders fled before Jirel's mighty steed and the onrush of Joiry's men, they had plucked up heart, thinking that perhaps the ominous tales of Giraud had been gossip only, since the castle fell as any ordinary lord's castle might fall. But now--there were whispers again, and nervous glances over the shoulder, and men huddled together as they re-entered Guischarde at their lady's hurrying heels. A castle from which a wizard might vanish into thin air, with all the exits watched, must be a haunted place, better burned and forgotten. They followed Jirel reluctantly, half ashamed but fearful.

In Jirel's stormy heart there was no room for terror as she plunged into the gloom of the archway that opened upon Guischarde's great central hall. Anger that the man might have escaped her was a torch to light the way, and she paused in the door with eager anticipation, sweeping the corpse-strewn hall at a glance, searching for some clue to explain how her quarry had disappeared.

"He can't have escaped," she told herself confidently. "There's no way out. He must be here somewhere." And she stepped into the hall, turning over the bodies she passed with a careless foot to make sure that death had not robbed her of vengeance.

An hour later, as they searched the last tower, she was still telling herself that the wizard could not have gone without her knowledge. She had taken special pains about that. There was a secret passage to the river, but she had had that watched. And an underwater door opened into the moat, but he could not have gone that way without meeting her men. Secret paths and open, she had found them all and posted a guard at each, and Giraud had not left the castle by any door that led out. She climbed the stairs of the last tower wearily, her confidence shaken.

An iron-barred oaken door closed the top of the steps, and Jirel drew back as her men lifted the heavy cross-pieces and opened it for her. It had not been barred from within. She stepped into the little round room inside, hope fading completely as she saw that it too was empty, save for the body of a page-boy lying on the uncarpeted floor. Blood had made a congealing pool about him, and as Jirel looked she saw something which roused her flagging hopes.

Feet had trodden in that blood, not the mailed feet of armed men, but the tread of shapeless cloth shoes such as surely none but Giraud would have worn when the castle was besieged and falling, and every man's help needed. Those bloody tracks led straight across the room toward the wall, and in that wall—a window.

Jirel stared. To her a window was a narrow slit deep in stone, made for the shooting of arrows, and never covered save in the coldest weather. But this window was broad and low, and instead of the usual animal pelt for hangings a curtain of purple velvet had been drawn back to disclose shutters carved out of something that might have been ivory had any beast alive been huge enough to yield such great unbroken sheets of whiteness. The shutters were unlatched, swinging slightly ajar, and upon them Jirel saw the smear of bloody fingers.

With a little triumphant cry she sprang forward. Here, then, was the secret way Giraud had gone. What lay beyond the window she could not guess. Perhaps an unsuspected passage, or a hidden room. Laughing exultantly, she swung open the ivory shutters.

There was a gasp from the men behind her. She did not hear it. She stood quite still, staring with incredulous eyes. For those ivory gates had opened upon no dark stone hiding-place or secret tunnel. They did not even reveal the afternoon sky outside, nor did they admit the shouts of her men still subduing the last of the defenders in the court

below. Instead she was looking up upon a green woodland over which brooded a violet day like no day she had ever seen before. In paralyzed amazement she looked down, seeing not the bloody flags of the courtyard far below, but a mossy carpet at a level with the floor. And on that moss she saw the mark of blood-stained feet. This window might be a magic one, opening into strange lands, but through it had gone the man she swore to kill, and where he fled she must follow.

She lifted her eyes from the tracked moss and stared out again through the dimness under the trees. It was a lovelier land than anything seen even in dreams; so lovely that it made her heart ache with its strange, unearthly enchantment--green woodland hushed and brooding in the hushed violet day. There was a promise of peace there, and forgetfulness and rest. Suddenly the harsh, shouting, noisy world behind her seemed very far away and chill. She moved forward and laid her hand upon the ivory shutters, staring out.

The shuffle of the scared men behind her awakened Jirel from the enchantment that had gripped her. She turned. The dreamy magic of the woodland loosed its hold as she faced the men again, but its memory lingered. She shook her red head a little, meeting their fearful eyes. She nodded toward the open window.

"Giraud has gone out there," she said. "Give me your dagger, Giles. This sword is too heavy to carry far."

"But lady--Lady Jirel--dear lady--you can't go out there--Saint Guilda save us! Lady Jirel!"

Jirel's crisp voice cut short the babble of protest.

"Your dagger, Giles. I've sworn to slay Giraud, and slay him I shall, in whatever land he hides. Giles!"

A man-at-arms shuffled forward with averted face, handing her his dagger. She gave him the sword she carried and thrust the long-bladed knife into her belt. She turned again to the window. Green and cool and lovely, the woodland lay waiting. She thought as she set her knee upon the sill that she must have explored this violet calm even had her oath not driven her; for there was an enchantment about the place that drew her irresistibly. She pulled up her other knee and jumped lightly. The mossy ground received her without a jar.

For a few moments Jirel stood very still, watching, listening. Bird songs trilled intermittently about her, and breezes stirred the leaves. From very far away she thought she caught the echoes of a song when the wind blew, and there was something subtly irritating about its simple melody that seemed to seesaw endlessly up and down on two notes. She was glad when the wind died and the song no longer shrilled in her ears.

It occurred to her that before she ventured far she must mark the window she had entered by, and she turned curiously, wondering how it looked from this side. What she saw sent an inexplicable little chill down her back. Behind her lay a heap of moldering ruins, moss-grown, crumbling into decay. Fire had blackened the stones in ages past. She could see that it must have been a castle, for the original lines of it were not yet quite lost. Only one low wall remained standing now, and in it opened the window through which she had come. There was something hauntingly familiar about the lines of those moldering stones, and she turned away with a vague unease, not quite understanding why. A little path wound away under the low-hanging trees, and she followed it slowly, eyes alert for signs that Giraud had passed this way. Birds trilled drowsily in the leaves overhead, queer, unrecognizable songs like the music of no birds she knew. The violet light was calm and sweet about her.

She had gone on in the bird-haunted quiet for many minutes before she caught the first hint of anything at odds with the perfect peace about her. A whiff of wood-smoke drifted to her nostrils on a vagrant breeze. When she rounded the next bend of the path she saw what had caused it. A tree lay across the way in a smother of shaking leaves and branches. She knew that she must skirt it, for the branches were too tangled to penetrate, and she turned out of the path, following the trunk toward its broken base.

She had gone only a few steps before the sound of a curious sobbing came to her ears. It was the gasp of choked breathing, and she had heard sounds like that too often before not to know that she approached death in some form or another. She laid her hand on her knife-hilt and crept forward softly.

The tree trunk had been severed as if by a blast of heat, for the stump was charred black and still smoking. Beyond the stump a queer tableau was being enacted, and she stopped quite still, staring through the leaves.

Upon the moss a naked girl was lying, gasping her life out behind the hands in which her face was buried. There was no mistaking the death-sound in that failing breath, although her body was unmarked. Hair of a strange green-gold pallor streamed over her bare white body, and by the fragility and tenuosity of that body Jirel knew that she could not be wholly human.

Above the dying girl a tall woman stood. And that woman was a magnet for Jirel's fascinated eyes. She was generously curved, sleepy-eyed. Black hair bound her head sleekly, and her skin was like rich, dark, creamy velvet. A violet robe wrapped her carelessly, leaving arms and one curved shoulder bare, and her girdle was a snake of something like purple glass. It might have been carved from some vast jewel, save for its size and unbroken clarity. Her feet were

thrust bare into silver sandals. But it was her face that held Jirel's yellow gaze.

The sleepy eyes under heavily drooping lids were purple as gems, and the darkly crimson mouth curled in a smile so hateful that fury rushed up in Jirel's heart as she watched. That lazy purple gaze dwelt aloofly upon the gasping girl on the moss. The woman was saying in a voice as rich and deep as thick-piled velvet,

"--nor will any other of the dryad folk presume to work forbidden magic in my woodlands for a long, long while to come. Your fate shall be a deadly example to them, Irsla. You dared too greatly. None who defy Jarisme live. Hear me, Irsla!"

The sobbing breath had slowed as the woman spoke, as if life were slipping fast from the dryad-girl on the moss; and as she realized it the speaker's arm lifted and a finger of white fire leaped from her outstretched hand, stabbing the white body at her feet. And the girl Irsla started like one shocked back into life.

"Hear me out, dryad! Let your end be a warning to--"

The girl's quickened breath slowed again as the white brilliance left her, and again the woman's hand rose, again the light-blade stabbed. From behind her shielding hands the dryad gasped.

"Oh, mercy, mercy, Jarisme! Let me die!"

"When I have finished. Not before. Life and death are mine to command here, and I am not yet done with you. Your stolen magic--"

She paused, for Irsla had slumped once more upon the moss, breath scarcely stirring her. As Jarisme's light-dealing hand rose for the third time Jirel leapt forward. Partly it was intuitive hatred of the lazy-eyed woman, partly revolt at this cat-and-mouse play with a dying girl

for victim. She swung her arm in an arc that cleared the branches from her path, and called out in her clear, strong voice,

"Have done, woman! Let her die in peace."

Slowly Jarisme's purple eyes rose. They met Jirel's hot yellow glare. Almost physical impact was in that first meeting of their eyes, and hatred flashed between them instantly, like the flash of blades--the instinctive hatred of total opposites, born enemies. Each stiffened subtly, as cats do in the instant before combat. But Jirel thought she saw in the purple gaze, behind all its kindling anger, a faint disquiet, a nameless uncertainty.

"Who are you?" asked Jarisme, very softly, very dangerously.

Something in that unsureness behind her angry eyes prompted Jirel to answer boldly.

"Jirel of Joiry. I seek the wizard Giraud, who fled me here. Stop tormenting that wretched girl and tell me where to find him. I can make it worth your while."

Her tone was imperiously mandatory, and behind Jarisme's drooping lips an answering flare of anger lighted, almost drowning out that faint unease.

"You do not know me," she observed, her voice very gentle. "I am the sorceress Jarisme, and high ruler over all this land. Did you think to buy me, then, earth-woman?"

Jirel smiled her sweetest, most poisonous smile.

"You will forgive me," she purred. "At the first glance at you I did not think your price could be high...."

A petty malice had inspired the speech, and Jirel was sorry as it left her lips, for she knew that the scorn which blazed up in Jarisme's eyes was justified. The sorceress made a contemptuous gesture of dismissal.

"I shall waste no more of my time here," she said. "Get back to your little lands, Jirel of Joiry, and tempt me no further."

The purple gaze rested briefly on the motionless dryad at her feet, flicked Jirel's hot eyes with a glance of scorn which yet did not wholly hide that curious uncertainty in its depths. One hand slid behind her, oddly as if she were seeking a door-latch in empty air. Then like a heat-shimmer the air danced about her, and in an instant she was gone.

Jirel blinked. Her ears had deceived her as well as her eyes, she thought, for as the sorceress vanished a door closed softly somewhere. Yet look though she would, the green glade was empty, the violet air untroubled. No Jarisme anywhere--no door. Jirel shrugged after a moment's bewilderment. She had met magic before.

A sound from the scarcely breathing girl upon the moss distracted her, and she dropped to her knees beside the dying dryad. There was no mark or wound upon her, yet Jirel knew that death could be only a matter of moments. And dimly she recalled that, so legend said, a tree-sprite never survived the death of its tree. Gently she turned the girl over, wondering if she were beyond help.

At the feel of those gentle hands the dryad's lids quivered and rose. Brook-brown eyes looked up at Jirel, with green swimming in their deeps like leaf-reflections in a woodland pool.

"My thanks to you," faltered the girl in a ghostly murmur. "But get you

back to your home now--before Jarisme's anger slays you."

Jirel shook her red head stubbornly.

"I must find Giraud first, and kill him, as I have sworn to do. But I will wait. Is there anything I can do?"

The green-reflecting eyes searched hers for a moment. The dryad must have read resolution there, for she shook her head a little.

"I must die--with my tree. But if you are determined--hear me. I owe you--a debt. There is a talisman--braided in my hair. When I--am dead--take it. It is Jarisme's sign. All her subjects wear them. It will guide you to her--and to Giraud. He is ever beside her. I know. I think it was her anger at you--that made her forget to take it from me, after she had dealt me my death. But why she did not slay you--I do not know. Jarisme is quick--to kill. No matter--listen now. If you must have Giraud--you must take a risk that no one here--has ever taken--before. Break this talisman--at Jarisme's feet. I do not know--what will happen then. Something--very terrible. It releases powers--even she can not control. It may--destroy you too. But--it is--a chance. May you--have--all good--"

The faltering voice failed. Jirel, bending her head, caught only meaningless murmurs that trailed away to nothing. The green-gold head dropped suddenly forward on her sustaining arm. Through the forest all about her went one long, quivering sigh, as if an intangible breeze ruffled the trees. Yet no leaves stirred.

Jirel bent and kissed the dryad's forehead, then laid her very gently back on the moss. And as she did so her hand in the masses of strangely colored hair came upon something sharp and hard. She remembered the talisman. It tingled in her fingers as she drew it out--an odd little jagged crystal sparkling with curious aliveness from the

fire burning in its heart.

When she had risen to her feet, leaving the dead dryad lying upon the moss which seemed so perfectly her couch, she saw that the inner brilliance streaming in its wedge-shaped pattern through the crystal was pointing a quivering apex forward and to the right. Irla had said it would guide her. Experimentally she twisted her hand to the left. Yes, the shaking light shifted within the crystal, pointing always toward the right, and Jarisme.

One last long glance she gave to the dryad on the moss. Then she set off again down the path, the little magical thing stinging her hand as she walked. And as she went she wondered. This strong hatred which had flared so instinctively between her and the sorceress was hot enough to burn any trace of fear from her mind, and she remembered that look of uncertainty in the purple gaze that had shot such hatred at her. Why? Why had she not been slain as Irla was slain, for defiance of this queer land's ruler?

For a while she paced unheedingly along under the trees. Then abruptly the foliage ceased and a broad meadow lay before her, green in the clear, violet day. Beyond the meadow the slim shaft of a tower rose dazzlingly white, and toward it in steady radiance that magical talisman pointed.

From very far away she thought she still caught the echoes of that song when the wind blew, an irritating monotony that made her ears ache. She was glad when the wind died and the song no longer shrilled in her ears.

Out across the meadow she went. Far ahead she could make out purple mountains like low clouds on the horizon, and here and there in the distances clumps of woodland dotted the meadows. She walked on more rapidly now, for she was sure that the white tower

housed Jarisme, and with her Giraud. And she must have gone more swiftly than she knew, for with almost magical speed the shining shaft drew nearer.

She could see the arch of its doorway, bluely violet within. The top of the shaft was battlemented, and she caught splashes of color between the teeth of the stone scarps, as if flowers were massed there and spilling blossoms against the whiteness of the tower. The singsong music was louder than ever, and much nearer. Jirel's heart beat a bit heavily as she advanced, wondering what sort of a sorceress this Jarisme might be, what dangers lay before her in the path of her vow's fulfillment. Now the white tower rose up over her, and she was crossing the little space before the door, peering in dubiously. All she could see was dimness and violet mist.

She laid her hand upon the dagger, took a deep breath and stepped boldly in under the arch. In the instant her feet left the solid earth she saw that this violet mist filled the whole shaft of the tower, that there was no floor. Emptiness engulfed her, and all reality ceased.

She was falling through clouds of violet blankness, but in no recognizable direction. It might have been up, down, or sidewise through space. Everything had vanished in the violet nothing. She knew an endless moment of vertigo and rushing motion; then the dizzy emptiness vanished in a breath and she was standing in a gasping surprise upon the roof of Jarisme's tower.

She knew where she was by the white battlements ringing her round, banked with strange blossoms in muted colors. In the center of the circular, marble-paved place a low couch, cushioned in glowing yellow, stood in the midst of a heap of furs. Two people sat side by side on the couch. One was Giraud. Black-robed, dark-visaged, he stared at Jirel with a flicker of disquiet in his small, dull eyes. He said nothing.

Jirel dismissed him with a glance, scarcely realizing his presence. For Jarisme had lowered from her lips a long, silver flute. Jirel realized that the queer, maddening music must have come from that gleaming length, for it no longer echoed in her ears. Jarisme was holding the instrument now in midair, regarding Jirel over it with a purple-eyed gaze that was somehow thoughtful and a little apprehensive, though anger glowed in it, too.

"So," she said richly, in her slow, deep voice. "For the second time you defy me."

At these words Giraud turned his head sharply and stared at the sorceress' impassive profile. She did not return his gaze, but after a moment he looked quickly back at Jirel, and in his eyes too she saw that flicker of alarm, and with it a sort of scared respect. It puzzled her, and she did not like being puzzled. She said a little breathlessly,

"If you like, yes. Give me that skulking potion-brewer beside you and set me down again outside this damned tower of trickery. I came to kill your pet spellmonger here for treachery done me in my own world by this creature who dared not stay to face me."

Her peremptory words hung in the air like the echoes of a gong. For a while no one spoke. Jarisme smiled more subtly than before, an insolent, slow smile that made Jirel's pulses hammer with the desire to smash it down the woman's lush, creamy throat. At last Jarisme said, in a voice as rich and deep as thick-piled velvet,

"Hot words, hot words, soldier-woman! Do you really imagine that your earthly squabbles matter to Jarisme?"

"What matters to Jarisme is of little moment to me," Jirel said contemptuously. "All I want is this skulker here, whom I have sworn to kill."

Jarisme's slow smile was maddening. "You demand it of me--Jarisme?" she asked with soft incredulity. "Only fools offend me, woman, and they but once. None commands me. You will have to learn that."

Jirel smiled thinly. "At what price, then, do you value your pet cur?"

Giraud half rose from the couch at that last insult, his dark face darker with a surge of anger. Jarisme pushed him back with a lazy hand.

"This is between your--friend--and me," she said. "I do not think, soldier"--the appellation was the deadliest of insults in the tone she used--"that any price you could offer would interest me."

"And yet your interest is very easily caught." Jirel flashed a contemptuous glance at Giraud, restive under the woman's restraining hand.

Jarisme's rich pallor flushed a little. Her voice was sharper as she said,

"Do not tempt me too far, earthling."

Jirel's yellow eyes defied her. "I am not afraid."

The sorceress'purple gaze surveyed her slowly. When Jarisme spoke again a tinge of reluctant admiration lightened the slow scorn of her voice.

"No--you are not afraid. And a fool not to be. Fools annoy me, Jirel of Joiry."

She laid the flute down on her knee and lazily lifted a ringless hand.

Anger was glowing in her eyes now, blotting out all trace of that little haunting fear. But Giraud caught the rising hand, bending, whispering urgently in her ear. Jirel caught a part of what he said, "--what happens to those who tamper with their own destiny--" And she saw the anger fade from the sorceress'face as apprehension brightened there again. Jarisme looked at Jirel with a long, hard look and shrugged her ample shoulders.

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes, Giraud. It is wisest so."

And to Jirel, "Live, then, earthling. Find your way back to your own land if you can, but I warn you, do not trouble me again. I shall not stay my hand if our paths ever cross in the future."

She struck her soft, white palms together sharply. And at the sound the roof-top and the violet sky and the banked flowers at the parapets whirled around Jirel in dizzy confusion. From very far away she heard that clap of peremptory hands still echoing, but it seemed to her that the great, smokily colored blossoms were undergoing an inexplicable transformation. They quivered and spread and thrust upward from the edges of the tower to arch over her head. Her feet were pressing a mossy ground, and the sweet, earthy odors of a garden rose about her. Blinking, she stared around as the world slowly steadied.

She was no longer on the roof-top. As far as she could see through the tangled stems, great flowering plants sprang up in the gloaming of a strange, enchanted forest. She was completely submerged in greenery, and the illusion of under-water filled her eyes, for the violet light that filtered through the leaves was diffused and broken into a submarine dimness. Uncertainly she began to grope her way forward, staring about to see what sort of a miracle had enfolded her.

It was a bower in fairyland. She had come into a tropical garden of

great, muted blooms and jungle silences. In the diffused light the flowers nodded sleepily among the leaves, hypnotically lovely, hypnotically soporific with their soft colors and drowsy, never-ending motion. The fragrance was overpowering. She went on slowly, treading moss that gave back no sound. Here under the canopy of leaves was a little separate world of color and silence and perfume. Dreamily she made her way among the flowers.

Their fragrance was so strongly sweet that it went to her head, and she walked in a waking dream. Because of this curious, scented trance in which she went she was never quite sure if she had actually seen that motion among the leaves, and looked closer, and made out a huge, incredible serpent of violet transparency, a giant replica of the snake that girdled Jarisme's waist, but miraculously alive, miraculously supple and gliding, miraculously twisting its soundless way among the blossoms and staring at her with impassive, purple eyes.

While it glided along beside her she had other strange visions too, and could never remember just what they were, or why she caught familiar traces in the tiny, laughing faces that peered at her from among the flowers, or half believed the wild, impossible things they whispered to her, their laughing mouths brushing her ears as they leaned down among the blossoms.

The branches began to thin at last, as she neared the edge of the enchanted place. She walked slowly, half conscious of the great transparent snake like a living jewel writhing along soundlessly at her side, her mind vaguely troubled in its dream by the fading remembrance of what those little, merry voices had told her. When she came to the very edge of the bowery jungle and broke out into clear daylight again she stopped in a daze, staring round in the brightening light as the perfumes slowly cleared from her head.

Sanity and realization returned to her at last. She shook her red head dizzily and looked round, half expecting, despite her returning clarity, to see the great serpent gliding across the grass. But there was nothing. Of course she had dreamed. Of course those little laughing voices had not told her that--that--she clutched after the vanishing tags of remembrance, and caught nothing. Ruefully she laughed and brushed away the clinging memories, looking round to see where she was.

She stood at the crest of a little hill. Below her the flower-fragrant jungle nodded, a little patch of enchanted greenery clothing the slopes of the hill. Beyond and below green meadows stretched away to a far-off line of forest which she thought she recognized as that in which she had first met Jarisme. But the white tower which had risen in the midst of the meadows was magically gone. Where it had stood, unbroken greenery lay under the violet clarity of the sky.

As she stared round in bewilderment a faint prickling stung her palm, and she glanced down, remembering the talisman clutched in her hand. The quivering light was streaming in a long wedge toward some point behind her. She turned. She was in the foothills of those purple mountains she had glimpsed from the edge of the woods. High and shimmering, they rose above her. And, hazily in the heat-waves that danced among their heights, she saw the tower.

Jirel groaned to herself. Those peaks were steep and rocky. Well, no help for it. She must climb. She growled a soldier's oath in her throat and turned wearily toward the rising slopes. They were rough and deeply slashed with ravines. Violet heat beat up from the reflecting rocks, and tiny, brilliantly colored things scuttled from her path--orange lizards and coral red scorpions and little snakes like bright blue jewels.

It seemed to her as she stumbled upward among the broken stones

that the tower was climbing too. Time after time she gazed upon it, and time after time when she lifted her eyes after a grueling struggle up steep ravines, that mocking flicker of whiteness shimmered still high and unattainable on some distant peak. It had the mistiness of unreality, and if her talisman's guide had not pointed steadily upward she would have thought it an illusion to lead her astray.

But after what seemed hours of struggle, there came the time when, glancing up, she saw the shaft rising on the topmost peak of all, white as snow against the clear violet sky. And after that it shifted no more. She took heart now, for at last she seemed to be gaining. Every laborious step carried her nearer that lofty shining upon the mountain's highest peak.

She paused after a while, looking up and wiping the moisture from her forehead where the red curls clung. As she stood there something among the rocks moved, and out from behind a boulder a long, slinking feline creature came. It was not like any beast she had ever seen before. Its shining pelt was fabulously golden, brocaded with queer patterns of darker gold, and down against its heavy jaws curved two fangs whiter than ivory. With a grace as gliding as water it paced down the ravine toward her.

Jirel's heart contracted. Somehow she found the knife-hilt in her hand, though she had no recollection of having drawn it. She was staring hard at the lovely and terrible cat, trying to understand the haunting familiarity about its eyes. They were purple, like jewels. Slowly recognition dawned. She had met that purple gaze before, insolent under sleepy lids. Jarisme's eyes. Yes, and the snake in her dream had watched her with a purple stare too. Jarisme?

She closed her hand tightly about the crystal, knowing that she must conceal from the sorceress her one potent weapon, waiting until the time came to turn it against its maker. She shifted her knife so that

light glinted down the blade. They stood quite still for a moment, yellow-eyed woman and fabulous, purple-eyed cat, staring at each other with hostility eloquent in every line of each. Jirel clenched her knife tight, warily eyeing the steel-clawed paws on which the golden beast went so softly. They could have ripped her to ribbons before the blade struck home.

She saw a queer expression flicker across the somber purple gaze that met hers, and the beautiful cat crouched a little, tail jerking, lip twitched back to expose shining fangs. It was about to spring. For an interminable moment she waited for that hurtling golden death to launch itself upon her, tense, rigid, knife steady in her hand....

It sprang. She dropped to one knee in the split second of its leaping, instinctively hiding the crystal, but thrusting up her dagger in defense. The great beast sailed easily over her head. As it hurtled past, a peal of derisive laughter rang in her ears, and she heard quite clearly the sound of a slamming door. She scrambled up and whirled in one motion, knife ready. The defile was quite empty in the violet day. There was no door anywhere. Jarisme had vanished.

A little shaken, Jirel sheathed her blade. She was not afraid. Anger burned out all trace of fear as she remembered the scorn in that ringing laugh. She took up her course again toward the tower, white and resolute, not looking back.

The tower was drawing near again. She toiled upward. Jarisme showed no further sign of her presence, but Jirel felt eyes upon her, purple eyes, scornful and sleepy. She could see the tower clearly, just above her at the crest of the highest peak, up to which a long arc of steps curved steeply. They were very old, these steps, so worn that many were little more than irregularities on the stone. Jirel wondered what feet had worn them so, to what door they had originally led.

She was panting when she reached the top and peered in under the arch of the door. To her surprise she found herself staring into a broad, semicircular hallway, whose walls were lined with innumerable doors. She remembered the violet nothingness into which she had stepped the last time she crossed the sill, and wondered as she thrust a tentative foot over it if the hall were an illusion and she were really about to plunge once more into that cloudy abyss of falling. But the floor was firm.

She stepped inside and paused, looking round in some bewilderment and wondering where to turn now. She could smell peril in the air. Almost she could taste the magic that hovered like a mist over the whole enchanted place. Little warning prickles ran down her back as she went forward very softly and pushed open one of those innumerable doors. Behind it a gallery stretched down miles of haze-shrouded extent. Arrow-straight it ran, the arches of the ceiling making an endless parade that melted into violet distance. And as she stood looking down the cloudy vista, something like a puff of smoke obscured her vision for an instant--smoke that eddied and billowed and rolled away from the shape of that golden cat which had vanished in the mountain ravine.

It paced slowly down the hall toward her, graceful and lovely, muscles rippling under the brocaded golden coat and purple eyes fixed upon her in a scornful stare. Jirel's hand went to the knife in her belt, hatred choking up in her throat as she met the purple eyes. But in the corridor a voice was echoing softly, Jarisme's voice, saying,

"Then it is war between us, Jirel of Joiry. For you have defied my mercy, and you must be punished. Your punishment I have chosen--the simplest, and the subtlest, and the most terrible of all punishments, the worst that could befall a human creature. Can you guess it? No? Then wonder a while, for I am not prepared yet to

administer it fully... or shall I kill you now? Eh-h-h?..."

The curious, long-drawn query melted into a purring snarl, and the great cat's lip lifted, a flare of murderous light flaming up in the purple eyes. It had been pacing nearer all the while that light voice had echoed in the air. Now its roar crescendoed into a crashing thunder that rang from the walls, and the steel springs of its golden body tightened for a leap straight at Jirel's throat. Scarcely a dozen paces away, she saw the brocaded beauty of it crouching, taut and poised, saw the powerful body quiver and tighten--and spring. In instinctive panic she leaped back and slammed the door in its face.

Derisive laughter belled through the air. A cloud of thin smoke eddied through the crack around the door and puffed in her face with all the insolence of a blow. Then the air was clear again. The red mist of murder swam before Jirel's eyes. Blind with anger, breath beating thickly in her throat, she snatched at the door again, ripping the dagger from her belt. Through that furious haze she glared down the corridor. It was empty. She closed the door a second time and leaned against it, trembling with anger, until the mist had cleared from her head and she could control her shaking hand well enough to replace the dagger.

When she had calmed a little she turned to scan the hall, wondering what to do next. And she saw that there was no escape now, even had she wished, for the door she had entered by was gone. All about her now closed the door-studded walls, enigmatic, imprisoning. And the very fact of their presence was an insult, suggesting that Jarisme had feared she would flee if the entrance were left open. Jirel forced herself into calmness again. She was not afraid, but she knew herself in deadly peril.

She was revolving the sorceress'threat as she cast about for some indication to guide her next step. The simplest and subtlest and most

terrible of the punishments--what could it be? Jirel knew much of the ways of torture--her dungeons were as blood-stained as any of her neighbors'--but she knew too that Jarisme had not meant only the pain of the flesh. There was a subtler menace in her words. It would be a feminine vengeance, and more terrible than anything iron and fire could inflict. She knew that. She knew also that no door she could open now would lead to freedom, but she could not stay quiet, waiting. She glanced along the rows of dark, identical panels. Anything that magic could contrive might lie behind them. In the face of peril more deadly than death she could not resist the temptation to pull open the nearest one and peer within.

A gust of wind blew in her face and rattled the door. Dust was in that wind, and bitter cold. Through an inner grille of iron, locked across the opening, she saw a dazzle of whiteness like sun on snow in the instant before she slammed the door shut on the piercing gust. But the incident had whetted her curiosity. She moved along the wall and opened another.

This time she was looking through another locked grille into a dimness of gray smoke shot through with flame. The smell of burning rose in her nostrils, and she could hear faintly, as from vast distances, the sound of groans and the shivering echo of screams. Shuddering, she closed the door.

When she opened the next one she caught her breath and stared. Before her a thick crystal door separated her from bottomless space. She pressed her face to the cold glass and stared out and down. Nothingness met her gaze. Dark and silence and the blaze of unwinking stars. It was day outside the tower, but she looked into fathomless night. And as she stared, a long streak of light flashed across the blackness and faded. It was not a shooting star. By straining her eyes she could make out something like a thin sliver of silver flashing across the dark, its flaming tail fading behind it in the

sky. And the sight made her ill with sudden vertigo. Bottomless void reeled around her, and she fell back into the hallway, slamming the door upon that terrifying glimpse of starry nothingness.

It was several minutes before she could bring herself to try the next door. When she did, swinging it open timorously, a familiar sweetness of flower perfume floated out and she found herself gazing through a grille of iron bars deep into that drowsy jungle of blossoms and scent and silence which she had crossed at the mountain's foot. A wave of remembrance washed over her. For an instant she could hear those tiny, laughing voices again, and she felt the presence of the great snake at her side, and the wild, mirth-ridden secrets of the little gray voices rang in her ears. Then she was awake again, and the memory vanished as dreams do, leaving nothing but tantalizing fragments of forgotten secrets drifting through her mind. She knew as she stared that she could step straight into that flowery fairyland again if the bars would open. But there was no escape from this magical place, though she might look through any number of opening doors into far lands and near.

She was beginning to understand the significance of the hall. It must be from here that Jarisme by her magical knowledge journeyed into other lands and times and worlds through the doors that opened between her domain and those strange, outland places. Perhaps she had sorcerer friends there, and paid them visits and brought back greater knowledge, stepping from world to world, from century to century, through her enchanted doorways. Jirel felt certain that one of these enigmatic openings would give upon that mountain pass where the golden cat with its scornful purple eyes had sprung at her, and vanished, and laughed backward as the door slammed upon it, and upon the woodland glade where the dryad died. But she knew that bars would close these places away even if she could find them.

She went on with her explorations. One door opened upon a steamy

fern-forest of gigantic growths, out of whose deeps floated musky, reptilian odors, and the distant sound of beasts bellowing hollowly. And another upon a gray desert stretching flat and lifeless to the horizon, wan under the light of a dim red sun.

But at last she came to one that opened not into alien lands but upon a stairway winding down into solid rock whose walls showed the mark of the tools that had hollowed them. No sound came up the shaft of the stairs, and a gray light darkened down their silent reaches. Jirel peered in vain for some hint of what lay below. But at last, because inactivity had palled upon her and she knew that all ways were hopeless for escape, she entered the doorway and went slowly down the steps. It occurred to her that possibly she might find Jarisme below, engaged in some obscure magic in the lower regions, and she was eager to come to grips with her enemy.

The light darkened as she descended, until she was groping her way through obscurity round and round the curving stairs. When the steps ended at a depth she could not guess, she could tell that she had emerged into a low-roofed corridor only by feeling the walls and ceiling that met her exploring hands, for the thickest dark hid everything. She made her slow way along the stone hall, which wound and twisted and dipped at unexpected angles until she lost all sense of direction. But she knew she had gone a long way when she began to see the faint gleam of light ahead.

Presently she began to catch the faraway sound of a familiar song--Jarisme's monotonous little flute melody on two notes, and she was sure then that her intuition had been true, that the sorceress was down here somewhere. She drew her dagger in the gloom and went on more warily.

An arched opening ended the passage. Through the arch poured a blaze of dancing white luminance. Jirel paused, blinking and trying to

make out what strange place she was entering. The room before her was filled with the baffling glitter and shimmer and mirage of reflecting surfaces so bewilderingly that she could not tell which was real and which mirror, and which dancing light. The brilliance dazzled in her face and dimmed into twilight and blazed again as the mirrors shifted. Little currents of dark shivered through the chaos and brightened into white sparkle once more. That monotonous music came to her through the quivering lights and reflections, now strongly, now faintly in the distance.

The whole place was a chaos of blaze and confusion. She could not know if the room were small or large, a cavern or a palace hall. Queer reflections danced through the dazzle of it. She could see her own image looking back at her from a dozen, a score, a hundred moving planes that grotesquely distorted her and then flickered out again, casting a blaze of light in her blinded eyes. Dizzily she blinked into the reeling wilderness of planes.

Then she saw Jarisme in her violet robe watching her from a hundred identical golden couches reflected upon a hundred surfaces. The figure held a flute to its lips, and the music pulsed from it in perfect time with the pulsing of the sorceress's swelling white throat. Jirel stared round in confusion at the myriad Jarismes all piping the interminable monotones. A hundred sensual, dreamy faces turned to her, a hundred white arms dropped as the flute left a hundred red mouths that Jarisme might smile ironic welcome a hundredfold more scornful for its multiplicity.

When the music ceased, all the flashing dazzle suddenly stilled. Jirel blinked as the chaos resolved itself into shining order, the hundred Jarismes merging into one sleepy-eyed woman lounging upon her golden couch in a vast crystal-walled chamber shaped like the semicircular half of a great, round, domed room. Behind the couch a veil of violet mist hung like a curtain shutting off what would have

formed the other half of the circular room.

"Enter," said the sorceress with the graciousness of one who knows herself in full command of the situation. "I thought you might find the way here. I am preparing a ceremony which will concern you intimately. Perhaps you would like to watch? This is to be an experiment, and for that reason a greater honor is to be yours than you can ever have known before; for the company I am assembling to watch your punishment is a more distinguished one than you could understand. Come here, inside the circle."

Jirel advanced, dagger still clenched in one hand, the other closed about her bit of broken crystal. She saw now that the couch stood in the center of a ring engraved in the floor with curious, cabalistic symbols. Beyond it the cloudy violet curtain swayed and eddied within itself, a vast, billowing wall of mist. Dubiously she stepped over the circle and stood eyeing Jarisme, her yellow gaze hot with rigidly curbed emotion. Jarisme smiled and lifted the flute to her lips again.

As the irritating two notes began their seesawing tune Jirel saw something amazing happen. She knew then that the flute was a magic one, and the song magical too. The notes took on a form that overstepped the boundaries of the aural and partook in some inexplicable way of all the other senses too. She could feel them, taste them, smell them, see them. In a queer way they were visible, pouring in twos from the flute and dashing outward like little needles of light. The walls reflected them, and those reflections became swifter and brighter and more numerous until the air was full of flying slivers of silvery brilliance, until shimmers began to dance among them and over them, and that bewildering shift of mirrored planes started up once more. Again reflections crossed and dazzled and multiplied in the shining air as the flute poured out its flashing double notes.

Jirel forgot the sorceress beside her, the music that grated on her ears, even her own peril, in watching the pictures that shimmered and vanished in the mirrored surfaces. She saw flashes of scenes she had glimpsed through the doors of Jarisme's hallway. She saw stranger places than that, passing in instant-brief snatches over the silvery planes. She saw jagged black mountains with purple dawns rising behind them and stars in unknown figures across the dark skies; she saw gray seas flat and motionless beneath gray clouds; she saw smooth meadows rolling horizon-ward under the glare of double suns. All these and many more awoke to the magic of Jarisme's flute, and melted again to give way to others.

Jirel had the strange fancy, as the music went on, that it was audible in those lands whose brief pictures were flickering across the background of its visible notes. It seemed to be piercing immeasurable distances, ringing across the cloudy seas, echoing under the double suns, calling insistently in strange lands and far, unknown places, over deserts and mountains that man's feet had never trod, reaching other worlds and other times and crying its two-toned monotony through the darkness of interstellar space. All of this, to Jirel, was no more than a vague realization that it must be so. It meant nothing to her, whose world was a flat plane arched by the heaven-pierced bowl of the sky. Magic, she told herself, and gave up trying to understand.

Presently the tempo of the fluting changed. The same two notes still shrilled endlessly up and down, but it was no longer a clarion call ringing across borderlands into strange worlds. Now it was slower, statelier. And the notes of visible silver that had darted crazily against the crystal walls and reflected back again took on an order that ranked them into one shining plane. Upon that plane Jirel saw the outlines of a familiar scene gradually take shape. The great door-lined hall above mirrored itself in faithful replica before her eyes. The music went on changelessly.

Then, as she watched, one of those innumerable doors quivered. She held her breath. Slowly it swung open upon that gray desert under the red sun which she had seen before she closed it quickly away behind concealing panels. Again as she looked, that sense of utter desolation and weariness and despair came over her, so uncannily dreary was the scene. Now the door stood wide, its locked grille no longer closing it, and as the music went on she could see a dazzle like a jagged twist of lightning begin to shimmer in its aperture. The gleam strengthened. She saw it quiver once, twice, then sweep forward with blinding speed through the open doorway. And as she tried to follow it with her eyes another moving door distracted her.

This time the steamy fern-forest was revealed as the panels swung back. But upon the threshold sprawled something so frightful that Jirel's free hand flew to her lips and a scream beat up in her throat. It was black--shapeless and black and slimy. And it was alive. Like a heap of putrescently shining jelly it heaved itself over the doorsill and began to flow across the floor, inching its way along like a vast blind ameba. But she knew without being told that it was horribly wise, horribly old. Behind it a black trail of slime smeared the floor.

Jirel shuddered and turned her eyes away. Another door was swinging open. Through it she saw a place she had not chanced upon before, a country of bare red rock strewn jaggedly under a sky so darkly blue that it might have been black, with stars glimmering in it more clearly than stars of earth. Across this red, broken desert a figure came striding that she knew could be only a figment of magic, so tall it was, so spidery-thin, so grotesquely human despite its bulbous head and vast chest. She could not see it clearly, for about it like a robe it clutched a veil of blinding light. On those incredibly long, thin legs it stepped across the door-sill, drew its dazzling garment closer about it, and strode forward. As it neared, the light was so

blinding that she could not look upon it. Her averted eyes caught the motion of a fourth door.

This time she saw that flowery ravine again, dim in its underwater illusion of diffused light. And out from among the flowers writhed a great serpent-creature, not of the transparent crystal she had seen in her dream, but iridescently scaled. Nor was it entirely serpent, for from the thickened neck sprang a head which could not be called wholly unhuman. The thing carried itself as proudly as a cobra, and as it glided across the threshold its single, many-faceted eye caught Jirel's in the reflection. The eye flashed once, dizzily, and she reeled back in sick shock, the violence of that glance burning through her veins like fire. When she regained control of herself many other doors were standing open upon scenes both familiar and strange. During her daze other denizens of those strange worlds must have entered at the call of the magic flute.

She was just in time to see an utterly indescribable thing flutter into the hall from a world which so violated her eyes that she got no more than a glimpse of it as she flung up outraged hands to shut it out. She did not lower that shield until Jarisme's amused voice said in an undertone,

"Behold your audience, Jirel of Joiry," and she realized that the music had ceased and a vast silence was pressing against her ears. Then she looked out, and drew a long breath. She was beyond surprise and shock now, and she stared with the dazed incredulity of one who knows herself in a nightmare.

Ranged outside the circle that enclosed the two women sat what was surely the strangest company ever assembled. They were grouped with a queer irregularity which, though meaningless to Jirel, yet gave the impression of definite purpose and design. It had a symmetry so strongly marked that even though it fell outside her range of

comprehension she could not but feel the Tightness of it.

The light-robed dweller in the red barrens sat there, and the great black blob of shapeless jelly heaved gently on the crystal floor. She saw others she had watched enter, and many more. One was a female creature whose robe of peacock iridescence sprang from her shoulders in great drooping wings and folded round her like a bat's leathery cloak. And her neighbor was a fat gray slug of monster size, palpitating endlessly. One of the crowd looked exactly like a tall white lily swaying on a stalk of silver pallor, but from its chalice poured a light so ominously tinted that she shuddered and turned her eyes away.

Jarisme had risen from her couch. Very tall and regal in her violet robe, she rose against the back-drop of mist which veiled the other half of the room. As she lifted her arms, the incredible company turned to her with an eager expectancy. Jirel shuddered. Then Jarisme's flute spoke softly. It was a different sort of music from the clarion that called them together, from the stately melody which welcomed them through the opening doors. But it harped still on the two seesawing notes, with low, rippling sounds so different from the other two that Jirel marveled at the range of the sorceress'ability on the two notes.

For a few moments as the song went on, nothing happened. Then a motion behind Jarisme caught Jirel's eye. The curtain of violet mist was swaying. The music beat at it and it quivered to the tune. It shook within itself, and paled and thinned, and from behind it a light began to glow. Then on a last low monotone it dissipated wholly and Jirel was staring at a vast globe of quivering light which loomed up under the stupendous arch that soared outward to form the second half of the chamber.

As the last clouds faded she saw that the thing was a huge crystal

sphere, rising upon the coils of a translucent purple base in the shape of a serpent. And in the heart of the globe burned a still flame, living, animate, instinct with a life so alien that Jirel stared in utter bewilderment. It was a thing she knew to be alive--yet she knew it could not be alive. But she recognized even in her daze of incomprehension its relation to the tiny fragment of crystal she clutched in her hand. In that too the still flame burned. It stung her hand faintly in reminder that she possessed a weapon which could destroy Jarisme, though it might destroy its wielder in the process. The thought gave her a sort of desperate courage.

Jarisme was ignoring her now. She had turned to face the great globe with lifted arms and shining head thrown back. And from her lips a piercingly sweet sound fluted, midway between hum and whistle. Jirel had the wild fancy that she could see that sound arrowing straight into the heart of the vast sphere bulking so high over them all. And in the heart of that still, living flame a little glow of red began to quiver.

Through the trembling air shrilled a second sound. From the corner of her eye Jirel could see that a dark figure had moved forward into the circle and fallen to its knees at the sorceress's side. She knew it for Giraud. Like two blades the notes quivered in the utter hush that lay upon the assembly, and in the globe that red glow deepened.

One by one, other voices joined the chorus, queer, uncanny sounds some of them, from throats not shaped for speech. No two voices blended. The chorus was one of single, unrelated notes. And as each voice struck the globe, the fire burned more crimson, until its still pallor had flushed wholly into red. High above the rest soared Jarisme's knife-keen fluting. She lifted her arms higher, and the voices rose in answer. She lowered them, and the blade-like music swooped down an almost visible arc to a lower key. Jirel felt that she could all but see the notes spearing straight from each singer into the

vast sphere that dwarfed them all. There was no melody in it, but a sharply definite pattern as alien and unmistakable as the symmetry of their grouping in the room. And as Jarisme's arms rose, lifting the voices higher, the flame burned more deeply red, and paled again as the voices fell.

Three times that stately, violet-robed figure gestured with lifted arms, and three times the living flame deepened and paled. Then Jarisme's voice soared in a high, triumphant cry and she whirled with spread arms, facing the company. In one caught breath, all voices ceased. Silence fell upon them like a blow. Jarisme was no longer priestess, but goddess, as she fronted them in that dead stillness with exultant face and blazing eyes. And in one motion they bowed before her as corn bows under wind. Alien things, shapeless monsters, faceless, eyeless, unrecognizable creatures from unknowable dimensions, abased themselves to the crystal floor before the splendor of light in Jarisme's eyes. For a moment of utter silence the tableau held. Then the sorceress' arms fell.

Ripplingly the company rose. Beyond Jarisme the vast globe had paled again into that living, quiet flame of golden pallor. Immense, brooding, alive, it loomed up above them. Into the strained stillness Jarisme's low voice broke. She was speaking in Jirel's native tongue, but the air, as she went on, quivered thickly with something like waves of sound that were pitched for other organs than human ears. Every word that left her lips made another wave through the thickened air. The assembly shimmered before Jirel's eyes in that broken clarity as a meadow quivers under heat waves.

"Worshippers of the Light," said Jarisme sweetly, "be welcomed from your far dwellings into the presence of the Flame. We who serve it have called you to the worship, but before you return, another sort of ceremony is to be held, which we have felt will interest you all. For we have called it truly the simplest and subtlest and most terrible

of all punishments for a human creature.

"It is our purpose to attempt a reversal of this woman's physical and mental self in such a way as to cause her body to become rigidly motionless while her mind--her soul--looks eternally backward along the path it has traveled. You who are human, or have known humanity, will understand what deadly torture that can be. For no human creature, by the laws that govern it, can have led a life whose intimate review is anything but pain. To be frozen into eternal reflections, reviewing all the futility and pain of life, all the pain that thoughtless or intentional acts have caused others, all the spreading consequences of every act--that, to a human being, would be the most dreadful of all torments."

In the silence that fell as her voice ceased, Giraud laid a hand on Jarisme's arm. Jirel saw terror in his eyes.

"Remember," he uttered, "remember, for those who tamper with their known destiny a more fearful thing may come than--"

Jarisme shrugged off the restraining hand impatiently. She turned to Jirel.

"Know, earthling," she said in a queerly strained voice, "that in the books of the future it is written that Jarisme the Sorceress must die at the hands of the one human creature who defies her thrice--and that human creature a woman. Twice I have been weak, and spared you. Once in the forest, once on the roof-top, you cast your puny defiance in my face, and I stayed my hand for fear of what is written. But the third time shall not come. Though you are my appointed slayer, you shall not slay. With my own magic I break Fate's sequence, now, and we shall see!"

In the blaze of her purple eyes Jirel saw that the moment had come.

She braced herself, fingers closing about the fragment of crystal in her hand uncertainly as she hesitated, wondering if the time had come for the breaking of her talisman at the sorceress' feet. She hesitated too long, though her waiting was only a split second in duration. For Jarisme's magic was more supremely simple than Jirel could have guessed. The sorceress turned a blazing purple gaze upon her and sharply snapped her plump fingers in the earthwoman's face.

At the sound Jirel's whole world turned inside out about her. It was the sheerest physical agony. Everything vanished as that terrible shift took place. She felt her own body being jerked inexplicably around in a reversal like nothing that any living creature could ever have experienced before. It was a backward-facing in a direction which could have had no existence until that instant. She felt the newness in the second before sight came to her--a breathless, soundless, new-born now in which she was the first dweller, created simultaneously with the new plane of being. Then sight broke upon her consciousness.

The thing spread out before her was so stupendous that she would have screamed if she had possessed an animate body. All life was open to her gaze. The sight was too immeasurable for her to grasp it fully--too vast for her human consciousness to look upon at all save in flashing shutter-glimpses without relation or significance. Motion and immobility existed simultaneously in the thing before her. Endless activity shuttling to and fro--yet the whole vast panorama was frozen in a timeless calm through which a mighty pattern ran whose very immensity was enough to strike terror into her soul. Threaded through it the backward trail of her own life stretched. As she gazed upon it such floods of conflicting emotion washed over her that she could not see anything clearly, but she was fiercely insisting to her inner consciousness that she would not--would not--look back, dared not, could not--and all the while her sight was running past days and

weeks along the path which led inexorably toward the one scene she could not bear to think of.

Very remotely, as her conscious sight retraced the backward way, she was aware of overlapping planes of existence in the stretch of limitless activity before her. Shapes other than human, scenes that had no meaning to her, quivered and shifted and boiled with changing lives--yet lay motionless in the mighty pattern. She scarcely heeded them. For her, of all that panoramic impossibility one scene alone had meaning--the one scene toward which her sight was racing now, do what she would to stop it--the one scene that she knew she could never bear to see again.

Yet when her sight reached that place the pain did not begin at once. She gazed almost calmly upon that little interval of darkness and flaring light, the glare of torches shining upon a girl's bent red head and on a man's long body sprawled motionless upon flagstones. In the deepest stillness she stared. She felt no urge to look farther, on beyond the scene into the past. This was the climax, the center of all her life--this torch-lit moment on the flagstones. Vividly she was back again in the past, felt the hardness of the cold flags against her knees, and the numbness of her heart as she stared down into a dead man's face. Tunelessly she dwelt upon that long-ago heartbreak, and within her something swelled unbearably.

That something was a mounting emotion too great to have name, too complexly blending agony and grief and hatred and love--and rebellion; so strong that all the rest of the stupendous thing before her was blotted out in the gathering storm of what seethed in her innermost consciousness. She was aware of nothing but that overwhelming emotion. And it was boiling into one great unbearable explosion of violence in which rage took precedence over all. Rage at life for permitting such pain to be. Rage at Jarisme for forcing her into memory. Such rage that everything shook before it, and melted

and ran together in a heat of rebellion, and--something snapped. The panorama reeled and shivered and collapsed into the dark of semi-oblivion.

Through the clouds of her half-consciousness the agony of change stabbed at her. Half understanding, she welcomed it, though the piercing anguish of that reversal was so strong it dragged her out of her daze again and wrung her anew in the grinding pain of that change which defied all natural laws. In heedless impatience she waited for the torture to pass. Exultation was welling up in her, for she knew that her own violence had melted the spell by which Jarisme held her. She knew what she must do when she stood free again, and conscious power flowed intoxicatingly through her.

She opened her eyes. She was standing rigidly before the great fire-quicken globe. The amazing company was grouped around her intently, and Jarisme, facing her, had taken one angry, incredulous step forward as she saw her own spell break. Upon that tableau Jirel's hot yellow eyes opened, and she laughed in grim exultation and swung up her arm. Violet light glinted upon crystal.

In the instant Jarisme saw what she intended, convulsive terror wiped all other expression from her face. A cry of mingled inarticulateness thundered up from the transfixed crowd. Giraud started forward from among them, frantic hands clawing out toward her.

"No, no!" shrieked Jarisme. "Wait!"

It was too late. The crystal dashed itself from Jirel's down-swinging arm, the light in it blazing. With a splintering crash it struck the floor at the sorceress's sandaled feet and flew into shining fragments.

For an instant nothing happened. Jirel held her breath, waiting. Giraud had flung himself flat on the shining floor, reaching out for her

in a last desperate effort. His hands had flown out to seize her, and found only her ankles. He clung to them now with a paralyzed grip, his face hidden between his arms. Jarisme cowered motionless, arms clasped about her head as if she were trying to hide. The motley throng of watchers was rigid in fatalistic quiet. In tense silence they waited.

Then in the great globe above them the pale flame flickered. Jarisme's gaspingly caught breath sounded loud in the utter quiet. Again the flame shook. And again. Then abruptly it went out. Darkness stunned them for a moment; then a low muttering roar rumbled up out of the stillness, louder and deeper and stronger until it pressed unbearably upon Jirel's ears and her head was one great aching surge of sound. Above that roar a sharply crackling noise broke, and the crystal walls of the room trembled, reeled dizzily--split open in long jagged rents through which the violet day poured in thin fingers of light. Overhead the shattering sound of falling walls roared loud. Jarisme's magic tower was crumbling all around them. Through the long, shivering cracks in the walls the pale violet day poured more strongly, serene in the chaos.

In that clear light Jirel saw a motion among the throng. Jarisme had risen to her full height. She saw the sleek black head go up in an odd, defiant, desperate poise, and above the soul-shaking tumult she heard the sorceress'voice scream,

"Urda! Urda--sla!"

In the midst of the roar of the falling walls for the briefest instant a deathly silence dropped. And out of that silence, like an answer to the sorceress'cry, came a Noise, an indescribable, intolerable loudness like the crack of cyclopean thunder. And suddenly in the sky above them, visible through the crumbling crystal walls, a long black wedge opened. It was like a strip of darkest midnight splitting the

violet day, a midnight through which stars shone unbearably near, unbearably bright.

Jirel stared up in dumb surprise at that streak of starry night cleaving the daylight sky. Jarisme stood rigid, arms outstretched, defiantly fronting the thunderous dark whose apex was drawing nearer and nearer, driving downward like a vast celestial spear. She did not flinch as it reached toward the tower. Jirel saw the darkness sweep forward like a racing shadow. Then it was upon them, and the earth shuddered under her feet, and from very far away she heard Jarisme scream.

When consciousness returned to her, she sat up painfully and stared around. She lay upon green grass, bruised and aching, but unharmed. The violet day was serene and unbroken once more. The purple peaks had vanished. No longer was she high among mountains. Instead, the green meadow where she had first seen Jarisme's tower stretched about her. In its dissolution it must have returned to its original site, flashing back along the magical ways it had traveled as the sorceress' magic was broken. For the tower too was gone. A little distance away she saw a heap of marble blocks outlining a rough circle, where that white shaft had risen. But the stones were weathered and cracked like the old, old stones of an ancient ruin.

She had been staring at this for many minutes, trying to focus her bewildered mind upon its significance, before the sound of groaning which had been going on for some time impressed itself on her brain. She turned. A little way off, Giraud lay in a tangle of torn black robes. Of Jarisme and the rest she saw no sign. Painfully she got to her feet and staggered to the wizard, turning him over with a disdainful toe. He opened his eyes and stared at her with a cloudy gaze into which recognition and realization slowly crept.

"Are you hurt?" she demanded.

He pulled himself to a sitting position and flexed his limbs experimentally. Finally he shook his head, more in answer to his own investigation than to her query, and got slowly to his feet. Jirel's eyes sought the weapon at his hip.

"I am going to kill you now," she said calmly. "Draw your sword, wizard."

The little dull eyes flashed up to her face. He stared. Whatever he saw in the yellow gaze must have satisfied him that she meant what she said, but he did not draw, nor did he fall back. A tight little smile drew his mouth askew, and he lifted his black-robed arms. Jirel saw them rise, and her gaze followed the gesture automatically. Up they went, up. And then in the queerest fashion she lost all control of her own eyes, so that they followed some invisible upward line which drew her on and on skyward until she was rigidly staring at a fixed point of invisibility at the spot where the lines of Giraud's arms would have crossed, where they extended to a measureless distance. Somehow she actually saw that point, and could not look away. Grippled in the magic of those lifted arms, she stood rigid, not even realizing what had happened, unable even to think in the moveless magic of Giraud.

His little mocking chuckle reached her from immeasurably far away.

"Kill me?" he was laughing thickly. "Kill me, Giraud? Why, it was you who saved me, Joiry! Why else should I have clung to your ankles so tightly? For I knew that when the Light died, the only one who could hope to live would be the one who slew it--nor was that a certainty, either. But I took the risk, and well I did, or I would be with Jarisme now in the outer dark whence she called up her no-god of the void to save her from oblivion. I warned her what would happen if she

tampered with Fate. And I would rather--yes, much rather--be here, in this pleasant violet land which I shall rule alone now. Thanks to you, Joiry! Kill me, eh? I think not!"

That thick, mocking chuckle reached her remotely, penetrated her magic-stilled mind. It echoed round and round there, for a long while, before she realized what it meant. But at last she remembered, and her mind woke a little from its inertia, and such anger swept over her that its heat was an actual pain. Giraud, the runaway sorcerer, laughing at Joiry! Holding Jirel of Joiry in his spell! Mocking her! Blindly she wrenched at the bonds of magic, blindly urged her body forward. She could see nothing but that non-existent point where the lifted arms would have crossed, in measureless distances, but she felt the dagger-hilt in her hand, and she lunged forward through invisibility, and did not even know when the blade sank home.

Sight returned to her then in a stunning flood. She rubbed dazed eyes and shook herself and stared round the green meadow in the violet day uncomprehendingly, for her mind was not yet fully awake. Not until she looked down did she remember.

Giraud lay there. The black robes were furled like wings over his quiet body, but red in a thick flood was spreading on the grass, and from the tangled garments her dagger-hilt stood up. Jirel stared down at him, emotionless, her whole body still almost asleep from the power of the dead man's magic. She could not even feel triumph. She pulled the blade free automatically and wiped it on his robes. Then she sat down beside the body and rested her head in her hands, forcing herself to awaken.

After a long while she looked up again, the old hot light rising in her eyes, life flushing back into her face once more. Shaking off the last shreds of the spell, she got to her feet, sheathing the dagger. About her the violet-misted meadows were very still. No living creature

moved anywhere in sight. The trees were motionless in the unstirring air. And beyond the ruins of the marble tower she saw the opening in the woods out of which her path had come, very long ago.

Jirel squared her shoulders and turned her back upon her vow fulfilled, and without a backward glance set off across the grass toward the tree-hid ruins which held the gate to home.

Mimsy Were the Borogoves

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There's no use trying to describe either Unthahorsten or his surroundings, because, for one thing, a good many million years had passed and, for another, Unthahorsten wasn't on Earth, technically speaking. He was doing the equivalent of standing in the equivalent of a laboratory. He was preparing to test his time machine.

Having turned on the power, Unthahorsten suddenly realized that the Box was empty. Which wouldn't do at all. The device needed a control, a three-dimensional solid which would react to the conditions of another age. Otherwise Unthahorsten couldn't tell, on the machine's return, where and when it had been. Whereas a solid in the Box would automatically be subject to the entropy and cosmic-ray bombardment of the other era, and Unthahorsten could measure the changes, both qualitative and quantitative, when the machine returned. The Calculators could then get to work and, presently, tell Unthahorsten that the Box had briefly visited a.d. 1,000,000, a.d. 1,000, or a.d. 1, as the case might be.

Not that it mattered, except to Unthahorsten. But he was childish in many respects.

There was little time to waste. The Box was beginning to glow and shiver. Unthahorsten stared around wildly, fled into the next glossatch and groped in a storage bin there. He came up with an armful of peculiar-looking stuff. Uh-huh. Some of the discarded toys of his son Snowen, which the boy had brought with him when he had passed over from Earth, after mastering the necessary technique. Well, Snowen needed this junk no longer. He was conditioned, and had

put away childish things. Besides, though Unthahorsten's wife kept the toys for sentimental reasons, the experiment was more important.

Unthahorsten left the glossatch and dumped the assortment into the Box, slamming the cover shut before the warning signal flashed. The Box went away. The manner of its departure hurt Unthahorsten's eyes.

He waited.

And he waited.

Eventually he gave up and built another time machine, with identical results. Snowen hadn't been annoyed by the loss of his old toys, nor had Snowen's mother, so Unthahorsten cleaned out the bin and dumped the remainder of his son's childhood relics in the second time machine's Box.

According to his calculations, this one should have appeared on Earth in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a.d. If that actually occurred, the device remained there.

Disgusted, Unthahorsten decided to make no more time machines. But the mischief had been done. There were two of them, and the first....

Scott Paradine found it while he was playing hooky from the Glendale Grammar School. There was a geography test that day, and Scott saw no sense in memorizing place names--which, in the nineteen-forties, was a fairly sensible theory. Besides, it was the sort of warm spring day, with a touch of coolness in the breeze, which invited a boy to lie down in a field and stare at the occasional clouds till he fell asleep. Nuts to geography! Scott dozed.

About noon he got hungry, so his stocky legs carried him to a nearby store. There he invested his small hoard with penurious care and a sublime disregard for his gastric juices. He went down by the creek to feed.

Having finished his supply of cheese, chocolate and cookies, and having drained the soda-pop bottle to its dregs, Scott caught tadpoles and studied them with a certain amount of scientific curiosity. He did not persevere. Something tumbled down the bank and thudded into the muddy ground near the water, so Scott, with a wary glance around, hurried to investigate.

It was a box. It was, in fact, the Box. The gadgetry hitched to it meant little to Scott, though he wondered why it was so fused and burned. He pondered. With his jack-knife he pried and probed, his tongue sticking out from a corner of his mouth— Hm-m-m. Nobody was around. Where had the box come from? Somebody must have left it here, and sliding soil had dislodged it from its precarious perch.

"That's a helix," Scott decided, quite erroneously. It was helical, but it wasn't a helix, because of the dimensional warp involved. Had the thing been a model airplane, no matter how complicated, it would have held few mysteries to Scott. As it was, a problem was posed. Something told Scott that the device was a lot more complicated than the spring motor he had deftly dismantled last Friday.

But no boy has ever left a box unopened, unless forcibly dragged away. Scott probed deeper. The angles on this thing were funny. Short circuit, probably. That was why—uh! The knife slipped. Scott sucked his thumb and gave vent to experienced blasphemy.

Maybe it was a music box.

Scott shouldn't have felt depressed. The gadgetry would have given

Einstein a headache and driven Steinmetz raving mad. The trouble was, of course, that the box had not yet completely entered the space-time continuum where Scott existed, and therefore it could not be opened—at any rate, not till Scott used a convenient rock to hammer the helical non-helix into a more convenient position.

He hammered it, in fact, from its contact point with the fourth dimension, releasing the space-time torsion it had been maintaining. There was a brittle snap. The box jarred slightly, and lay motionless, no longer only partially in existence. Scott opened it easily now.

The soft, woven helmet was the first thing that caught his eye, but he discarded that without much interest. It was just a cap. Next, he lifted a square, transparent crystal block, small enough to cup in his palm—much too small to contain the maze of apparatus within it. In a moment Scott had solved that problem. The crystal was a sort of magnifying glass, vastly enlarging the things inside the block. Strange things they were, too. Miniature people, for example.

They moved, like clockwork automatons, though much more smoothly. It was rather like watching a play. Scott was interested in their costumes, but fascinated by their actions. The tiny people were deftly building a house. Scott wished it would catch fire, so he could see the people put it out.

Flames licked up from the half-completed structure. The automatons, with a great deal of odd apparatus, extinguished the blaze.

It didn't take Scott long to catch on. But he was a little worried. The manikins would obey his thoughts. By the time he discovered that, he was frightened and threw the cube from him.

Halfway up the bank, he reconsidered and returned. The crystal lay partly in the water, shining in the sun. It was a toy; Scott sensed that,

with the unerring instinct of a child. But he didn't pick it up immediately. Instead, he returned to the box and investigated its remaining contents.

He found some really remarkable gadgets. The afternoon passed all too quickly. Scott finally put the toys back in the box and lugged it home, grunting and puffing. He was quite red-faced by the time he arrived at the kitchen door.

His find he hid at the back of a closet in his room upstairs. The crystal cube he slipped into his pocket, which already bulged with string, a coil of wire, two pennies, a wad of tinfoil, a grimy defense stamp and a chunk of feldspar. Emma, Scott's two-year-old sister, waddled unsteadily in from the hall and said hello.

"Hello, Slug," Scott nodded, from his altitude of seven years and some months. He patronized Emma shockingly, but she didn't know the difference. Small, plump and wide-eyed, she flopped down on the carpet and stared dolefully at her shoes.

"Tie 'em, Scotty, please?"

"Sap," Scott told her kindly, but knotted the laces. "Dinner ready yet?"

Emma nodded.

"Let's see your hands." For a wonder they were reasonably clean, though probably not aseptic. Scott regarded his own paws thoughtfully and, grimacing, went to the bathroom, where he made a sketchy toilet. The tadpoles had left traces.

Dennis Paradine and his wife Jane were having a cocktail before dinner, downstairs in the living room. He was a youngish, middle-aged man with soft gray hair and a thin, prim-mouthed face; he

taught philosophy at the University. Jane was small, neat, dark and very pretty. She sipped her Martini and said:

"New shoes. Like 'em?"

"Here's to crime," Paradine muttered absently. "Huh? Shoes? Not now. Wait till I've finished this. I had a bad day."

"Exams?"

"Yeah. Flaming youth aspiring towards manhood. I hope they die. In considerable agony. Insh'Allah!"

"I want the olive," Jane requested.

"I know," Paradine said despondently. "It's been years since I've tasted one myself. In a Martini, I mean. Even if I put six of 'em in your glass, you're still not satisfied."

"I want yours. Blood brotherhood. Symbolism. That's why."

Paradine regarded his wife balefully and crossed his long legs. "You sound like one of my students."

"Like that hussy Betty Dawson, perhaps?" Jane unsheathed her nails. "Does she still leer at you in that offensive way?"

"She does. The child is a neat psychological problem. Luckily she isn't mine. If she were--" Paradine nodded significantly. "Sex consciousness and too many movies. I suppose she still thinks she can get a passing grade by showing me her knees. Which are, by the way, rather bony."

Jane adjusted her skirt with an air of complacent pride. Paradine uncoiled himself and poured fresh Martinis. "Candidly, I don't see the

point of teaching those apes philosophy. They're all at the wrong age. Their habit patterns, their methods of thinking, are already laid down. They're horribly conservative, not that they'd admit it. The only people who can understand philosophy are mature adults or kids like Emma and Scotty."

"Well, don't enroll Scotty in your course," Jane requested. "He isn't ready to be a Philosophiae Doctor. I hold no brief for a child genius, especially when it's my son."

"Scotty would probably be better at it than Betty Dawson," Paradine grunted.

"He died an enfeebled old dotard at five," Jane quoted dreamily. "I want your olive."

"Here. By the way, I like the shoes."

"Thank you. Here's Rosalie. Dinner?"

"It's all ready, Miz Pa'dine," said Rosalie, hovering. "I'll call Miss Emma 'n'Mista'Scotty."

"I'll get 'em." Paradine put his head into the next room and roared, "Kids! Come and get it!"

Small feet scattered down the stairs. Scott dashed into view, scrubbed and shining, a rebellious cowlick aimed at the zenith. Emma pursued, levering herself carefully down the steps. Halfway, she gave up the attempt to descend upright and reversed, finishing the task monkey-fashion, her small behind giving an impression of marvellous diligence upon the work in hand. Paradine watched, fascinated by the spectacle, till he was hurled back by the impact of his son's body.

"Hi, Dad!" Scott shrieked.

Paradine recovered himself and regarded Scott with dignity. "Hi, yourself. Help me in to dinner. You've dislocated at least one of my hip joints."

But Scott was already tearing into the next room, where he stepped on Jane's new shoes in an ecstasy of affection, burred an apology and rushed off to find his place at the dinner table. Paradine cocked up an eyebrow as he followed, Emma's pudgy hand desperately gripping his forefinger.

"Wonder what the young devil's been up to."

"No good, probably," Jane sighed. "Hello, darling. Let's see your ears."

"They're clean. Mickey licked 'em."

"Well, that Airedale's tongue is far cleaner than your ears," Jane pondered, making a brief examination. "Still, as long as you can hear, the dirt's only superficial."

"Fisshul?"

"Just a little, that means." Jane dragged her daughter to the table and inserted her legs into a high chair. Only lately had Emma graduated to the dignity of dining with the rest of the family, and she was, as Paradine remarked, all eaten up with pride by the prospect. Only babies spilled food, Emma had been told. As a result, she took such painstaking care in conveying her spoon to her mouth that Paradine got the jitters whenever he watched.

"A conveyor belt would be the thing for Emma," he suggested, pulling out a chair for Jane. "Small buckets of spinach arriving at her face at

stated intervals."

Dinner proceeded uneventfully until Paradine happened to glance at Scott's plate. "Hello, there. Sick? Been stuffing yourself at lunch?"

Scott thoughtfully examined the food still left before him. "I've had all I need, Dad," he explained.

"You usually eat all you can hold, and a great deal more," Paradine said. "I know growing boys need several tons of foodstuff a day, but you're below par tonight. Feel o.k.?"

"Uh-huh. Honest, I've had all I need."

"All you want?"

"Sure. I eat different."

"Something they taught you at school?" Jane inquired. Scott shook his head solemnly.

"Nobody taught me. I found it out myself. I use spit."

"Try again," Paradine suggested. "It's the wrong word."

"Uh--s-saliva. Hm-m-m?"

"Uh-huh. More pepsin? Is there pepsin in the salivary juices, Jane? I forget."

"There's poison in mine," Jane remarked. "Rosalie's left lumps in the mashed potatoes again."

But Paradine was interested. "You mean you're getting everything possible out of your food--no wastage--and eating less?"

Scott thought that over. "I guess so. It's not just the sp--saliva. I sort of measure how much to put in my mouth at once, and what stuff to mix up. I dunno. I just do it."

"Hm-m-m," said Paradine, making a note to check up later. "Rather a revolutionary idea." Kids often get screwy notions, but this one might not be so far off the beam. He pursed his lips. "Eventually I suppose people will eat quite differently--I mean the way they eat, as well as what. What they eat, I mean. Jane, our son shows signs of becoming a genius."

"Oh?"

"It's a rather good point in dietetics he just made. Did you figure it out yourself, Scott?"

"Sure," the boy said, and really believed it.

"Where'd you get the idea?"

"Oh, I--" Scott wriggled. "I dunno. It doesn't mean much, I guess."

Paradine was unreasonably disappointed. "But surely--"

"S-s-s-spit!" Emma shrieked, overcome by a sudden fit of badness. "Spit!" She attempted to demonstrate, but succeeded only in dribbling into her bib.

With a resigned air Jane rescued and reproved her daughter, while Paradine eyed Scott with rather puzzled interest. But it was not till after dinner, in the living room, that anything further happened.

"Any homework?"

"N-no," Scott said, flushing guiltily. To cover his embarrassment he

took from his pocket a gadget he had found in the box, and began to unfold it. The result resembled a tesseract, strung with beads. Paradine didn't see it at first, but Emma did. She wanted to play with it.

"No. Lay off, Slug," Scott ordered. "You can watch me." He fumbled with the beads, making soft, interested noises. Emma extended a fat forefinger and yelped.

"Scotty," Paradine said warningly.

"I didn't hurt her."

"Bit me. It did," Emma mourned.

Paradine looked up. He frowned, staring. What in-- "Is that an abacus?" he asked. "Let's see it, please."

Somewhat unwillingly, Scott brought the gadget across to his father's chair. Paradine blinked. The "abacus," unfolded, was more than a foot square, composed of thin, rigid wires that interlocked here and there. On the wires the colored beads were strung. They could be slid back and forth, and from one support to another, even at the points of jointure. But--a pierced bead couldn't cross interlocking wires.

So, apparently, they weren't pierced. Paradine looked closer. Each small sphere had a deep groove running around it, so that it could be revolved and slid along the wire at the same time. Paradine tried to pull one free. It clung as though magnetically. Iron? It looked more like plastic.

The framework itself-- Paradine wasn't a mathematician. But the angles formed by the wires were vaguely shocking, in their ridiculous lack of Euclidean logic. They were a maze. Perhaps that's what the

gadget was--a puzzle.

"Where'd you get this?"

"Uncle Harry gave it to me," Scott said, on the spur of the moment. "Last Sunday, when he came over." Uncle Harry was out of town, a circumstance Scott well knew. At the age of seven, a boy soon learns that the vagaries of adults follow a certain definite pattern, and that they are fussy about the donors of gifts. Moreover, Uncle Harry would not return for several weeks; the expiration of that period was unimaginable to Scott, or, at least, the fact that his lie would ultimately be discovered meant less to him than the advantages of being allowed to keep the toy.

Paradine found himself growing slightly confused as he attempted to manipulate the beads. The angles were vaguely illogical. It was like a puzzle. This red bead, if slid along this wire to that junction, should reach there--but it didn't. A maze, odd, but no doubt instructive. Paradine had a well-founded feeling that he'd have no patience with the thing himself.

Scott did, however, retiring to a corner and sliding beads around with much fumbling and grunting. The beads did sting, when Scott chose the wrong ones or tried to slide them in the wrong direction. At last he crowed exultantly.

"I did it, Dad!"

"Eh? What? Let's see." The device looked exactly the same to Paradine, but Scott pointed and beamed.

"I made it disappear."

"It's still there."

"That blue bead. It's gone now."

Paradine didn't believe that, so he merely snorted. Scott puzzled over the framework again. He experimented. This time there were no shocks, even slight. The abacus had showed him the correct method. Now it was up to him to do it on his own. The bizarre angles of the wires seemed a little less confusing now, somehow.

It was a most instructive toy-- It worked, Scott thought, rather like the crystal cube. Reminded of that gadget, he took it from his pocket and relinquished the abacus to Emma, who was struck dumb with joy. She fell to work sliding the beads, this time without protesting against the shocks--which, indeed, were very minor--and, being imitative, she managed to make a bead disappear almost as quickly as had Scott. The blue bead reappeared--but Scott didn't notice. He had forethoughtfully retired into an angle of the chesterfield and an overstuffed chair and amused himself with the cube.

There were the little people inside the thing, tiny manikins much enlarged by the magnifying properties of the crystal. They moved, all right. They built a house. It caught fire, with realistic-seeming flames, and the little people stood by waiting. Scott puffed urgently. "Put it out!"

But nothing happened. Where was that queer fire engine, with revolving arms, that had appeared before? Here it was. It came sailing into the picture and stopped. Scott urged it on.

This was fun. The little people really did what Scott told them, inside of his head. If he made a mistake, they waited till he'd found the right way. They even posed new problems for him.

The cube, too, was a most instructive toy. It was teaching Scott, with alarming rapidity--and teaching him very entertainingly. But it gave

him no really new knowledge as yet. He wasn't ready. Later... later....

Emma grew tired of the abacus and went in search of Scott. She couldn't find him, even in his room, but once there the contents of the closet intrigued her. She discovered the box. It contained a treasure-trove: a doll, which Scott had already noticed but discarded with a sneer. Squealing, Emma brought the doll downstairs, squatted in the middle of the floor and began to take it apart.

"Darling! What's that?"

"Mr. Bear!"

Obviously it wasn't Mr. Bear, who was blind, earless, but comforting in his soft fatness. But all dolls were named Mr. Bear to Emma.

Jane Paradine hesitated. "Did you take that from some other little girl?"

"I didn't. She's mine."

Scott came out from his hiding place, thrusting the cube into his pocket. "Uh--that's from Uncle Harry."

"Did Uncle Harry give that to you, Emma?"

"He gave it to me for Emma," Scott put in hastily, adding another stone to his foundation of deceit. "Last Sunday."

"You'll break it, dear."

Emma brought the doll to her mother. "She comes apart. See?"

"Oh? It--ugh!" Jane sucked in her breath. Paradine looked up quickly.

"What's up?"

She brought the doll over to him, hesitated and then went into the dining room, giving Paradine a significant glance. He followed, closing the door. Jane had already placed the doll on the cleared table.

"This isn't very nice is it, Denny?"

"Hm-m-m." It was rather unpleasant, at first glance. One might have expected an anatomical dummy in a medical school, but a child's doll.

The thing came apart in sections--skin, muscles, organs--miniature but quite perfect, as far as Paradine could see. He was interested. "Dunno. Such things haven't the same connotations to a kid."

"Look at that liver. Is it a liver?"

"Sure. Say, l--this is funny."

"What?"

"It isn't anatomically perfect, after all." Paradine pulled up a chair. "The digestive tract's too short. No large intestine. No appendix, either."

"Should Emma have a thing like this?"

"I wouldn't mind having it myself," Paradine said. "Where on earth did Harry pick it up? No, I don't see any harm in it. Adults are conditioned to react unpleasantly to innards. Kids don't. They figure they're solid inside, like a potato. Emma can get a sound working knowledge of physiology from this doll."

"But what are those? Nerves?"

"No, these are the nerves. Arteries here; veins here. Funny sort of aorta." Paracline looked baffled. "That--what's Latin for network, anyway, huh? Rita? Rata?"

"Rales," Jane suggested at random.

"That's a sort of breathing," Paradine said crushingly. "I can't figure out what this luminous network of stuff is. It goes all through the body, like nerves."

"Blood."

"Nope. Not circulatory, not neural. Funny! It seems to be hooked up with the lungs."

They became engrossed, puzzling over the strange doll. It was made with remarkable perfection of detail, and that in itself was strange, in view of the physiological variation from the norm. "Wait'll I get that Gould," Paradine said, and presently was comparing the doll with anatomical charts. He learned little, except to increase his bafflement.

But it was more fun than a jigsaw puzzle.

Meanwhile, in the adjoining room, Emma was sliding the beads to and fro in the abacus. The motions didn't seem so strange now. Even when the beads vanished. She could almost follow that new direction--almost...

Scott panted, staring into the crystal cube and mentally directing, with many false starts, the building of a structure somewhat more complicated than the one which had been destroyed by fire. He, too, was learning--being conditioned....

Paradine's mistake, from a completely anthropomorphic standpoint, was that he didn't get rid of the toys instantly. He did not realize their significance, and, by the time he did, the progression of circumstances had got well under way. Uncle Harry remained out of town, so Paradine couldn't check with him. Too, the midterm exams were on, which meant arduous mental effort and complete exhaustion at night; and Jane was slightly ill for a week or so. Emma and Scott had free rein with the toys.

"What," Scott asked his father one evening, "is a wabe, Dad?"

"Wave?"

He hesitated. "I--don't think so. Isn't 'wabe' right?"

" 'Wabe' is Scot for 'web.' That it?"

"I don't see how," Scott muttered, and wandered off, scowling, to amuse himself with the abacus. He was able to handle it quite deftly now. But, with the instinct of children for avoiding interruption, he and Emma usually played with the toys in private. Not obviously, of course--but the more intricate experiments were never performed under the eye of an adult.

Scott was learning fast. What he now saw in the crystal cube had little relationship to the original simple problems. But they were fascinatingly technical. Had Scott realized that his education was being guided and supervised--though merely mechanically--he would probably have lost interest. As it was, his initiative was never quashed.

Abacus, cube, doll and other toys the children found in the box.

Neither Paradine nor Jane guessed how much of an effect the

contents of the time machine were having on the kids. How could they? Youngsters are instinctive dramatists, for purposes of self-protection. They have not yet fitted themselves to the exigencies--to them partially inexplicable--of a mature world. Moreover, their lives are complicated by human variables. They are told by one person that playing in the mud is permissible, but that, in their excavations, they must not uproot flowers or small trees. Another adult vetoes mud per se. The Ten Commandments are not carved on stone--they vary; and children are helplessly dependent on the caprice of those who give them birth and feed and clothe them. And tyrannize. The young animal does not resent that benevolent tyranny, for it is an essential part of nature. He is, however, an individualist, and maintains his integrity by a subtle, passive fight.

Under the eyes of an adult he changes. Like an actor on stage, when he remembers, he strives to please, and also to attract attention to himself. Such attempts are not unknown to maturity. But adults are less obvious--to other adults.

It is difficult to admit that children lack subtlety. Children are different from mature animals because they think in another way. We can more or less easily pierce the pretenses they set up, but they can do the same to us. Ruthlessly a child can destroy the pretenses of an adult. Iconoclasm is a child's prerogative.

Foppishness, for example. The amenities of social intercourse, exaggerated not quite to absurdity. The gigolo--

"Such savoir-faire! Such punctilious courtesy!" The dowager and the blonde young thing are often impressed. Men have less pleasant comments to make. But the child goes to the root of the matter.

"You're silly!"

How can an immature human being understand the complicated system of social relationships? He can't. To him, an exaggeration of natural courtesy is silly. In his functional structure of life patterns, it is rococo. He is an egotistic little animal who cannot visualize himself in the position of another—certainly not an adult. A self-contained, almost perfect natural unit, his wants supplied by others, the child is much like a unicellular creature floating in the bloodstream, nutriment carried to him, waste products carried away.

From the standpoint of logic, a child is rather horribly perfect. A baby must be even more perfect, but so alien to an adult that only superficial standards of comparison apply. The thought processes of an infant are completely unimaginable. But babies think, even before birth. In the womb they move and sleep, not entirely through instinct. We are conditioned to react rather peculiarly to the idea that a nearly viable embryo may think. We are surprised, shocked into laughter and repelled. Nothing human is alien.

But a baby is not human. An embryo is far less human.

That, perhaps, was why Emma learned more from the toys than did Scott. He could communicate his thoughts, of course; Emma could not, except in cryptic fragments. The matter of the scrawls, for example.

Give a young child pencil and paper, and he will draw something which looks different to him than to an adult. The absurd scribbles have little resemblance to a fire engine, but it is a fire engine, to a baby. Perhaps it is even three-dimensional. Babies think differently and see differently.

Paradine brooded over that, reading his paper one evening and watching Emma and Scott communicate. Scott was questioning his sister. Sometimes he did it in English. More often he had resource to

gibberish and sign language. Emma tried to reply, but the handicap was too great.

Finally Scott got pencil and paper. Emma liked that. Tongue in cheek, she laboriously wrote a message. Scott took the paper, examined it and scowled.

"That isn't right, Emma," he said.

Emma nodded vigorously. She seized the pencil again and made more scrawls. Scott puzzled for a while, finally smiled rather hesitantly and got up. He vanished into the hall. Emma returned to the abacus.

Paradine rose and glanced down at the paper, with some mad thought that Emma might abruptly have mastered calligraphy. But she hadn't. The paper was covered with meaningless scrawls, of a type familiar to any parent. Paradine pursed his lips.

It might be a graph showing the mental variations of a manic-depressive cockroach, but probably wasn't. Still, it no doubt had meaning to Emma. Perhaps the scribble represented Mr. Bear.

Scott returned, looking pleased. He met Emma's gaze and nodded. Paradine felt a twinge of curiosity.

"Secrets?"

"Nope. Emma--uh--asked me to do something for her."

"Oh." Paradine, recalling instances of babies who had babbled in unknown tongues and baffled linguists, made a note to pocket the paper when the kids had finished with it. The next day he showed the scrawl to Elkins at the university. Elkins had a sound working knowledge of many unlikely languages, but he chuckled over

Emma's venture into literature.

"Here's a free translation, Dennis. Quote. I don't know what this means, but I kid the hell out of my father with it. Unquote."

The two men laughed and went off to their classes. But later Paradine was to remember the incident. Especially after he met Holloway. Before that, however, months were to pass, and the situation to develop even further towards its climax.

Perhaps Paradine and Jane had evinced too much interest in the toys. Emma and Scott took to keeping them hidden, playing with them only in private. They never did it overtly, but with a certain unobtrusive caution. Nevertheless, Jane especially was somewhat troubled.

She spoke to Paradine about it one evening. "That doll Harry gave Emma."

"Yeah?"

"I was downtown today and tried to find out where it came from. No soap."

"Maybe Harry bought it in New York."

Jane was unconvinced. "I asked them about the other things, too. They showed me their stock--Johnson's a big store, you know. But there's nothing like Emma's abacus."

"Hm-m-m." Paradine wasn't much interested. They had tickets for a show that night, and it was getting late. So the subject was dropped for the nonce.

Later it cropped up again, when a neighbor telephoned Jane.

"Scotty's never been like that, Denny. Mrs. Burns said he frightened the devil out of her Francis."

"Francis? A little fat bully of a punk, isn't he? Like his father. I broke Burns's nose for him once, when we were sophomores."

"Stop boasting and listen," Jane said, mixing a highball. "Scott showed Francis something that scared him. Hadn't you better--"

"I suppose so." Paradine listened. Noises in the next room told him the whereabouts of his son. "Scotty!"

"Bang," Scott said, and appeared smiling. "I killed 'em all. Space pirates. You want me, Dad?"

"Yes. If you don't mind leaving the space pirates unburied for a few minutes. What did you do to Francis Burns?"

Scott's blue eyes reflected incredible candor. "Huh?"

"Try hard. You can remember, I'm sure."

"Uh. Oh, that. I didn't do nothing."

"Anything," Jane corrected absently.

"Anything. Honest. I just let him look into my television set, and it--it scared him."

"Television set?"

Scott produced the crystal cube. "It isn't really that. See?"

Paradine examined the gadget, startled by the magnification. All he could see, though, was a maze of meaningless colored designs.

"Uncle Harry--"

Paradine reached for the telephone. Scott gulped. "Is--is Uncle Harry back in town?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I gotta take a bath." Scott headed for the door. Paradine met Jane's gaze and nodded significantly.

Harry was home, but disclaimed all knowledge of the peculiar toys. Rather grimly, Paradine requested Scott to bring down from his room all of the playthings. Finally they lay in a row on the table--cube, abacus, doll, helmet-like cap, several other mysterious contraptions. Scott was cross-examined. He lied valiantly for a time, but broke down at last and bawled, hiccuping his confession.

"Get the box these things came in," Paradine ordered. "Then head for bed."

"Are you--hup!--gonna punish me, Daddy?"

"For playing hooky and lying, yes. You know the rules. No more shows for two weeks. No sodas for the same period."

Scott gulped. "You gonna keep my things?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well--g'night, Daddy. G'night, Mom."

After the small figure had gone upstairs, Paradine dragged a chair to the table and carefully scrutinized the box. He poked thoughtfully at the focused gadgetry. Jane watched.

"What is it, Denny?"

"Dunno. Who'd leave a box of toys down by the creek?"

"It might have fallen out of a car."

"Not at that point. The road doesn't hit the creek north of the railroad trestle. Empty lots--nothing else." Paradine lit a cigarette. "Drink, honey?"

"I'll fix it." Jane went to work, her eyes troubled. She brought Paradine a glass and stood behind him, ruffling his hair with her fingers. "Is anything wrong?"

"Of course not. Only--where did these toys come from?"

"Johnson's didn't know, and they get their stock from New York."

"I've been checking up, too," Paradine admitted. "That doll"--he poked it--"rather worried me. Custom jobs, maybe, but I wish I knew who'd made 'em."

"A psychologist? That abacus--don't they give people tests with such things?"

Paradine snapped his fingers. "Right! And say, there's a guy going to speak at the university next week, fellow named Holloway, who's a child psychologist. He's a big shot, with quite a reputation. He might know something about it."

"Holloway? I don't--"

"Rex Holloway. He's--hm-m-m! He doesn't live far from here. Do you suppose he might have had these things made himself?"

Jane was examining the abacus. She grimaced and drew back. "If he did, I don't like him. But see if you can find out, Denny."

Paradine nodded. "I shall."

He drank his highball, frowning. He was vaguely worried. But he wasn't scared--yet.

Rex Holloway was a fat, shiny man, with a bald head and thick spectacles, above which his thick, black brows lay like bushy caterpillars. Paradine brought him home to dinner one night a week later. Holloway did not appear to watch the children, but nothing they did or said was lost on him. His gray eyes, shrewd and bright, missed little.

The toys fascinated him. In the living room the three adults gathered around the table, where the playthings had been placed. Holloway studied them carefully as he listened to what Jane and Paradine had to say. At last he broke his silence.

"I'm glad I came here tonight. But not completely. This is very disturbing, you know."

"Eh?" Paradine stared, and Jane's face showed her consternation. Holloway's next words did not calm them.

"We are dealing with madness."

He smiled at the shocked looks they gave him. "All children are mad, from an adult viewpoint. Ever read Hughes' High Wind in Jamaica?"

"I've got it." Paradine secured the little book from its shelf. Holloway extended a hand, took the book and flipped the pages till he had found the place he wanted. He read aloud:

Babies, of course, are not human--they are animals, and have a very ancient and ramified culture, as cats have, and fishes, and even snakes; the same in kind as these, but much more complicated and vivid, since babies are, after all, one of the most developed species of the lower vertebrates. In short, babies have minds which work in terms and categories of their own, which cannot be translated into the terms and categories of the human mind.

Jane tried to take that calmly, but couldn't. "You don't mean that Emma--"

"Could you think like your daughter?" Holloway asked. "Listen: 'One can no more think like a baby than one can think like a bee.'"

Paradine mixed drinks. Over his shoulder he said, "You're theorizing quite a bit, aren't you? As I get it, you're implying that babies have a culture of their own, even a high standard of intelligence."

"Not necessarily. There's no yardstick, you see. All I say is that babies think in other ways than we do. Not necessarily better--that's a question of relative values. But with a different matter of extension." He sought for words, grimacing.

"Fantasy," Paradine said, rather rudely but annoyed because of Emma. "Babies don't have different senses from ours."

"Who said they did?" Holloway demanded. "They use their minds in a different way, that's all. But it's quite enough!"

"I'm trying to understand," Jane said slowly. "All I can think of is my Mixmaster. It can whip up batter and potatoes, but it can squeeze oranges, too."

"Something like that. The brain's a colloid, a very complicated machine. We don't know much about its potentialities. We don't even

know how much it can grasp. But it is known that the mind becomes conditioned as the human animal matures. It follows certain familiar theorems, and all thought thereafter is pretty well based on patterns taken for granted. Look at this." Holloway touched the abacus. "Have you experimented with it?"

"A little," Paradine said.

"But not much, eh?"

"Well--"

"Why not?"

"It's pointless," Paradine complained. "Even a puzzle has to have some logic. But those crazy angles--"

"Your mind has been conditioned to Euclid," Holloway said. "So this--thing--bores us, and seems pointless. But a child knows nothing of Euclid. A different sort of geometry from ours wouldn't impress him as being illogical. He believes what he sees."

"Are you trying to tell me that this gadget's got a fourth-dimensional extension?" Paradine demanded.

"Not visually, anyway," Holloway denied. "All I say is that our minds, conditioned to Euclid, can see nothing in this but an illogical tangle of wires. But a child--especially a baby--might see more. Not at first. It'd be a puzzle, of course. Only a child wouldn't be handicapped by too many preconceived ideas."

"Hardening of the thought arteries," Jane interjected.

Paradine was not convinced. "Then a baby could work calculus better than Einstein? No, I don't mean that. I can see your point, more

or less clearly. Only--"

"Well, look. Let's suppose there are two kinds of geometry; we'll limit it, for the sake of the example. Our kind, Euclidean, and another, we'll call x . X hasn't much relationship to Euclid. It's based on different theorems. Two and two needn't equal four in it; they could equal $y[2]$, or they might not even equal. A baby's mind is not yet conditioned, except by certain questionable factors of heredity and environment. Start the infant on Euclid--"

"Poor kid," Jane said.

Holloway shot her a quick glance. "The basis of Euclid. Alphabet blocks. Math, geometry, algebra--they come much later. We're familiar with that development. On the other hand, start the baby with the basic principles of our x logic."

"Blocks? What kind?"

Holloway looked at the abacus. "It wouldn't make much sense to us. But we've been conditioned to Euclid."

Paradine poured himself a stiff shot of whisky. "That's pretty awful. You're not limiting to math."

"Right! I'm not limiting it at all. How can I? I'm not conditioned to x logic."

"There's the answer," Jane said, with a sigh of relief. "Who is? It'd take such a person to make the sort of toys you apparently think these are."

Holloway nodded, his eyes, behind the thick lenses, blinking. "Such people may exist."

"Where?"

"They might prefer to keep hidden."

"Supermen?"

"I wish I knew. You see, Paradine, we've got yardstick trouble again. By our standards these people might seem super-dupers in certain respects. In others they might seem moronic. It's not a quantitative difference; it's qualitative. They think different. And I'm sure we can do things they can't."

"Maybe they wouldn't want to," Jane said.

Paradine tapped the fused gadgetry on the box. "What about this? It implies--"

"A purpose, sure."

"Transportation?"

"One thinks of that first. If so, the box might have come from anywhere."

"Where--things are--different?" Paradine asked slowly.

"Exactly. In space, or even time. I don't know; I'm a psychologist. Unfortunately I'm conditioned to Euclid, too."

"Funny place it must be," Jane said. "Denny, get rid of those toys."

"I intend to."

Holloway picked up the crystal cube. "Did you question the children much?"

Paradine said, "Yeah. Scott said there were people in that cube when he first looked. I asked him what was in it now."

"What did he say?" The psychologist's eyes widened.

"He said they were building a place. His exact words. I asked him who--people? But he couldn't explain."

"No, I suppose not," Holloway muttered. "It must be progressive. How long have the children had these toys?"

"About three months, I guess."

"Time enough. The perfect toy, you see, is both instructive and mechanical. It should do things, to interest a child, and it should teach, preferably unobtrusively. Simple problems at first. Later--"

"X logic," Jane said, white-faced.

Paradine cursed under his breath. "Emma and Scott are perfectly normal!"

"Do you know how their minds work--now?"

Holloway didn't pursue the thought. He fingered the doll. "It would be interesting to know the conditions of the place where these things came from. Induction doesn't help a great deal, though. Too many factors are missing. We can't visualize a world based on the x factor--environment adjusted to minds thinking in x patterns. This luminous network inside the doll. It could be anything. It could exist inside us, though we haven't discovered it yet. When we find the right stain--" He shrugged. "What do you make of this?"

It was a crimson globe, two inches in diameter, with a protruding knob upon its surface.

"What could anyone make of it?"

"Scott? Emma?"

"I hadn't even seen it till about three weeks ago. Then Emma started to play with it." Paradine nibbled his lip. "After that, Scott got interested."

"Just what do they do?"

"Hold it up in front of them and move it back and forth. No particular pattern of motion."

"No Euclidean pattern," Holloway corrected. "At first they couldn't understand the toy's purpose. They had to be educated up to it."

"That's horrible," Jane said.

"Not to them. Emma is probably quicker at understanding x than is Scott, for her mind isn't yet conditioned to this environment."

Paradine said, "But I can remember plenty of things I did as a child. Even as a baby."

"Well?"

"Was I—mad then?"

"The things you don't remember are the criterion of your madness," Holloway retorted. "But I use the word 'madness' purely as a convenient symbol for the variation from the known human norm. The arbitrary standard of sanity."

Jane put down her glass. "You've said that induction was difficult, Mr.

Holloway. But it seems to me you're making a great deal of it from very little. After all, these toys--"

"I am a psychologist, and I've specialized in children. I'm not a layman. These toys mean a great deal to me, chiefly because they mean so little."

"You might be wrong."

"Well, I rather hope I am. I'd like to examine the children."

Jane rose in arms. "How?"

After Holloway had explained, she nodded, though still a bit hesitantly. "Well, that's all right. But they're not guinea pigs."

The psychologist patted the air with a plump hand. "My dear girl! I'm not a Frankenstein. To me the individual is the prime factor--naturally, since I work with minds. If there's anything wrong with the youngsters, I want to cure them."

Paradine put down his cigarette and slowly watched blue smoke spiral up, wavering in an unfelt draught. "Can you give a prognosis?"

"I'll try. That's all I can say. If the undeveloped minds have been turned into the x channel, it's necessary to divert them back. I'm not saying that's the wisest thing to do, but it probably is from our standards. After all, Emma and Scott will have to live in this world."

"Yeah. Yeah. I can't believe there's much wrong. They seem about average, thoroughly normal."

"Superficially they may seem so. They've no reason for acting abnormally, have they? And how can you tell if they--think differently?"

"I'll call 'em," Paradine said.

"Make it informal, then. I don't want them to be on guard."

Jane nodded towards the toys. Holloway said, "Leave the stuff there, eh?"

But the psychologist, after Emma and Scott were summoned, made no immediate move towards direct questioning. He managed to draw Scott unobtrusively into the conversation, dropping key words now and then. Nothing so obvious as a word-association test; cooperation is necessary for that.

The most interesting development occurred when Holloway took up the abacus. "Mind showing me how this works?"

Scott hesitated. "Yes, sir. Like this." He slid a bead deftly through the maze, in a tangled course, so swiftly that no one was quite sure whether or not it ultimately vanished. It might have been merely legerdemain. Then, again--

Holloway tried. Scott watched, wrinkling his nose.

"That's right?"

"Uh-huh. It's gotta go there."

"Here? Why?"

"Well, that's the only way to make it work."

But Holloway was conditioned to Euclid. There was no apparent reason why the bead should slide from this particular wire to the other. It looked like a random factor. Also, Holloway suddenly noticed, this wasn't the path the bead had taken previously, when

Scott had worked the puzzle. At least, as well as he could tell.

"Will you show me again?"

Scott did, and twice more, on request. Holloway blinked through his glasses. Random, yes. And a variable. Scott moved the bead along a different course each time.

Somehow, none of the adults could tell whether or not the bead vanished. If they had expected to see it disappear, their reactions might have been different.

In the end nothing was solved. Holloway, as he said good night, seemed ill at ease.

"May I come again?"

"I wish you would," Jane told him. "Any time. You still think--"

He nodded. "The children's minds are not reacting normally. They're not dull at all, but I've the most extraordinary impression that they arrive at conclusions in a way we don't understand. As though they used algebra while we used geometry. The same conclusion, but a different method of reaching it."

"What about the toys?" Paradine asked suddenly.

"Keep them out of the way. I'd like to borrow them, if I may."

That night Paradine slept badly. Holloway's parallel had been ill chosen. It led to disturbing theories. The x factor.... The children were using the equivalent of algebraic reasoning, while adults used geometry.

Fair enough. Only--

Algebra can give you answers that geometry cannot, since there are certain terms and symbols which cannot be expressed geometrically. Suppose x logic showed conclusions inconceivable to an adult mind.

"Damn!" Paradine whispered. Jane stirred beside him.

"Dear? Can't you sleep either?"

"No." He got up and went into the next room. Emma slept peacefully as a cherub, her fat arm curled around Mr. Bear. Through the open doorway Paradine could see Scott's dark head motionless on the pillow.

Jane was beside him. He slipped his arm around her.

"Poor little people," she murmured. "And Holloway called them mad. I think we're the ones who are crazy, Dennis."

"Uh-huh. We've got jitters."

Scott stirred in his sleep. Without awakening, he called what was obviously a question, though it did not seem to be in any particular language. Emma gave a little mewling cry that changed pitch sharply.

She had not wakened. The children lay without stirring.

But, Paradine thought, with a sudden sickness in his middle, it was exactly as though Scott had asked Emma something, and she had replied.

Had their minds changed so that even--sleep was different to them?

He thrust the thought away. "You'll catch cold. Let's get back to bed."

Want a drink?"

"I think I do," Jane said, watching Emma. Her hand reached out blindly towards the child; she drew it back. "Come on. We'll wake the kids."

They drank a little brandy together, but said nothing. Jane cried in her sleep, later.

Scott was not awake, but his mind worked in slow, careful building. Thus--

"They'll take the toys away. The fat man--listava dangerous, maybe. But the Ghoric direction won't show... evankrus dun hasn't them. Intransduction... bright and shiny. Emma. She's more khopranik-high now than.... I still don't see how to... thavarar lixery dist--"

A little of Scott's thoughts could still be understood. But Emma had become conditioned to x much faster.

She was thinking, too.

Not like an adult or a child. Not even like a human being. Except, perhaps, a human being of a type shockingly unfamiliar to genus Homo.

Sometimes, Scott himself had difficulty in following her thoughts. If it had not been for Holloway, life might have settled back into an almost normal routine. The toys were no longer active reminders. Emma still enjoyed her dolls and sandpile, with a thoroughly explicable delight. Scott was satisfied with baseball and his chemical set. They did everything other children did, and evinced few, if any, flashes of abnormality. But Holloway seemed to be an alarmist.

He was having the toys tested, with rather idiotic results. He drew endless charts and diagrams, corresponded with mathematicians, engineers and other psychologists, and went quietly crazy trying to find rhyme or reason in the construction of the gadgets. The box itself, with its cryptic machinery, told nothing. Fusing had melted too much of the stuff into slag. But the toys....

It was the random element that baffled investigation. Even that was a matter of semantics. For Holloway was convinced that it wasn't really random. There just weren't enough known factors. No adult could work the abacus, for example. And Holloway thoughtfully refrained from letting a child play with the thing.

The crystal cube was similarly cryptic. It showed a mad pattern of colors, which sometimes moved. In this it resembled a kaleidoscope. But the shifting of balance and gravity didn't affect it. Again the random factor.

Or, rather, the unknown. The x pattern. Eventually, Paradine and Jane slipped back into something like complacency, with a feeling that the children had been cured of their mental quirk, now that the contributing cause had been removed. Certain of the actions of Emma and Scott gave them every reason to quit worrying.

For the kids enjoyed swimming, hiking, movies, games, the normal functional toys of this particular time-sector. It was true that they failed to master certain rather puzzling mechanical devices which involved some calculation. A three-dimensional jigsaw globe Paradine had picked up, for example. But he found that difficult himself.

Once in a while there were lapses. Scott was hiking with his father one Saturday afternoon, and the two had paused at the summit of a hill. Beneath them a rather lovely valley was spread.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Paradine remarked.

Scott examined the scene gravely. "It's all wrong," he said.

"Eh?"

"I dunno."

"What's wrong about it?"

"Gee." Scott lapsed into puzzled silence. "I dunno."

The children had missed their toys, but not for long. Emma recovered first, though Scott still moped. He held unintelligible conversations with his sister, and studied meaningless scrawls she drew on paper he supplied. It was almost as though he was consulting her, anent difficult problems beyond his grasp.

If Emma understood more, Scott had more real intelligence, and manipulatory skill as well. He built a gadget with his Meccano set, but was dissatisfied. The apparent cause of his dissatisfaction was exactly why Paradine was relieved when he viewed the structure. It was the sort of thing a normal boy would make, vaguely reminiscent of a cubistic ship.

It was a bit too normal to please Scott. He asked Emma more questions, though in private. She thought for a time, and then made more scrawls, with an awkwardly clutched pencil.

"Can you read that stuff?" Jane asked her son one morning.

"Not read it, exactly. I can tell what she means. Not all the time, but mostly."

"Is it writing?"

"N-no. It doesn't mean what it looks like."

"Symbolism," Paradine suggested over his coffee.

Jane looked at him, her eyes widening. "Denny--"

He winked and shook his head. Later, when they were alone, he said, "Don't let Holloway upset you. I'm not implying that the kids are corresponding in an unknown tongue. If Emma draws a squiggle and says it's a flower, that's an arbitrary rule--Scott remembers that. Next time she draws the same sort of squiggle, or tries to--well!"

"Sure," Jane said doubtfully. "Have you noticed Scott's been doing a lot of reading lately?"

"I noticed. Nothing unusual, though. No Kant or Spinoza."

"He browses, that's all."

"Well, so did I, at his age," Paradine said, and went off to his morning classes. He lunched with Holloway, which was becoming a daily habit, and spoke of Emma's literary endeavors.

"Was I right about symbolism, Rex?"

The psychologist nodded. "Quite right. Our own language is nothing but arbitrary symbolism now. At least in its application. Look here." On his napkin he drew a very narrow ellipse. "What's that?"

"You mean what does it represent?"

"Yes. What does it suggest to you? It could be a crude representation of--what?"

"Plenty of things," Paradine said. "Rim of a glass. A fried egg. A loaf

of French bread. A cigar."

Holloway added a little triangle to his drawing, apex joined to one end of the ellipse. He looked up at Paradine.

"A fish," the latter said instantly.

"Our familiar symbol for a fish. Even without fins, eyes or mouth, it's recognizable, because we've been conditioned to identify this particular shape with our mental picture of a fish. The basis of a rebus. A symbol, to us, means a lot more than what we actually see on paper. What's in your mind when you look at this sketch?"

"Why--a fish."

"Keep going. What do you visualize? Everything!"

"Scales," Paradine said slowly, looking into space. "Water. Foam. A fish's eye. The fins. The colors."

"So the symbol represents a lot more than just the abstract idea fish. Note the connotation's that of a noun, not a verb. It's harder to express actions by symbolism, you know. Anyway--reverse the process. Suppose you want to make a symbol for some concrete noun, say bird. Draw it." Paradine drew two connected arcs, concavities down.

"The lowest common denominator," Holloway nodded. "The natural tendency is to simplify. Especially when a child is seeing something for the first time and has few standards of comparison. He tries to identify the new thing with what's already familiar to him. Ever notice how a child draws the ocean?" He didn't wait for an answer; he went on.

"A series of jagged points. Like the oscillating line on a

seismograph. When I first saw the Pacific, I was about three. I remember it pretty clearly. It looked--tilted. A flat plain, slanted at an angle. The waves were regular triangles, apex upward. Now, I didn't see them stylized that way, but later, remembering, I had to find some familiar standard of comparison. Which is the only way of getting any conception of an entirely new thing. The average child tries to draw these regular triangles, but his coordination's poor. He gets a seismograph pattern."

"All of which means what?"

"A child sees the ocean. He stylizes it. He draws a certain definite pattern, symbolic, to him, of the sea. Emma's scrawls may be symbols, too. I don't mean that the world looks different to her--brighter, perhaps, and sharper, more vivid and with a slackening of perception above her eye level. What I do mean is that her thought processes are different, that she translates what she sees into abnormal symbols."

"You still believe--"

"Yes, I do. Her mind has been conditioned unusually. It may be that she breaks down what she sees into simple, obvious patterns--and realizes a significance to those patterns that we can't understand. Like the abacus. She saw a pattern in that, though to us it was completely random."

Paradine abruptly decided to taper off these luncheon engagements with Holloway. The man was an alarmist. His theories were growing more fantastic than ever, and he dragged in anything, applicable or not, that would support them.

Rather sardonically he said, "Do you mean Emma's communicating with Scott in an unknown language?"

"In symbols for which she hasn't any words. I'm sure Scott understands a great deal of those--scrawls. To him, an isosceles triangle may represent any factor, though probably a concrete noun. Would a man who knew nothing of chemistry understand what H_2O meant? Would he realize that the symbol could evoke a picture of the ocean?"

Paradine didn't answer. Instead, he mentioned to Holloway Scott's curious remark that the landscape, from the hill, had looked all wrong.

A moment later, he was inclined to regret his impulse, for the psychologist was off again.

"Scott's thought patterns are building up to a sum that doesn't equal this world. Perhaps he's subconsciously expecting to see the world where those toys came from."

Paradine stopped listening. Enough was enough. The kids were getting along all right, and the only remaining disturbing factor was Holloway himself. That night, however, Scott evinced an interest, later significant, in eels.

There was nothing apparently harmful in natural history. Paradine explained about eels.

"But where do they lay their eggs? Or do they?"

"That's still a mystery. Their spawning grounds are unknown. Maybe the Sargasso Sea, or the deeps, where the pressure can help them force the young out of their bodies."

"Funny," Scott said, thinking deeply.

"Salmon do the same thing, more or less. They go up rivers to spawn." Paradine went into detail. Scott was fascinated.

"But that's right, Dad. They're born in the river, and when they learn how to swim, they go down to the sea. And they come back to lay their eggs, huh?"

"Right."

"Only they wouldn't come back," Scott pondered. "They'd just send their eggs--"

"It'd take a very long ovipositor," Paradine said, and vouchsafed some well-chosen remarks upon oviparity.

His son wasn't entirely satisfied. Flowers, he contended, sent their seeds long distances.

"They don't guide them. Not many find fertile soil."

"Flowers haven't got brains, though. Dad, why do people live here?"

"Glendale?"

"No--here. This whole place. It isn't all there is, I bet."

"Do you mean the other planets?"

Scott was hesitant. "This is only--part of the big place. It's like the river where the salmon go. Why don't people go on down to the ocean when they grow up?"

Paradine realized that Scott was speaking figuratively. He felt a brief chill. The--ocean?

The young of the species are not conditioned to live in the more complete world of their parents. Having developed sufficiently, they enter that world. Later they breed. The fertilized eggs are buried in the sand, far up the river, where later they hatch.

And they learn. Instinct alone is fatally slow. Especially in the case of a specialized genus, unable to cope even with this world, unable to feed or drink or survive, unless someone has foresightedly provided for those needs.

The young, fed and tended, would survive. There would be incubators and robots. They would survive, but they would not know how to swim downstream, to the vaster world of the ocean.

So they must be taught. They must be trained and conditioned in many ways.

Painlessly, subtly, unobtrusively. Children love toys that do things, and if those toys teach at the same time--

In the latter half of the nineteenth century an Englishman sat on a grassy bank near a stream. A very small girl lay near him, staring up at the sky. She had discarded a curious toy with which she had been playing, and now was murmuring a wordless little song, to which the man listened with half an ear.

"What was that, my dear?" he asked at last.

"Just something I made up, Uncle Charles."

"Sing it again." He pulled out a notebook. The girl obeyed.

"Does it mean anything?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes. Like the stories I tell you, you know."

"They're wonderful stories, dear."

"And you'll put them in a book someday?"

"Yes, but I must change them quite a lot, or no one would understand. But I don't think I'll change your little song."

"You mustn't. If you did, it wouldn't mean anything."

"I won't change that stanza, anyway," he promised. "Just what does it mean?"

"It's the way out, I think," the girl said doubtfully. "I'm not sure yet. My magic toys told me."

"I wish I knew what London shop sold these marvellous toys!"

"Mama bought them for me. She's dead. Papa doesn't care."

She lied. She had found the toys in a box one day, as she played by the Thames. And they were indeed wonderful.

Her little song--Uncle Charles thought it didn't mean anything. (He wasn't her real uncle, she parenthesized. But he was nice.) The song meant a great deal. It was the way. Presently she would do what it said, and then--

But she was already too old. She never found the way.

Paradine had dropped Holloway. Jane had taken a dislike to him, naturally enough, since what she wanted most of all was to have her fears calmed. Since Scott and Emma acted normally now, Jane felt satisfied. It was partly wishful thinking, to which Paradine could not entirely subscribe.

Scott kept bringing gadgets to Emma for her approval. Usually she'd shake her head. Sometimes she would look doubtful. Very occasionally she would signify agreement. Then there would be an hour of laborious, crazy scribbling on scraps of note paper, and Scott, after studying the notations, would arrange and rearrange his rocks, bits of machinery, candle ends and assorted junk. Each day the maid cleaned them away, and each day Scott began again.

He condescended to explain a little to his puzzled father, who could see no rhyme or reason in the game.

"But why this pebble right here?"

"It's hard and round, Dad. It belongs there."

"So is this one hard and round."

"Well, that's got vaseline on it. When you get that far, you can't see just a hard, round thing."

"What comes next? This candle?"

Scott looked disgusted. "That's toward the end. The iron ring's next." It was, Paradine thought, like a scout trail through the woods, markers in a labyrinth. But here again was the random factor. Logic halted--familiar logic--at Scott's motives in arranging the junk as he did.

Paradine went out. Over his shoulder he saw Scott pull a crumpled piece of paper and a pencil from his pocket and head for Emma, who was squatted in a corner thinking things over.

Well--

Jane was lunching with Uncle Harry, and, on this hot Sunday

afternoon, there was little to do but read the papers. Paradine settled himself in the coolest place he could find, with a Collins, and lost himself in the comic strips.

An hour later a clatter of feet upstairs roused him from his doze. Scott's voice was crying exultantly, "This is it, Slug! Come on!"

Paradine stood up quickly, frowning. As he went into the hall the telephone began to ring. Jane had promised to call....

His hand was on the receiver when Emma's faint voice squealed with excitement. Paradine grimaced. What the devil was going on upstairs?

Scott shrieked, "Look out! This way!"

Paradine, his mouth working, his nerves ridiculously tense, forgot the phone and raced up the stairs. The door of Scott's room was open.

The children were vanishing.

They went in fragments, like thick smoke in a wind, or like movement in a distorting mirror. Hand in hand they went, in a direction Paradine could not understand, and as he blinked there on the threshold, they were gone.

"Emma!" he said, dry-throated. "Scotty!"

On the carpet lay a pattern of markers, pebbles, an iron ring--junk. A random pattern. A crumpled sheet of paper blew towards Paradine.

He picked it up automatically.

"Kids. Where are you? Don't hide--Emma! Scotty!"

Downstairs the telephone stopped its shrill, monotonous ringing. Paradine looked at the paper he held.

It was a leaf torn from a book. There were interlineations and marginal notes, in Emma's meaningless scrawl. A stanza of verse had been so underlined and scribbled over that it was almost illegible, but Paradine was thoroughly familiar with *Through the Looking Glass*. His memory gave him the words--

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Idiotically he thought: Humpty Dumpty explained it. A wabe is the plot of grass around a sundial. A sundial. Time. It has something to do with time. A long time ago Scotty asked me what a wabe was. Symbolism.

'Twas brillig.

A perfect mathematical formula, giving all the conditions, in symbolism the children had finally understood. The junk on the floor. The "toves" had to be made slithy--vaseline?--and they had to be placed in a certain relationship, so that they'd gyre and gimble.

Lunacy!

But it had not been lunacy to Emma and Scott. They thought differently. They used x logic. Those notes Emma had made on the page--she'd translated Carroll's words into symbols both she and Scott could understand.

The random factor had made sense to the children. They had fulfilled the conditions of the time-span equation. And the mome raths outgrabe--

Paradine made a rather ghastly little sound, deep in his throat. He looked at the crazy pattern on the carpet. If he could follow it, as the kids had done-- But he couldn't. The pattern was senseless. The random factor defeated him. He was conditioned to Euclid.

Even if he went insane, he still couldn't do it. It would be the wrong kind of lunacy.

His mind had stopped working now. But in a moment the stasis of incredulous horror would pass-- Paradine crumpled the page in his fingers. "Emma! Scotty!" he called in a dead voice, as though he could expect no response.

Sunlight slanted through the open windows, brightening the golden pelt of Mr. Bear. Downstairs the ringing of the telephone began again.

Satellite Five

by Arthur K. Barnes

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Chapter I.

Cacus

Tommy Strike let out a startled squawk and tried to leap aside. Then suddenly his legs folded limply beneath him, and he fell to the floor.

"Blast it!" he howled at the man behind the desk. "Turn that thing off! You've crippled me for life!"

The man behind the desk was past middle age, with rabbitlike eyes peering through thick lenses. On the desk-top before him rested a lead-gray box, the interior of which contained a bewildering array of weird tubes and coils. There was a portable power unit, and a cameralike lens: now focused on Strike's lower body. The man fumbled for the activating switch, snapped it off.

"Oh--so sorry, Mr. Strike. No harm intended. Just checking my--er--apparatus, seeing that it's in working order." Which explained nothing as far as his victim was concerned.

Strike reassured himself that his legs were still sound, then advanced on the older man, who retreated around the desk in alarm with apology very plain on his face.

"I've never struck a man as old as you," Strike said grimly, "but so help me, I've a good notion to clip you down!"

It was at times like these when Tommy Strike was led to wonder, privately, if he had been really bright in allowing Gerry to argue him out of the independence of a trader's life--boring and ill-rewarded as it had often proved to be--to become her second-in-command and the so-called "Captain" of The Ark. Gerry--in one of her rare, very rare, melting moods could certainly wear a fellow down and Tommy had begun to suspect that where Gerry Carlyle was concerned he was sometimes not quite bright--a thought he kept very much to himself. Anyway he had made his bargain--even if it had been when he had been completely dazzled--and he was too stubborn now to admit that he should have waited a little before he mortgaged his future. At any rate--if Gerry thought that he was going to be one of her "yes men," she was very much mistaken.

Just then the office door slid noiselessly open, and all activity was automatically suspended as a young woman entered. One with a mind of her own to judge by her firm chin and high-tempered arch of nostril.

Her presence in the office brought an elusive suggestion of far-away places and unfamiliar, romantic things--a breath of the thin, dry wind that combs the deserts of Mars, a faint memory of the spicy scents that throng Venus' eternal mists.

"Tommy!" Gerry snapped. "That'll be enough! This is the New York office of the London Interplanetary Zoo, and was not designed for brawling. Now what's it all about?"

Strike pointed at the visitor.

"This crazy inventor crashed in here with his box full of junk, acting mysterious and refusing to tell me what it's for. Then all of a sudden he turned the darned thing on me and my legs went out from under me--"

"Oh, my. My, no. Not a crazy inventor. I am Professor Lunde, head of the department of physics at Plymouth University."

"Oh!" There was a wealth of intolerant scorn in Strike's voice, and he glanced significantly at Gerry. Lunde was well known as an overly self-important and doddering old fool many years past his prime. He had contributed nothing to advance physical research for ten years, hanging on at Plymouth by virtue of decades-old triumphs.

But, surprisingly, Gerry nodded.

"Sit down, Professor." Turning to Strike, she explained, "Professor Lunde has been sending me a letter each day for the past week, cryptically reminding me that Rod Shipkey's broadcast tonight would be of interest to me. Very intriguing."

Lunde's checks became shiny red apples. "Er--I must apologize for the melodramatic manner in which your attention was solicited. My assistant's idea, really. Trevelyan is invaluable. Ambitious lad. He felt a woman in your position could not be reached under ordinary circumstances. But my daughter-in-law works for Mr. Shipkey, and, well, we got wind of tonight's broadcast. I'd rather not explain the purpose of my visit until after you've heard Mr. Shipkey, if you please.

He's on now."

Strike moved across the room to the television set, careful to keep out of range of Lunde's funny box. He snapped the switch just in time to catch the program highlight.

The image of Rod Shipkey appeared. He spoke with the easy smoothness that characterized this veteran explorer and newsman's delivery.

"... and now for our 'Five-Star Believe-This-If-You-Can of Space.' Around the largest of our planets, Jupiter, a whole host of satellites of varying sizes are slung in their orbits, tied by the invisible cord of gravity. The closest of these--paradoxically known as Satellite Five because it wasn't discovered until after some of the larger ones--is a tiny bit of rock less than two hundred miles in diameter. It circles its primary some 112,600 miles away, hurtling like a cannon-ball around Jupiter in less than twelve hours. Incredible to think there might be anything on that barren and useless ball of stone dangerous or even interesting to Man, lord of the Universe.

"And yet--believe this if you can!--on Satellite Five there is a strange form of life which has defied all efforts to kill or catalogue it. No man has ever set foot on Satellite Five and returned alive!"

"There are three authenticated records of space-masters who, either by choice or force of circumstance, landed their craft on Five. None has ever been heard from again. One of these cases was an expedition especially equipped to take care of itself under any conditions. It was the spaceship and crew of Jan Ebers, famous Dutch hunter of extraterrestrial life-forms, one of the earliest pioneers in that romantic and dangerous business now epitomized by the greatest of them all--our own Gerry Carlyle.

"What this strange creature, so inimical, may be, we can only conjecture, aided by fragmentary notes of space farers who passed briefly in proximity to Satellite Five, and by telescopic observations from Io, the next Jovian satellite outward. These give us a curious picture. Four things we can say about it. The thing is somewhat saurian or wormlike in appearance, low on the evolutionary scale. It seems to be of a sluggish nature, which would be natural considering what a limited supply of energy-building food elements there must be on Five. Not more than one has ever been seen at a given time. And--believe this if you can! The monster breathes fire! Literally!"

Gerry and Strike exchanged tolerant smiles. They had seen a lot of incredible things, but a fire-breathing monster would require a good deal of seeing to believe.

"... have precedent for this phenomena," Shipkey was saying, "in classic mythology. Cacus, from Vergil's Aeneid, spouted fire.... Here an attendant stepped into view with an artist's conception of Cacus, the half-man, half-beast slain by Hercules.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, time's a-flyin'. Which is just as well, for there's not much more we can say about our mysterious fire-demon, the Cacus. Safe it is to say that Man, with his insatiable curiosity, will not long let this remain a mystery. Someone with courage and the proper facilities will dare death once again, and tear out the black heart of the secret that shrouds Satellite Five. Indeed, it's a surprise to me that the inimitable Carlyle has not already done so. Can it possibly be that at last there's something in the Universe that blonde dare-devil hesitates to tackle? Believe that, ladies and gentlemen, if you can!"

The too-handsome announcer with his too-suave voice slipped deftly into focus, saying dulcetly, "This is wzqz, bringing you Rod Shipkey with the compliments of Tootsie-Tonic, that gentle--" The screen went

dead.

Strike looked across at Gerry in surprise.

"I bought one of those gadgets yesterday that automatically turns off the radio when the commercials begin," she explained. "All right, Professor Lunde. We've played ball with you. We've granted you an interview, listened to Shipkey. Now let's have a look at a brass tack or two."

Lunde hitched himself forward earnestly.

"I have invented a weapon, Miss Carlyle, that will render the monster on Satellite Five helpless!" he proclaimed dramatically. "A paralysis ray!"

Gerry was dubious. She had seen abortive attempts at paralysis rays before.

"What's the principle?" she asked.

Lunde removed his glasses and used them to tap his fingers and gesture with as he broke into a classroom lecture.

"The transmission of a nerve impulse along the nerve fiber is provided by local electrical currents within the fiber itself. But the transmission of a state of activity from one nerve fiber to another, as happens in the brain when sense organs are stimulated, or from a nerve fiber to a muscle fiber, as happens in voluntary movement, means transmission of excitation from one cell to another.

"Passage over the junction point between cells is effected by a chemical transmitter, acetylcholine. Every voluntary or involuntary movement is accompanied by the production of minute amounts of acetylcholine at the ends of nerve fibers, and it is through this

chemical agent that the muscle is set into action."

Tommy Strike stirred.

"Old stuff, Doc. Sir Henry Dale and Professor Otto Loewi won the Nobel Prize for physiology and medicine for that discovery sixty-seventy years ago. Nineteen-thirty-six, wasn't it?"

Lunde seemed vaguely annoyed by this display of erudition.

"Well!" Professor Lunde was resuming. "The acetylcholine is very unstable, and breaks down into other chemicals as soon as its function is completed. There is a disease known as myasthenia gravis, characterized by muscle weakness, in which there is too-rapid destruction of acetylcholine. Now, if a device could be built which would decompose acetylcholine as fast as it is produced within the body--you see? The muscles would be unable to receive nerve impulses, unable to act. Paralysis!"

Lunde now exposed the interior of the leaden-colored box which had caused Strike such distress earlier. The interior showed a bewildering array of tubes and coils, all in miniature; there was also a portable power unit attached. The lens was shutterlike, similar to a camera lens. It appeared extremely simple to operate.

"This, in effect," went on Professor Lunde in lecture style, "produces a neutron stream. We decided against a stream of electrons, because they lack sufficient momentum; protons, too, can be deflected. But neutrons react with atoms at low energies. And the penetrating neutron blast destroys the acetylcholine by adding to its atomic structure, thus making it so extremely unstable that it breaks itself up at once. It does not harm blood or lymph or bodily tissues because they are essentially stable combinations, whereas acetylcholine is not."

"Say! That makes sense! And I can testify the blasted outfit sure works! That means we can take a crack at this Cacus jigger on Satellite Five and show Shipkey up for a dope! How about it, Gerry? Let's go!"

Gerry shook her head.

"Impossible, Tommy, and you know it. I have lecture commitments three weeks ahead, conferences with Kent on the autobiography, business appointments, a hundred and one things to do. No, the Jupiter trip'll have to wait. Sorry, Tommy...." Then Gerry's voice turned poisonously sweet. "Besides, I have to run up to Hollywood on the Moon day after tomorrow. Special occasion at the Silver Spacesuit. Henri, the maitre d'hotel, is naming a sandwich after me. A double-decker: hardboiled egg and ham!"

"Yow!" Strike convulsed with delight, with one wary eye on Gerry as if half expecting a missile. "That's good. Yknow whose idea that is?"

"Certainly. Nine Planets Pictures runs the Moon as they please, and this is that chimpanzee Von Zorn's idea of humor. He put Henri up to it. But boy--will I make a speech that'll singe his ears!"

But Tommy wasn't to be put off by changing the subject; he was like a small boy at prospect of a fishing trip. "All right; you can't go. But nobody wants to take my picture or get my autograph. I'm not tied down here. Besides, I'm sick of sitting around. There isn't a reason in the world why I couldn't round up the crew and take The Ark myself!"

"I remember the last time you started out alone! On Venus. Remember the lost continent?"

Tommy Strike brushed that aside.

"That was different. This'll be a cinch with The Ark's equipment and Lunde's ray and all the gang--"

"Well--" Gerry was weakening. "Might be arranged. Before we decide on anything definitely, though, there're three things I'd like to ask Professor Lunde."

"Yes, Miss Carlyle?"

"First, have you tried your ray on extra-terrestrial animals?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. The curator of the local zoo permitted experiments on several Martian and Venusian specimens. All creatures of our Universe, it seems, transmit nerve impulses with the aid of acetylcholine. Provided this--this Cacus is not a vegetable, I'm sure the ray will work on him, too."

"All right. Secondly, what's in this for you? Not money. Even if we found the ray practicable, you couldn't manufacture it for general distribution because your only market would be hunters like myself who wish to capture live specimens."

Lunde put on a vague dignity.

"Prestige, miss, is my sole motive. Prestige for Plymouth University and its faculty."

"I see. And now tell me who put you up to this?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean whose idea was it to write me notes about the Shipkey broadcast and so on? You're just not the type."

"Er--no. Not entirely my idea. Trevelyan's, really. He's my assistant,

or did I tell you that before? Smart lad--"

"Very well, Professor Lunde." Gerry cut the interview off abruptly. "You've been very entertaining. My secretary'll give you a written authorization to install your apparatus in The Ark. We may be able to give it a trial."

As soon as Lunde had left Gerry immediately snapped open a circuit on the inter-office communicator.

"Barney Galt? You and your partner come right in."

Two men promptly entered through another door. Galt was tall and lean with a face like a good-natured chow dog. His partner was a nondescript man of middle age. Both were old-time policemen, retired from public duty to act as private investigators for Gerry Carlyle. She wasn't a woman to bother with bodyguards, but a woman in her position is besieged with all sorts of threats, rackets, fraudulent charities and fantastic schemes; Galt invariably discovered the good among the bad.

"Fellow named Lunde just left here, a little gray-haired chap with a bundle under his arm. Follow him, make a complete check. Don't interfere with anything he may do; just report anything phony."

The two detectives saluted casually and left on their unobtrusive mission. Strike snorted.

"Why set those bloodhounds on Lunde's tail? He's all right. A bit of an old fool who has stumbled on something good, but too dumb to be anything but honest."

"Just routine, Tommy. I don't think there's anything wrong with Lunde. Just a hunch. If he gets a clean bill of health, you can take The Ark and go."

"Woman's intuition again?" Strike spoke with tolerant condescension.

"So what if it is? Tommy, I take lots more precautions than this when I sign the lowliest member of my crew for a dangerous expedition. No doubt Lunde is all he appears, and I know you can take care of yourself, but you can't blame me for wanting to make sure when it concerns the man I love."

They grinned at each other.

"Okay, fluff. Snoop around while I rout the crew out of their sinful pleasures and provision the ship. That'll take several hours; you'll know by then everything's on the up and up. Call me as soon as Galt okays Lunde, because Jupiter's nearing conjunction and I want to take off as soon as possible. Bye."

Chapter II.

Flight of the Ark

Events marched swiftly on their silent feet, moving inevitably into place in the strange pattern that spelt disaster. Tommy Strike was busy over radio and telephone, giving forth the rallying cry that brought the seasoned veterans of The Ark rushing from all corners, dropping unfinished business or pleasures at once to get to the spaceport in time to blast off on another adventurous journey. They'd tell you, those tough space-hounds, that Gerry Carlyle's expeditions were nothing but iron discipline and hardships with sudden death waiting to pounce on the unwary; but you couldn't bribe one of them with love or money to give up his berth on the famous ship.

At the landing field itself, under the blazing carbon dioxide lamps, a

small man drove up in a surface car, showed an authorization to the guard, passed into the burglar-proof enclosure. He carried a bundle to The Ark, again showed his pass, and went inside. He came out before long empty-handed.

Gerry Carlyle worked without cessation in her office, while outside the city's lights went out one by one, and the muted torrent of traffic in the canyons of the city street grew thinner and thinner, dwindling away to trickles. Presently a light flashed above the door to the outer office. Someone wanted admittance. Gerry slid a heat-ray pistol into plain sight, then tripped the foot-switch which unlocked the door.

"Come in!" she cried.

It was Barney Galt. One hand bulged suggestively in his coat pocket. Before him, registering bewildered indignation, walked a short, stocky chap of about thirty, with bold, dark eyes. He strode aggressively up to Gerry.

"I demand to know the meaning of this outrage!" he said. "Your--your hireling here has held me up at the point of a gun, without authority, and forced me to come to this office against my will. That's abduction, and I'll see this gangster go to the disintegrator chamber for it!"

Gerry looked questioningly at Galt, who grinned faintly.

"My buddy's still on Lunde's tail. We split when we seen this monkey come out o' the prof's place. He's the assistant, Trevelyan, an' he looks an awful lot like a bird we picked up ten-fifteen years ago for delinquency." Galt was famous for his memory. "Anyhow, he took the stuff to The Ark and installed it. Left instructions on how to work it, then beat it. I had the spaceport guards hang onto him while I sniffed around. Miss Carlyle, the junk he put into The Ark wouldn't paralyze a

beetle! It's fake! I tried it!"

Trevelyan sneered.

"You just couldn't puzzle out how to work it, that's all. I demonstrated it to a couple of the crew there. They'll tell you it was left in perfect shape. I demand--"

"Shut up, you." Gerry's voice was like a mallet. The paralysis ray had been extremely simple to operate; Galt could have managed it easily. Gerry remembered her vague suspicions at Lunde's carefully arranged build-up, how he insisted on a certain order of events, Shipkey's broadcast first, then his apparatus, all designed to intrigue her interest.

It now seemed rehearsed, a routine entirely foreign to Lunde's vacillating character. And there had been the misty figure of the assistant in the background, "clever" and "ambitious" Trevelyan, the motivating force behind the innocuous Professor Lunde. There was something off-color here.

"Then you wouldn't mind if we went back, picked up Lunde, and tried the apparatus again?"

Trevelyan shifted uneasily.

"Why not? Of course, the assembly is delicate, and the ray machine can easily be jarred out of kilter."

"So that's what you did! After the test, you knocked one of the parts haywire so your superior would be blamed for sending people out to risk their lives with apparatus so delicately and unsubstantially built that it won't even last through an ordinary testing. Why?"

"You're crazy, lady! I didn't do anything! I just installed the stuff Lunde

told me to install. If it's broken down already, that's not my fault!" He suddenly twisted free of Galt's grip. "I insist you allow me to go, or else suffer the consequences before the law!"

Silence, then, while Gerry pondered. Finally she looked at Galt.

"Well, Barney, what does your detective instinct dictate?"

Galt laughed shortly.

"Police methods ain't changed much in fifty years, Miss Carlyle. When we used t' want to find out things in a hurry, we persuaded people t' tell us."

"You mean scopolamine--the truth serum?"

"No, ma'am. That ain't always reliable. We used to use a rubber hose 'cause it didn't leave no marks. Science has give us gadgets like the psycho-probe that beat the old hose all hollow. They don't leave no marks, either, but they sure get the truth out of a man."

Trevelyan's eyes held a horrified look of dawning comprehension.

"You can't third-degree me!" he shouted. "It's unlawful! I won't--"

Galt clapped his powerful fingers across the man's mouth.

"Okay by you, Miss Carlyle?"

Gerry nodded. She was a woman who had lived with blood and death and wasn't the one to quail before a little necessary brutality. When there might be lives at stake, the lives of her own men, she could be as hard as any man.

"Shoot the works, Barney. We'll use the back office. The walls are

Vacuum-Brik with mineral fluff insulation, so we won't disturb anyone. And don't worry about the law. If anything happens, all the influence of the London Interplanetary Zoo will back you up."

Galt grinned ominously at the trembling Trevelyan.

"My buddy'll have a hemorrhage when he finds out what he missed!" And they grimly forced Trevelyan into the tiny inner room, locked the door behind.

It was mid-morning when those three staggered out of that little black chamber. Galt and Gerry Carlyle were drawn and haggard, red-eyed from lack of sleep, grim-faced from the things they had had to do to break Trevelyan down. Trevelyan himself could scarcely stand. There was not a mark on his body; physically he was unharmed. Trevelyan had been a tough nut to crack, but Galt had done it. They had the story. The end had justified the means.

It wasn't a pleasant tale to hear—a recounting of ugly passion, jealousy, treachery, hate. Under the American university system, for fifty years increasingly the centers of ultra-conservatism and reactionary tendencies, Trevelyan, in common with many underlings, had had no chance to express his own theories or receive credit for his own calculations and inventions. The silly and unjust ruling that required all papers to be published—and all discoveries to be announced—by the department heads only, regardless of who in the department might have been responsible, had stifled Trevelyan's restless soul too long. He couldn't stand by and see fools like Lunde take credit for scientific advances with which they had nothing to do. It galled him.

So he had planned to discredit Lunde completely, have him ousted, and take what he felt was his rightful place as professor of physics at Plymouth University. If someone as famous as Gerry Carlyle tried out

a Lunde "invention" and found it a failure, with probable loss of life, public indignation would ruin him. Then Trevelyan, turning up with the genuine paralysis ray and a story of Lunde's blind stupidity and the fact that he had refused to take advice from subordinates, would easily ride into office. So he had egged the professor into saddling Gerry with the paralysis ray.

The only thing Trevelyan didn't foresee was meeting an old-time copper like Barney Galt, who wouldn't hesitate to go any length to wrest the truth from a man he suspected.

Gerry picked up a visiphone and called the space-port.

"Put Mr. Strike on, please," she asked the attendant who appeared on the screen.

"Mr. Strike, miss? I'm sorry. He left with The Ark for Jupiter at eight o'clock this morning."

"For Jupiter!" she cried. "That's impossible. He promised to wait until I okayed everything!"

"Well, miss, Mr. Strike and the crew were all ready to leave several hours ago. He became impatient and tried to get in touch with you two or three times. Finally I heard him say everything must be all right and you'd gone home to bed, and anyhow he wasn't going to wait while some er--"

"I know. 'While some woman spoiled his fun.' Go on from there."

"Uh--exactly, miss. While some woman stalled around thinking up excuses to spoil the trip. And off he went." The attendant's face twisted slightly but remained heroically stolid.

"All right. Don't stand there like a dummy!" Gerry snapped. "Plug me

into the radio communications bureau!" Once the connection was made, she told the operator to get in touch with The Ark at once. Minutes passed. At intervals the operator cut in to say,

"Sorry, Miss Carlyle. The Ark does not answer. We'll keep trying."

After ten minutes of this, Gerry suggested they call some other ship nearby and have her contact The Ark.

"We've already done so, Miss Carlyle. The Martian freighter Phobos is in the same sector as The Ark. The Phobos' signals are not answered, either."

Gerry hung up abruptly as comprehension dawned on her.

"That louse Trevelyan!" she cried aloud, wishing momentarily Galt hadn't taken the fellow away so she'd have something more satisfying than the desk to pound. "He wrecked the radio receiver, too. If Tommy tests the ray apparatus before reaching Jupiter, that reckless guy will be so far along on the trip that he won't want to come back."

Quickly Gerry got busy on the phone, calling the major spaceports of the Earth, asking the same question over and over:

"When does your next ship leave for the vicinity of Jupiter?"

Luck was against her. Every passenger clipper in service was either out along the spaceways or undergoing repairs. Frantically, then, Gerry got in touch with those private concerns that had ships comparable in speed and power to The Ark. There were only a few--one or two utility companies, the big exploitation concerns. Again she failed. Sudden fear loosed ice in her veins. The fact had to be faced: nowhere on Earth was there a ship available to overtake Tommy.

Gerry wasted no tears over spilt milk. She did the next best thing, buying passage at a fabulous price on a fast freighter leaving for Ganymede within the hour. She barely had time to see Lunde and explain what had happened, bully him into parting with the only remaining model of the paralysis ray--a miniature low-power set for small-scale experimentation--rush to the port in an air-taxi and dash through the freighter's air-lock ten seconds before deadline.

Only when she was safely ensconced in one of the foul-smelling holes these freight lines used for cabins was Gerry able to relax and give vent to a wholehearted blistering of every one and everything connected with this ghastly game.

Chapter III.

Outpost of Forgotten Men

On Ganymede, fourth satellite outward from Jupiter, is the strangest community in the System, the center, in a way, of the vast mining activities that go on throughout practically every Jovian satellite, except Five, large and small.

It would be impractical for the freighters which periodically bring supplies and take away the accumulated ores and concentrates to make the rounds of each individual satellite, scattered about Jupiter in different positions as they are. So a single base was established on Ganymede. Earth freighters stop only there to leave supplies and equipment; and all shipments are brought to the Ganymede depot by a local transport system.

And the pilots of these local transport ships compose this unique village. Not ordinary pilots, these men and women, but the toughest, most hard-bitten crew of rocket-busters who ever spat into the teeth

of Death herself. Gutter scrapings, many of them, society's outcasts--men with ugly blots on their records such as drunkenness on duty that cost the lives of passengers--criminals, murderers.

There is a reason for this: the job these people do requires that they take their lives in their hands every time they leave the rocky soil of Ganymede. The terrible iron fingers of Jupiter's gravity threaten every instant to drag their puny ships down, down, to plummet into the heart of that pseudo-sun. Great magnetic storms tower high above the limits of Jovian atmosphere, the slightest breath of which would ruin the firing system of a rocket ship and leave it to spin disabled to destruction. Unrelaxing vigilance and incredible reserves of fuel is the price of survival.

Wages are high here, but none but those who have little to live for consider the job. The law shuts its eye to criminals who take refuge there, because they are doing valuable work. Besides, just as surely as if they had been sentenced in a tribunal of law, they are men and women condemned.

Yet this lonely outpost with its heavy-fisted, bragging, hard-drinking ruffians held Gerry Carlyle's only hope of reaching Strike in time to help him. When, after several restless days and sleepless nights during which the so-called "fast freight" seemed to crawl among the stars, it finally reached Ganymede, Gerry was first out of the ship. The place was unprepossessing, simply a barren landing field pitted and scarred from rocket blasts. The thin air was bitterly cold, and ugly yellow Jupiter-glow lighted the scene badly.

While the crew unloaded the cargo, Gerry turned to a young under-officer.

"Looks like this place was wiped out by the plague. Where is everyone?"

The officer smiled.

"Pretty self-important bunch, these bums. Act as if they were lords of creation and us ordinary mortals are only born to cater to their vanity. Here come a few of them now."

There was a cluster of three or four barracks in the near distance. Out of the most pretentious of them, a half dozen sauntered casually. They were hard-faced, dressed in furs.

The officer met them halfway.

"Got a passenger for you this time. Wants to see your chief."

One of the pilots, a huge hulk of a fellow, grinned.

"You don't say! We ain't got any chief. We're all equals here; everybody's just as good as everybody else."

The freighter officer bit his lip indecisively, but before he could speak, Gerry's temper slipped its leash a trifle.

"Nonsense!" she cried sharply. "A blind man could see that you and this bunch of down-at-heel underlings aren't equal to anything. You must have a leader, someone to tell you what to do. Without a chief you wouldn't know enough to come in out of a meteor shower!"

There was dumfounded silence as the pilots all gathered close for a good view of this phenomenon.

"Well, split my rocket-tubes if I ain't seen her on the news!" one woman exploded.

"I'm Gerry Carlyle," she announced imperiously, "and I'm in a very

great hurry. I insist upon seeing your chief at once!"

The giant opened his mouth to bellow in Gerry's face, but something changed his mind at the last instant. He shut his mouth, scratched his chin in bewilderment.

"Maybe we better let Frenchy figure this one out," one of the others suggested.

There was general assent, and the party moved across the field to the pilots' living quarters. A blast of warm air struck their faces as the door opened, and everyone shucked off his furs. There were four more women and men inside and one of them, a man with black spade beard and dark, flashing eyes, was obviously French.

"Hey, Frenchy, there was a passenger landed today," the big man said.

The Frenchman was busy with something in his hands and did not look up.

"So, my good Bullwer? And this passenger, what is it that he wishes?"

"Wants to see our chief. Ain't that a laugh?" Bullwer looked around and saw it was no laugh. It was obvious everyone in that room accepted the mild-looking little Frenchman as nominal leader.

The latter looked up, handling Bullwer with his eyes. "So you bring this passenger to see Louis Duval, is it not?" Bullwer squirmed.

"Okay. No need to get sore. The passenger's here, but it's just a dame."

Duval looked around, startled, saw Gerry. For a moment of

breathless silence he stared as if it had been given to him to see a vision. Then he sprang to his feet.

"A dame, yes!" he breathed. "But a dame of the most magnificent, is it not? Louis Duval, Mademoiselle, at your service!" And he bowed low over Gerry's hand.

Suddenly Duval glared about him.

"Swine!" he roared. "Take off your hats! A chair for the lady! Refreshments! Vite! Vite!"

But Gerry was not to be swerved from her purpose.

"Monsieur Duval," she said tensely, "I'm here for a reason. Every minute that passes may mean the difference between life and death to many men. I must, at the earliest possible moment, get to Satellite Five. The only men and women in the System with the courage and skill to get me there in time are right in this room. Will you aid me?"

The pilots, who had lounged about in interested silence while Duval held the floor, now burst into concerted, ironic laughter.

"The dame don't want much," one said. "Just a mass suicide!"

"Satellite Five!" ejaculated a second. "There ain't two dozen ships in the System could make Five. And they ain't none of em anywheres near this dump of a Ganymede!"

Duval's eyes darkened with genuine regret.

"Mademoiselle," he declared earnestly, "there is nothing on this world or any world we would not do for you gladly--if it can be done. But the journey to Satellite Five--it is not possible."

He took Gerry gently by the arm, led her to a window.

"Look. There is one of the vehicles so splendid in which we make our trips regular to the other satellites."

Gerry stared. The ship was an ancient iron hull. Its rocket exhausts were badly corroded; the plates were warped and buckled, roughened by the relentless pelting of thousands of wandering meteorites. A far cry from The Ark's streamlined power which would take it anywhere in the System.

"That wreck!" Gerry ejaculated. "Why that's a condemned crate if I ever saw one! That thing wouldn't last thirty minutes in space! It'd fall apart!"

"Frequently they do fall apart, Mademoiselle. For example, Scoffino is two days overdue from Io. Soon we will drink the toast."

Gerry's eyes followed Duval's to a shelf which ran across the rear of the room. On it were ranged a row of shattered goblets; etched in acid across each was a name.

"Great heavens!" Gerry was indignant. "That's criminal!"

"But no one can blame the company. They would be very foolish to risk ships valuable, costing many thousands of dollars, on these routes hazardous. Besides, there is genius--I, Duval, admit it--among the mechanics. They continue to patch and to patch and somehow most of us we manage to return alive with our cargoes. But to journey to Five--" Duval hunched his shoulders in the inimitable shrug with which a Frenchman can express so little or so much.

Something rose suddenly in Gerry's throat, chokingly. Was it to be failure this time? And what about Tommy Strike, facing some alien horror with empty weapons? He was so quixotically reckless that be

would never consent to turn tail and flee, even when his own life was in danger. Was he, too, to die with succor so near at hand because she couldn't dig up transportation to bridge a little gap of a few hundred thousand miles of space?

Not while the strongest in Gerry's arsenal of weapons was yet unused. She had a hypodermic tongue, and the knack of injecting caustic, rankling remarks. She whirled on the group of lounging pilots, fire in her eye.

"That's a laugh!" she cried in piercing tones. "That's a real laugh! My fiancé is down there on Satellite Five right now, fighting it out with some monstrous thing no man has ever seen 'to tell of. There's nothing the matter with his insides; he's got what it takes. But because of a scheming rat back in New York, he's out there defenseless with a weapon that won't work. I have the real one, and I came to the only place in the entire System where I could find men and women supposedly with the skill and guts to pilot me to Satellite Five.

"And what do I find? A bunch of no-good tramps, half-baked defeatists playing cribbage for matches! Telling each other how tough they really are, living perpetually in the shadow of death! Dramatizing themselves! Breaking a two-bit goblet every time one of their worthless carcasses takes a dive into Jupiter--the cheapest kind of theatrics! If the whole lot of you were laid end to end, it would be a darned good job! All told, you couldn't muster up the courage of a sick rabbit!"

It was a cruel, bitter indictment, completely unjust; but it was the last trump in Gerry's hand. If it failed to take the trick, she was through. With a final sweeping glance of unutterable scorn, she strode out of the barracks and slammed the door behind her.

There was thick silence in the pilots' quarters after Gerry left, broken finally by sheepish stirrings and a muttered, "Whew!"

Of all the people gathered there, Gerry's denunciation affected Duval most poignantly. He had all the Frenchman's traditional romanticism and chivalry and love of beauty. For three seemingly endless years he had been a lonely exile on Ganymede, far from the beloved Gascony of his birth.

Paris was a dim memory; he had not seen a cultured woman in years.

All the ideals in his romantic soul had become magnified to an unnatural extent. Despite the fact that he dominated this hardy crew, he was a misfit. By nature he was cut out to be a reincarnation of the chevalier Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*; cruel circumstance had made him--what he was. And now this flame of a young woman had poured salt on his wounds. Boy and girl in love, and in need. It meant everything such a situation means to any Frenchman, a hundred times keener. And he with opportunity to make his worthless life meaningful again.

Purposefully Duval strode to a cupboard, yanked out a handful of charts, pored over them. He sat down with pencil and calculator, muttering to himself, figuring.

"Name of a pipe," he whispered presently. "It might be done."

Duval hurried out after Gerry and found her by the freighter, which was now taking on its load of ore concentrates, trying bitterly and hopelessly to argue its commander into attempting to make Satellite Five.

"Mademoiselle!" called Duval breathlessly. "Mademoiselle, I believe

there is a possibility of the faintest--"

"Duval!" Gerry cried, her face lighting like a torch from within. "You mean you'll try it? Oh, that's marvelous! And I'll see you're properly rewarded, too. I have influence. Plenty. I don't know what you did back home, but if it can be fixed--"

Duval brushed this aside.

"We have perhaps one chance in the hundred to arrive safely. After that is time to talk of the rewarding. Fortunately, the Satellite Five is almost directly opposite Ganymede, on the other side of Jupiter--"

They were moving rapidly across the field tarmac toward the battered rocket ship in its starting cradle, Duval's feet fairly twinkling to match Gerry's eager strides. The paralysis ray swung at her side. She nodded incisively.

"I see what you mean. We dive straight into the heart of Jupiter to gather terrific momentum, then cut over in a hump and utilize our speed to draw clear and make our objective. Splendid! I knew there must be some rocket-buster around here with the stuff to make this trip."

Duval beamed.

"You are willing to risk the life with me?"

"Perfectly."

Drawn by curiosity, some of the pilots drifted around as Duval made a swift final check-up before taking off. A few, a bit embarrassed by anything like a display of emotion, diffidently shook the Frenchman's hand in a manner clearly indicating they never expected to see him again. Just before they scaled the entrance port, Bullwer poked his

head inside.

"Say! You really gonna shoot for v, Frenchy?" he asked incredulously.

Duval drew himself up to every inch of his five feet. "And why not? If there is anyone who can it achieve, I, Duval, am he, is it not?"

Bullwer grinned.

"Maybe so. But I'll lay a week's pay you can't."

"Done!" And Duval slammed the port shut, nearly decapitating Bullwer. Flames spewed from the rocket-tubes in tenuous streamers along the ground; thunder shook the ship. Scarcely waiting for the motors to warm up properly, Duval poured on the power, and the strangely assorted couple took off on perhaps the most hazardous journey in the history of rocketry.

Chapter IV.

Re-birth

Gerry always remembered that trip with the breathless terror of a nightmare. Once in the ship, there was no time to adjust herself to the danger, none of the usual hours of preparation, of preliminary approach, during which one can screw up courage to the sticking point. Instead, one instant the clang of the port was ringing in her ears, the next, the booming of the engines, and all at once they were dropping like a plummet straight into the maw of the gigantic golden bubble of Jupiter, which burgeoned before them like a mighty blossom of disaster.

Duval was a grim figure strapped in the pilot's seat, his magic hands

flying over the control board, delicately probing, guiding the old cracker-box ship miraculously, wary of indications of Jovian magnetic storms which would mean destruction for them. Completely ignoring the physical effects of acceleration, Duval soon had the rocket ship hurtling down at speeds she had never achieved before, and for which she was never built.

Soon the sinister, swirling globe of Jupiter filled every corner of the visi-screen. Duval spoke sharply without turning his head.

"The straps, Mademoiselle! Make certain they are tight! Soon we must make our move!"

Gerry set her teeth grimly, watching with almost impersonal admiration the skill of Duval. Too late to turn back now; already a faint scream was audible as they bulleted through the extreme upper reaches of the Jovian atmosphere. Then Duval's fingers plunged downward on the firing keys, and the underrockets flowered crimson petals of flame.

The ship lurched, groaned hideously in every joint as if in some strange cosmic labor, striving to tear itself free. Instantly the steely fingers of Jupiter's gravity wrenched powerfully at the ancient bull. Seams squealed, ripping open as the rivets sprung; the plates twisted tortuously under the unprecedented strains. Air pressure dropped as the precious mixture whistled out through a dozen tiny vents. The obsolete air-o-stat pumped valiantly in a grim losing battle.

Temperature suddenly rose, rapidly becoming intolerable as the outer air became thicker and friction heated the hull. Sweat poured into Gerry's eyes, but she maintained her stoic calm.

The picture of Jupiter on the visi-screen was shifting erratically; a

matter of a few seconds would tell the story....

They made it. Their incredible velocity defeated the greedy powers of Jovian gravity. One final burst in which the rockettube flames burst completely around the ship's nose, obscuring everything, and they had cleared the "hump," missed the surface of Jupiter cleanly and burst through the layers of upper atmosphere into open space again. Ahead, moving round to its assignation with the ship, was Satellite Five, barren and bright in the Jupiter-glow.

The rest was comparatively simple. Jupiter's gravity still had a strong claim on them; it was as if they were chained to the giant planet by a cosmic rubber band, which tightened inexorably the further they coasted away. Handling this mighty force with dexterity, Duval jockeyed the ship so it was barely moving when it reached the appointed spot in space. They came to rest with a jar that completed the wrecking of the ship, but they were safe.

Gerry took Duval's hand and squeezed hard.

"You were magnificent, Duval; I'll never forget it. But now we've got work to do. Ready?"

They piled into space-suits, Gerry seized the paralysis equipment, and the two left the wreckage. There was nothing moving in sight on the fairly level plane, spawled off by Jupiter's fierce heat when the System was young, whose horizon was a scant mile away. So they started walking. Gravitation was surprisingly strong, indicating unusual density. This fact, plus the intense cold which slows down the dance of the atoms, accounted for the fact that Five still retained remnants of an atmosphere.

The hikers even saw traces of water vapor, in form of frost. Occasionally they passed clumps of mossy or lichenous growth.

Twice they observed colonies of sluglike creatures growing, reproducing, and dying with amazing rapidity. And then, like an enormous silver cigar looming over the horizon, The Ark came into view. It looked almost as large as the Satellite itself, and there was furious activity going on. A half-dozen suited figures scurried about the nose of The Ark. From the pilot house another figure was throwing out instruments to those below.

Gerry and Duval drew quickly near, and she shouted into her headset, "Hey. Tommy! Tommy Strike!"

All the moving figures turned sharply, in varying attitudes of astonishment. Then one of them gestured sharply and came lumbering over the plain as fast as possible.

As the two from Ganymede moved forward, Duval tripped and sprawled ludicrously, though harmlessly, on his face. He scrambled carefully to his feet and bent over to see what had caused his humiliation. He uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Name of a pipe! What a monster of the most incredible!"

Gerry, too, stopped to examine the thing stretched out on the rocky ground. It was something beyond even Gerry's vast experience in extra-terrestrial life. From tip to tip it might have measured as much as twenty feet, and its ugly, warty gray hide was divided into armored sections along its entire length with soft spots between the plates. It was oval-shaped in lateral cross-section, something like a gigantic cut-worm that has been stepped upon but not quite squashed. Duval was for leaving the nauseous horror strictly alone.

Gerry's clinical instinct, however, prompted her to turn it over with her foot. About a fourth of the way along the under side were six short legs, arranged with no particular symmetry, just stuck here and there.

Sprouting about the front end of the thing was a forest of what looked like dead gloved fingers--sensory organs of some kind. The mouth parts resembled a funnel, much like the proboscis of the common house-fly. Two eyes set on either side of the head were glazed in death. While the entire lower half of the abdomen was slit wide open; inside was nothing but a sickening mess of half-devoured vitals.

At that moment Tommy Strike finally galloped up, spluttering.

"Gerry! How the dickens did you ever manage to get here? And why? And--"

"Never mind all that!" interrupted Gerry. "Duval here brought me from Ganymede by rocket. He's the greatest pilot in the System. And I came because the paralysis ray equipment you have is no good."

"No kidding!" Strike was bitterly sarcastic. "You came a long ways just to tell us that. We found it out a few hours ago. It cost us two lives. Leeds and Machen are gone, burned to cinders."

"Burned!" Gerry rocked back on her heels, stunned at the loss. "Then this--this Cacus really does breathe fire?"

"And how it does! You've never seen anything like it. But what I want to know is about the ray apparatus. What--"

Gerry quickly explained about Trevelyan's treachery. "I have the genuine article with me now." She displayed Lunde's other model.

Strike seized it avidly.

"Then let me have it! Will we give that monkey what-for!"

"But wait a minute, Tommy. What about this thing here?" She kicked at the empty dead thing at their feet. "Is this the Cacus?"

"Well, it was the Cacus." Strike looked a bit befuddled. "Though now the Cacus has helped itself to The Ark. Just walked in and took over. The pilot-house and engine rooms are locked, keeping it out of there, but the boys trapped in the nose of the ship are jettisoning the valuable stuff in case the Cacus decides to burn its way in there." He swore. "It's a mess!"

Gerry shook her head.

"Then you mean there's more than one Cacus; you killed this one, but another showed up. That it?"

"No, that isn't it! There's only one Cacus. It--it--" Strike stopped and drew a deep breath. He rolled the carcass over on its side and began again. "See that heat-ray burn? Well, here's what happened. When we found the paralysis apparatus on the blink, we were practically here already, so we figured we'd take this freak with our regular equipment. We found it crawling around with little jets of fire occasionally licking out of its mouth or snout or whatever it is. It was burning this mossy junk that grows all over, and also toasting plenty of these snail-like things, and then siphoning them up. Omnivorous.

"Well, the job looked like a cinch, so I creased it across the spine with a heat-ray, just enough to double it up while we doped out a muzzle to cap that fiery mouth. It twisted into a knot, all right, but then the damndest thing happened. The thing split down the middle like an over-ripe fruit and another Cacus popped out almost full-born. The new one spouted a terrific blast of fire at us, and while we ducked out of range, the new Cacus just sat down and made a meal off its mother's--or is it its father's--insides. You could see the creature grow by inches till it got about the size of the original. Then it made for the ship.

"Leeds and Machen were guarding the air-lock, and they gave the second Cacus full-power heat-ray. It never bothered the thing. It just burned the two of 'em to so much charcoal with a single breath and pushed on inside the ship." Strike's mouth twisted bitterly at the memory. "Most of the gang escaped, though a few are still in there, safe behind the emergency bulkheads and with some of the air still preserved. Don't think anyone else was hurt."

The trio hurried toward The Ark.

"So the Cacus is bisexuals," said Gerry wonderingly. "Self-fertilizing. That's amazing. And only one of them on the whole satellite! That's really amazing."

Strike looked at her queerly.

"You don't grasp the truly amazing part of it--the Cacus' imperviousness to Leeds' and Machen's heat guns. Don't you see, Gerry? When Cacus number one was attacked by the heatray, it promptly transferred all its life and intelligence to the youngster in its womb. But it also transferred the power of unbelievable adaptability, so when Cacus number two was born it was completely defended against that heat-ray forever henceforth.

"It'd be the same for any other weapon we have for capturing an animal alive; it would simply let itself be born again fully adapted and protected. The only way we can stop this monstrosity is by suspending instantly all its vital functions, or by killing it outright."

Gerry thought for a moment. "Well, why worry?" she said finally. "A cathode gun will always do the trick."

"That's just it," said Strike with melancholy triumph. "The door to the arsenal was open when the Cacus entered the ship. Everyone ran

out of there in a hurry, and there isn't a cathode gun in the crowd."

Gerry snorted.

"You certainly have a genius for getting into trouble. But it can't be as bad as you say. For one thing, this business about instant adaptability is so much moon-truffle. It's fantastic. Leeds' and Machen's guns simply failed. Or maybe they shot wildly."

Strike expressed unutterable scorn. Gerry Carlyle's crew were all sharpshooters, and they simply never got rattled.

"You'll soon see for yourself," was all he said.

When the three of them approached The Ark, the crew gave a ragged cheer for their famous leader and rallied hopefully around, visibly heartened. Nothing in their experience had ever completely baffled Gerry Carlyle, except the strange case of the Venusian murri, and they had confidence she would get them out of this predicament.

Gerry looked over the familiar faces with relief--Kranz, Barrows, Michaels--most of her veterans were all right.

"Let's find out about this adaptability stuff first of all," she decided. "Anyone got a hypo rifle handy?"

The original hunting party had carried several, and presently one of them cautiously approached the open port of The Ark to act as decoy while Gerry stood within easy range, rifle ready. The decoy peered gingerly inside the ship, passed the two grim chunks of seared flesh and fabric that marked the pyres of two brave men, then finally vanished inside. Minutes dragged by. Then a faint shout rang in the watchers' helmets, and suddenly the man tore out of The Ark as fast as he could run.

Once outside, he gave a tremendous upward leap many feet high, and just cleared a sizzling tongue of hot flame that belched out of the door behind him.

The Cacus, bulgy-eyed and hot-breathed, crouched angrily at the door.

Quickly Gerry drove home three hypodermic bullets in the creature's soft flesh in the crevices between the armor-like coverings. They took quick effect. The Cacus' head drooped sleepily, and it moved uncertainly as if undecided whether to come out or stay in.

Then suddenly a series of hideous abdominal convulsions wracked the thing.

The monster rolled over, still inside the ship; as if an invisible surgeon slit the Cacus open for two-thirds its length, the abdomen parted. Like some strange phoenix of terror, a new Cacus struggled out of the dying body of the old, stood defiantly with the upper half of its body raised on the six legs.

Unerringly and with no sign of nerves, Gerry deliberately emptied the hypodermic rifle into the new Cacus. The creature lowered itself to the metal floor, hunching along like a caterpillar. Then it turned and commenced ravenously to devour the soft inner parts of its host's anatomy.

Jerkily it seemed to increase in size, like a speeded-up motion picture of subaqueous life.

The hypo slugs had absolutely no effect upon it.

Petulantly Gerry slammed the rifle to the ground, where it bounced lightly.

"That's impossible!" she cried. "I've never heard of such a thing before in the entire Solar System!"

"Maybe it got here from some other solar system," Tommy said. "Lord knows how, and isn't native here. But that won't help subduing it."

"Rats! How about anesthetic gas? Any bombs available?"

A dozen were turned up. The Cacus having disappeared from view, Kranz daringly ran up to The Ark, threw several of the bombs in, and shoved the port partly closed. In less than five minutes the port was nudged wide open again, and the Cacus, ugly and flame-wrapped, glared challengingly at the little group of scattered humans. Everyone saw instantly that the new Cacus was slightly smaller than the one before, and was still growing. The amazing re-birth had defeated the anesthetic gas as well.

"Well," said Gerry cheerfully, "I guess we'll just have to quit playing games."

Chapter V.

Duval the Magnificent

She quickly set up Lunde's model paralysis ray machine. It worked successfully on Kranz, to everyone's amusement, and Gerry advanced on The Ark. Instantly the Cacus, watchfully guarding the port, emitted a tremendous streamer of fire close to the ground, curling up at the end like an enormous prehensile tongue. Gerry marked the limit of that flame and stopped outside it. Aiming the paralysis ray at the Cacus, she flipped the activating switch.

Nothing happened. Gerry fiddled with the lens to no avail. She

moved closer, only to be forced to scamper out of range of the breath of fire. Then she remembered. Lunde had told her this was a small-scale model, with less than half the power of the working model. The Cacus out-ranged them; they couldn't get close enough to allow the smaller ray machine to take effect.

The Cacus blew another fiery lance at the crew, as if in derision, then turned at some vibration within the ship and moved into its depths. Abandoning its sluggish mode of crawling, the Cacus coiled and raised its tail over its back much in the manner of the scorpion, and trotted off on its six curious legs in search of some incautious engineer who was seeking, perhaps, to sneak out to safety.

Gerry wore a baffled expression.

"That," she pronounced, "beats me. It looks like stalemate."

"Pardon, mademoiselle. Not stalemate." Everyone turned to look at Duval, who had been completely forgotten in the excitement.

"No?" said Strike. "Then it's a pretty good imitation of stalemate. He can't catch us in the open; we can't do anything to him."

"But, monsieur, every second that passes works in favor of the enemy. Our oxygen supply grows short. It is a situation of the most desperate. I, Duval, say it."

Immediately, though no one had noticed the mustiness of their air before, every person there gestured toward his throat and fumbled quickly with the oxygen valves. Breathing became consciously shallow, slow. There was no sign of panic among these veterans, but uneasiness was a definite presence among them.

Gerry bit her lip. "Any suggestions, Duval? You've played aces every trick so far."

"Merci bien. Yes, mademoiselle, I have the suggestion to offer. To combat our enemy, it is necessary that we study him, find his points vulnerable, if such he has."

"And how'll you get that monstrosity under your microscope?"

Duval's teeth flashed. "Ah. To study the present Monsieur Cacus, that is not possible. But his ancestors--eh?"

Startled looks were exchanged.

"Say, that's a thought!" Strike cried, and led a rapid trek across the plain to where the carcass of the first Cacus lay disemboweled. While not scientists in the strict sense, all the Carlyle crew had had scientific education and training. Almost at once a remarkable discovery was made by Kranz.

"Captain, will you take a look at this?" He was holding up the dead creature's funnel-shaped mouth, spreading it wide apart with his hands. Instead of true teeth, the entire inner mouth was composed of a sort of flexible horny growth which probably served for mastication when and if necessary. But the extraordinary thing was that every available crevice was veined with a gray, spongy mass.

"That," said Kranz, "is spongy platinum!"

"And say!" someone chimed in impressively. "The whole Satellite must be rank with platinum if there's enough to impregnate the system of any animal life."

Excitement over a possible bonanza discovery stirred them momentarily. Then Duval's ringing voice held them all again.

"Ah! But more important, I believe, it is that we have here the

explanation of the breath of fire! One may read in any textbook of chemistry elementary that when hydrogen or coal gas is made to pass over spongy platinum, it makes of fire, is it no? Well! One may also read that anerobic bacteria, acting upon matter of decomposition in swamps, generate methane, which is one of the constituents--as is hydrogen--of coal gas. Now! All the world knows we have in our digestive tracts many bacteria. Surely, Monsieur Cacus, within, contains anerobic bacteria which act on the decaying matter animal and vegetable, of which a decomposition product must be gas similar to coal gas. Thus the breath of fire!" Duval finished with a flourish.

Everyone agreed: the Frenchman had something there. But how to turn it to advantage? Strike screwed his face up thoughtfully.

"Spongy platinum, then," he groped hesitantly, "is a catalyst--"

Instantly Gerry took him up.

"Of course! A catalyst! And there are several things which, in combination with it, kill its action as a catalytic agent. The halogens, for instance--bromine, flourine. Or hydrogen cyanide--"

Everyone looked at everyone else, eager to advance Gerry's idea, uncertain just how to go about it.

"That's smart brain-work, Gerry," said Strike, "but our supplies might as well be on Sirius for all the good they can do us. Where'll we get any of the things you mentioned?"

"If it pleases you, mademoiselle--" It was Duval again, and hopes soared at the confidence in his voice. "I, Duval, can perhaps solve this problem. You see these blossoms, so tiny, so unimportant?" He toed one of the little groups of close-clinging growths with the

colorless, star-shaped blooms. "They are found, I believe, in one species or another, on all the satellites of Jupiter. We know them well. They are related, one might say, to the night-shade of Earth, because they have poison within them. It is, as you have said it, hydrogen cyanide."

Without the necessity of a single command, the crew went to work. Three of them got furiously busy picking great handfuls of the plants which offered them salvation. Another ran back to the prow of The Ark, from which the man in the pilot house had dropped the important instruments, and had him toss out a space-suit helmet; it would make a perfect pot for boiling.

The little remaining drinking water left in the pilot house was also lowered. A pair of low-power heat beams was arranged under a tripod made of three of the useless hypo rifles. In a very few minutes the mixture was bubbling merrily--it came to a boil quickly in the absence of much pressure--brewing a vengeful hell-broth for the Cacus.

By the time it cooled to a scummy liquid with a brown substance deposited from the solution, the whole party was laboring for breath, with the exception of Gerry and Duval, who hadn't been in their space-suits as long as the others.

Gerry peered around the row of blue-lipped faces; what she had to do now was hard. Someone had to be chosen to try conclusions with the Cacus; someone had to risk his life, perhaps lose it, in a desperate effort to introduce the hcn into the monster's mouth.

True, it had to be done at close range; so why not try the paralysis ray? But Gerry had come to distrust the ray machine, which was the cause of all the trouble. Perhaps it didn't have the proper power even at close range. If a life had to be lost, it would simply be thrown away

if the per analysis ray failed to work. But it might do some good if lost while putting into effect Duval's textbook chemistry.

The crew would never under any circumstances allow Gerry to try it, so she was forced to call for volunteers. To the last member, they all stepped forward.

But Tommy Strike stepped farthest, taking the bowl of deadly juice from Gerry's hands.

"My job," he said briefly. "I'm sort of responsible for this mess. It's up to me to straighten things out."

Gerry's eyes misted. She had no right to refuse him. Someone had to go and Strike, as co-captain, had authority to choose himself. And rigid discipline of the Carlyle expeditions insisted on no needless sacrifice of life or limb. Strike would go alone. Gerry needed all her iron control at that moment.

Strike opened one of the meta-glass gas bombs to allow the gas to disperse, then filled it with most of the poison solution, saving a little for a second try in case he failed. With a crooked grin he waved salute and started toward The Ark. Deftly, and before anyone had the slightest inkling of what was happening, Duval slipped up behind Strike, tripped him, and threw him easily to the ground. He caught the meta-glass ball as it floated downward.

Gerry yelled at him.

"Duval! Stop it! You've done enough already, besides, you're not properly one of us at all. Put that down!"

Duval's smile gleamed brightly. "But I have just made a flight impossible from Ganymede to Satellite Five in a scrap heap. Today is my day of luck! I cannot fail!"

"Duval! Come back! We want no quixotic foolishness. If you understood our discipline you'd realize we just don't do things that way."

And Duval of the empty life, whose passing none would mourn, who burned to do heroic things in the grand manner, said soberly:

"And if you, mademoiselle, but understood the French, you would realize that we Gascons do things this way."

And he was gone, running rapidly toward The Ark. Strike floundered finally to his feet, snarling. He seized the paralysis ray model and set out after Duval as fast as he could go. In a flash the entire crew made a concerted rush in the same direction. Only Gerry's savage commands halted them reluctantly.

Duval reached the port, peered cautiously in, then vanish inside. Strike followed him less than a half minute later. Then nothing. The watchers outside listened intently at their helmet earphones, but no word came from either Duval or Strike. They got in touch with those still trapped in the ship, but the latter reported nothing. That was natural, as the lethal game being played between Duval, Strike, and the Cacus was taking place along nearly airless passages where sound would not carry well.

Presently the listeners were shocked to hear a high-pitched squeal like that of a wounded horse coming faintly through the earphones. It was nothing human: it must have been picked up by someone's helmet mike at a point very close to the screamer. At that, all restraint was flung aside and the crew, with Gerry in the lead, pounded pell-mell over the solid terrain and recklessly into The Ark.

They burst in gasping on a climax of terrible ferocity. It was so swift,

so savagely sudden, that it was all over before they could throw their feeble powers into the balance.

The Cacus had evidently been prowling down a side passage, and Duval had attracted its attention, then ducked around a corner into the main corridor; when they met, it would be at close quarters where there was no chance for the Frenchman to miss. As the crew tumbled in, Duval was crouching by the passage corner and had just finished yammering at Tommy Strike to stay back and not be a fool. Strike had apparently started in the wrong direction and had just located the real theater of action; he was running purposely along the corridor to back up Duval's play.

And then everything happened at once, like a badly-rehearsed bit of stage continuity in which the actors rush through their parts almost simultaneously.

The Cacus, tail curled up and running on its six legs, skidded furiously into the main corridor of The Ark. At once it spied Duval and emitted another of those hideous shrilling sounds. Duval's arm went back, whipped forward. A glittering arc made a line straight for the ugly, horn-like snout of the beast. Strike, off to one side and several feet behind Duval, dropped to his knees and fumbled with the ray-box. A terrific blast of flame belched out from the Cacus to envelop head and shoulders of the doughty Frenchman.

For a moment it appeared that the fiery stream had caught the container of hcn and demolished it. But no--the Frenchman had been the quicker; he had scored a bull's-eye. By the time the Cacus turned to annihilate Strike, the hydrogen cyanide had entered into combination with the spongy platinum, and nothing but a burst of gas came forth. From that moment the monster was through. Strike brought the miniature paralysis ray to bear, and instantly the Cacus collapsed in a twitching mound of nauseous flesh.

Cathode guns were brought from the arsenal, and the Cacus was ruthlessly blasted out of existence. Then Gerry and Strike hurried to Duval's side. The Frenchman was terribly burned, his face blackened, blinded travesty of a man. The spark of life was almost extinguished. But as the two knelt beside him, Duval's cracked lips managed a feeble grin.

"Mademoiselle," he whispered, "will have to collect that wager I have won from the good Bullwer. We made the flight. He has lost a week's pay, that one." Something like a laugh bubbled up from his seared chest.

Gerry groaned in anguish.

"Duval! Oh, you magnificent fool, Duval! Why did you do it? Because of me, you must die. That's wrong--"

"Death?" Duval somehow managed a shrug. "Death, yes. But what a death of the most heroic!" And with supreme courtesy to the last, Duval carefully rolled over to face the wall, that a woman might not have to suffer the unpleasant sight of a dying man.

Somberly, Strike helped Gerry to her feet, and she clung to him tightly. For a while they said no word. All about them throughout the ship came the noises of normal life being resumed. The entrance port clanged shut. Voices rang out. Distantly a generator began to hum. Bulkheads rumbled open again. Oxygen hissed into the airless passages. Feet drummed faintly.

Then Gerry Carlyle gave Louis Duval his epitaph.

"There lies," she said, "a very gallant gentleman."

The Big Night

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Chapter I

Last of the Hyper Ships

She came lumbering up out of the ecliptic plane of the planets like a wallowing space beast, her jet tubes scarred and stained, a molten streak across her middle where Venus's turgid atmosphere had scarred her, and every ancient spot weld in her fat body threatened to rip apart the moment she hit stress again.

The skipper was drunk in his cabin, his maudlin voice echoing through the compartments as he bewailed the unsympathetic harshness of the Interplanetary Trade Commission.

There was a mongrel crew from a dozen worlds, half of them shanghaied. Logger Hilton, the mate, was trying to make sense out of the tattered charts, and La Cucaracha, her engines quaking at the suicidal thought, was plunging ahead through space into the Big Night.

In the control room a signal light flared. Hilton grabbed a mike.

"Repair crew!" he yelled. "Get out on the skin and check jet a-six. Move!"

He turned back to his charts, chewing his lip and glancing at the pilot, a tiny, inhuman Selenite, with his arachnoid multiple limbs and fragile-seeming body. Ts'ss--that was his name, or approximated it--was wearing the awkward audio-converter mask that could make his sub-sonic voice audible to human ears, but, unlike Hilton, he wasn't wearing space armor. No Lunarian ever needed protection against deep space. In their million years on the Moon, they had got used to airless-ness. Nor did the ship's atmosphere bother Ts'ss. He simply didn't trouble to breathe it.

"Blast you, take it easy!" Hilton said. "Want to tear off our hide?"

Through the mask the Selenite's faceted eyes glittered at the mate.

"No, sir. I'm going as slowly as I can on jet fuel. As soon as I know the warp formulae, things'll ease up a bit."

"Ride it! Ride it--without jets!"

"We need the acceleration to switch over to warp, sir."

"Never mind," Hilton said. "I've got it now. Somebody must have been breeding fruit-flies all over these charts. Here's the dope." He dictated a few equations that Ts'ss' photographic memory assimilated at once.

A distant howling came from far off.

"That's the skipper, I suppose," Hilton said. "I'll be back in a minute. Get into hyper as soon as you can, or we're apt to fold up like an

accordion."

"Yes, sir. Ah--Mr. Hilton?"

"Well?"

"You might look at the fire extinguisher in the Cap'n's room."

"What for?" Hilton asked.

Several of the Selenite's multiple limbs pantomimed the action of drinking. Hilton grimaced, rose and fought the acceleration down the companionway. He shot a glance at the visio-screens and saw they were past Jupiter already, which was a relief. Going through the giant planet's gravity-pull wouldn't have helped La Cucaracha's aching bones. But they were safely past now. Safely! He grinned wryly as he opened the captain's door and went in.

Captain Sam Danvers was standing on his bunk, making a speech to an imaginary Interplanetary Trade Commission. He was a big man, or rather he had been once, but now the flesh had shrunk and he was beginning to stoop a little. The skin of his wrinkled face was nearly black with space-tan. A stubble of gray hair stood up angrily.

Somehow, though, he looked like Logger Hilton. Both were deep-space men. Hilton was thirty years younger, but he, too, had the same dark tan and the same look in his blue eyes. There's an old saying that when you go out into the Big Night, beyond Pluto's orbit, that enormous emptiness gets into you and looks out through your eyes. Hilton had that. So did Captain Danvers.

Otherwise--Hilton was huge and heavy where Danvers was a little frail now, and the mate's broad chest bulged his white tunic. He hadn't had time yet to change from dress uniform, though he knew that even this cellulose fabric couldn't take the dirt of a space-run

without showing it. Not on La Cucaracha, anyway.

But this would be his last trip on the old tub.

Captain Danvers interrupted his speech to ask Hilton what the devil he wanted. The mate saluted.

"Routine inspection, sir," he observed, and took down a fire extinguisher from the wall. Danvers sprang from the bunk, but Hilton moved too fast. Before the captain reached him, Hilton had emptied the tank down the nearest disposal vent.

"Old juice," he explained. "I'll refill her."

"Listen, Mr. Hilton," Danvers said, swaying slightly and stabbing a long forefinger at the mate's nose. "If you think I had whiskey in there, you're crazy."

"Sure," Hilton said. "I'm crazy as a loon, skipper. How about some caffeine?"

Danvers weaved to the disposal port and peered down it vaguely.

"Caffeine. Huh? Look, if you haven't got sense enough to take La Cucaracha into hyper, you ought to resign."

"Sure, sure. But in hyper it won't take long to get to Fria. You'll have to handle the agent there."

"Christie? I ... I guess so." Danvers sank down on the bunk and held his head. "I guess I just got mad, Logger. itc--what do they know about it? Why, we opened that trading post on Sirius Thirty."

"Look, skipper, when you came aboard you were so high you forgot to tell me about it," Hilton said. "You just said we'd changed our

course and to head for Fria. How come?"

"Interplanetary Trade Commission," Danvers growled. "They had their crew checking over La Cucaracha."

"I know. Routine inspection."

"Well, those fat slobs have the brassbound nerve to tell me my ship's unsafe! That the gravity-drag from Sirius is too strong--and that we couldn't go to Sirius Thirty!"

"Could be they're right," Hilton said thoughtfully. "We had trouble landing on Venus."

"She's old." Danvers' voice was defensive. "But what of it? I've taken La Cucaracha around Betelgeuse and plenty closer to Sirius than Sirius Thirty. The old lady's got what it takes. They built atomic engines in those days."

"They're not building them now," Hilton said, and the skipper turned purple.

"Transmission of matter!" he snarled. "What kind of a crazy set-up is that? You get in a little machine on Earth, pull a switch and there you are on Venus or Bar Canopus or--or Purgatory, if you like! I shipped on a hyper ship when I was thirteen, Logger. I grew up on hyper ships. They're solid. They're dependable. They'll take you where you want to go. Hang it, it isn't safe to space travel without an atmosphere around you, even if it's only in a suit."

"That reminds me," Hilton said. "Where's yours?"

"Ah, I was too hot. The refrigerating unit's haywire."

The mate found the lightweight armor in a closet and deftly began to

repair the broken switch.

"You don't need to keep the helmet closed, but you'd better wear the suit," he said absently. "I've issued orders to the crew. All but Ts'ss, and he doesn't need any protection."

Danvers looked up. "How's she running?" he asked quickly.

"Well, she could use an overhaul," Hilton said. "I want to get into hyperspace fast. This straight running is a strain. I'm afraid of landing, too."

"Uh. Okay, there'll be an overhaul when we get back--if we make a profit. You know how much we made this last trip. Tell you what--you supervise the job and take a bigger cut for it."

Hilton's fingers slowed on the switch. He didn't look around.

"I'll be looking for a new berth," he said. "Sorry, skipper. But I won't be aboard after this voyage."

There was silence behind him. Hilton grimaced and began to work again on the spacesuit. He heard Danvers say:

"You won't find many hyper ships needing mates these days."

"I know. But I've got engineering training. Maybe they would use me on the matter transmitters. Or as an outposter--a trader."

"Oh, for the love of Pete! Logger, what are you talking about? A--trader? A filthy outposter? You're a hyper ship man!"

"In twenty years there won't be a hyper ship running," Hilton said.

"You're a liar. There'll be one."

"She'll fall apart in a couple of months!" Hilton said angrily. "I'm not going to argue. What are we after on Fria, the fungus?"

After a pause Danvers answered.

"What else is there on Fria? Sure, the fungus. It's pushing the season a little. We're not due there for three weeks Earth-time, but Christie always keeps a supply on hand. And that big hotel chain will pay us the regular cut. Blamed if I know why people eat that garbage, but they pay twenty bucks a plate for it."

"It could mean a profit, then," Hilton said. "Provided we land on Fria without falling apart." He tossed the repaired suit on the bunk beside Danvers. "There you are, skipper. I'd better get back to controls. We'll be hitting hyper pretty soon."

Danvers leaned over and touched a button that opened the deadlight. He stared at the star screen.

"You won't get this on a matter transmitter," he said slowly. "Look at it, Logger."

Hilton leaned forward and looked across the Captain's shoulder. The void blazed. To one side a great arc of Jupiter's titan bulk blared coldly bright. Several of the moons were riding in the screen's field, and an asteroid or two caught Jupiter's light in their tenuous atmospheres and hung like shining veiled miniature worlds against that blazing back-drop. And through and beyond the shining stars and moons and planets showed the Big Night, the black emptiness that beats like an ocean on the rim of the Solar System.

"So it's pretty," Hilton said. "But it's cold, too."

"Maybe. Maybe it is. But I like it. Well, get a job as a trader, you

jackass. I'll stick to La Cucaracha. I know I can trust the old lady."

For answer the old lady jumped violently and gave a wallowing lurch.

Chapter II

Bad News

Hilton instantly exploded out of the cabin. The ship was bucking hard. Behind him the mate heard Danvers shouting something about incompetent pilots, but he knew it probably wasn't the Selenite's fault. He was in the control cabin while La Cucaracha was still shuddering on the downswing of the last jump. Ts'ss was a tornado of motion, his multiple legs scrabbling frantically at a dozen instruments.

"I'll call the shot!" Hilton snapped, and Ts'ss instantly concentrated on the incredibly complicated controls that were guiding the ship into hyper.

The mate was at the auxiliary board. He jerked down levers.

"Hyper stations!" he shouted. "Close helmets! Grab the braces, you sun-jumpers! Here we go!"

A needle swung wildly across a gauge, hovering at the mark. Hilton dropped into a seat, sliding his arms under the curved braces and hooking his elbows around them. His ankles found similar supports beneath him. The visor screens blurred and shimmered with crawling colors, flicking back and forth, on and off, as La Cucaracha fought the see-saw between hyper and normal space.

Hilton tried another mike. "Captain Danvers. Hyper stations. All right?"

"Yeah, I'm in my suit," Danvers' voice said. "Can you take it? Need me? What's wrong with Ts'ss?"

"The vocor at my board blew out, "Cap'n," Ts'ss said. "I couldn't reach the auxiliary."

"We must need an overhaul bad," Danvers said, and cut off.

Hilton grinned. "We need a rebuilding job," he muttered, and let his fingers hang over the control buttons, ready in case Ts'ss slipped.

But the Selenite was like a precision machine; he never slipped. The old Cucaracha shook in every brace. The atomic engines channeled fantastic amounts of energy into the dimensional gap. Then, suddenly, the see-saw balanced for an instant, and in that split second the ship slid across its powerbridge and was no longer matter. It no longer existed, in the three-dimensional plane. To an observer, it would have vanished. But to an observer in hyperspace, it would have sprung into existence from white nothingness.

Except that there were no hyperspatial observers. In fact, there wasn't anything in hyper—it was, as some scientist had once observed, just stuff, and nobody knew what the stuff was. It was possible to find out some of hyper's properties, but you couldn't go much further than that. It was white, and it must have been energy, of a sort, for it flowed like an inconceivably powerful tide, carrying ships with it at speeds that would have destroyed the crew in normal space. Now, in the grip of the hyper current, La Cucaracha was racing toward the Big Night at a velocity that would take it past Pluto's orbit in a matter of seconds.

But you couldn't see Pluto. You had to work blind here, with instruments. And if you got on the wrong level, it was just too bad—for you!

Hastily Hilton checked the readings. This was Hyper c-758-r. That was right. On different dimensional levels of hyper, the flow ran in various directions. Coming back, they'd alter their atomic structure to ride Hyper m-75-l, which rushed from Fria toward Earth and beyond it.

"That's that," Hilton said, relaxing and reaching for a cigarette. "No meteors, no stress-strain problems--just drift till we get close to Fria. Then we drop out of hyper, and probably fall apart."

An annunciator clicked. Somebody said:

"Mr. Hilton, there's some trouble."

"There is. Okay, Wiggins. What now?"

"One of the new men. He was out skinside making repairs."

"You had plenty of time to get back inside," snapped Hilton, who didn't feel quite as sure of that as he sounded. "I called hyper stations."

"Yes, sir. But this fella's new. Looks like he never rode a hyper ship before. Anyhow, his leg's broken. He's in sick bay."

Hilton thought for a moment. La Cucaracha was understaffed anyway. Few good men would willingly ship on such an antique.

"I'll come down," he said, and nodded at Ts'ss. Then he went along the companionway, glancing in at the skipper, who had gone to sleep. He used the handholds to pull himself along, for there was no accelerative gravity in hyper. In sick bay he found the surgeon, who doubled in brass as cook, finishing a traction splint on a pale, sweating youngster who was alternately swearing feebly and

groaning.

"What's the matter with him?" Hilton asked.

Bruno, the sawbones, gave a casual soft salute. "Simple fracture. I'm giving him a walker splint, so he'll be able to get around. And he shot his cookies, so he can't be used to hyper."

"Looks like it," Hilton said, studying the patient. The boy opened his eyes, glared at Hilton.

"I was shanghaied!" he yelled. "I'll sue you for all you're worth!"

The first officer was unperturbed.

"I'm not the skipper, I'm mate," Hilton said. "And I can tell you right now that we're not worth much. Ever hear about discipline?"

"I was shanghaied!"

"I know it. That's the only way we can get a full crew to sign articles on La Cucaracha. I mentioned discipline. We don't bother much with it here. Just the same, you'd better call me Mister when people are around. Now shut up and relax. Give him a sedative, Bruno."

"No! I want to send a spacegram!"

"We're in hyper. You can't. What's your name?"

"Saxon. Luther Saxon. I'm one of the consulting engineers on Transmat."

"The matter-transmission gang? What were you doing around the space docks?"

Saxon gulped. "Well--uh--I go out with the technical crews to supervise new installations. We'd just finished a Venusian transmission station. I went out for a few drinks--that was all! A few drinks, and--"

"You went to the wrong place," Hilton said, amused. "Some crimp gave you a Mickey. Your name's on the articles, anyhow, so you're stuck, unless you jump ship. You can send a message from Fria, but it'd take a thousand years to reach Venus or Earth. Better stick around, and you can ride back with us."

"On this crate? It isn't safe. She's so old I've got the jitters every time I take a deep breath."

"Well, stop breathing," Hilton said curtly. La Cucaracha was an old tramp, of course, but he had shipped on her for a good many years. It was all right for this Transmat man to talk; the Transmat crews never ran any risks.

"Ever been on a hyper ship before?" he asked.

"Naturally," Saxon said. "As a passenger! We have to get to a planet before we can install a transmission station, don't we?"

"Uh-huh." Hilton studied the scowling face on the pillow. "You're not a passenger now, though."

"My leg's broken."

"You got an engineering degree?"

Saxon hesitated and finally nodded.

"All right, you'll be assistant pilot. You won't have to walk much to do that. The pilot'll tell you what to do. You can earn your mess that way."

Saxon spluttered protests.

"One thing," Hilton said. "Better not tell the skipper you're a Transmat man. He'd hang you over one of the jets. Send him for'rd when he's fixed up, Bruno."

"Yessir," Bruno said, grinning faintly. An old deep-space man, he didn't like Transmat either.

Hilton pulled himself back to the control room. He sat down and watched the white visio-screens. Most of Ts'ss' many arms were idle. This was routine now.

"You're getting an assistant," Hilton said after a while. "Train him fast. That'll give us all a break. If that fat-headed Callistan pilot hadn't jumped on Venus, we'd be set."

"This is a short voyage," Ts'ss said. "It's a fast hyper flow on this level."

"Yeah. This new guy. Don't tell the skipper, but he's a Transmat man."

Ts'ss laughed a little.

"That will pass, too," he said. "We're an old race, Mr. Hilton. Earth-men are babies compared to the Selenites. Hyper ships are fading out, and eventually Transmat will fade out too, when something else comes."

"We won't fade," Hilton said, rather surprised to find himself defending the skipper's philosophy. "Your people haven't--you Selenites."

"Some of us are left, that's true," Ts'ss said softly. "Not many. The great days of the Selenite Empire passed very long ago. But there are still a few Selenites left, like me."

"You keep going, don't you? You can't kill off a--a race."

"Not easily. Not at once. But you can, eventually. And you can kill a tradition, too, though it may take a long time. But you know what the end will be."

"Oh, shut up," Hilton said. "You talk too much."

Ts'ss bent again above the controls. La Cucaracha fled on through the white hyper flow, riding as smoothly as the day she had been launched.

But when they reached Fria, it would be rough space and high gravity. Hilton grimaced.

He thought: So what? This is just another voyage. The fate of the universe doesn't depend on it. Nothing depends on it, except, maybe, whether we make enough profit to have the old lady overhauled. And that won't matter to me for it's my last voyage into the Big Night.

He watched the screens. He could not see it, but he knew that it hung beyond the universal whiteness, in a plane invisible to his eyes. The little sparks of worlds and suns glowed in its immensity, but never brightened it. It was too vast, too implacable. And even the giant suns would be quenched in its ocean, in the end. As everything else would be quenched, as everything moved on the tides of time into that huge darkness.

That was progress. A wave was born and gathered itself and grew--and broke. A newer wave was behind it. And the old one slipped

back and was lost forever. A few foam-flecks and bubbles remained, like Ts'ss, remnant of the giant wave of the ancient Selenite Empire.

The Empire was gone. It had fought and ruled a hundred worlds, in its day. But, in the end, the Big Night had conquered and swallowed it.

As it would swallow the last hyper ship eventually.

They hit Fria six days later, Earth time. And hit was the word. One of Ts'ss' chitin-covered arms was snapped off by the impact, but he didn't seem to mind. He couldn't feel pain, and he could grow another limb in a few weeks. The crew, strapped to their landing braces, survived with minor bruises.

Luther Saxon, the Transmat man, was in the auxiliary pilot's seat—he had enough specialized engineering training so that he learned the ropes fast—and he acquired a blue bump on his forehead, but that was all. La Cucaracha had come out of hyper with a jolt that strained her fat old carcass to the limit, and the atmosphere and gravity of Fria was the penultimate straw. Seams ripped, a jet went out, and new molten streaks appeared on the white-hot hull.

The crew had been expecting liberty. There was no time for that. Hilton told off working gangs to relieve each other at six-hour intervals, and he said, rather casually, that Twilight was out of bounds. He knew the crew would ignore that order. There was no way to keep the men aboard, while Twilight sold liquor and even more effective escape mechanisms. Still, there were few women on Fria, and Hilton hoped that enough working stiffs would keep on the job to get La Cucaracha repaired and spaceworthy before the fungus cargo was loaded.

He knew that Wiggins, the second mate, would do his best. For

himself he went with the skipper in search of Christie, the Fria trader. The way led through Twilight, the roofed settlement that was shielded from the hot, diamond-bright glare of the primary. It wasn't big. But then Fria was an outpost, with a floating population of a few hundred. They came in and out with the ships and the harvest seasons. If necessary, Hilton thought, some of the bums could be shanghaied. Still, it wasn't too likely that any of the crew would desert. None of them would be paid off till they went back in the Solar System.

They found Christie in his plasticoid cabin, a fat, bald, sweating man puffing at a huge meerschaum pipe. He looked up, startled, and then resignedly leaned back in his chair and waved them to seats.

"Hello, Chris," Danvers said. "What's new?"

"Hello, Skipper. Hi, Logger. Have a good trip?"

"The landing wasn't so good," Hilton said.

"Yeah, I heard about it. Drinks?"

"Afterward," Danvers said, though his eyes gleamed. "Let's clean up the business first. Got a good shipment ready?"

Christie smoothed one of his fat, glistening cheeks. "Well--you're a couple of weeks early."

"You keep a stockpile."

The trader grunted. "Fact is--look, didn't you get my message? No, I guess there wasn't time. I sent a spacemail on the Blue Sky last week for you, Skipper."

Hilton exchanged glances with Danvers.

"You sound like bad news, Chris," he said. "What is it?"

Christie said uncomfortably, "I can't help it. You can't meet competition like Transmat. You can't afford to pay their prices. You got running expenses on La Cucaracha. Jet fuel costs dough, and--well, Transmat sets up a transmitting station, pays for it, and the job's done, except for the power outlay. With atomic, what does that amount to?"

Danvers was growing red.

"Is Transmat setting up a station here?" Hilton said hastily.

"Yeah. I can't stop 'em. It'll be ready in a couple of months."

"But why? The fungus isn't worth it. There isn't enough market. You're pulling a bluff, Chris. What do you want? A bigger cut?"

Christie regarded his meerschaum. "Nope. Remember the ore tests twelve years ago? There's valuable ores on Fria, Logger. Only it's got to be refined plenty. Otherwise it's too bulky for shipment. And the equipment would cost too much to freight by spaceship. It's big stuff-- I mean big."

Hilton glanced at Danvers. The skipper was purple now, but his mouth was clamped tightly.

"But--hold on, Chris. How can Transmat get around that? By sending the crude ores to Earth in their gadgets?"

"The way I heard it," Christie said, "is that they're going to send the refining machines here and set 'em up right on Fria. All they need for that is one of their transmitters. The field can be expanded to take almost anything, you know. Shucks, you could move a planet that way if you had the power! They'll do the refining here and transmit the

refined ores back Earthside."

"So they want ores," Danvers said softly. "They don't want the fungus, do they?"

Christie nodded. "It looks like they do. I had an offer. A big one. I can't afford to turn it down, and you can't afford to meet it, Skipper. You know that as well as I do. Thirteen bucks a pound."

Danvers snorted. Hilton whistled.

"No, we can't meet that," he said. "But how can they afford to pay it?"

"Quantity. They channel everything through their transmitters. They set one up on a world, and there's a door right to Earth—or any planet they name. One job won't net them much of a profit, but a million jobs—and they take everything! So what can I do, Logger?"

Hilton shrugged. The captain stood up abruptly.

Christie stared at his pipe.

"Look, Skipper. Why not try the Orion Secondaries? I heard there was a bumper crop of bluewood gum there."

"I heard that a month ago," Danvers said. "So did everybody else. It's cleaned out by now. Besides, the old lady won't stand a trip like that. I've got to get an overhaul fast, and a good one, back in the System."

There was a silence. Christie was sweating harder than ever. "What about that drink?" he suggested. "We can maybe figure a way."

"I can still pay for my own drinks," Danvers lashed out. He swung around and was gone.

"Jehoshaphat, Logger!" Christie said. "What could I do?"

"It's not your fault, Chris," Hilton said. "I'll see you later, unless--anyhow, I'd better get after the skipper. Looks like he's heading for Twilight."

He followed Danvers, but already he had lost hope.

Chapter III

Danvers Lays the Course

Two days later the skipper was still drunk.

In the half-dusk of Twilight, Hilton went into a huge, cool barn where immense fans kept the hot air in circulation, and found Danvers, as usual, at a back table, a glass in his hand. He was talking to a tiny-headed Canopian, one of that retrovolved race that is only a few degrees above the moron level. The Canopian looked as though he was covered with black plush, and his red eyes glowed startlingly through the fur. He, too, had a glass.

Hilton walked over to the two. "Skipper," he said.

"Blow," Danvers said. "I'm talking to this guy."

Hilton looked hard at the Canopian and jerked his thumb. The red-eyed shadow picked up his glass and moved away quickly. Hilton sat down.

"We're ready to jet off," he said.

Danvers blinked at him blearily. "You interrupted me, mister. I'm busy."

"Buy a case and finish your binge aboard," Hilton said. "If we don't jet soon, the crew will jump."

"Let 'em."

"Okay. Then who'll work La Cucaracha back to Earth?"

"If we go back to Earth, the old lady will land on the junkpile," Danvers said furiously. "The itc won't authorize another voyage without a rebuilding job."

"You can borrow dough."

"Ha!"

Hilton let out his breath with a sharp, angry sound. "Are you sober enough to understand me? Then listen. I've talked Saxon around."

"Who's Saxon?"

"He was shanghaied on Venus. Well—he's a Transmat engineer." Hilton went on quickly before the skipper could speak. "That was a mistake. The crimp's mistake and ours. Transmat stands behind its men. Saxon looked up the Transmat crew on Fria, and their superintendent paid me a visit. We're in for trouble. A damage suit. But there's one way out. No hyper ship's due to hit Fria for months and the matter transmitter won't be finished within two months. And it seems Transmat has a shortage of engineers. If we can get Saxon back to Venus or Earth fast, he'll cover. There'll be no suit."

"Maybe he'll cover. But what about Transmat?"

"If Saxon won't sign a complaint, what can they do?" Hilton shrugged. "It's our only out now."

Danvers' brown-spotted fingers played with his glass.

"A Transmat man," he muttered. "Ah-h. So we go back Earthside. What then? We're stuck." He looked under his drooping lids at Hilton. "I mean I'm stuck. I forgot you're jumping after this voyage."

"I'm not jumping. I sign for one voyage at a time. What do you want me to do, anyhow?"

"Do what you like. Run out on the old lady. You're no deep-space man." Danvers spat.

"I know when I'm licked," Hilton said; "The smart thing then is to fight in your own weight, when you're outclassed on points, not wait for the knockout. You've had engineering training. You could get on with Transmat, too."

For a second Hilton thought the skipper was going to throw the glass at him. Then Danvers dropped back in his chair, trying to force a smile.

"I shouldn't blow my top over that," he said, with effort. "It's the truth."

"Yeah. Well--are you coming?"

"The old lady's ready to jet off?" Danvers said. "I'll come, then. Have a drink with me first."

"We haven't time."

With drunken dignity Danvers stood up. "Don't get too big for your boots, mister. The voyage isn't over yet. I said have a drink! That's an order."

"Okay, okay!" Hilton said. "One drink. Then we go?"

"Sure."

Hilton gulped the liquor without tasting it. Rather too late, he felt the stinging ache on his tongue. But before he could spring to his feet, the great dim room folded down upon him like a collapsing umbrella, and he lost consciousness with the bitter realization that he had been Mickeyed like the rawest greenhorn. But the skipper had poured that drink.

The dreams were confusing. He was fighting something, but he didn't know what. Sometimes it changed its shape, and sometimes it wasn't there at all, but it was always enormous and terribly powerful.

He wasn't always the same, either. Sometimes he was the wide-eyed kid who had shipped on Starhopper, twenty-five years ago, to take his first jump into the Big Night. Then he was a little older, in a bos'n's berth, his eye on a master's ticket, studying, through the white, un-changeable days and nights of hyperspace, the intricate logarithms a skilled pilot must know.

He seemed to walk on a treadmill toward a goal that slid away, never quite within reach. But he didn't know what that goal was. It shone like success. Maybe it was success. But the treadmill had started moving before he'd really got started. In the Big Night a disembodied voice was crying thinly:

"You're in the wrong game, Logger. Thirty years ago you'd have a future in hyper ships. Not any more. There's a new wave coming up. Get out, or drown."

A red-eyed shadow leaned over him. Hilton fought out of his dream. Awkwardly he jerked up his arm and knocked away the glass at his lips. The Canopian let out a shrill, harsh cry. The liquid that had been in the glass was coalescing in midair into a shining sphere.

The glass floated--and the Canopian floated too. They were in hyper. A few lightweight straps held Hilton to his bunk, but this was his own cabin, he saw. Dizzy, drugged weakness swept into his brain.

The Canopian struck a wall, pushed strongly, and the recoil shot him toward Hilton. The mate ripped free from the restraining straps. He reached out and gathered in a handful of furry black plush. The Canopian clawed at his eyes.

"Captain!" he screamed. "Captain Danvers!"

Pain gouged Hilton's cheek as his opponent's talons drew blood. Hilton roared with fury. He shot a blow at the Canopian's jaw, but now they were floating free, and the punch did no harm. In midair they grappled, the Canopian incessantly screaming in that thin, insane shrilling.

The door handle clicked twice. There was a voice outside--Wiggins, the second. A deep thudding came. Hilton, still weak, tried to keep the Canopian away with jolting blows. Then the door crashed open, and Wiggins pulled himself in.

"Dzann!" he said. "Stop it!" He drew a jet-pistol and leveled it at the Canopian.

On the threshold was a little group. Hilton saw Saxon, the Transmat man, gaping there, and other crew members, hesitating, unsure. Then, suddenly, Captain Danvers' face appeared behind the others, twisted, strained with tension.

The Canopian had retreated to a corner and was making mewing, frightened noises.

"What happened, Mr. Hilton?" Wiggins said. "Did this tomcat jump

you?"

Hilton was so used to wearing deep-space armor that till now he had scarcely realized its presence. His helmet was hooded back, like that of Wiggins and the rest. He pulled a weight from his belt and threw it aside; the reaction pushed him toward a wall where he gripped a brace.

"Does he go in the brig?" Wiggins asked.

"All right, men," Danvers said quietly. "Let me through." He propelled himself into Hilton's cabin. Glances of discomfort and vague distrust were leveled at him. The skipper ignored them.

"Dzann!" he said. "Why aren't you wearing your armor? Put it on. The rest of you—get to your stations. You too, Mr. Wiggins. I'll handle this."

Still Wiggins hesitated. He started to say something.

"What are you waiting for?" Hilton said. "Tell Bruno to bring some coffee. Now beat it." He maneuvered himself into a sitting position on his bunk. From the tail of his eye he saw Wiggins and the others go out. Dzann, the Canopian, had picked up a suit from the corner and was awkwardly getting into it.

Danvers carefully closed the door, testing the broken lock.

"Got to have that fixed," he murmured. "It isn't shipshape this way." He found a brace and stood opposite the mate, his eyes cool and watchful, the strain still showing on his tired face. Hilton reached for a cigarette.

"Next time your tomcat jumps me, I'll burn a hole through him," he promised.

"I stationed him here to guard you, in case there was trouble," Danvers said. "To take care of you if we cracked up or ran into danger. I showed him how to close your helmet and start the oxygen."

"Expect a half-witted Canopian to remember that?" Hilton said. "You also told him to keep drugging me." He reached toward the shining liquid sphere floating near by and pushed a forefinger into it. He tasted the stuff. "Sure. Vakheesh. That's what you slipped in my drink on Fria. Suppose you start talking, skipper. What's this Canopian doing aboard?"

"I signed him," Danvers said.

"For what? Supercargo?"

Danvers answered that emotionlessly, watching Hilton.

"Cabin boy."

"Yeah. What did you tell Wiggins? About me, I mean?"

"I said you'd got doped up," Danvers said, grinning. "You were doped, too."

"I'm not now." Hilton's tone rang hard. "Suppose you tell me where we are? I can find out. I can get the equations from Ts'ss and run chart-lines. Are we on m-75-l?"

"No, we're not. We're riding another level."

"Where to?"

The Canopian shrilled, "I don't know name. Has no name. Double sun it has."

"You crazy!" Hilton glared at the skipper. "Are you heading us for a double primary?"

Danvers still grinned. "Yeah. Not only that, but we're going to land on a planet thirty thousand miles from the suns--roughly."

Hilton flicked on his deadlight and looked at white emptiness. "Closer than Mercury is to Sol. You can't do it. How big are the primaries?"

Danvers told him.

"All right. It's suicide. You know that. La Cucaracha won't take it."

"The old lady will take anything the Big Night can hand out."

"Not this. Don't kid yourself. She might have made it back to Earth--with a Lunar landing--but you're riding into a meat grinder."

"I haven't forgotten my astrogation," Danvers said. "We're coming out of hyper with the planet between us and the primaries. The pull will land us."

"In small pieces," Hilton agreed. "Too bad you didn't keep me doped. If you keep your mouth shut, we'll replot our course to Earth and nobody'll get hurt. If you want to start something, it'll be mutiny, and I'll take my chances at Admiralty."

The captain made a noise that sounded like laughter.

"All right," he said. "Suit yourself. Go look at the equations. I'll be in my cabin when you want me. Come on, Dzann."

He pulled himself into the companionway, the Canopian gliding behind him as silently as a shadow.

Hilton met Bruno with coffee as he followed Danvers. The mate grunted, seized the covered cup, and sucked in the liquid with the deftness of long practice under antigravity conditions. Bruno watched him.

"All right, sir?" the cook-surgeon said.

"Yeah. Why not?"

"Well--the men are wondering."

"What about?"

"I dunno, sir. You've never--you've always commanded the launchings, sir. And that Canopian--the men don't like him. They think something's wrong."

"Oh, they do, do they?" Hilton said grimly. "I'll come and hold their hands when they turn in for night watch. They talk too much."

He scowled at Bruno and went on toward the control room. Though he had mentioned mutiny to the skipper, he was too old a hand to condone it, except in extremity. And discipline had to be maintained, even though Danvers had apparently gone crazy.

Ts'ss and Saxon were at the panels. The Selenite slanted a glittering stare at him, but the impassive mask under the audio filter showed no expression. Saxon, however, swung around and began talking excitedly.

"What's happened, Mr. Hilton? Something's haywire. We should be ready for an Earth landing by now. But we're not. I don't know enough about these equations to chart back, and Ts'ss won't tell me a blamed thing."

"There's nothing to tell," Ts'ss said. Hilton reached past the Selenite and picked up a folder of ciphered figures. He said absently to Saxon:

"Pipe down. I want to concentrate on this."

He studied the equations.

He read death in them.

Chapter IV

Gamble With Death

Logger Hilton went into the skipper's cabin, put his back against the wall, and started cursing fluently and softly. When he had finished, Danvers grinned at him.

"Through?" he asked.

Hilton switched his stare to the Canopian, who was crouched in a corner, furtively loosening the locks of his spacesuit.

"That applies to you, too, tomcat," he said.

"Dzann won't mind that," Danvers said. "He isn't bright enough to resent cussing. And I don't care, as long as I get what we want. Still going to mutiny and head for Earth?"

"No, I'm not," Hilton said. With angry patience he ticked off his points on his fingers. "You can't switch from one hyperplane to another without dropping into ordinary space first, for the springboard. If we went back into normal space, the impact might tear La Cucaracha into tiny pieces. We'd be in suits, floating free, a hundred million

miles from the nearest planet. Right now we're in a fast hyper flow heading for the edge of the universe, apparently."

"There's one planet within reach," Danvers said.

"Sure. The one that's thirty thousand miles from a double primary. And nothing else."

"Well? Suppose we do crack up? We can make repairs once we land on a planet. We can get the materials we need. You can't do that in deep space. I know landing on this world will be a job. But it's that or nothing--now."

"What are you after?"

Danvers began to explain:

"This Canopian--Dzann--he made a voyage once, six years ago. A tramp hyper ship. The controls froze, and the tub was heading for outside. They made an emergency landing just in time--picked out a planet that had been detected and charted, but never visited. They repaired there, and came back into the trade routes. But there was a guy aboard, an Earthman who was chummy with Dzann. This guy was smart, and he'd been in the drug racket, I think. Not many people know what raw, growing paraine looks like, but this fellow knew. He didn't tell anybody. He took samples, intending to raise money, charter a ship and pick up a cargo later. But he was knifed in some dive on Callisto. He didn't die right away, though, and he liked Dzann. So he gave Dzann the information."

"That halfwit?" Hilton said. "How could he remember a course?"

"That's one thing the Canopians can remember. They may be morons, but they're fine mathematicians. It's their one talent."

"It was a good way for him to bum a drink and get a free berth," Hilton said.

"No. He showed me the samples. I can talk his lingo, a little, and that's why he was willing to let me in on his secret, back on Fria. Okay. Now. We land on this planet--it hasn't been named--and load a cargo of paraine. We repair the old lady, if she needs it--"

"She will!"

"And then head back."

"To Earth?"

"I think Silenus. It's an easier landing."

"Now you're worrying about landings," Hilton said bitterly. "Well, there's nothing I can do about it, I suppose. I'm stepping out after this voyage. What's the current market quotation on paraine?"

"Fifty a pound. At Medical Center, if that's what you mean."

"Big money," the mate said. "You can buy a new ship with the profits and still have a pile left for happy days."

"You'll get your cut."

"I'm still quitting."

"Not till this voyage is over," Danvers said. "You're mate on La Cucaracha." He chuckled. "A deep-space man has plenty of tricks up his sleeve--and I've been at it longer than you."

"Sure," Hilton said. "You're smart. But you forgot Saxon. He'll throw that damage suit against you now, with Transmat behind him."

Danvers merely shrugged. "I'll think of something. It's your watch. We have about two hundred hours before we come out of hyper. Take it, mister."

He was laughing as Hilton went out.

In two hundred hours a good deal can happen. It was Hilton's job to see that it didn't. Luckily, his reappearance had reassured the crew, for when masters fight, the crew will hunt for trouble. But with Hilton moving about La Cucaracha, apparently as casual and assured as ever, even the second mate, Wiggins, felt better. Still, it was evident that they weren't heading for Earth. It was taking too long.

The only real trouble came from Saxon, and Hilton was able to handle that. Not easily, however. It had almost come to a showdown, but Hilton was used to commanding men, and finally managed to bluff the Transmat engineer. Dissatisfied but somewhat cowed, Saxon grumblingly subsided.

Hilton called him back.

"I'll do my best for you, Saxon. But we're in the Big Night now. You're not in civilized space. Don't forget that the skipper knows you're a Transmat man, and he hates your insides. On a hyper ship, the Old Man's word is law. So--for your own sake--watch your step!"

Saxon caught the implication. He paled slightly, and after that managed to avoid the captain.

Hilton kept busy checking and rechecking La Cucaracha. No outside repairs could be done in hyper, for there was no gravity, and ordinary physical laws were inoperative--magnetic shoes, for example, wouldn't work. Only in the ship itself was there safety. And that safety was illusory for the racking jars of the spatial see-saw might

disintegrate La Cucaracha in seconds.

Hilton called on Saxon. Not only did he want technical aid, but he wanted to keep the man busy. So the pair worked frantically over jury-rigged systems that would provide the strongest possible auxiliary bracing for the ship. Torsion, stress and strain were studied, the design of the craft analyzed, and structural alloys x-ray tested.

Some flaws were found--La Cucaracha was a very old lady--but fewer than Hilton expected. In the end, it became chiefly a matter of ripping out partitions and bulkheads and using the material for extra bracing.

But Hilton knew, and Saxon agreed with him, that it would not be enough to cushion the ship's inevitable crash.

There was one possible answer. They sacrificed the after section of the craft. It could be done, though they were racing against time. The working crews mercilessly cut away beams from aft and carried them forward and welded them into position, so that, eventually, the forward half of the ship was tremendously strong and cut off, by tough air-tight partitions, from a skeleton after half. And that half Hilton flooded with manufactured water, to aid in the cushioning effect.

Danvers, of course, didn't like it. But he had to give in. After all, Hilton was keeping the ship on the skipper's course, insanely reckless as that was. If La Cucaracha survived, it would be because of Hilton. But Captain Danvers shut himself in his cabin and was sullenly silent.

Toward the end, Hilton and Ts'ss were alone in the control room, while Saxon, who had got interested in the work for its own sake, superintended the last-minute jobs of spot bracing. Hilton, trying to find the right hyper space level that would take them back to Earth after they had loaded the paraine cargo, misplaced a decimal point

and began to curse in a low, furious undertone.

He heard Ts'ss laugh softly and whirled on the Selenite.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"It's not really funny, sir," Ts'ss said. "There have to be people like Captain Danvers, in any big thing."

"What are you babbling about now?" he asked curiously.

Ts'ss shrugged. "The reason I keep shipping on La Cucaracha is because I can be busy and efficient aboard, and planets aren't for Selenites any more. We've lost our own world. It died long ago. But I still remember the old traditions of our Empire. If a tradition ever becomes great, it's because of the men who dedicate themselves to it. That's why anything ever became great. And it's why hyper ships came to mean something, Mr. Hilton. There were men who lived and breathed hyper ships. Men who worshipped hyper ships, as a man worships a god. Gods fall, but a few men will still worship at the old altars. They can't change. If they were capable of changing, they wouldn't have been the type of men to make their gods great."

"Been burning paraine?" Hilton demanded unpleasantly. His head ached, and he didn't want to find excuses for the skipper.

"It's no drug dream," Ts'ss said. "What about the chivalric traditions? We had our Chyra Emperor, who fought for--"

"I've read about Chyra," Hilton said. "He was a Selenite King Arthur."

Slowly Ts'ss nodded his head, keeping his great eyes on Hilton.

"Exactly. A tool who was useful in his time, because he served his cause with a single devotion. But when that cause died, there was

nothing for Chyra--or Arthur--to do except die too. But until he did die, he continued to serve his broken god, not believing that it had fallen. Captain Danvers will never believe the hyper ships are passing. He will be a hyper-ship man until he dies. Such men make causes great--but when they outlive their cause, they are tragic figures."

"Well, I'm not that crazy," Hilton growled. "I'm going into some other game. Transmat or something. You're a technician. Why don't you come with me after this voyage?"

"I like the Big Night," Ts'ss said. "And I have no world of my own--no living world. There is nothing to--to make me want success, Mr. Hilton. On La Cucaracha I can do as I want. But away from the ship, I find that people don't like Selenites. We are too few to command respect or friendship any more. And I'm quite old, you know."

Startled, Hilton stared at the Selenite. There was no way to detect signs of age on the arachnoid beings. But they always knew, infallibly, how long they had to live, and could predict the exact moment of their death.

Well, he wasn't old. And he wasn't a deep-space man as Danvers was. He followed no lost causes. There was nothing to keep him with the hyper ships, after this voyage, if he survived.

A signal rang. Hilton's stomach jumped up and turned into ice, though he had been anticipating this for hours. He reached for a mike.

"Hyper stations! Close helmets! Saxon, report!"

"All work completed, Mr. Hilton," said Saxon's voice, strained but steady.

"Come up here. May need you. General call: stand by! Grab the

braces. We're coming in."

Then they hit the see-saw!

Chapter V

Hilton's Choice

No doubt about it, she was tough--that old lady. She'd knocked around a thousand worlds and ridden hyper for more miles than a man could count. Something had got into her from the Big Night, something stronger than metal bracing and hard alloys. Call it soul, though there never was a machine that had a soul. But since the first log-craft was launched on steaming seas, men have known that a ship gets a soul--from somewhere.

She hopped like a flea. She bucked like a mad horse. Struts and columns snapped and buckled, and the echoing companionways were filled with an erratic crackling and groaning as metal, strained beyond its strength, gave way. Far too much energy rushed through the engines. But the battered old lady took it and staggered on, lurching, grunting, holding together somehow.

The see-saw bridged the gap between two types of space, and La Cucaracha yawed wildly down it, an indignity for an old lady who, at her age, should ride sedately through free void--but she was a hyper ship first and a lady second. She leaped into normal space. The skipper had got his figures right. The double sun wasn't visible, for it was eclipsed by the single planet, but the pull of that monstrous twin star clamped down like a giant's titanic fist closing on La Cucaracha and yanking her forward irresistibly.

There was no time to do anything except stab a few buttons. The

powerful rocket-jets blazed from La Cucaracha's hull. The impact stunned every man aboard. No watcher saw, but the automatic recording charts mapped what happened then.

La Cucaracha struck what was, in effect, a stone wall. Not even that could stop her. But it slowed her enough for the minimum of safety, and she flipped her stern down and crashed on the unnamed planet with all her after jets firing gallantly, the flooded compartments cushioning the shock, and a part of her never made of plastic or metal holding her together against even that hammer blow struck at her by a world.

Air hissed out into a thinner atmosphere and dissipated. The hull was half molten. Jet tubes were fused at a dozen spots. The stem was hash.

But she was still--a ship.

The loading of cargo was routine. The men had seen too many alien planets to pay much attention to this one. There was no breathable air, so the crew worked in their suits--except for three who had been injured in the crash, and were in sick-bay, in a replenished atmosphere within the sealed compartments of the ship. But only a few compartments were so sealed. La Cucaracha was a sick old lady, and only first aid could be administered here.

Danvers himself superintended that. La Cucaracha was his own, and he kept half the crew busy opening the heat-sealed jets, doing jury-rig repairs, and making the vessel comparatively spaceworthy. He let Saxon act as straw-boss, using the engineer's technical knowledge, though his eyes chilled whenever he noticed the Transmat man.

As for Hilton, he went out with the other half of the crew to gather the paraine crop. They used strong-vacuum harvesters, running long,

flexible carrier tubes back to La Cucaracha's hold, and it took two weeks of hard, driving effort to load a full cargo. But by then the ship was bulging with paraine, the repairs were completed, and Danvers had charted the course to Silenus.

Hilton sat in the control room with Ts'ss and Saxon. He opened a wall compartment, glanced in, and closed it again. Then he nodded at Saxon.

"The skipper won't change his mind," he said. "Silenus is our next port. I've never been there."

"I have," Ts'ss said. "I'll tell you about it later."

Saxon drew an irritated breath. "You know what the gravity pull is, then, Ts'ss. I've never been there either, but I've looked it up in the books. Giant planets, mostly, and you can't come from hyper into normal space after you've reached the radius. There's no plane of the ecliptic in that system. It's crazy. You have to chart an erratic course toward Silenus, fighting varying gravities from a dozen planets all the way, and then you've still got the primary's pull to consider. You know La Cucaracha won't do it, Mr. Hilton."

"I know she won't," Hilton said. "We pushed our luck this far, but any more would be suicide. She simply won't hold together for another run. We're stranded here. But the skipper won't believe that."

"He's insane," Saxon said. "I know the endurance limits of a machine--that can be found mathematically--and this ship's only a machine. Or do you agree with Captain Danvers? Maybe you think she's alive!"

Saxon was forgetting discipline, but Hilton knew what strain they were all under.

"No, she's a machine all right," he merely said. "And we both know she's been pushed too far. If we go to Silenus, it's--" He made a gesture of finality.

"Captain Danvers says--Silenus," Ts'ss murmured. "We can't mutiny, Mr. Hilton."

"Here's the best we can do," Hilton said. "Get into hyper somehow, ride the flow, and get out again somehow. But then we're stuck. Any planet or sun with a gravity pull would smash us. The trouble is, the only worlds with facilities to overhaul La Cucaracha are the big ones. And if we don't get an overhaul fast we're through. Saxon, there's one answer, though. Land on an asteroid."

"But why?"

"We could manage that. No gravity to fight, worth mentioning. We certainly can't radio for help, as the signals would take years to reach anybody. Only hyper will take us fast enough. Now--has Transmat set up any stations on asteroids?"

Saxon opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Yes. There's one that would do, in the Rigel system. Far out from the primary. But I don't get it. Captain Danvers wouldn't stand for that."

Hilton opened the wall compartment. Gray smoke seeped out.

"This is paraine," he said. "The fumes are being blown into the skipper's cabin through his ventilator. Captain Danvers will be parahappy till we land on that Rigel asteroid, Saxon."

There was a little silence. Hilton suddenly slammed the panel shut.

"Let's do some charting," he said. "The sooner we reach the Rigel

port, the sooner we can get back to Earth--via Transmat."

Curiously, it was Saxon who hesitated.

"Mr. Hilton. Wait a minute. Transmat--I know I work for the outfit, but they--they're sharp. Business men. You have to pay plenty to use their matter transmitters."

"They can transmit a hyper ship, can't they? Or is it too big a job?"

"No, they can expand the field enormously. I don't mean that. I mean they'll want payment, and they'll put on the squeeze. You'll have to give up at least half of the cargo."

"There'll still be enough left to pay for an overhaul job."

"Except they'll want to know where the paraine came from. You'll be over a barrel. You'll have to tell them, eventually. And that'll mean a Transmat station will be set up right here, on this world."

"I suppose so," Hilton said quietly. "But the old lady will be space-worthy again. When the skipper sees her after the overhaul, he'll know it was the only thing to do. So let's get busy."

"Remind me to tell you about Silenus," Ts'ss said.

The Lunar Refitting Station is enormous. A crater has been roofed with a transparent dome, and under it the hyper ships rest in their cradles. They come in battered and broken, and leave clean and sleek and strong, ready for the Big Night again. La Cucaracha was down there, no longer the groaning wreck that had settled on the Rigel asteroid, but a lovely lady, shining and beautiful.

Far above, Danvers and Hilton leaned on the railing and watched.

"She's ready to jet," Hilton said idly. "And she looks good."

"No thanks to you, mister."

"Tush for that!" Hilton said. "If I hadn't doped you, we'd be dead and La Cucaracha floating around in space in pieces. Now look at her."

"Yeah. Well, she does look good. But she won't carry another paraine cargo. That strike was mine. If you hadn't told Transmat the location, we'd be set." Danvers grimaced. "Now they're setting up a Transmat station there; a hyper ship can't compete with a matter transmitter."

"There's more than one world in the Galaxy."

"Sure. Sure." But Danvers' eyes brightened as he looked down.

"Where are you heading, Skipper?" Hilton said.

"What's it to you? You're taking that Transmat job, aren't you?"

"You bet. I'm meeting Saxon in five minutes. In fact, we're going down to sign the contracts. I'm through with deep space. But--where are you heading?"

"I don't know," Danvers said. "I thought I might run up around Arcturus and see what's stirring."

Hilton did not move for a long time. Then he spoke without looking at the captain.

"You wouldn't be thinking of a stopover at Canis after that, would you?"

"You're a liar."

"Go keep your appointment," Danvers said.

Hilton eyed the great hyper ship below. "The old lady's always been a nice, clean craft. She's never got out of line. She's always charted a straight course. It'd be too bad if she had to carry slaves from Arcturus to the Canis market. It's illegal, of course, but that isn't the point. It's a rotten, crooked racket."

"I didn't ask your advice, mister!" Danvers flared. "Nobody's talking about slave-running!"

"I suppose you weren't figuring on unloading the paraine at Silenus? You can get a good price for paraine from Medical Center, but you can get six times the price from the drug ring on Silenus. Yeah, Ts'ss told me. He's been on Silenus."

"Oh, shut up," Danvers said.

Hilton tilted back his head to stare through the dome at the vast darkness above. "Even if you're losing a fight, it's better to fight clean," he said. "Know where it'd end?"

Danvers looked up, too, and apparently saw something in the void that he didn't like.

"How can you buck Transmat?" he demanded. "You've got to make a profit somehow."

"There's an easy, dirty way, and there's a clean, hard way. The old lady had a fine record."

"You're not a deep-space man. You never were. Beat it! I've got to get a crew together!"

"Listen--" Hilton said. He paused. "Ah, the devil with you. I'm through."

He turned and walked away through the long steel corridor.

Ts'ss and Saxon were drinking highballs at the Quarter Moon. Through the windows they could see the covered way that led to the Refitting Station, and beyond it the crags of a crater-edge, with the star-shot darkness hanging like a backdrop. Saxon looked at his watch.

"He isn't coming," Ts'ss said.

The Transmat man moved his shoulders impatiently. "No. You're wrong. Of course, I can understand your wanting to stay with La Cucaracha."

"Yes, I'm old. That's one reason."

"But Hilton's young, and he's smart. He's got a big future ahead of him. That guff about sticking to an ideal--well, maybe Captain Danvers is that sort of man, but Hilton isn't. He isn't in love with hyper ships."

Ts'ss turned his goblet slowly in his curious fingers. "You are wrong about one thing, Saxon. I'm not shipping on La Cucaracha."

Saxon stared. "But I thought--why not?"

"I will die within a thousand Earth hours," Ts'ss said softly. "When that time comes, I shall go down into the Selenite caverns. Not many know they exist, and only a few of us know the secret caves, the holy places of our race. But I know. I shall go there to die, Saxon. Every man has one thing that is strongest--and so it is with me. I must die on my own world. As for Captain Danvers, he follows his cause, as

our Chyra Emperor did, and as your King Arthur did. Men like Danvers made hyper ships great. Now the cause is dead, but the type of men who made it great once can't change their allegiance. If they could, they would never have spanned the Galaxy with their ships. So Danvers will stay with La Cucaracha. And Hilton--"

"He's not a fanatic! He won't stay. Why should he?"

"In our legends Chyra Emperor was ruined, and his Empire broken," Ts'ss said. "But he fought on. There was one who fought on with him, though he did not believe in Chyra's cause. A Selenite named Jailyra. Wasn't there--in your legends--a Sir Lancelot? He didn't believe in Arthur's cause either, but he was Arthur's friend. So he stayed. Yes, Saxon, there are the fanatics who fight for what they believe--but there are also the others, who do not believe, and who fight in the name of a lesser cause. Something called friendship."

Saxon laughed and pointed out the window. "You're wrong, Ts'ss," he said triumphantly. "Hilton's no fool. For here he comes."

Hilton's tall form was visible moving quickly along the way. He passed the window and vanished. Saxon turned to the door.

There was a pause.

"Or, perhaps, it isn't a lesser cause," Ts'ss said. "For the Selenite Empire passed, and Arthur's court passed, and the hyper ships are passing. Always the Big Night takes them, in the end. But this has gone on since the beginning--"

"SATHat?"

This time Ts'ss pointed.

Saxon leaned forward to look. Through the angle of the window he

could see Hilton, standing motionless on the ramp. Passersby streamed about him unnoticed. He was jostled, and he did not know it, Hilton was thinking.

They saw the look of deep uncertainty on his face. They saw his face suddenly clear. Hilton grinned wryly to himself. He had made up his mind. He turned and went rapidly back the way he had come.

Saxon stared after the broad, retreating back, going the way it had come, toward the Refitting Station where Danvers and La Cucaracha waited. Hilton--going back where he had come from, back to what he had never really left.

"The crazy fool!" Saxon said. "He can't be doing this! Nobody turns down jobs with Transmat!"

Ts'ss gave him a wise, impassive glance. "You believe that," he said.

"Transmat means much to you. Transmat needs men like you, to make it great--to keep it growing. You're a lucky man, Saxon. You're riding with the tide. A hundred years from now--two hundred--and you might be standing in Hilton's shoes. Then you'd understand."

Saxon blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Transmat is growing now," Ts'ss said gently. "It will be very great--thanks to men like you. But for Transmat too, there will come an end."

He shrugged, looking out beyond the crater's rim with his inhuman, faceted eyes, at the glittering points of light which, for a little while, seemed to keep the Big Night at bay.

Julhi

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The tale of Smith's scars would make a saga. From head to foot his brown and sunburnt hide was scored with the marks of battle. The eye of a connoisseur would recognize the distinctive tracks of knife and talon and ray-burn, the slash of the Martian drylander cwg, the clean, thin stab of the Venusian stiletto, the crisscross lacing of Earth's penal whip. But one or two scars that he carried would have baffled the most discerning eye. That curious, convoluted red circling, for instance, like some bloody rose on the left side of his chest just where the beating of his heart stirred the sun-darkened flesh....

In the starless dark of the thick Venusian night Northwest Smith's pale steel eyes were keen and wary. Save for those restless eyes he did not stir. He crouched against a wall that his searching fingers had told him was stone, and cold; but he could see nothing and he had no faintest idea of where he was or how he had come there. Upon this dark five minutes ago he had opened puzzled eyes, and he was still puzzled. The dark-piercing pallor of his gaze flickered restlessly through the blackness, searching in vain for some point of familiarity. He could find nothing. The dark was blurred and formless around him, and though his keen senses spoke to him of enclosed spaces, yet there was a contradiction even in that, for the air was fresh and blowing.

He crouched motionless in the windy dark, smelling earth and cold stone, and faintly--very faintly--a whiff of something unfamiliar that made him gather his feet under him noiselessly and poise with one hand against the chill stone wall, tense as a steel spring. There was motion in the dark. He could see nothing, hear nothing, but he felt that stirring come cautiously nearer. He stretched out exploring toes,

found the ground firm underfoot, and stepped aside a soundless pace or two, holding his breath. Against the stone where he had been leaning an instant before he heard the soft sound of hands fumbling, with a queer, sucking noise, as if they were sticky. Something exhaled with a small, impatient sound. In a lull of the wind he heard quite distinctly the slither over stone of something that was neither feet nor paws nor serpent-coils, but akin to all three.

Smith's hand sought his hip by instinct, and came away empty. Where he was and how he came there he did not know, but his weapons were gone and he knew that their absence was not accidental. The something that was pursuing him sighed again, queerly, and the shuffling sound over the stones moved with sudden, appalling swiftness, and something touched him that stung like an electric shock. There were hands upon him, but he scarcely realized it, or that they were no human hands, before the darkness spun around him and the queer, thrilling shock sent him reeling into a blurred oblivion.

When he opened his eyes again he lay once more upon cold stone in the unfathomable dark to which he had awakened before. He lay as he must have fallen when the searcher dropped him, and he was unhurt. He waited, tense and listening, until his ears ached with the strain and the silence. So far as his blade-keen senses could tell him, he was quite alone. No sound broke the utter stillness, no sensation of movement, no whiff of scent. Very cautiously he rose once more, supporting himself against the unseen stones and flexing his limbs to be sure that he was unhurt.

The floor was uneven underfoot. He had the idea now that he must be in some ancient ruins, for the smell of stone and chill and desolation was clear to him, and the breeze moaned a little through unseen openings. He felt his way along the broken wall, stumbling over fallen blocks and straining his senses against the blanketing

gloom around him. He was trying vainly to recall how he had come here, and succeeding in recapturing only vague memories of much red segir whisky in a nameless dive, and confusion and muffled voices thereafter, and wide spaces of utter blank--and then awakening here in the dark. The whisky must have been drugged, he told himself defensively, and a slow anger began to smolder within him at the temerity of whoever it was who had dared lay hands upon Northwest Smith.

Then he froze into stony quiet, rigid in mid-step, at the all but soundless stirring of something in the dark near by. Blurred visions of the unseen thing that had seized him ran through his head--some monster whose gait was a pattering glide and whose hands were armed with the stunning shock of an unknown force. He stood frozen, wondering if it could see him in the dark.

Feet whispered over the stone very near him, and something breathed pantingly, and a hand brushed his face. There was a quick suck of indrawn breath, and then Smith's arms leaped out to grapple the invisible thing to him. The surprise of that instant took his breath, and then he laughed deep in his throat and swung the girl round to face him in the dark.

He could not see her, but he knew from the firm curves of her under his hands that she was young and feminine, and from the sound of her breath that she was near to fainting with fright.

"Sh-h-h," he whispered urgently, his lips at her ear and her hair brushing his cheek fragrantly. "Don't be afraid. Where are we?"

It might have been reaction from her terror that relaxed the tense body he held, so that she went limp in his arms and the sound of her breathing almost ceased. He lifted her clear of the ground--she was light and fragrant and he felt the brush of velvet garments against his

bare arms as unseen robes swept him--and carried her across to the wall. He felt better with something solid at his back. He laid her down there in the angle of the stones and crouched beside her, listening, while she slowly regained control of herself.

When her breathing was normal again, save for the faint hurrying of excitement and alarm, he heard the sound of her sitting up against the wall, and bent closer to catch her whisper.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Northwest Smith," he said under his breath, and grinned at her softly murmured "Oh-h!" of recognition. Whoever she was, she had heard that name before. Then,

"There has been a mistake," she breathed, half to herself. "They never take any but the--space-rats and the scum of the ports for Julhi to--I mean, to bring here. They must not have known you, and they will pay for that mistake. No man is brought here who might be searched for--afterward."

Smith was silent for a moment. He had thought her lost like himself, and her fright had been too genuine for pretense. Yet she seemed to know the secrets of this curious, unlit place. He must go warily.

"Who are you?" he murmured. "Why were you so frightened? Where are we?"

In the dark her breath caught in a little gasp, and went on unevenly.

"We are in the ruins of Vonng," she whispered. "I am Apri, and I am condemned to death. I thought you were death coming for me, as it will come at any instant now." Her voice failed on the last syllables, so that she spoke in a fading gasp as if terror had her by the throat and would not let her breathe. He felt her trembling against his arm.

Many questions crowded up to his lips, but the most urgent found utterance.

"What will come?" he demanded. "What is the danger?"

"The haunters of Vonng," she whispered fearfully. "It is to feed them that Julhi's slaves bring men here. And those among us who are disobedient must feed the haunters too. I have suffered her displeasure--and I must die."

"The haunters--what are they? Something with a touch like a live wire had me awhile ago, but it let me loose again. Could that have been--"

"Yes, one of them. My coming must have disturbed it. But as to what they are, I don't know. They come in the darkness. They are of Julhi's race, I think, but not flesh and blood, like her. I--I can't explain."

"And Julhi--?"

"Is--well, simply Julhi. You don't know?"

"A woman? Some queen, perhaps? You must remember I don't even know where I am."

"No, not a woman. At least, not as I am. And much more than queen. A great sorceress, I have thought, or perhaps a goddess. I don't know. It makes me ill to think, here in Vonng. It makes me ill to--to--oh, I couldn't bear it! I think I was going mad! It's better to die than go mad, isn't it? But I'm so afraid--"

Her voice trailed away incoherently, and she cowered shivering against him in the dark.

Smith had been listening above her shuddering whispers for any tiniest sound in the night. Now he turned his mind more fully to what she had been saying, though with an ear still alert for any noises about them.

"What do you mean? What was it you did?"

"There is a--a light," murmured Apri vaguely. "I've always seen it, even from babyhood, whenever I closed my eyes and tried to make it come. A light, and queer shapes and shadows moving through it, like reflections from somewhere I never saw before. But somehow it got out of control, and then I began to catch the strangest thought-waves beating through, and after a while Julhi came--through the light. I don't know--I can't understand. But she makes me summon up the light for her now, and then queer things happen inside my head, and I'm ill and dizzy, and--and I think I'm going mad. But she makes me do it. And it grows worse, you know, each time worse, until I can't bear it. Then she's angry, and that dreadful still look comes over her face--and this time she sent me here. The haunters will come, now--"

Smith tightened his arm comfortingly about her, thinking that she was perhaps a little mad already.

"How can we get out of here?" he demanded, shaking her gently to call back her wandering mind. "Where are we?"

"In Vonng. Don't you understand? On the island where Vonng's ruins are."

He remembered then. He had heard of Vonng, somewhere. The ruins of an old city lost in the tangle of vines upon a small island a few hours off the coast of Shann. There were legends that it had been a great city once, and a strange one. A king with curious powers had built it, a king in league with beings better left unnamed, so the

whispers ran. The stone had been quarried with unnamable rites, and the buildings were very queerly shaped, for mysterious purposes. Some of its lines ran counterwise to the understanding even of the men who laid them out, and at intervals in the streets, following a pattern certainly not of their own world, medallions had been set, for reasons known to none but the king. Smith remembered what he had heard of the strangeness of fabulous Vonng, and of the rites that attended its building, and that at last some strange plague had overrun it, driving men mad... something about ghosts that flickered through the streets at mid-day; so that at last the dwellers there had deserted it, and for centuries it had stood here, slowly crumbling into decay. No one ever visited the place now, for civilization had moved inland since the days of Vonng's glory, and uneasy tales still ran through men's minds about the queer things that had happened here once.

"Julhi lives in these ruins?" he demanded.

"Julhi lives here but not in a ruined Vonng. Her Vonng is a splendid city. I have seen it, but I could never enter."

"Quite mad," thought Smith compassionately. And aloud, "Are there no boats here? No way to escape at all?"

Almost before the last words had left his lips he heard something like the humming of countless bees begin to ring in his ears. It grew and deepened and swelled until his head was filled with sound, and the cadences of that sound said,

"No. No way. Julhi forbids it."

In Smith's arms the girl startled and clung to him convulsively.

"It is Julhi!" she gasped. "Do you feel her, singing in your brain?"

Julhi!"

Smith heard the voice swelling louder, until it seemed to fill the whole night, humming with intolerable volume.

"Yes, my little Apri. It is I. Do you repent your disobedience, my Apri?"

Smith felt the girl trembling against him. He could hear her heart pounding, and the breath rushed chokingly through her lips.

"No--no, I do not," he heard her murmur, very softly. "Let me die, Julhi."

The voice hummed with a purring sweetness.

"Die, my pretty? Julhi could not be so cruel. Oh no, little Apri, I but frightened you for punishment. You are forgiven now. You may return to me and serve me again, my Apri. I would not let you die." The voice was cloyingly sweet.

Apri's voice crescendoed into hysterical rebellion.

"No, no! I will not serve you! Not again, Julhi! Let me die!"

"Peace, peace my little one." That humming was hypnotic in its soothing lilt. "You will serve me. Yes, you will obey me as before, my pretty. You have found a man there, haven't you, little one? Bring him with you, and come."

Apri's unseen hands clawed frantically at Smith's shoulders, tearing herself free, pushing him away.

"Run, run!" she gasped. "Climb this wall and run! You can throw yourself over the cliff and be free. Run, I say, before it's too late. Oh,

Shar, Shar, if I were free to die!"

Smith prisoned the clawing hands in one of his and shook her with the other.

"Be still!" he snapped. "You're hysterical. Be still!"

He felt the shuddering slacken. The straining hands fell quiet. By degrees her panting breath evened.

"Come," she said at last, and in quite a different voice. "Julhi commands--it. Come."

Her fingers twined firmly in his, and she stepped forward without hesitation into the dark. He followed, stumbling over debris, bruising himself against the broken walls. How far they went he did not know, but the way turned and twisted and doubled back upon itself, and he had, somehow, the curious idea that she was not following a course through corridors and passages which she knew well enough not to hesitate over, but somehow, under the influence of Julhi 's sorcery, treading a symbolic pattern among the stones, tracing it out with unerring feet--a witch-pattern that, when it was completed, would open a door for them which no eyes could see, no hands unlock.

It may have been Julhi who put that certainty in his mind, but he was quite sure of it as the girl walked on along her intricate path, threading silently in and out among the unseen ruins, nor was he surprised when without warning the floor became smooth underfoot and the walls seemed to fall away from about him, the smell of cold stone vanished from the air. Now he walked in darkness over a thick carpet, through sweetly scented air, warm and gently moving with invisible currents. In that dark he was somehow aware of eyes upon him. Not physical eyes, but a more all-pervading inspection. Presently the humming began again, swelling through the air and

beating in his ears in sweetly pitched cadences.

"Hm-m-m... have you brought me a man from Earth, my Apri? Yes, an Earthman, and a fine one. I am pleased with you, Apri, for saving me this man. I shall call him to me presently. Until then let him wander, for he can not escape."

The air fell quiet again, and about him Smith gradually became aware of a dawning light. It swelled from no visible source, but it paled the utter dark to a twilight through which he could see tapestries and richly glowing columns about him, and the outlines of the girl Apri standing at his side. The twilight paled in turn, and the light grew strong, and presently he stood in full day among the queer, rich furnishings of the place into which he had come.

He stared round in vain for signs of the way they had entered. The room was a small cleared space in the midst of a forest of shining pillars of polished stone. Tapestries were stretched between some of them, swinging down in luxuriant folds. But as far as he could see in all directions the columns reached away in diminishing aisles, and he was quite sure that they had not made their way to this place through the clustering pillars. He would have been aware of them. No, he had stepped straight from Vonng's stonestrewn ruins upon this rug which carpeted the little clear space, through some door invisible to him.

He turned to the girl. She had sunk upon one of the divans which stood between the columns around the edge of the circular space. She was paler than the marble, and very lovely, as he had known she would be. She had the true Venusian's soft, dark, sidelong eyes, and her mouth was painted coral, and her hair swept in black, shining clouds over her shoulders. The tight-swathed Venusian robe clung to her in folds of rose-red velvet, looped to leave one shoulder bare, and slit, as all Venusian's women's garments are, to let one leg flash

free with every other step. It is the most flattering dress imaginable for any woman to wear, but Apri needed no flattery to make her beautiful. Smith's pale eyes were appreciative as he stared.

She met his gaze apathetically. All rebellion seemed to have gone out of her, and a strange exhaustion had drained the color from her face.

"Where are we now?" demanded Smith.

She gave him an oblique glance.

"This is the place Julhi uses for a prison," she murmured, almost indifferently. "Around us I suppose her slaves are moving, and the halls of her palace stretch. I can't explain it to you, but at Julhi's command anything can happen. We could be in the midst of her palace and never suspect it, for there is no escape from here. We can do nothing but wait."

"Why?" Smith nodded toward the columned vistas stretching away all around them. "What's beyond that?"

"Nothing. It simply extends like that until--until you find yourself back here again."

Smith glanced at her swiftly under lowered lids, wondering just how mad she really was. Her white, exhausted face told him nothing.

"Come along," he said at last. "I'm going to try anyhow."

She shook her head.

"No use. Julhi can find you when she is ready. There is no escape from Julhi."

"I'm going to try," he said again, stubbornly. "Are you coming?"

"No. I'm--tired. I'll wait here. You'll come back."

He turned without further words and plunged at random into the wilderness of pillars surrounding the little carpeted room. The floor was slippery under his boots, and dully shining. The pillars, too, shone along all their polished surfaces, and in the queer light diffused throughout the place no shadows fell; so that a dimension seemed to be lacking and a curious flatness lay over all the shining forest. He went on resolutely, looking back now and again to keep his course straight away from the little clear space he had left. He watched it dwindle behind him and lose itself among the columns and vanish, and he wandered on through endless wilderness, to the sound of his own echoing footsteps, with nothing to break the monotony of the shining pillars until he thought he glimpsed a cluster of tapestries far ahead through the unshadowed vistas and began to hurry, hoping against hope that he had found at least a way out of the forest. He reached the place at last, and pulled aside the tapestry, and met Apri's wearily smiling eyes. The way somehow had doubled back upon him.

He snorted disgustedly at himself and turned again to plunge into the columns. This time he had wandered for no more than ten minutes before he found himself coming back once more into the clearing. He tried a third time, and it seemed had taken no more than a dozen steps before the way twisted under his feet and catapulted him back again into the room he had just left. Apri smiled as he flung himself upon one of the divans and regarded her palely from under knit brows.

"There is no escape," she repeated. "I think this place is built upon some different plan from any we know, with all its lines running in a circle whose center is this room. For only a circle has boundaries,

yet no end, like this wilderness around us."

"Who is Julhi?" asked Smith abruptly. "What is she?"

"She is--a goddess, perhaps. Or a devil from hell. Or both. And she comes from the place beyond the light--I can't explain it to you. It was I who opened the door for her, I think, and through me she looks back into the light that I must call up for her when she commands me. And I shall go mad--mad!"

Desperation flamed from her eyes suddenly and faded again, leaving her face whiter than before. Her hands rose in a small, futile gesture and dropped to her lap again. She shook her head.

"No--not wholly mad. She would never permit me even that escape, for then I could not summon up the light and so open the window for her to look backward into that land from which she came. That land--"

"Look!" broke in Smith. "The light--"

Apri glanced up and nodded almost indifferently.

"Yes. It's darkening again. Julhi will summon you now, I think."

Rapidly the illumination was failing all about them, and the columned forests melted into dimness, and dark veiled the long vistas, and presently everything clouded together and black night fell once more. This time they did not move, but Smith was aware, remotely, of a movement all about them, subtle and indescribable, as if the scenes were being shifted behind the curtain of the dark. The air quivered with motion and change. Even under his feet the floor was shifting, not tangibly but with an inner metamorphosis he could put no name to.

And then the dark began to lift again. Light diffused slowly through it,

paling the black, until he stood in a translucent twilight through whose veil he could see that the whole scene had changed about him. He saw Apri from the corner of his eye, heard her quickened breathing beside him, but he did not turn his head. Those columned vistas were gone. The limitless aisles down which he had wandered were closed now by great walls uplifting all around.

His eyes rose to seek the ceiling, and as the dusk lightened into day once more he became aware of a miraculous quality about those walls. A curious wavy pattern ran around them in broad bands, and as he stared he realized that the bands were not painted upon the surface, but were integrally part of the walls themselves, and that each successive band lessened in density. Those along the base of the walls were heavily dark, but the rising patterns paled and became less solid as they rose, until at half-way up the wall they were like layers of patterned smoke, and farther up still bands of scarcely discernible substance more tenuous than mist. Around the heights they seemed to melt into pure light, to which he could not lift his eyes for the dazzling brilliance of it.

In the center of the room rose a low black couch, and upon it--Julhi. He knew that instinctively the moment he saw her, and in that first moment he realized nothing but her beauty. He caught his breath at the sleek and shining loveliness of her, lying on her black couch and facing him with a level, unwinking stare. Then he realized her unhumanity, and a tiny prickling ran down his back--for she was one of that very ancient race of one-eyed beings about which whispers persist so unescapably in folklore and legend, though history has forgotten them for ages. One-eyed. A clear eye, uncolored, centered in the midst of a fair, broad forehead. Her features were arranged in a diamond-shaped pattern instead of humanity's triangle, for the slanting nostrils of her low-bridged nose were set so far apart that they might have been separate features, tilting and exquisitely modeled. Her mouth was perhaps the queerest feature of her

strange yet somehow lovely face. It was perfectly heartshaped, in an exaggerated cupid's-bow, but it was not a human mouth. It did not close, ever. It was a beautifully arched orifice, the red lip that rimmed it compellingly crimson, but fixed and moveless in an unhinged jaw. Behind the bowed opening he could see the red, fluted tissue of flesh within.

Above that single, clear, deep-lashed eye something sprang backward from her brow in a splendid sweep, something remotely feather-like, yet no such feather as was ever fledged upon any bird alive. It was exquisitely iridescent, and its fronds shivered with blowing color at the slight motion of her breathing.

For the rest—well, as the lines of a lap-dog travesty the clean, lean grace of a racing greyhound, so humanity's shape travestied the serpentine loveliness of her body. And it was definitely humanity that aped her form, not herself aping humanity. Somehow she was so right in every flowing, curving line, so unerringly fashioned toward some end he could not guess, yet to which instinctively he conceded her perfect fitness.

There was a fluidity about her, a litheness that partook more of the serpent's rippling flow than of any warm-blooded creature's motion, but her body was not like any being, warm-blooded or cold, that he had ever seen before. From the waist up she was human, but below all resemblance ended. And yet she was so breath-takingly lovely. Any attempt to describe the alien beauty of her lower limbs would sound grotesque, and she was not grotesque even in her unnamable shape, even in the utter weirdness of her face.

That clear, unwinking eye turned its gaze upon Smith. She lay there luxuriously upon her black couch, ivory-pale against the darkness of it, the indescribable strangeness of her body lolling with a serpent's grace upon the cushions. He felt the gaze of that eye go through him,

searching out all the hidden places in his brain and flickering casually over the lifetime that lay behind him. The feathery crest quivered very gently above her head.

He met the gaze steadily. There was no expression upon that changeless face, for she could not smile, and the look in her single eye was meaningless to him. He had no way of guessing what emotions were stirring behind the alien mask. He had never realized before how essential is the mobility of the mouth in expressing moods, and hers was fixed, immobile, for ever stretched into its heart-shaped arch—like a lyre-frame, he thought, but irrevocably dumb, surely, for such a mouth as hers, in its immovable unhinged jaw, could never utter human speech.

And then she spoke. The shock of it made him blink, and it was a moment before he realized just how she was accomplishing the impossible. The fluted tissue within the arched opening of her mouth had begun to vibrate like harp-strings, and the humming he had heard before went thrilling through the air. Beside him he was aware of Apri shuddering uncontrollably as the humming strengthened and swelled, but he was listening too closely to realize her save subconsciously; for there was in that humming something that—that, yes, it was rounding into the most queerly uttered phrases, in a sort of high, unutterably sweet singing note, like the sound of a violin. With her moveless lips she could not articulate, and her only enunciation came from the varied intensities of that musical tone. Many languages could not be spoken so, but the High Venusian's lilt is largely that of pitch, every word-sound bearing as many meanings as it has degrees of intensity, so that the exquisitely modulated notes which came rippling from her harp-like mouth bore as clear a meaning as if she were enunciating separate words.

And it was more eloquent than speech. Somehow those singing phrases played upon other senses than the aural. From the first lilted

note he recognized the danger of that voice. It vibrated, it thrilled, it caressed. It rippled up and down his answering nerves like fingers over harp-strings.

"Who are you, Earthman?" that lazy, nerve-strumming voice demanded. He felt, as he answered, that she knew not only his name but much more about him than he himself knew. Knowledge was in her eye, serene and all-inclusive.

"Northwest Smith," he said, a little sullenly. "Why have you brought me here?"

"A dangerous man." There was an undertone of mockery in the music. "You were brought to feed the dwellers of Vonng with human blood, but I think--yes, I think I shall keep you for myself. You have known much of emotions that are alien to me, and I would share them fully, as one with your own strong, hot-blooded body, Northwest Smith. Aie-e-e"--the humming wailed along an ecstatic upward note that sent shivers down the man's spine--"and how sweet and hot your blood will be, my Earthman! You shall share my ecstasy as I drink it! You shall--but wait. First you must understand. Listen, Earthman."

The humming swelled to an inarticulate roaring in his ears, and somehow his mind relaxed under that sound, smoothed out, pliantly as wax for the recording of her voice. In that queer, submissive mood he heard her singing,

"Life dwells in so many overlapping planes, my Earthman, that even I can comprehend but a fraction of them. My plane is very closely akin to your own, and at some places they overlap in so intimate a way that it takes little effort to break through, if one can find a weak spot. This city of Vonng is one of the spots, a place which exists simultaneously in both planes. Can you understand that? It was laid out along certain obscure patterns in a way and for a purpose which

are stories in themselves; so that in my own plane as well as here in yours Vonng's walls and streets and buildings are tangible. But time is different in our two worlds. It moves faster here. The strange alliance between your plane and mine, through two sorcerers of our alien worlds, was brought about very curiously. Vonng was built by men of your own plane, laboriously, stone by stone. But to us it seemed that through the magic of that sorcerer of ours a city suddenly appeared at his command, empty and complete. For your time moves so much faster than ours.

"And though through the magic of those strangely matched conspirators the stone which built Vonng existed in both planes at once, no power could make the men who dwelt in Vonng accessible to use. Two races simultaneously inhabited the city. To mankind it seemed haunted by nebulous, imponderable presences. That race was ourselves. To us you were tantalizingly perceptible in flashes, but we could not break through. And we wanted to very badly. Mentally, sometimes we could reach you, but physically never.

"And so it went on. But because time moved faster here, your Vonng fell into ruins and has been deserted for ages, while to our perceptions it is still a great and thronging city. I shall show you presently.

"To understand why I am here you must understand something of our lives. The goal of your own race is the pursuit of happiness, is it not so? But our lives are spent wholly in the experiencing and enjoyment of sensation. To us that is food and drink and happiness. Without it we starve. To nourish our bodies we must drink the blood of living creatures, but that is a small matter beside the ravenous hunger we know for the sensations and the emotions of the flesh. We are infinitely more capable of experiencing them than you, both physically and mentally. Our range of sensation is vast beyond your comprehension, but to us it is an old story, and always we seek new

sensations, other alien emotions. We have raided many worlds, many planes, many dimensions, in search of something new. It was only a short while ago that we succeeded in breaking into yours, through the help of Apri here.

"You must understand that we could not have come had there not been a doorway. Ever since the building of Vonng we have been mentally capable of entering, but to experience the emotions we crave we must have physical contact, a temporary physical union through the drinking of blood. And there has never been a way to enter until we found Apri. You see, we have long known that some are born with a wider range of perceptions than their comrades can understand. Sometimes they are called mad. Sometimes in their madness they are more dangerous than they realize. For Apri was born with the ability to gaze in upon our world, and though she did not know this, or understand what the light was which she could summon up at will, she unwittingly opened the door for us to enter here.

"It was through her aid that I came, and with her aid that I maintain myself here and bring others through in the dark of the night to feed upon the blood of mankind. Our position is precarious in your world, and we have not yet dared make ourselves known. So we have begun upon the lowest types of man, to accustom ourselves to the fare and to strengthen our hold upon humanity, so that when we are ready to go forth openly we shall have sufficient power to withstand your resistance. But soon now we shall come."

The long, lovely, indescribable body upon the couch writhed round to front him more fully, the motion rippling along her limbs like a wavelet over water. The deep, steady gaze of the eye bored into his, the voice pulsed with intensity.

"Great things are waiting for you, Earthman--before you die. We shall become one, for a while. I shall savor all your perceptions, suck up

the sensations you have known. I shall open new fields to you, and see them through your senses with a new flavor, and you shall share my delight in the taste of your newness. And as your blood flows you shall know all beauty, and all horror, and all delight and pain, and all the other emotions and sensations, nameless to you, that I have known."

The humming music of her voice spun through Smith's brain soothingly. Somehow what she said held no urgency for him. It was like a legend of something which had happened long ago to another man. He waited gravely as the voice went on again, dreamily, gloatingly.

"You have known much of danger, O wanderer. You have looked upon strange things, and life has been full for you, and death an old comrade, and love--and love--those arms have held many women, is it not so?... Is it not so?"

Unbearably sweet, the voice lingered murmuringly over the vibrant query, something compelling and irresistible in the question, in the pitch and the queer, ringing tone of it. And quite involuntarily memories flashed back across the surface of his mind. He was quiet, remembering.

The milk-white girls of Venus are so lovely, with their sidelong eyes and their warm mouths and their voices pitched to the very tone of love. And the canal-women of Mars--coral pink, sweet as honey, murmuring under the moving moons. And Earth's girls are vibrant as swordblades, and heady with kisses and laughter. There were others, too. He remembered a sweet brown savage on a lost asteroid, and one brief, perfume-dizzied night under the reeling stars. And there had been a space-pirate's wench in stolen jewels, flame-gun belted, who came to him in a camptown on the edge of Martian civilization, where the drylands begin. There was that rosy

Martian girl in the garden palace by the canal, where the moons were wheeling through the sky.... And once, very long ago, in a garden upon Earth--he closed his eyes and saw again the moonlight of home silvering a fair, high head, and level eyes looking into his and a mouth that quivered, saying--

He drew a long, unsteady breath and opened his eyes again. The pale steel stare of them was expressionless, but that last, deep-buried memory had burnt like a heat-ray, and he knew she had tasted the pain of it, and was exulting. The feathery crest that swept backward from her forehead was trembling rhythmically, and the colors blowing through it had deepened in intensity and were changing with bewildering swiftness. But her still face had not changed, although he thought there was a softening in the brilliance of her eyes, as if she were remembering too.

When she spoke, the sustained, fluting note of her voice was breathless as a whisper, and he realized anew how infinitely more eloquent it was than a voice which spoke in words. She could infuse into the vibrant lilt blood-stirring intensities and soft, rich purrs that went sweeping along his nerves like velvet. His whole body was responding to the pitch of her voice. She was playing upon him as upon a harp, evoking chords of memory and sending burring thrills down his back and setting the blood athrob in his pulses by the very richness and deepness of her tone. And it strummed not only upon the responses of his body but also upon the chords of his very mind, waking thoughts to match her own, compelling him into the channels she desired. Her voice was purest magic, and he had not even the desire to resist it.

"They are sweet memories--sweet?" she purred caressingly. "The women of the worlds you know--the women who have lain in those arms of yours--whose mouths have clung to yours--do you remember?"

There was the most flagrant mesmerism in her voice as it ran on vibrantly over him--again he thought of fingers upon harp-strings--evoking the melodies she desired, strumming at his memories with words like hot, sweet flames. The room misted before his eyes, and that singing voice was a lilt through timeless space, no longer speaking in phrases but in a throbbingly inarticulate purr, and his body was no more than a sounding-board for the melodies she played.

Presently the mesmerism of her tone took on a different pitch. The humming resolved itself into words again, thrilling through him now more clearly than spoken phrases.

"And in all these remembered women"--it sang--"in all these you remember me.... For it was I in each of them whom you remember--that little spark that was myself--and I am all women who love and are loved--my arms held you--do you not remember?"

In the midst of that hypnotic murmuring he did remember, and recognized dimly through the reeling tumult of his blood some great, veiled truth he could not understand.

The crest above her forehead trembled in slow, languorous rhythm, and rich colors flowed through it in tints that caressed the eyes--velvety purples, red like embers, flame colors and sunset shades. When she rose upon her couch with an unnamed gliding movement and held out her arms he had no recollection of moving forward, but somehow he was clasping her and the outstretched arms had coiled like serpents about him, and very briefly the heart-shaped orifice which was her mouth brushed against his lips. Something icy happened then. The touch was light and fluttering, as if the membrane that lined that bowed and rigid opening had vibrated delicately against his mouth as swiftly and lightly as the brush of

humming-birds' wings. It was not a shock, but somehow with the touch all the hammering tumult within him died. He was scarcely aware that he possessed a body. He was kneeling upon the edge of Julhi's couch, her arms like snakes about him, her weird, lovely face upturned to his. Some half-formed nucleus of rebellion in his mind dissipated in a breath, for her single eye was a magnet to draw his gaze, and once his pale stare was fixed upon it there was no possibility of escape.

And yet the eye did not seem to see him. It was fixed and glowing upon something immeasurably distant, far in the past, so intently that there was no consciousness in it of the walls about them, nor of himself so near, staring into the lucid depths wherein vague, cloudy reflections were stirring, queer shapes and shadows which were the images of nothing he had ever seen before.

He bent there, tense, his gaze riveted upon the moving shadows in her eyes. A thin, high humming fluted from her mouth in a monotone which compelled all his consciousness into one straight channel, and that channel the clouded deeps of her remembering eye. Now the past was moving more clearly through it, and he could see the shapes of things he had no name for stirring sluggishly across a background of dimness veiling still deeper pasts.

Then all the shapes and shadows ran together in a blackness like a vacuum, and the eye was no longer clear and lucid, but darker than sunless space, and far deeper... a dizzy deep that made his senses whirl. Vertigo came upon him overwhelmingly, and he reeled and somehow lost all hold upon reality, and was plunging, falling, whirling through the immeasurable, bottomless abysses of that dark.

Stars reeled all about him, streaks of light against a velvet black almost tangible in its utter dark. Slowly the lights steadied. His giddiness ceased, though the rush of his motion did not. He was

being borne more swiftly than the wind through a dark ablaze with fixed points of brilliance, starry and unwinking. Gradually he became aware of himself, and knew without surprise that he was no longer of flesh and blood, a tangible human creature, but something nebulous and diffused and yet of definite dimensions, freer and lither than the human form and light as smoke.

He was riding through the starry dark a something all but invisible even to his keen new eyes. That dark did not muffle him as it would have blinded a human being. He could see quite clearly, his eyes utilizing something other than light in their perception. But this dim thing he rode was no more than a blur even to the keenness of his dark-defying gaze.

The vague outlines of it which were all he could catch as they flashed and faded and formed again, were now of one shape and now of another, but most often that of some fabulous monster with heaven-spanning wings and a sinuous body trailing out to incredible length. Yet somehow he knew that it was not in reality any such thing. Somehow he knew it for the half-visible manifestation of a force without name, a force which streamed through this starry dark in long, writhing waves and tides, taking fantastic shapes as it flowed. And those shapes were controlled in a measure by the brain of the observer, so that he saw what he expected to see in the nebulous outlines of the dark.

The force buoyed him up with a heady exhilaration more intoxicating than wine. In long arcs and plunges he swept on through the spangled night, finding that he could control his course in some dim way he managed without understanding. It was as if he had wings spread out upon conflicting currents, and by the poise and beat of them rode the air more easily than a bird--yet he knew that his strange new body bore no wings. For a long while he swept and curved and volplaned upon those forces which flowed invisibly

through the dark, giddy with the intoxicating joy of flight. He was aware of neither up nor down in this starry void. He was weightless, disembodied, a joyous ghost breasting the air-currents upon unreal wings. Those points of light which flecked the blackness lay strewn in clusters and long winnowed swaths and strange constellations. They were not distant, like real stars, for sometimes he plunged through a swarm of them and emerged with the breathless sensation of one who has dived into a smother of foaming seas and risen again, yet the lights were intangible to him. That refreshing sensation was not a physical one, nor were the starry points real. He could see them, but that was all. They were like the reflections of something far away in some distant dimension, and though he swung his course straight through a clustering galaxy he did not disarrange a single star. It was his own body which diffused itself through them like smoke, and passed on gasping and refreshed.

As he swept on through the dark he began to find a tantalizing familiarity in the arrangement of some of those starry groups. There were constellations he knew... surely that was Orion, striding across the sky. He saw Beteleguese's redly glowing eye, and Rigel's cold blue blaze. And beyond, across gulfs of darkness, twin Sirius was spinning, blue-white against the black. The red glimmer in the midst of that wide swath of spangles must be Antares, and the great clustering galaxy that engulfed it--surely the Milky Way! He swerved upon the currents that bore him up, tilted wide, invisible pinions and plunged through its sparkling froth of stars, intoxicated with the space-devouring range of his flight. He spanned a billion light-years with one swoop, volplaned in a long steep curve across a universe. He looked for the tiny sun round which his native planets spun, and could not find it in the wilderness of splendor through which he was plunging. It was a giddy and joyous thing to know that his body dwelt upon some light-point too small to be seen, while here in the limitless dark he soared heedlessly through a welter of constellations, defying

time and space and matter itself. He must be swooping through some airy plane where distance and size were not measured in the terms he knew, yet upon whose darkness the reflections of familiar galaxies fell.

Then in his soaring course he swept on beyond the familiar stars, across an intervening gulf of dark, and into another spangled universe whose constellations traced strange and shining patterns across the sky. Presently he became aware that he was not alone. Outlined like wraiths against the blackness, other forms went plunging down the space ways, sweeping in long curves upon currents of flowing force, plunging into smothers of starry brilliance and bursting through a-sparkle with it to go swinging on again down swooping arcs of darkness.

And then reluctantly he felt the exhilaration begin to fade. He fought against the force that was drawing him backward, clinging stubbornly to this new and intoxicating pleasure, but despite himself the vision was paling, the constellations fading. The dark rolled suddenly away, curtainwise, and with a jerk he was back again in Julhi's queerly walled room, solid and human once more, and Julhi's lovely and incredible body was pressing close to his, her magical voice humming again through his head.

It was a wordless humming she sang now, but it chose its pitch unerringly to play upon the nerves she sought, and his heart began to hammer and his breath came fast, and the noise of war was roaring in his ears. That singing was a Valkyrie battle-chant, and he heard the crash of conflict and the shouts of struggling men, smelled burnt flesh and felt the kick of the ray-gun's butt against his gripping hand. All the sensations of battle poured over him in unrelated disarray. He was aware of smoke and dust and the smell of blood, felt the pain of ray-burns and the bite of blades, tasted sweat and salt blood, knew again the feel of his fists crashing into alien faces, the heady surge of

power through his long, strong body. The wild exhilaration of battle flamed through him in deepening waves to the sorcery of Julhi's song.

It grew stronger then, and more intense, until the physical sensation faded wholly and nothing was left but that soul-consuming ecstasy, and that in turn intensified until he no longer stood upon solid ground, but floated free through void again, pure emotion divorced from all hint of flesh. Then the void took nebulous shape around him, as he passed upward by the very intensity of his ecstasy into some higher land beyond the reach of any sense he possessed. For a while he floated through cloudy shapes of alien form and meaning. Little thrills of perception tingled through the calm of his exultation as he brushed by the misty things that peopled the cloudland to which he had penetrated. They came swifter, until that calm was rippled across and across with conflicting thrills and ecstasies that ran at cross-currents and tossed up little wavelets, and clashed together, and--

Everything spun dizzily and with breath-taking abruptness he leaned once more in Julhi's embrace. Her voice lilted through his brain.

"That was new! I've never gone so high before, or even suspected that such a place existed. But you could not have endured that pitch of ecstasy longer, and I am not ready yet for you to die. Let us sing now of terror...."

And as the tones that went humming over him shivered through his brain, dim horrors stirred in their sleep and lifted ghastly heads in the lowest depths of his consciousness to the awakening call of the music, and terror rippled along his nerves until the air dimmed about him again and he was fleeing unnamable things down endless vistas of insanity, with that humming to hound him along.

So it went. He ran the gamut of emotion over and over again. He

shared the strange sensations of beings he had never dreamed existed. Some he recognized, but more he could not even guess at, nor from what far worlds their emotions had been pilfered, to lie hoarded in Julhi's mind until she evoked them again.

Faster they came, and faster. They blew over him in dizzy succession, unknown emotions, familiar ones, strange ones, freezingly alien ones, all hurrying through his brain in a blurred confusion, so that one merged into another and they two into a third before the first had done more than brush the surface of his consciousness. Faster still, until at last the whole insane tumult blended into a pitch of wild intensity which must have been too great for his human fiber to endure; for as the turmoil went on he felt himself losing all grasp upon reality, and catapulting upon the forces that ravaged him into a vast and soothing blankness which swallowed up all unrest in the nirvana of its dark.

After an immeasurable while he felt himself waking, and fought against it weakly. No use. A light was broadening through that healing night which all his stubbornness could not resist. He had no sensation of physical awakening, but without opening his eyes he saw the room more clearly than he had ever seen it before, so that there were tiny rainbows of light around all the queer objects there, and Apri--

He had forgotten her until now, but with this strange awareness that was not of the eyes alone he saw her standing before the couch upon which he leaned in Julhi's arms. She stood rigid, rebellion making a hopeless mask of her face, and there was agony in her eyes. All about her like a bright nimbus the light rayed out. She was incandescent, a torch whose brilliance strengthened until the light radiating from her was almost palpable.

He sensed in Julhi's body, clinging to his, a deep-stirring exultation

as the light swelled about her. She luxuriated in it, drank it in like wine. He felt that for her it was indeed tangible, and that he looked upon it now, in this queer new way, through senses that saw it as she did. Somehow he was sure that with normal eyes it would not have been visible. Dimly he was remembering what had been said about the light which opened a door into Julhi's alien world. And he felt no surprise when it became clear to him that the couch no longer supported his body--that he had no body--that he was suspended weightlessly in midair, Julhi's arms still elapsing him in a queer, unphysical grip, while the strangely banded walls moved downward all about him. He had no sensation of motion himself; yet the walls seemed to fall away below and he was floating freely past the mounting bands of mist that paled and brightened swiftly until he was bathed in the blinding light that ringed the top.

There was no ceiling. The light was a blaze of splendor all about him, and out of that blaze, very slowly, very nebulously, the streets of Vonng took shape, it was not that Vonng which had stood once upon the little Venusian island. The buildings were the same as those which must once have risen where their ruins now stood, but there was a subtle distortion of perspective which would have made it clear to him, even had he not known, that this city stood in another plane of existence than his own. Sometimes amidst the splendor he thought he caught glimpses of vine-tangled ruins. A wall would shimmer before his eyes for an instant and crumble into broken blocks, and the pavement would be debris-strewn and mossy. Then the vision faded and the wall stood up unbroken again. But he knew he was looking through the veil which parted the two worlds so narrowly, upon the ruins which were all that remained of Vonng in his own plane.

It was the Vonng which had been shaped for the needs of two worlds simultaneously. He could see, without really understanding, how some of the queerly angled buildings and twisted streets which could

have no meaning to the eyes of a man were patterned for the use of these gliding people. He saw in the pavement the curious medallions set by the long-dead sorcerers to pin two planes together at this point of intersection.

In these shimmering unstable streets he saw for the first time in full light shapes which must be like that of the creature which had seized him in the dark. They were of Julhi's race, unmistakably, but he saw now that in her metamorphosis into a denizen of his own world she had perforce taken on a more human aspect than was normally her own. The beings that glided through Vonng's strangely altered streets could never have been mistaken, even at the first glance, as human. Yet they gave even more strongly than had Julhi the queer impression of being exquisitely fitted for some lofty purpose he could not guess at, their shapes of a perfect proportion toward which mankind might have aimed and missed. For the hint of humanity was there, as in man there is a hint of the beast. Julhi in her explanation had made them seem no more than sensation-eaters, intent only upon the gratification of hunger. But, looking upon their perfect, indescribable bodies, he could not believe that the goal for which they were so beautifully fashioned could be no more than that. He was never to know what that ultimate goal was, but he could not believe it only the satisfaction of the senses.

The shining crowds poured past him down the streets, the whole scene so unstable that great rifts opened in it now and again to let the ruins of that other Vonng show through. And against this background of beauty and uncertainty he was sometimes aware of Apri, rigid and agonized, a living torch to light him on his way. She was not in the Vonng of the alien plane nor in that of the ruins, but somehow hung suspended between the two in a dimension of her own. And whether he moved or not, she was always there, dimly present, radiant and rebellious, the shadow of a queer, reluctant

madness behind her tortured eyes.

In the strangeness of what lay before him he scarcely heeded her, and he found that when he was not thinking directly of the girl she appeared only as a vague blur somewhere in the back of his consciousness. It was a brain-twisting sensation, this awareness of overlapping planes. Sometimes in flashes his mind refused to encompass it and everything shimmered meaninglessly for an instant before he could get control again.

Julhi was beside him. He could see her without turning. He could see a great many strange things here in a great many queer, incomprehensible ways. And though he felt himself more unreal than a dream, she was firm and stable with a different sort of substance from that she had worn in the other Vonng. Her shape was changed too. Like those others she was less human, less describable, more beautiful even than before. Her clear, unfathomable eye turned to him limpidly. She said,

"This is my Vonng," and it seemed to him that though her humming thrilled compellingly through the smoky immaterialism which was himself, her words, in some new way, had gone directly from brain to brain with no need of that pseudo-speech to convey them. He realized then that her voice was primarily not for communication, but for hypnosis--a weapon more potent than steel or flame.

She turned now and moved away over the tiled street, her gait a liquidly graceful gliding upon those amazing lower limbs. Smith found himself drawn after her with a power he could not resist. He was smokily impalpable and without any independent means of locomotion, and he followed her as helplessly as her shadow followed. At a corner ahead of them a group of the nameless beings had paused in the onward sweep which was carrying so many of Vonng's denizens along toward some yet unseen goal. They turned

as Julhi approached, their expressionless eyes fixed on the shadow-wraith behind her which was Smith. No sound passed between them, but he felt in his increasingly receptive brain faint echoes of thoughts that were flashing through the air. It puzzled him until he saw how they were communicating--by those exquisitely feathery crests which swept backward above their foreheads.

It was a speech of colors. The crests quivered unceasingly, and colors far beyond the spectrum his earthly eyes could see blew through them in bewildering sequence. There was a rhythm about it that he gradually perceived, though he could not follow it. By the vagrant echoes of their thoughts which he could catch he realized that the harmony of the colors reflected in a measure the harmony of the two minds which produced them. He saw Julhi's crest quiver with a flush of gold, and those of the rest were royally purple. Green flowed through the gold, and a lusciously rosy tinge melted through the purple of the rest. But all this took place faster than he could follow, and before he was aware of what was happening a discord in the thoughts that sounded in his mind arose, and while Julhi's crest glowed orange those of the rest were angrily scarlet.

Violence had sprung up between them, whose origin he could not quite grasp though fragments of their quarrel flashed through his brain from each of the speakers, and wildly conflicting colors rippled through the plumes. Julhi's ran the gamut of a dozen spectra in tints that were eloquent of fury. The air quivered as she turned away, drawing him after her. He was at a loss to understand the suddenness of the rage which had swept over her so consumingly, but he could catch echoes of it vibrating through his mind from her own hot anger. She flashed on down the street with blurring swiftness, her crest trembling in swift, staccato shivers.

She must have been too furious to notice where she went, for she had plunged now straight into that streaming crowd which poured

through the streets, and before she could win free again the force of it had swallowed her up. She had no desire to join the torrent, and Smith could feel her struggling violently against it, the fury rising as her efforts to be free were vain. Colors like curses raved through her trembling crest.

But the tide was too strong for her. They were carried along irresistibly past the strangely angled buildings, over the patterned pavements, toward an open space which Smith began to catch glimpses of through the houses ahead of them. When they reached the square it was already nearly filled. Ranks of crested, gliding creatures thronged it, their one-eyed faces, heart-mouths immobile, were lifted toward a figure on a dais in the center. He sensed in Julhi a quivering of hatred as he faced that figure, but in it he thought he saw a serenity and a majesty of bearing which even Julhi's indescribable and lovely presence did not have. The rest waited in packed hundreds, eyes fixed, crests vibrating.

When the square was filled he watched the being on the dais lift undulant arms for quiet, and over the crowd a rigid stillness swept. The feathery crests poised motionless above intent heads. Then the plume of the leader began to vibrate with a curious rhythm, and over all the crowd the antennae-like plumes quivered in unison. Every ripple of that fronded crest was echoed to the last shiver by the crowd. There was something infinitely stirring in the rhythm. Obscurely it was like the beat of marching feet, the perfect timing of a dance. They were moving faster now, and the colors that swept through the leader's crest were echoed in those of the crowd. There was no opposition of contrast or complement here; the ranks followed their leader's harmonies in perfect exactitude. His thoughts were theirs.

Smith watched an exquisitely tender rose shiver through that central crest, darken to crimson, sweep on through richness of deepening

tones to infra-red and mount in an eloquence of sheer color that stirred his being, even though he could not understand. He realized the intense and rising emotion which swept the crowd as the eloquence of the leader went vibrating through their senses.

He could not have shared that emotion, or understood a fraction of what was taking place, but as he watched, something gradually became clear to him. There was a glory about them. These beings were not innately the sensation-hungry vampires Julhi had told him of. His instinct had been right.

No one could watch them in their concerted harmony of emotion and miss wholly the lofty ardor which stirred them now. Julhi must be a degenerate among them. She and her followers might represent one side of these incomprehensible people, but it was a baser side, and not one that could gain strength among the majority. For he sensed sublimity among them. It thrilled through his dazzled brain from that intent, worshipping crowd about him.

And knowing this, rebellion suddenly surged up within him, and he strained in awakening anger at the mistiness which held him impotent. Julhi felt the pull. He saw her turn, anger still blazing in her crest and her single eye glowing with a tinge of red. From her rigid lips came a furious hissing, and colors he could not name rippled through the plume in surges eloquent of an anger that burned like a heatgun's blast. Something in the single-minded ardor of the crowd, the message of the orator, must have fanned the flame of her for at the first hint of rebellion in her captive she turned suddenly upon the crowd which hemmed her in and began to shoulder her way free.

They did not seem to realize her presence or feel the force of her pushing them aside. Devoutly all eyes were riveted upon the leader, all the feathery crests vibrated in perfect unison with his own. They were welded into an oblivious whole by the power of his eloquence.

Julhi made her way out of the thronged square without distracting a single eye.

Smith followed like a shadow behind her, rebellious but impotent. She swept down the angled streets like a wind of fury. He was at a loss to understand the consuming anger which blazed higher with every passing moment, though they were vague suspicions in his mind that he must have guessed rightly as he watched the crested orator's effect upon the throng--that she was indeed degenerate, at odds with the rest, and hated them the more fiercely for it.

She swept him on along deserted streets whose walls shimmered now and again into green-wreathed ruins, and took shape again. The ruins themselves seemed to flicker curiously with dark and light that swept over them in successive waves, and suddenly he realized that time was passing more slowly here than in his own plane. He was watching night and day go by over the ruins of that elder Vonng.

They were coming now into a courtyard of strange, angular shape. As they entered, the half-forgotten blur at the back of his mind which was Apri glowed into swift brilliance, and he saw that the light which streamed from her was bathing the court in radiance, stronger than the light outside. He could see her vaguely, hovering over the exact center of the courtyard in that curious dimension of her own, staring with mad, tortured eyes through the veils of the planes between. About the enclosure shapes like Julhi's moved sluggishly, the colors dull on their crests, their eyes filmed. And he saw, now that a suspicion of the truth had entered his mind, that Julhi herself did not have quite the clear and shining beauty of those who had thronged the square. There was an indescribable dullness over her.

When she and her shadowy captive entered the court those aimlessly moving creatures quickened into sudden life. A scarlet the color of fresh blood flowed through Julhi's crest, and the others

echoed it with eager quiverings of their plumes which were somehow obscene and avid. And for the first time Smith's dulled consciousness awoke into fear, and he writhed helplessly in the recesses of his mind away from the hungry shapes around him. The crowd was rushing forward now with quivering plumes and fluttering, wide-arched mouths that had flushed a deeper crimson as if in anticipation. For all their strangeness, their writhing shapes and weird, alien faces, they were like wolves bearing down hungrily upon their quarry.

But before they reached him something happened. Somehow Julhi had moved with lightning swiftness, and vertigo seized Smith blindingly. The walls around them shimmered and vanished. Apri vanished, the light blazed into a dazzle and he felt the world shifting imponderably about him. Scenes he recognized flashed and faded--the black ruins he had awakened in, Julhi's cloud-walled room, the wilderness of pillars, this curiously shaped courtyard itself, all melted together and blurred and faded. In the instant before it vanished he felt, as from far away, the touch upon the mistiness of his bodiless self of hands that were not human, hands that stung with the shock of lightning.

Somehow in the timeless instant while this took place he realized that he had been snatched away from the pack for some obscure purpose. Somehow, too, he knew that what Apri had told him had been true, though he had thought her mad at the time. In some vague way all these scenes were the same. They occupied the same place, at the same time--ruined Vonng, the Vonng that Julhi knew, all those places he had known since he met Apri in the dark--they were overlapping planes through which, as through open doors, Julhi had drawn him.

He was aware of an unnamable sensation then, within himself, and the mistiness which had prisoned him gave way before the returning

strength of his flesh-and-blood body. He opened his eyes. Something was clinging to him in heavy coils, and a pain gnawed at his heart, but he was too stunned at what surrounded him to heed it just then.

He stood among the ruins of a court which must once, long ago, have been the court he had just left--or had he? For he saw now that it too surrounded him, flickering through the ruins in glimpses of vanished splendor. He stared round wildly. Yes, shining through the crumbled walls and the standing walls that were one and the same, he could catch glimpses of that columned wilderness through which he had wandered. And rising above this, one with it, the misty-walled chamber where he had met Julhi. They were all here, occupying the same space, at the same time. The world was a chaos of conflicting planes all about him. There were other scenes too, intermingling with these, places he had never seen before. And Apri, incandescent and agonized, peered with mad eyes through the bewildering tangle of worlds. His brain lurched sickeningly with the incredible things it could not comprehend.

Around him through the chaotic jumbling of a score of planes prowled strange forms. They were like Julhi--yet unlike her. They were like those figures which had rushed upon him in that other Vonng--but not wholly. They had bestialized in the metamorphosis. The shining beauty was dulled. The incomparable grace of them had thickened into animal gropings. Their plumes burned with an ugly crimson and the clarity of their eyes was clouded now with a blind and avid hunger. They circled him with a baffled gliding.

All this he was aware of in the flashing instant when his eyes opened. Now he looked down, for the first time consciously aware of that pain which gnawed at his heart, of the clinging arms. And suddenly that pain stabbed like a heatray, and he went sick with the shock of what he saw. For Julhi clung to him, relaxed in avid coils. Her eyes were

closed, and her mouth was fastened tightly against the flesh of his left breast, just over the heart. The plume above her head quivered from base to tip with long, voluptuous shudders, and all the shades of crimson and scarlet and bloody rose that any spectrum ever held went blowing through it.

Smith choked on a word half-way between oath and prayer, and with shaking hands ripped her arms away, thrust against her shoulders blindly to tear loose that clinging, agonizing mouth. The blood spurted as it came free. The great eye opened and looked up into his with a dull, glazed stare. Swiftly the glaze faded, the dullness brightened into a glare behind which hell-fires flamed scorchingly, to light up the nameless hells within. Her plume whipped erect and blazed into angry red. From the arched mouth, wet now, and crimson, a high, thin, nerve-twanging hum shrilled agonizingly.

That sound was like the flick of a wire whip on raw flesh. It bit into his brain-centers, sawed at his quivering nerves excruciatingly, unbearably. Under the lash of that voice Smith wrenched away from her clinging arms, stumbling over the stones, blundering anywhere away from the punishing shrill of that hum. The chaos spun about him, scenes shifting and melting together maddeningly. The blood ran down his breast.

Through his blind agony, as the world dissolved into shrilling pain, one thing alone was clear. That burning light. That steady flame. Apri. He was blundering unimpeded through solid walls and columns and buildings in their jumble of cross-angled planes, but when he came to her at last she was tangible, she was real. And with the feel of her firm flesh under his hands a fragment of sanity rose out of that piercing anguish which shivered along his nerves. Dully he knew that through Apri all this was possible. Apri the light-maker, the doorway between worlds.... His fingers closed on her throat.

Blessedly, blessedly that excruciating song was fading. He knew no more than that. He scarcely realized that his fingers were sunk yet in the softness of a woman's throat. The chaos was fading around him, the crazy planes righting themselves, paling, receding backward into infinity. Through their fragments the solid rocks of Vonng loomed up in crumbling ruins. The agony of Julhi's song was a faint shrilling from far away. And about him in the air he sensed a frenzied tugging, as if impalpable hands were clutching at his, ghostly arms pulling ineffectually upon him. He looked up, dazed and uncertain.

Where Julhi had stood among the tumbling planes an expanding cloudy image hovered now, bearing still the lovely outlines that had been hers, but foggy, spreading and dissipating like mist as the doorway closed between planes. She was scarcely more than a shadow, and fading with every breath, but she wrenched at him yet with futile, cloudy hands, striving to the last to preserve her gate into the world she hungered for. But as she clawed she was vanishing. Her outlines blurred and melted as smoke fades. She was no more than a darkening upon the air now, tenuous, indistinguishable. Then the fog that had been lovely Julhi had expanded into nothingness--the air was clear.

Smith looked down, shook his dulled head a little, bent to what he still gripped between his hands. It needed no more than a glance, but he made sure before he released his grasp. Pity clouded his eyes for an instant--Apri was free now, in the freedom she had longed for, the madness gone, the terrible danger that was herself banished. Never again through that gate would Julhi and her followers enter. The door was closed.